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Texts and Textuality

Baudrillard and Reality TV

Reality TV has been around a while, but it really became popular in the early 90s. It started in 1992 with MTV's *The Real World*. The show followed a bunch of people living together in an apartment. But reality TV has changed a lot since then. It's been through all of Baudrillard's different phases of the image. He talks about them in his essay "Simulacra and Simulations." He says the image exists on a kind of continuum, from the real to simulation. We definitely see this in the range of reality shows now. They're getting less and less real. *The Real World* corresponded with Baudrillard's first stage of the image. But it spawned other genres like the dating show. One of the most famous examples is *Flavor of Love*. It corresponded with Baudrillard's second phase of the image, masking reality. Around that same time, *The Joe Schmo Show* made its debut. It was the first fake reality show. All the contestants were actors, except for one guy. He thought he was on a real show called *The Lap of Luxury*. It corresponded with the third phase, hiding the absence of reality. Lastly, there's Spike TV's *Deadliest Warrior*—Baudrillard's fourth phase. It simulates battles between warriors from different periods of time.

Theory

Baudrillard first tries to define simulation. He says it means “to feign to have what one hasn't.” But then he says “feign” isn't quite the right word; it doesn't really describe what he's trying to say. It implies there's a reality when really it “threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’, between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’”. He uses religion as an example. The Bible tells people not to worship graven images. But why? Baudrillard says they're destructive—it's so easy for them to write over the existence of God. They also suggest maybe the idea of a higher power is really just a simulation.

Baudrillard compares this with representation, which he says “starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent.” The opposite is true of simulation, though. The sign doesn't refer to anything real. He also talks about the four different phases of the sign. It exists on a kind of continuum. In the first stage, the image directly reflects reality. The signifier refers to the signified. But in the second stage, reality is altered somehow. In the third stage, the image hides “the absence of a basic reality.” In the fourth and final stage, he concludes the image is “irreferent”—it has no relation to reality whatsoever. Baudrillard concludes the two ends of the continuum are always chasing each other. Representation tries to consume simulation, and simulation tries to turn representation into a simulacrum.

Baudrillard also says simulation is like a moebius strip. The real is supposed to come before simulation (like in his example from the Borges story). Simulation, though, eventually takes over and the image gets stuck in a never-ending downward spiral. The real can never be recovered; as a result, illusions aren't possible anymore because

there's no reality to imitate. To illustrate his point, Baudrillard suggests trying to stage a bank robbery. He says even if your weapons are fake, it'll be worse than a real hold up. Why? Because "...a real hold up only upsets the order of things, the right of property, whereas a simulated hold up interferes with the very principle of reality." It would be impossible then to have a real hold up. The media already has certain ways of talking about bank robberies—they can never be new again.

Baudrillard also says people realize they're living in an age of simulation. They want to make things real again, so they keep trying "... to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere." He uses the example of Disney World. Baudrillard calls it "hyperreal". It's an imaginary world of princesses and pirates. People go there to forget their real lives. But Baudrillard says, "It's meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the 'real' world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere..." It really makes the rest of the world seem real.

Application

Reality TV really became popular in the early 90s. This was when we first saw MTV's *The Real World*. It marked the beginning of Baudrillard's first stage—when the image actually represented reality. The premise: producers picked seven people to live together in an apartment. Cameras then followed them around all day, every day, for four months. The first season was set in New York. There was Becky, a singer. She was twenty-four, making her one of the oldest roommates. Andre was also a singer. He was the front man for a heavy metal band. Heather was African-American. She's a

hip-hop artist signed with Boogie Down Productions. Julie was from a small town, friendly and naïve. Norman was African-American. He was also gay; he owned a business with his partner. Eric was a model, and a bit of a bad boy. Lastly, Kevin was a writer, and kind of shy.

