

# Reality TV: Truth behind the Lens?

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The Norman Lear

**CENTERTAINMENT**

Exploring Implications of the Convergence of Entertainment, Commerce, and Society

## Reality TV: Truth behind the Lens?

The Spring, 2004 Spectrum Lecture was provided by Lear Center senior fellow, Neal Gabler, the author of *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* and *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*.

### USC Spectrum Lectures

One of the genuine advantages of attending a residential university is the opportunity it affords to join the community of scholars and engage pressing questions and contemporary issues. At USC, the Spectrum Speakers Series promotes this intellectual tradition by inviting knowledgeable yet diverse thinkers to address a common theme and to initiate a discourse that will carry over from the auditorium to the residence hall and classroom.

### The Norman Lear Center

Based at the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. Through scholarship and research; through its programs of visiting fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.

### Neal Gabler

Neal Gabler, senior fellow at the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, is an author, cultural historian and film critic. His first book, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. His second book, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity*, was named non-fiction book of the year by *Time* magazine. His most recent book is *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, and he is currently at work on a biography of Walt Disney. Gabler held fellowships from the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center and the Guggenheim Foundation and taught at the University of Michigan and at Pennsylvania State. He graduated *summa cum laude* from the University of Michigan and holds advanced degrees in film and American culture.

### Martin Kaplan

The director of the Lear Center is Martin Kaplan, associate dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication. A *summa cum laude* graduate of Harvard, a Marshall Scholar to Cambridge University, and a Stanford PhD, he has been an Aspen Institute program officer; a federal education staffer; a Vice President's chief speechwriter; a Washington journalist in print, television and radio; a deputy presidential campaign manager; a Disney Studios vice president of motion picture production and a film and television writer and producer. His film credits include *The Distinguished Gentleman*, which he wrote and executive produced and *Noises Off*, directed by Peter Bogdanovich, which he adapted for the screen.

### 3 THE NORMAN LEAR CENTER Reality TV: Truth Behind the Lens?

**Martin Kaplan:** Good evening. I am not Paris Hilton. I am Marty Kaplan. I'm the associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communications, and I'd like to welcome you all here this evening.

Why are you here? Why am I here? You're here because USC wants you to have a common experience, something in addition to, say, watching the Super Bowl on Sunday. Something with a little intellectual depth and content that can be part of your lives together with other members of your class, that can be a topic for something in your writing course, in your social issues course, maybe even the basis of a pickup line, if we're lucky.

This is the first of a couple of these events which you'll be going to, and the topic tonight is "Reality TV." To talk about it we're extremely fortunate – the reason I have the privilege to introduce our speaker is that he is a senior fellow of the Norman Lear Center, which I direct. The Lear Center starts with the premise that entertainment has conquered every other realm of modern life. So whether you are in journalism, or politics, or poetry, or religion or architecture, the need to grab and hold the attention of an audience is at the center of your life.

Our speaker tonight is somebody who was a pioneer in thinking about the way in which entertainment has conquered reality. In fact, one of his books is called *Life, the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*.

Here's the way the evening will work. Would you all look at your watches, please? You will be out of here by 8:15. There will be two elements between now and then. One is the talk, one is the question and answer session. We'll have, I hope, ten or fifteen minutes of questions and answers. There are microphones both down here and up there for you to ask questions. Please don't be shy.

#### 4 THE NORMAN LEAR CENTER Reality TV: Truth Behind the Lens?

Our speaker tonight, who I mentioned is a senior fellow of the Lear Center, is also the author of a number of books about entertainment. One is a biography of Walter Winchell, one of the great gossip columnists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He's currently working on a biography, which will, I'm sure, be known as *the* biography, of Walt Disney. He is extraordinarily interesting and passionate, and I think you will be challenged and you will find lots of ways to connect with what he has to say. Please join me in welcoming Neal Gabler.

#### Neal Gabler:

Thank you very much, Marty. I thank you for being here, but I know that you're a captive audience and you have to be here. I feel a little like Saddam Hussein lording over the prison. But nevertheless, even though I know you have to be here and even though you will be out by 8:15, I still appreciate the fact that you're here at this time of great decision in this country, at this time of great choice in this country, at this time when we are determining the movement of this country and the direction of this country.

