



The Real Housewives of Orange County



Heidi and Spencer from The Hills



America's Next Top Model



Flavor of Love

THE SURREAL LIFE...

Q: Reality TV: harmful fluff or guilty pleasure? We asked Jennifer L. Pozner, author of *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV*, and Alannah O'Neill, a reality-TV junkie, to weigh in.

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Women are bitches. Women are stupid. Women are incompetent at work and failures at home. How do we know? Because reality TV tells us so. The media shapes and informs our ideas about people, politics and public policy. Just ask Mike Darnell, the bottom-feeding suit at Fox who brought us *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire*, *Joe Millionaire* and *Temptation Island*. The secret to his success, he once told *Entertainment Weekly*, is that his series are “steeped in some social belief.”

If, like most people, you think that reality TV is harmless fluff, Darnell's admission should give you pause. When it comes to women, the “social beliefs” that reality producers, writers and editors exploit are both anachronistic and toxic. So, what does reality TV want us to believe it means to be a “real” woman? According to a decade of “unscripted” (but carefully crafted) television, we're desperate, pathetic gold diggers who aren't happy without husbands. Here are three of the genre's most damaging tropes about women.

Women are...catty, manipulative bitches From frenemies on lifestyle series like *The Real Housewives*, *The Hills* and *Jersey Shore* to flat-out enemies on dating and beauty shows like *The Bachelor* and *America's Next Top Model*, reality TV presents women as being in constant competition for romantic love, professional success and personal fulfillment.

“We're all enemies, vying for the same prize,” says one *For Love or Money* dater of her sexed-up competitors. As proof, a parade of love-starved ladies badmouth one another to the lone Y chromosome in their midst. “Women tend to be jealous, catty and bitchy,” insists one of *Joe Millionaire's* so-called “gold diggers.” One angry *Bachelor* babe proclaims, “I know better than to trust women!” while another rants that “Girls can be conniving, deceiving and just vicious!” The lunkhead princes of such shows hardly hold their harems in higher esteem: “There is ▷



Bachelor Pad



The Bachelorette

nothing like a good catfight!” says Flavor Flav with a smirk on *Flavor of Love*; second-season *Bachelor* Aaron



Reality TV's original "dumb blondes" were Jessica Simpson from *Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica* and Anna Nicole Smith from *The Anna Nicole Show*.

grumbles, “The vindictive nature of all the women is starting to show.”

That’s right—all the women. It’s not unusual for the genre to reduce an entire gender to a few insulting adjectives. Women’s inherent cattiness is coded into promo commercials that plaster “BACKSTABBING!” in big, bold captions, while images of pretty babes are accompanied by feral, hissing soundtracks. “The claws were bound to come out,” promise announcers.

Editing also plays up regional and ethnic stereotypes. Stuck-up snobbery and betrayal among wealthy white women are major themes of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* and *The Real Housewives of New York City*. In contrast, Italian-American women throw “low-class” tantrums on *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, flipping over banquet tables and accusing each other of prostitution, while the African-Americans on *Real Housewives of Atlanta* get into verbal and physical brawls.

To ensure that women dutifully perform their bitch-tastic roles, producers egg them on with techniques that would make psychops intelligence officers proud. The same tactics that generate the genre’s oh-so-important “drama” (sleep deprivation, misinformation, constant surveillance, isolation from the outside world, minimal food, ubiquitous alcohol) are used as elements of torture. And so, they snipe away. They attack each other (“You are all a bunch of catty-ass bitches!” *Flavor of Love*), conspire like *Mean Girls* (“[She’s] a ho and she’s got to go,” *Joe Millionaire*) and mouth off in bleep-filled “confessionals” (“You f*cking worthless c*nt!” *America’s Next Top Model*). Whether the women are sloshed and overtired or sober and alert, such angry outbursts are stoked and edited to “prove” that no matter how sophisticated or sweet her facade, nearly every woman is a selfish schemer deep down.

Women are...stupid, ditzzy bimbos

Across unscripted subgenres, the female half of the population is portrayed as cringe-inducingly stupid. After all, we learn from *Bridezillas*’ Karen, “Thinking is a waste of time. Thinking is for people who have no brains.” When the genre’s gender templates were first being created, reality TV taught us that “dumb blondes” exist for our comedic pleasure. In 2002, the original reality-TV train wreck *The Anna Nicole Show* encouraged us to snicker at the steady mental and physical decline of a buxom, stoned former *Playboy* Playmate, whose slurred speech and erratic behavior fuelled the tag line “It’s not supposed to be funny. It just is.” Then came *The Newlyweds*’ Jessica Simpson, who led news outlets to report that the stereotype of the “dumb blonde” won’t go away because “maybe it’s true.”

Reality-TV producers cut their teeth on “dumb blondes” like Smith and Simpson, but they want viewers to believe that female stupidity knows no racial limits. On *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, NeNe Leakes was portrayed as a simpering idiot, unable to help her son with his math because she didn’t know if one-third was bigger or smaller than one-half. The only white woman, Kim Zolciak, couldn’t pass elementary English: When asked “How do you spell ‘cat’?” she replied “K-A-T.” Yet, during the show’s first season, viewers never learned about cast member DeShawn Snow’s postgraduate divinity studies. Why? Because filming an intelligent African-American woman pursuing a master’s degree would have broken producers’ preferred narrative: that black women (and their wealthy white friends) are gossipy idiots.