In the very first episode, there's controversy. It begins by showing one of the roommates, Julie, leaving her home in Alabama. She's eager to get away from her conservative family. When she finally arrives at the apartment, some of the other roommates are already there. They each tell a little about themselves. Most of them are from New York or have lived there a while. Julie seems to be the only transplant. This is when Heather's pager goes off. Julie asks, "Do you deal drugs or something?" The rest of the roommates look shocked. They can't believe she'd say something so racist. Heather and Norman get mad, but Becky tries to defend her. She says she doesn't know any better. Everyone eventually calms down, but they still don't know what to think about Julie.

Later in the episode, Julie goes to dinner with Heather and Norman. They have another talk about racism. Norman says, "I think racism is alive and well." Julie accuses him, though, of being racist. She says he doesn't like white people. Heather responds by saying she just doesn't like ignorant people—it doesn't matter what race they are. We finally see Julie may not be so conservative after all. The cameras follow her around as she tries new things. For example, she randomly goes up to a man on a motorcycle. She asks him for a ride, and we watch naïve Julie get on the back of a Harley. The roommates finally agree, she's actually pretty open-minded.

In almost every episode, the roommates tackle some real issue. For example, they later find out Eric posed in his underwear for a cologne ad. Someone asks Julie, “For the right price, would you take off your clothes?” She surprises the rest of the roommates by saying she would. They all then talk about the differences between ads like Eric’s and porn. But as the show progresses, it doesn’t seem so real anymore. In between scenes are interviews with some of the roommates. They provide a running commentary on the show. For example, Norman talks about Julie—while he’s sitting in the tub, taking a bubble bath. His head is wrapped in a towel; he looks directly at the camera. It’s meant to seem spontaneous, like the camera caught him off-guard, but really it just seems staged. We know they wouldn’t really interrupt his bath to ask him questions. In the very last episode, the roommates say goodbye to each other. Becky tells the camera the show is “as real as it gets.” But her speech seems scripted. Why does she feel like she has to tell us it’s real? She brings us a little closer to Baudrillard’s next phase of the image—masking reality.

Sometime in 1999, we started seeing shows like *Blind Date*, *The Fifth Wheel* and *The Bachelor*. They all took some aspect of reality—dating—and turned it into a competition. One of the most famous examples is “*Flavor of Love*.” It debuted on VH1. It showed Flavor Flav from the rap group Public Enemy as he looked for a girlfriend. Like *The Real World*, producers made a bunch of women live together in a mansion. They then had to compete to win dates with Flav. Each week, he eliminated a woman until there was only one left.

In the first episode, Flav arrives at the mansion in a stretch limo. He has on a pink tux with tails and a top hat. He immediately becomes a character, ready to entertain. The camera then shows the women inside the mansion, waiting expectantly. Before he goes inside, though, Flav says he wants to test them. From the very beginning, he lets us know this is a competition. The women are ecstatic to see Flav. But right away we can tell they're all there for different reasons. A few seem genuinely interested in finding love. One says she believes in love at first sight. Others seem to care more about money and fame. And there are others who act like it's a contest and Flav is the prize. One woman says, "I plan to win Flav's heart. In order for that to happen with twenty other women, there's no way I'm going to play fair." She implies there are rules—it begins to seem more like a game show than anything else.

After Flav greets the women, they all line up behind a velvet rope. They file in front of Flav, and he gives each one a nick name. He calls one woman "Hoopz" because she likes to play basketball; he names another "Hottie" because she has huge breasts. We eventually stop seeing the women as real people. He turns them into characters, so we don't mind so much when he objectifies them later. We're also reminded Flav is just a character himself. Everything about him is exaggerated. For example, he makes a nametag for each woman using a giant quill. It looks like a prop from a play; he flourishes it dramatically as he writes. The women don't seem to mind, though—they never call him by his real name, William Drayton. They always call him by his stage name.