I refer not to the primaries but to Larissa having to make the choice between the average Joes and the hunks. Because it's a mighty, mighty big decision here as to whether she picks David, the mailroom employee with the long hair or one of those hunky guys. David thinks he's got a chance and I think it's ridiculous, but he's living in "unreality television."

The *Daily Trojan* this morning headlined that I blasted reality TV, and I'm not going to do that at all. I will make very, very few aesthetic judgments about that. There is, as you no doubt know, a feeling in the country, primarily among your parents and other people who are morally disapproving, that you've really got to be a moron to like these shows, that watching these programs and enjoying them is a sign of some kind of mental feebleness.

I don't believe that. In fact, I'll even let you in on a little secret, a little cultural secret. The secret is, for as long as there has been popular culture in this country, there have been people who have told the American people that they are idiots, that they're illiterate and that they're stupid for enjoying trash culture. And for as long as there's been a popular culture in this country, there has been a desire for and an appreciation of trash novels, trash plays, trash music, you name it—things that don't pass muster with the commissars of culture. And the idea is, of course, that American culture, American popular culture, is a demonstration of American stupidity.

I think, in fact, that the embrace of trash, whether it was dime novels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or trashy movies early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or reality TV now, is not a sign of idiocy but rather that there is a cause and effect relationship between those who disapprove of these things and those who embrace them. The cause and effect relationship is that in a world where we are always being told what's good for us, where we're always being told what we ought to like, where we're always being told that classical music is great, and high literature is great, and high drama is great, we have the last laugh. And that in enjoying, consuming trash, and I use that word descriptively not aesthetically, what we're doing is thumbing our nose at all of those people who are telling us what we're supposed to like.

In short, we consume these things because we're told they're bad for us. It's our form of rebellion, our way of repossessing a culture from which we have been dispossessed. So what you're engaged in is something that's actually kind of clever, though your parents don't get the joke.

So in discussing reality TV tonight, I'm not interested in whether these things are good. I could not care less. Some are actually halfway decent,

some aren't. What I'm interested in is what these things say about us. Why we watch them. How they sink a drill, an analytical drill, into American culture. Those are the things in which I'm interested.

Now, there's no question whatsoever that reality TV is a phenomenon in this country. I don't have to tell you that. And in fact, I have a list here of the programs that are classified as reality TV.

And if you bear with me, I want to read through this list : *30 Seconds of Fame, Airline, All-American Girl, Amazing Race I, Amazing Race II, Amazing Race III, Amazing Race IV, American Idol I, American Idol II, American Idol III, American Juniors, America's Next Top Model, The Anna Nicole Show, Anything for Love, The Apprentice, Are You Hot?* (remember *Are You Hot?* Lorenzo Lamas and that darn pointer as he went up and down the anatomy of these humiliated women. You know that some day Lorenzo Lamas is going to wind up on *Celebrity Mole* or *The Surreal Life*. His career is headed right in that direction), *Average Joe, Average Joe: Hawaii, Average Joe: Adam Returns, The Bachelor I, The Bachelor II, The Bachelor III, The Bachelor IV, The Bachelor V, The Bachelorette I, The Bachelorette II, Beg, Borrow and Deal, Big Brother I, Big Brother II, Big Brother III, Big Brother IV, Big Brother Africa, Boarding House, North Shore*. (Yet, we don't have *Big Brother Antarctica* yet, but I think they're working on it.) *Boot Camp, Boy Meets Boy, But The Sex is So Good, Canadian Idol, Celebrity Mole: Hawaii, Celebrity Mole: Yucatan, Change of Heart, Combat Missions, Cupid, Dance Fever, The Dating Experiment, Dog Eat Dog, Dream Job, Echo Chamber, Extreme Makeover, Extreme Makeover: The Home Edition, Fame, The Family, Family Business, Fear Factor, For Better or For Worse, For Love or Money I, For Love or Money II, High School Reunion, Hooked Up, House Rules, I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here!, The It Factor, Jackass, Joe Millionaire, The Joe Schmo Show, Last Comic Standing, The Last Resort, Little Black Book, Liza and David* (never made it to the air but it was

