



TELEVISION

On the fakeness of reality shows, how ‘the dumb bimbo’ is cast, and why actresses are shrinking

JENNIFER POZNER IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNE KINGSTON

JENNIFER POZNER is the director of Women In Media & News in New York City. Her book *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV* comes out next month.

Q: Why do you say it’s “bulls-t” that viewer demand has created the deluge of reality TV?

A: It’s true that some reality shows—*American Idol*, *The Bachelor*—have gotten high ratings, but many others languish with paltry ratings and they get to stay [on air] because these shows are really cheap to produce. It can cost about 50 per cent less—sometimes even 75 per cent less—to make a reality show than to make a quality scripted program.

Q: And they can also get advertisers to pay big money for stealth product placement.

A: Advertisers can pay millions of dollars per episode to integrate their products into the casting choices, the plot development, the dialogue, the scenery, the “challenges” of shows like *The Apprentice*. So every episode is basically one long infomercial.

Q: Do most people understand that what they’re watching is completely manufactured?

A: If you ask most people, “Do you think reality TV is real?” they’ll say, “Oh, no, no, I know it’s fake”—but in the next breath they’ll say, “Oh, but that bitch needed to get eliminated,” or, “Oh, but that guy was such a douchebag.” Well, if you think you know anything about any of the people you’ve seen on reality shows, you don’t know that the shows are not real. These shows aren’t any more real than *Mad Men*, without the cool clothes. But *Mad Men*, at least, is intentionally scripted to have a running critical commentary about the sexism and racism of the ’50s and early ’60s within the advertising industry.

Q: You argue that we need to readjust our definition of “scripted.”

A: Scripting doesn’t happen in the traditional sense of actors being given a 30-page manifesto to memorize. It starts with casting. Producers find people with addiction problems or anger problems, and think, “This will make great TV.” Women who are high achievers tend not to be cast. Women who are either sincerely “looking for their Prince Charming” or sincerely feeling down on their luck

do. After casting, they then edit people into stock characters: the dumb bimbo, the catty bitch, the weepy loser who says, “I’m going to die alone if the bachelor doesn’t choose me!” For women of colour those stock characters are even more extreme. Editing is the predominant way that scripting happens. People don’t understand that for every 45 minutes of *The Bachelor* they see, more than 100 hours of film have been shot.

Q: You write about “Frankenbites,” the industry term for splicing various conversations together to create a fraudulent new one.

A: One of the most controversial scenes on any reality show was in *Joe Millionaire*. Viewers watched about five minutes of trees in the dark, nothingness. But what you heard were things like, “Do you think it would go better lying down?” And there were captions like “slurp” and “mmm.” Those bits of conversation were from an entirely different day.

Q: Reality shows appear to exist in a bubble, completely disconnected from social reality.

A: What we see in reality television is the remarkable success of producers creating a

fictitious world that the most ardent fundamentalists have always tried to achieve: one in which women who have independence are scorned and will die alone, and in which the only role for fathers is financial provision—and if they are stay-at-home parents they're not real men. People of colour exist only as buffoons, thugs, and pimps. They want us to believe that the women's movement, the civil rights movement never existed.

Q: *You give the example of a black woman being axed from Real Housewives of Atlanta because she didn't fit producers' stereotypes.*

A: She was a divinity student studying for a Ph.D., she headed a foundation for girls' empowerment. We never saw her studying. The only thing we ever saw about her foundation was as an excuse for her to have problems throwing a

party. When they dropped her they told her, "You don't fly off the handle the way we need you to."

Q: *A catfight does generate more interest.*

A: By no means am I saying that these shows aren't compelling. They are. They basically offer all of the sniping and gossip and voyeurism of high school cliques and office gossip without feeling like we're affecting any real people. And if we're questioning whether or not we're being the best parents we can be, well, at least our families aren't self-destructing like Jon and Kate's. But [the appeal is] not just *schadenfreude*—there's a lot of humour. That's the biggest draw of *Jersey Shore*, that people behave ridiculously and it's funny to watch. The bigger question is why there's such a huge appetite for this prurient kind of thing. When this genre burst onto the scene with *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?*, there was the hugest public outcry: "Oh my God, this is so regressive." Ten years later it's a very different climate. News outlets basically just repeat the same big lies that reality TV producers sell.

Q: *And now Jon and Kate are "news," the argument being that people are interested.*

A: There's often a massively financed campaign to get us to believe in the appearance of spontaneous collective interest. For example, *Survivor* existed to test the new Infinity-Viacom-CBS merger, to test the power of cross-platform promotion. So for months before that show appeared, shock jocks on FM stations would wake people up with, "There's going to be this show with cute chicks in bikinis eating bugs. You gotta check it out."

And then you could turn to your news station and find Mark Burnett being interviewed about a new format in which advertisers and networks work together to bring us unscripted content, and then when you get home, *60 Minutes* was talking about it. Nobody was talking about that show who wasn't on CBS's, Viacom's and Infinity's payroll. And then there were embedded sponsors, the *Survivor* logo on Doritos, so it seemed like if you were not watching *Survivor*, you were missing out on a massive cultural phenomenon.

Q: *Why do you cite Project Runway and The Amazing Race as examples of higher-quality fare?*

A: The reason so many people love *Project Runway* is because it's not based on humiliation, it's based on validating artistic endeavour. But people are wondering why this season seems to

pointing at bellies, when somebody basically ate a bagel that day. This was not the case when media companies cared about profit but also, in a measured way, about the quality of their content. So in the '80s you had shows like *Beverly Hills 90210*, in which the girls basically looked like thin but healthy young women. Fast forward after Telecom '96 to the current show *90210*—almost every single girl looks unhealthily skinny.

Q: *Why do you say violence against women is part of the subtext and text of reality shows?*

A: On *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?*, the guy who was considered the crown prince had a restraining order against him. Flavor Flav had charges against him for domestic violence, and yet he gets three seasons of a dating show. And then you have shows like *America's Next Top Model*, which have repeatedly used images of women in pain and even in coffins in challenges in which they're supposed to pose as murder victims while judges say things like, "Beautiful! You look great

dead." Two summers ago Ryan Jenkins got voted off *Megan Wants a Millionaire*, went home, then allegedly killed his ex-girlfriend, mutilated her body, and then killed himself. Lots of reporters called me and asked, "Has reality TV created a monster?" My answer was, "No, they cast a monster, and they should have known that because he had a record for domestic violence."

Q: *Is reality programming the new reality?*

A: If we continue to allow media companies to let



'The Bachelor': Women who are high achievers tend not to be cast

feature so much more backbiting and stereotyping. With *The Amazing Race*, while there is quite a bit of cultural reduction and sometimes inaccuracy, that show brings cultures from across the world—that we never hear about in any other context in America—into [our] living rooms.

Q: *Explain why you see a link between the [U.S.] Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the shrinking size of actresses.*

A: Telecom '96 happens [and] media companies merge at a much faster rate than ever before, and we see the introduction of really cheap-to-produce tabloids, both print and TV, that do very little more than follow celebrity women around shaming them about their bodies. All of these "Baby Bump?" arrows

market forces define everything to the point where quality means nothing and the economics behind production is 100 per cent of the priority, then every season will have more provocative, more bigoted fare. For example, *Bridalplasty* is about to debut: cosmetic surgery given to brides who compete to get procedures while they plan their wedding. We've had *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*. So what can they do to make it even more disgusting? Oh, let's merge the wedding-industrial-complex shows with the cosmetic-surgery-is-liberating-for-women shows. They have to go further and further, more racist, more misogynistic, more over-the-top. We will see more of that if we don't become very critical very quickly. ♣