It quickly becomes clear, Flav doesn't care about love. The women open bottles of champagne. Flav makes a toast, saying, "Here's to...finding a true companion." But later he jokes, "If I can't keep y'all all, I'm gonna try to keep three." Everyone laughs, but we wonder if he really means it. The women then wander around the house, drinking and fighting for his attention. One woman named Shells says, "This is my first time meeting the guy—I'm not going flash my ass." She's the exception, though. As the night goes on, several women put on bikinis. Some even try to kiss Flav. At the end of the night, he eliminates five women. He gives clocks to the ones he likes. The rest have to leave the mansion. Before they go, though, they talk to the camera one last time. Their real names appear on the bottom of the screen. They stop being characters, and become real people again.

The remaining women compete to win dates with Flav. In one episode called "The Flavor of Chicken," they each have to cook dinner. The winner gets some alone time with the rapper. Some do a great job, like Hoopz. She tells the camera she's been cooking since she was a kid. But others are terrible, like Hottie. She puts the chicken in the microwave. But is this really dating? Flav and the women go through the motions. They go on dates, but usually in big groups. The women usually end up fighting with each other. They also meet Flav's mom. They have tea with her, and go with her to church. But she's only around for one episode. Later in the season, they even meet Flav's ex, actress Brigitte Nielsen. She says she wants to help him find the right person. She picks fights with the women, though, and gives them each a lie detector test. The show gets more and more dramatic with each episode. We don't know if Flav really cares about finding love or getting good ratings.

Around this same time, The Joe Schmo Show first aired on Spike TV. This was the beginning of Baudrillard's third phase, hiding the absence of reality. Producers used the same format as Flavor of Love—they made a bunch of people live together in a house and compete for prizes. All the contestants were actors, though, except for one guy named Matt Kennedy Gould. He thought he was on a real show called The Lap of Luxury and they were all trying to win \$100,00.00.

Each actor plays some kind of stock character. There was Ashleigh the bitch, Brian the nice guy, Kip the gay guy, Molly the virgin, Gina the back stabber, Hutch the asshole, Earl the veteran, Dr. Pat the counselor, and Ralph Garman the host. Lastly, there was Matt, the only person who didn't know the show was fake. But even he becomes a kind of stock character. This reminds me of when Baudrillard says simulation "threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false'". As reality TV moves closer to simulation, it's harder to draw the line between real and fake. One actor describes Matt as the "all American guy." That's his role—he unwittingly plays Joe Schmo.

The episode begins with Ralph Garman, the host, talking about the show. He asks, "What would you do if your entire world turned out to be fake?" The camera shows writers and producers working behind the scenes. Garman says it took over a year to plan the show. We then see Matt talking about how he's just an ordinary guy. Garman explains he recently dropped out of law school. He lives with his parents and likes to play basketball on the weekends. The host makes him seem average in every way, perfect for the role of Joe Schmo. He becomes more of a character and less of a

real person. That way we're not so bothered when he calls the show "TV's most elaborate experiment."

We also see the director talking to the actors. He reminds them to let their characters develop naturally. He wants the show to seem real. But he also gives them tips like, "Let those awkward moments play out." He doesn't want to make Matt too comfortable, either, because then people won't want to watch the show. Some of the actors seem excited. Hutch says he can't wait to be in character all the time; it's the ultimate role. But others seem a little nervous. One of the actors says he's not sure Matt will believe their fake world. We wonder the same thing: will he fall for it? But we also help to blur the lines between the real and fake, like Baudrillard says. We become part of the hoax, just by watching the show.

Matt is the first to arrive at the mansion where they're going to film the show. The actors arrive one by one, and he greets them all enthusiastically. Right away we see some of the actors struggling to stay in character. A few of them have trouble not staring at Matt. Also, Hutch's character is supposed to be from Texas. Matt asks if he likes certain sports teams from that area. Hutch obviously doesn't know what he's talking about. He fidgets nervously, but Matt doesn't seem to notice. Ralph the host finally rides up on a horse. He talks a little about the \$1,000.00 prize. He then sends them in groups to find their bedrooms. Matt, of course, is in the last group with Dr. Pat and Earl. When they finally get inside, there's only one bed left. This is just the first in a series of jokes on Matt. He doesn't question where he's going to sleep, though. He's

more than happy to share a bed with the two actors. We start to see Matt is a pretty good guy. We also feel a little sorry for him—how could he not realize the show is fake?