planned—that’s Liza Minnelli and her ex-husband, David Gest. Yeah, that would have been a comedy, wouldn’t it?), *Looking for Love*, *Love Cruise*, *Love Shack*, *Making the Band*, *Married by America*, *Meet My Folks*, *The Mole I*, *The Mole II*, *Mr. Personality* (remember, with Monica Lewinsky?), *Murder in Small Town X*, *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiance* (you know, that’s not a bad one), *My Life is a Sitcom*, *Nashville Star*, *Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica* (tuna will never be the same), *The Next Action Star*, *The Next Joe Millionaire*, *No Boundaries*, *The Osbournes*, *Paradise Hotel*, *Pepsi Play for a Billion*, *Perfect Match*, *New York*, *Performing As*, *Project Greenlight*, *Push, Nevada*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Race to the Altar*, *The Real Roseanne Show*, *The Real World*, *The Real World: Paris*, *The Real World: San Diego*, *The Restaurant*, *Rich Guy*, *Poor Guy*, *Rich Girls*, *Food Rules*, *Road Rules*, *The South Pacific*, *Scare Tactics*, *The Search for the Most Haunted Kid in America*, *Second Chance*, *America’s Most Talented Senior* (you mean you didn’t all watch that one?), *Sex in the Itty Bitty City*, *Shipmates*, *The Simple Life*, *Sorority Life*, *Star Search*, *Starting Over*, *Surf Girls*, *The Surreal Life*, *The Surreal Life II*, *Survivor*, *Survivor Australian Outback*, *Survivor Africa*, *Survivor Marqueses*, *Survivor Thailand*, *Survivor Amazon*, *Survivor Pearl Islands*, and this week after the Super Bowl, *Survivor All-Stars*, *Temptation Island I*, *Temptation Island II*, *Temptation Island III*, *There’s Something About Miriam*, *’Til Death Do Us Part: Carmen and Dave*, *Todd TV*, *Tough Enough*, *Trading Moms*, *Trading Spaces*—this next one brings a tear to my eye, I’m going to have to pause for a moment, if you’ll bear with me, because it’s *Trista and Ryan’s Wedding*. Oh, that was moving – which was more moving? The little boy in the car or when they mixed the sand on the altar? Oh, my gosh! That tugged at my heart strings—*Under One Roof*, *The Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show*, *The Weakest Link*, *While You Were Out*, *Who Wants to Marry My Dad* and *World Idol*.

Now, you may notice something from that list if you are observant, and I’m told that you are a very observant crowd. And that is that there’s absolutely

nothing in common in the some hundred shows. Now, we talk about reality TV, but you look at these programs and what does one really have to do with another and why this list and not some other list?

Why not, if you're going to put on some of these quiz shows, why not *The Price is Right*, or *Jeopardy* or why not sports? You know, sports are the greatest reality show of all. It's real, unless there are certain boxing matches that may be fixed, or wrestling. Why not the news? The news is allegedly reality. Why not the war in Iraq, when those embedded reporters were broadcasting back to us? It's reality.

This is a very inexact terminology. But I'll let you in on another little secret here about this terminology. That is that there really is no such thing as reality TV, at least not by this definition. Now, having said that, that doesn't mean that you can head for the exits because I'm going to keep going on anyway. When you talk about reality you usually mean one of two things. You usually mean this is my reality and you mean that this is what you do day in and day out. By that standard, virtually none of these shows is a reality program. Now, I admit I may have lived a very sheltered existence, but I know of no one who eats pig testicles, or eats worms or does any of the things that people do on *Fear Factor*. It's not part of my reality. Now, your generation may have a different reality and I'm willing to concede that.

I don't really know, to be perfectly frank, and I hate to say this because I wish it were part of my reality, but I really don't remember, even when I was your age, that you meet somebody—in fact, you barely meet somebody—you'd walk into a room and there would be a beautiful girl. And you'd say, "My name is so and so," and two minutes later you'd be French-kissing or jumping into a hot tub. And yet, that's the reality, and a great deal, of so-called reality television. You don't even have to know the

person's name before you're smooching away and jumping into that hot tub, and on some shows doing more than that. So that notion of reality doesn't seem exactly appropriate.