Sometimes, entire series are built around women’s supposed idiocy. On *Beauty and the Geek*, dim-witted hotties are paired ▷

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As I read Jennifer L. Pozner’s piece on the downsides to reality TV, my heart sank.

What did I get myself into? Why had I volunteered to defend my favourite guilty pleasure? You see, I love reality TV the same way I love red wine and big chocolate cupcakes: I consume without question. In fact, if I were to count the hours I’ve spent in front of *The Bachelor*, *The Amazing Race* and *The Real Housewives*, well, put it this way: My mother would probably tell me to “go outside and get some fresh air.”

I was a teenager when the reality boom hit. Roughly a couple thousand hours later, I’ve watched people date Flavor Flav, work for Diddy, get sober, fight, cry and fall in love, all from the comfort of my living room. I agree with Pozner’s take on how women are depicted. Still, a whole book could be written about how unfavourably men are portrayed on reality TV. From the oversexed clowns on *Jersey Shore* and *Bachelor Pad* to the villains of *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, “unscripted” television tells us that “real men” are buff and sexually promiscuous, don’t display emotion (other than anger) and, let’s face it, aren’t Mensa material. ▷

with briny, socially awkward boys and “teach” each other “valuable” life skills. The men instruct the women in science, grammar and geography. In return, the “beauties” teach the geeks how to choose good-ass jeans, construct the perfect pickup line and dazzle at parties with tidbits about Brangelina. The point of this “social experiment”? One gender’s knowledge is vital to the world, while the other has a lock on all things superficial.

Worse still, the few intellectual women who appear are reprimanded, as when Tyra Banks eliminated a med student from *America’s Next Top Model* because her intelligence was “intimidating.” Get that, girls? Your mind is a terrible thing to use.

Women are...wicked wives, weak workers and mediocre moms Reality TV has very clear, archaic notions about what a “woman’s place” is and what it isn’t. Women, the genre suggests ad nauseam, should be confined to their rightful realms of hearth and home (and, of course, hot tubs and strip clubs). But even when they escape network-approved domesticity, women still supposedly can’t perform their “natural” roles with any efficacy.

If we work outside the home for fulfillment or economic necessity, we’re slovenly housekeepers and bossy tyrants to wimpy husbands, or so says *Wife Swap*. We’re piss-poor parents to our out-of-control children on *Supermanny*. And, as *The Real Housewives* is meant to illustrate, women with money are horrid human beings who care more about their implants, mansions, galas and feuds than their kids, husbands, families and communities.

Boob power, not brainpower, is the real key to female success on *The Apprentice*, where female execs rely on their sexuality to compete against men’s “inherent” problem-solving abilities. Excelling in business is just one of many things that reality TV tells women we just can’t do. We can’t wait tables, milk cows or manage not to

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desecrate cremated ashes (*The Simple Life*). We can’t serve and protect (“Female officers put people’s lives at risk,” a husband tells his “new wife,” a cop, on *Wife Swap*). We can’t cook as delectably as men (only one *Top Chef* winner in six seasons has been female). We can’t even dress without embarrassing ourselves (*What Not to Wear*).

The bottom line...

Reality shows can be additively amusing—but, make no mistake, they’re

also deeply political. Their ideology mirrors *Mad Men* minus the cool clothes, and their producers routinely glorify and try to revive archaic gender stereotypes. Long-term exposure to tropes about women as stupid, incompetent, gold-digging bitches may begin to affect the way we see ourselves, our relationships to loved ones and co-workers and our own place in public and private life. If women are generally dumber than men, why hire or elect us, consider our concerns as citizens or respect us as equal life partners?

Young women and men who reached voting age this year would have been eight years old when *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire* arranged an on-air wedding between an unsuspecting bride and a groom with a restraining-order-tainted past. If they’ve had TVs in their homes (or on their computers), they’ve potentially consumed thousands of hours of programming that claims that “in reality,” female solidarity doesn’t exist, women’s inequality in the workplace and government is the result not of structural bias but of individual weakness and the most important thing a girl can do is look pretty. How can this help but poison our world view? So, the next time *The Bachelor* asks “Will you accept this rose?” consider the thorns. □

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While I doubt that a show about good Samaritans being nice to one another would be a ratings hit, I don’t believe that *schadenfreude* entirely explains reality TV’s addictive draw. It appeals to us because, at some level, it democratizes the star system. Case in point: Susan Boyle. The 49-year-old cat lady from Blackburn, Scotland, dreamed a dream and people all over the world fell for her. The antithesis to a sexualized pubescent pop star, this bushy-browed spinster became a top-selling artist and YouTube phenom.

But, while Boyle may be an exception, I don’t believe that Snooki, Bethenny or Brody have negatively changed how I see myself or altered my expectations of others. My boyfriend doesn’t do the Jersey-boy “GTLing,” but if he did, he’d be gone. No one I know in my “real” life behaves like a reality star. We understand that it’s manufactured low-brow drama we’re being fed. Olivia Palermo (*The City’s* resident villain) isn’t Lady Macbeth, and Spencer Pratt (*The Hills’* primo bad boy) isn’t Edmund from *King Lear*, but they are both highly entertaining. But, like anything wickedly delicious—and this includes red wine and cupcakes—a little moderation is called for. That said, when the next season of *The Bachelor* starts, I’ll definitely accept—thorns and all. ALANNAH O’NEILL