After the roommates have had some time to unpack, they all go outside. Ralph announces their first contest, “Those Drawers Aren’t Yours.” He asks everyone for a pair of underwear. He gives them to other people in the house to model. They then have to guess the rightful owners. The winner gets to sleep in a fancy bedroom suite; the loser has to wear the winner’s underwear the rest of the day. They all strut down a fake runway. Keith dances around in a leopard print thong. Hutch doesn’t wear anything. Matt puts on a skimpy pair of women’s underwear. He really seems to have fun. But the line between reality and simulation really starts to get blurry here. We see what Baudrillard means when he says representation is always trying to take over simulation. No matter how much they plan ahead, reality keeps foiling the producers. They tried to fix the game so Matt would lose, but he actually everything correctly. They then have come up with new answers. In the mean time, Ralph pretends to look at the results. He finally declares Kip the winner and Matt the loser. Matt doesn’t complain when Kip gives him a silky thong to wear—he puts it on obediently. One of the actors says, “He’s game.” He marvels at Matt’s willingness to be humiliated.

Earl almost blows their cover, though. Matt later asks the veteran about the contest. He answers, “I thought yours were the fishing ones.” The boxers with the fix on them were supposed to be his, though. Matt looks confused; he asks, “Weren’t they yours?” We can see Earl trying to think of an excuse. He says something about not wearing his glasses. Dr. Pat jumps in--she tries to help him his story. She asks, “Did

they tell you not to wear them for the camera?" She nods her head a little too much; it's obvious she's coaching him. Earl looks relieved and says they did. Matt seems to believe their story, though, and doesn't mention it again.

The next morning, the cast escapes the mansion to meet with producers. They encourage Hutch to act meaner, Molly to act sweeter. They also tell Gina to make an alliance with Matt, so he doesn't try to vote her off. This is crucial if they're going to act out the next part of their script. This also reminds me of Baudrillard means says simulation is like a moebius strip. Reality is supposed to come before simulation. It gets stuck in a downward spiral, though, so we can't tell which comes first. We definitely see this when Gina tries to talk to Matt. She corners him later that day in the game room. Before she can say anything, though, Matt suggests they make an alliance. He tells her, "I want to ride with you to the end." They agree not to vote for each other at the elimination ceremony. Gina later tells the camera, "Everything I was about to say, he comes to me and says it." She seems surprised. She obviously wasn't expecting him to be so forward. Like Baudrillard's moebius strip, we can no longer tell if Matt is controlling the producers or if they're controlling him.

Ashleigh then pretends to find something Gina wrote insulting the other roommates. She shows it to everyone in the house. Matt starts to get nervous; he warns Gina, "I don't know if I can help you." But he also promises he won't vote her off the show. At the elimination ceremony, Matt votes for Molly. Gina supposedly gets seven votes, making her the first person to leave the show.

Throughout the show, we see reality competing with simulation. The producers try to script everything, but Matt is unpredictable. They never know how he'll react to the situations they create. For example, he becomes close friends with Earl. When the actor is supposedly voted off the show, Matt cries. He begins to wonder if he can handle the pressure of being on TV. And producers begin to worry viewers will think he's being exploited. When they finally reveal the truth, Matt is bewildered. But he's also happy to win the money. We see Baudrillard's moebius strip again. He gladly gives up his identity to become Joe Schmo, and reality feeds right back into simulation.

