

## CURB YOUR REALITY

“How do audiences make sense not only of reality TV, but of the relationship between reality and television?” (“*The Meaning of Life*,” Justin Lewis, p.288)

Television is a pedagogical tool purposed with teaching its viewers how to comprehend reality without said viewer ever having to *learn* what is behind this heavily coded representation of truth. When *Survivor* inherited the legacy of social surveillance from Allen Funt’s *Candid Camera*, it continued television’s complex negotiation between education and entertainment, transparent reportage and self-conscious artifice, reality and representation. In considering this, one can also suggest that television’s contention with reality is characteristic of any technology or institution burdened with mediating society’s cacophony of stimuli; a mandate to compress, demystify, simplify and render easier to digest what is otherwise a cumbersome reality.

Throughout the readings, there were frequent evocations of television’s relationship with (and presumed commitment to) “the real.” This relationship was often convoluted by a need to dress substance in art, eventually leading to a delicate balance between a socially-progressive (or at least aware) form of cinema-verité and an often profit-based drive to entertain (and therefore, sustain) the masses. According to McCarthy, “reality TV served as a place where popular culture and social science overlapped via a realist ideal in which social norms, mechanisms of conformity, ritualized scripts and modes of interaction were put on display.” (22) However, McCarthy further notes that executive producers, appreciative of the important social implications of this form of programming, were nonetheless concerned about the glaring “lack of art.”(25) This negotiation between scientific observation and artifice would later be resolved in the form of a castaway “dramality” where real people battle real challenges while evoking real emotions in the hopes of winning real cash.

Like many of its kindred programs, *Survivor*’s success is predicated largely on how well it fulfills its promise to represent “reality.” While it can never divorce itself from the acknowledged contrivance attributed to television in general, it anchors its claim as the paragon of televisual reality (“expect the unexpected”) on the unscripted (and therefore fundamentally unpredictable) (re)actions of its participants. While the institution of the Tribal Council, the physical challenges for Immunity and the carefully constructed demographic make-up of the participants strips any claims of classic cinema-verité, *Survivor*’s omnipresent surveillance of the participants assures that at the very least, the volatility of human emotion will remain genuine.

As a final note: my final project for this class involves critical analysis of how viewer reception of Aaron Sorkin’s inimitable drama *The West Wing* has affected popular notions of national identity and civic engagement. While Sorkin’s *West Wing* is posited as a liberal *fantasy* of a conservative administration, the easily palatable manner by which it presents an otherwise exclusive and complex institution has rendered it the primary reference for many viewers of how the Executive Branch operates. One could call it “couch-based fulfillment of civic duty,” which is innocuous at first until one begins to question a) if the drama’s depiction is indeed a *real* one and therefore worthy of being a pedagogical tool and b) does television have a responsibility to educate while it entertains? In representing reality, how real must “TV reality” be? And at the end of the day, is it really “just TV?”