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## Reality Television: Trash or Thought-Provoking Form of Entertainment?

I love watching the Emmy awards. I, however, usually become aggravated when the awards for reality television are presented. The presenters are encouraged to rush through the obligatory awkward banter as quickly as possible and those who receive awards are barely given the chance to give a proper acceptance speech.

I understand that most people watching the Emmys probably think that the reality television category is insignificant – after all, reality television has been stereotyped as a television genre consisting of so-called trash that emphasizes sensationalism and the exploitation of individuals. I, however, would argue that reality television as a whole has been given a reputation that it doesn't fully deserve.

Unfortunately, it is true that many reality programs – such as *Honey Boo Boo* and *Jersey Shore* – are created with the sole purpose to exploit human beings and depict them in the most unflattering way possible. There are, however, reality shows with much more depth than *Jersey Shore* and feature characters that are much more interesting than the love-crazed lemmings on *The Bachelor* or the cringe-worthy psychopaths on *Bridezilla*.

For example, the reality television shows *Survivor* and *Big Brother* have, for over ten years, given viewers the opportunity to observe the attributes of human nature and behavior while being entertained at the same time. Admittedly, these shows

accomplished this to a much stronger degree in the early years of their existence; during the first several seasons of both programs, the contestants were noticeably behaving much more candidly in front of the cameras than in some of their more recent seasons.

Nevertheless, *Survivor* and *Big Brother* continue to examine the ways in which humans interact with one another when surrounded by a diverse population as well as inspect how ideas of moral right and wrong become twisted once people are put into stressful, high-pressure situations. In both programs, at the end of each season a “jury” consisting of voted out contestants individually vote for who they want to win the game. Each member’s decision will usually come down to a simple question: Do I want to reward someone because they made smart and strategic decisions or because they remained loyal and honest to those who helped them in the game? Subsequently, viewers are encouraged to think about how important of a role morals such as loyalty and honesty play in their own lives and about whether deception is ever acceptable or justifiable.

Another reality television show that exhibits a level of complexity and depth regarding the human condition is *The Biggest Loser*. At first glance, many might dismiss *The Biggest Loser* as a show meant to expose the health problems of America in a cruel and unjust way – after all, each contestant is required to endure the unsettling task of standing on a scale each week while their weight is broadcast to the world. Despite this, I believe that the goal that the show hopes to achieve is not to ridicule

and condemn the overweight population of North America. Several of the people I know who watch *The Biggest Loser* often talk about how emotionally moved they become when they see the contestants persistently trying to reach their goals and lose weight for the benefit of their families and themselves, regardless of the obstacles that these contestants have to overcome in order to do so.

The contestants on *The Biggest Loser* are not portrayed as stupid or lazy “typical Americans” – they are portrayed in a way that may even be considered heroic, for these people achieve success by defeating the doubt and fear that lies within them. Think about all of the reality television shows that you watch or at least hear about on a regular basis; you need look no further than your TV guide to realize that several reality shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, *Little People*, *Big World*, and even *American Idol* feature ordinary people succeeding and striving to reach a certain goal. These are the television shows that inspire the common viewer to work diligently in order to achieve their own goals and to overcome their own issues, thus allowing them to contribute to society to a further extent and increase their level of self-esteem. Yet another way in which reality television positively affects viewers – are you seeing a pattern here?

If that wasn't enough to convince you that reality television isn't as horrible as people claim it to be, some reality television shows have also sparked public interest in previously little-known topics and have made the public more aware of certain issues in society. For instance, when *The Real World* – a television show based on the

premise of taking people from very diverse backgrounds and seeing how they interact – first premiered, it greatly increased public awareness of subjects ranging from AIDS and homosexuality to childhood abuse and depression. Negative and inaccurate stereotypes that viewers of *The Real World* had developed about certain societal groups were challenged and often proven wrong.

Though it is questionable how “real” the behavior of each participant was when they were in front of a camera, the level of emotion and passion they exhibited on the show makes this irrelevant. Regardless of whether the cast members were being completely truthful when they vented about the hardships that they endured, people who watched *The Real World* in the 1990s – as well as those who continue to watch it today – became emotionally affected when they saw participants talking openly about their experiences. Thus, viewers were encouraged to develop a greater level of empathy for those in society who were struggling in some way. While soap operas and dramas also regularly depict controversial and sometimes unsettling topics, the fact that *The Real World* is about real people as opposed to fictional characters allows the show to have a much more drastic emotional effect on those who watch it.

I should make myself clear: I’m not trying to deny the fact that many reality television shows are created in order to exploit and humiliate the people who appear on them. It doesn’t take an expert to understand that *I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* and *Dance Moms* aren’t exactly prime examples of television at its finest. There are some reality television shows, however, that are complex and effective in the way

that they generate strong reactions among the television viewing audience and allow them to gain insight into society and human nature. Isn't good television meant to instill powerful emotions within us and make viewers react strongly to what they are observing? Shouldn't a good television program also be able to make those who watch it learn or realize something new about society or themselves? Several reality television shows do just that, and it is unjust that the reality television genre as a whole is stereotyped as being low-quality, poorly conceived and uninspired – innovative, thought-provoking reality shows *do* exist, and it is only fair that they receive the proper credit and recognition that they deserve. So when you sit down to watch the Emmy awards ceremony when it is broadcast in about a year or so, consider paying closer attention than usual when the reality television awards are presented. Though it is inevitable that the presentation of awards will be rushed as usual, I will at least sleep more soundly knowing that someone out there is giving the reality television genre some of the respect it merits.