More and more shows are starting to simulate reality, though, Baudrillard's last phase of the image. A good example of this is Spike TV's "Deadliest Warrior." It first aired in the summer of 2009. It looks at warriors from different periods of time and asks who would win in a fight—the yakuza or the mafia, the IRA or the Taliban, a Viking or a samurai. The show brings in experts to talk about the weapons typically used by each warrior. They also test them on dummies and a scientist and an ER doctor gauge the injuries. Someone then puts all this information into a special computer program. It calculates who would win the most out of 1,000 fights. Finally, actors show what a fight between the two warriors would look like.

In one episode, they compare pirates with knights. The experts give a historical context for each warrior. They say knights were bred to be fighters, trained from childhood. They also had the best weapons because they were usually wealthy. The experts on pirates, though, say knights were probably slow because of their armor. Pirates were also great tacticians because they were usually former soldiers. They

then test all the weapons, starting with a morning star. It was usually used by knights, and it looks like a ball and chain hanging from the end of a long pole. They hit a dummy with the morning star. Inside are sensors to measure the force of the blow. They hit the dummy so hard, it splits open. The scientist and the doctor then assess the damage—they call it a “death blow.” They then compare it with a weapon used by pirates: the grenade. In its early stages, it was just a clay pot filled with gun powder and nails. But it was very dangerous. The experts go outside to test the grenade. They put it on the ground between pigs hanging from a clothesline. They even dress one pig in armor. The blast tears apart the unprotected pig, but it doesn’t even dent the armor on the other one. Despite this, the grenade is declared the better weapon. The experts say the explosion would disorient any knight, giving the pirate an advantage.

They then test several other weapons, including a halberd and a blunderbuss. A halberd was used by knights and it looks like an axe on a long pole. It’s deadly; the experts use it to chop up a dummy. But the blunderbuss is also extremely dangerous. It was usually used by pirates. It has a one inch barrel, and one expert calls it a “hand cannon.” Even though the blunderbuss isn’t very accurate, it still pierces the armor on a dummy. The experts say it’s the better weapon.

In between tests, they also show clips of actors pretending to be pirates and knights. This reminds me of when Baudrillard says people keep trying “... to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere.” They realize they’re living in an age of simulation. The show’s producers try to do the same thing. They make the dummies to look like people. They’re covered with a special gel that feels like skin. They even

bleed. But why do they try so hard to make the dummies seem real? We're just reminded they're on a sound stage somewhere in Los Angeles, not a battlefield.

The experts then feed all this information through a computer program. We don't get to find out the results for a while, though. First they stage a fight between the two warriors. Before it starts, they remind us we're watching a simulation. The announcer says, "These warriors have never met in history." We then see a pirate in the middle of a forest, trying to pick up a chest of gold. A knight rides up on a horse. He hits the pirate with his morning star. The pirate quickly recovers; he throws a grenade at the knight, knocking him off his horse. It all looks so real—the two warriors use all the weapons the experts talked about. But then we start to see everything is really choreographed. No one actually gets hurt in the fight. It becomes what Baudrillard calls "hyperreal." Like his Disney World example, the fight pretends to be something else—a game, a history lesson. It's really there, though, to make the rest of the world seem real. It reminds us war is unpredictable. The outcome can't be determined using some kind of computer program. Finally, after some struggle, the pirate shoots the knight in the head. The camera then cuts to the computer programmer. He says the computer predicted the pirate would win 629 fights, making him the deadliest warrior. He concludes the gun ultimately gave the pirate the advantage.

There are so many different kinds of reality shows now. There are game shows like *Survivor*. There are shows about celebrities, like *Hogan Knows Best* and *The Surreal Life*. And there are shows about working in certain professions, like *L.A. Ink*.

One thing is clear, though. Reality shows are becoming less and less real. At some point there was a shift from reality to simulation.

Evaluation

With this paper, I want to show reality TV has evolved from reality to simulation. There are a lot of reality shows, though, and it's impossible to prove there's a direct correspondence with Baudrillard's phases of the image. Also, while I think The Real World was much more real than shows now, there were still parts that were staged. Here's the URL to the website I made: baudrillardtv.livejournal.com

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