Now, there's another sense in which we use reality. We talk about something being the real thing, by which we mean it's genuine, it's authentic. Now this one might say comes a little closer to the mark of what the so-called reality programs are. They're not everyday reality, not even something like *The Osbournes* is everyday reality because it leaves out so much of the Osbournes' life. In fact, it leaves out a lot of the good stuff. But by this sense you might say, "Okay, it's the real thing, it's genuine." There's a lot of phoniness out there, this is real. But even that, though I say it's closer to the mark, is not exactly on the mark because so much of this reality isn't genuine. I think of one of my favorite characters in all of these reality programs is Elaine from *The Bachelor*. Well, you may remember that poor Elaine was chosen by Aaron as his girl at the end of, I believe it was, *The Bachelor III*. And he got down on one knee, which you're supposed to do, and said "Honey, I've gone through all of these girls, and you're the one for me, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I've got this ring that ABC bought for me that I can give to you, and I'll put it on your finger, and we're going to live happily ever after." And you blubber, and she says, "Oh Aaron, I love you, and blah, blah, blah."

And it was so sweet, it was like Trista and Ryan all over again. And it just warmed the cockles of my heart to watch it but there was a problem here. Elaine believed that Aaron was going to marry her. She subscribed to the idea that this was real. Aaron, being a guy, said, "What, are you nuts?" And so, after that three-month period, because they tape these shows and then for three months they're not supposed to see one another because somebody might spot them together and that would blow the end of the show. So after that three-month period they finally get together, and as

Elaine tells it on an ABC special which had Trista and Ryan on one half, and Aaron and Elaine on the other, Elaine says, "We were together, spending the weekend together in Toronto, and I noticed he started looking at other women. And I said to him, 'How can you be looking at other women, you're engaged to me, we're going to be married. I've got your ring on my finger.' To which he said, 'Well, I'm reconsidering.'" And she goes on the air and starts crying and pouring out her soul because it turned out it wasn't real. It wasn't real. It wasn't genuine. It wasn't authentic. It was wrong.

So in some ways we have to think of a different terminology for this besides "reality." Some people call it "unscripted television," but so many of these shows have, if not lines that each individual reads, nevertheless situations that are devised, and so there is a kind of overall script—*Survivor* has situations, those situations are scripted.

Some people call it "non-professional television," meaning that the people on it aren't professional actors, but there are shows like *Joe Schmo*, where everybody is an actor aside from the schmo, or my *Big Fat Obnoxious Fiance*, where the main character in the show is an actor, so you can't really say that they're unprofessional. Some people may say you can call this kind of programming "midriff programming," because almost every show features prominently a woman's midriff, but I don't think that that's a more accurate way of looking at it.

The one thing that seems, in some loose way, to yoke all of these things is the notion that they are not predetermined. That the characters, or the performers, or the participants, or whatever the heck you want to call them, their actions are not already written or determined, or told, or whatever. But they are essentially, to some degree at least, autonomous on these shows. They will make determinations, or the audience will make a

determination as in the case of *American Idol*. But somehow a scriptwriter, a director, a studio executive, a network executive is not making those determinations. And that's really important, I think, in understanding how these things function and what we respond to, whether it's subliminally or overtly.

There are a lot of people who say, "Why is there so much reality TV on television?" Simple. To make an episode of a dramatic series like *ER*, which is the most expensive program on television, it costs somewhere in the vicinity of \$15 million per episode—per episode! To make something like *Friends*, just think about it, each one of the friends—no wonder they're so friendly—they make over \$1 million per episode—per episode. Even a brand-new sitcom with actors who are not prominent yet, who haven't made it, costs somewhere in the vicinity of \$2 million per episode.

But now you've got a situation where you have no professional actors, no real script writers, no sets, none of all of that stuff that you have to buy. And so people say, "Well, of course, reality programming is cheap to produce." But that doesn't explain something. You don't care how much a show costs when you decide to watch it. You don't sit there and say, "Ah, I want to watch this show. 'Hey, you guys, watch this show. It's cheap. It didn't cost anything.'" You can't care less how much a show costs.

