MINDING THE ENTHUSIASM GAP

BY ANDREW KASPAR

How progressive activists plan to get out the vote

PLUS

Jennifer L. Pozner on how reality TV bites
“Need” isn’t the issue. Improving people’s lives can be a happy side effect on some shows, as when Extreme Makeover built flood-damaged homes for Hurricane Katrina survivors, or when What Not to Wear gives single moms new wardrobes to help them dress for the job they want. But altruism is these shows’ feel-good tactic, not their purpose. The presentation of these gifts is about plugging the brand, and cultivating the idea that luxuries are the secret to happiness.

Extreme Makeover families weep with joy at the end of every episode, shielding viewers from problematic follow-ups: Exorbitant property taxes, building code violations and legal issues that lead to headlines such as, “With ‘Extreme Makeover’ Homes, Some Get Foreclosure Instead of Happy Ending.” The big reveal at the conclusion of What Not to Wear is as much ideological as visual. Made-over women’s former protestations about frugality, comfort, and nontraditional gender presentation vanish. By the end of the show, one stillette-clad foot after another, these Stepford Shoppers march to the same consumerist beat, raving about their newfound “shopping bug.”

Give them a piece of cake
At the opposite end of the reality TV spectrum, “do-gooder” programs promise to explore solutions to poverty—yet reinforce the flawed notion that America needs charity, not social change.

Reality TV’s ‘do-gooder’ programs promise to explore solutions to poverty—yet reinforce the flawed notion that America needs charity, not social change.
Potential stepmoms were welcomed to the California estate where they'd be living while dating divorcee Don Mueller on NBC's *Who Wants To Marry My Dad?* “This is our house,” said Mueller's son Chris.

Except it wasn’t.

Neither was the six-car garage or the $165,000 Ferrari Don drove on the show. Despite the entry sign that read “The Muellers” and the family photos on the walls, Don's family lives in a lovely, but hardly-palatial, Cincinnati house. The same bait-and-switch mansions and hot tubs were used on *Meet My Folks*.

Reality TV producers relocate “the folks” on such shows from their own modest homes to erase anything so banal as a middle- or working-class existence because integrated marketers prefer upscale homes as the sets where their products will be showcased. Reality TV coaches us to lust after the exorbitant lifestyles of trust fund brats on MTV’s *Paris Hilton’s My New BFF*, trophy wives on Bravo’s *Real Housewives* franchise and wealthy bachelors on *The Millionaire Matchmaker*. Watching the bad behavior of heiresses, *Housewives*, and bad-toupee-wearing moguls plays on Americans' twin desires to hate the rich for having what most of us don’t—and to be them.

From Fox’s *The Simple Life* to wedding-industrial complex series such as WeTV’s *Platinum Weddings*, reality TV has skewed our economic realities, overemphasizing the short-term pleasures of “having nice things” while hiding the long-term economic consequences of our nation’s overconsumption. “I don't understand saving for the rainy day,” celebrity stylist Rachel Zoe said earnestly on *The Rachel Zoe Project*. Never mind that Americans are drowning in debt—we need couture. “Live like it’s your last day, every day!” she urged.

By the end of 2009, while 34 million of us received food stamps, Bravo rolled out *NYC Prep*, profiling rich kids in “the top 1 percent” of the “elite.” As crippling healthcare costs continue to force hundreds of thousands into bankruptcy every year, E!’s *Dr. 90210* is always on call to provide costly cosmetic surgeries to wealthy women with body image issues. And just as millions were facing foreclosure, Bravo invited us to root for massive profits for real-estate speculators on *Million Dollar Listing*. Of course, there’s no acknowledgment that our protagonists here come from the same industry that gave us the collapse of the housing market.

On reality TV, low-income women's struggles to feed, clothe, shelter, and educate themselves and their kids become fodder for mockery. Broke, busty babes beg for a

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