So to my mind, that begs the question of how these shows operate. I think, in fact, there's another mechanism at work, and it is particularized to you. Remember that you are the target for these shows. Networks don't care about people like me. They think I'm an old fart, they don't care, they don't want my money, they don't want my eyes, they don't want me at all. They want you. They want people aged 18 to 34. They want, particularly, males aged 18 to 34, because they believe that males 18 to 34 watch less television than anybody else, and therefore, they've got to find some way

to get you to watch television so they can sell you products. So that's what they want, and to get you to watch they have to somehow resonate off of things that you feel, and one of the things you feel is that you have grown up in a nexus of manipulation and falseness and phoniness. You are a skeptical bunch. I've got a couple of you myself, roughly your age, so I know. You know that you can't really trust anything out there, that everybody is trying to sucker you, and everybody is trying to get you somehow. You were born in skepticism, you live in skepticism and that's led to something else, I think. I don't want to overstate this case, but to a certain extent your generation has a harder time suspending your disbelief.

With reality television, there's no suspension of disbelief. It's something that people like me have to deploy if we're watching a movie or a television show. The idea is, "Look, I'm watching this movie, or I'm watching this show, I know these people are actors, they're not really in love, they're not really fighting, they're not really doing all of these things," but if I had the consciousness as I watched the movie or the television show that they're not real, that they're not really doing these things, ultimately it's going to ruin my experience.

And so I suspend my disbelief and I pretend that they're real. I pretend that Dr. Carter is a real doctor on *ER*. Or that Seth on *The OC* is a real student. You can make those kinds of suspensions, but your generation doesn't want to do that because in some ways to suspend your disbelief is to buy into another form of manipulation. And in some ways conventional television, conventional sitcoms, conventional dramas on TV, conventional programs of all sorts are almost a metaphor for you guys, a metaphor for the kinds of manipulations and falseness that you've lived with all your life.

And what you're looking for, what I believe you're seeking, and what I believe that reality TV is tapped into, is some search for something that is

genuine, something that is different than conventional television, that conventional television is tired and it's empty and it's phony.

Reality TV, if you look at it from an aesthetic standpoint, is very interesting because if you were taking a screenwriting course and you were to list the kind of elements that a good screenplay would have, you'd find that if you apply those elements to reality TV, it's surprising how many of those elements reality TV not only has but how it punches them up, punches them up more than conventional entertainment. For example, take suspense. Suspense is a basic component of entertainment. I'm not talking just about thrillers. I'm talking about the whole idea of what's going to happen next? I really wonder what's going to happen. That's one of the reasons you keep on reading a book, you keep on watching television, you keep on watching movies, you want to know what's going to happen next, I wonder what's going to happen next?

In reality television nobody really knows what's going to happen next because it's really unfolding. Since it's not predetermined you don't really know. When you think about reality TV a few years ago, there was a Web site that was enormously popular. It was a guy who had his house outfitted with cameras. It turned out he worked for the company that made the cameras. He had a camera in every room of his house and he was online all the time so if you clicked on the site, which millions of people did, myself included, you could look at him in whatever room he was in. Now, I'll tell you right off the bat that his wife forbade the cameras from being in the bedroom, and so there was none of that. This wasn't voyeuristic in that sense. Now why did millions of people, myself included, occasionally click on for ten or fifteen minutes to see a guy who most of the time just sat at his desk or dangled his baby on his knee or watched TV? One minute he's sitting at the desk, two minutes he's sitting at the desk, three minutes he's sitting at the desk, four, five minutes later he's sitting at the desk. Why?

Because you never knew what was going to happen next. It may just be that he was coughing. It may just be that he was getting up to go to the bathroom. It may just be that he was turning the channel. But you never knew because nothing was predetermined. He could collapse of a heart attack. Somebody could jump in the house and kill him. You never knew. Suspense.

Also identification. In a screenwriting class, they say, "You've got to identify with the characters." I don't have to go on to tell you that in reality TV these are allegedly real people who can identify with them. They're average Joes, they're Joe Schmos, they're people allegedly like you and me, except for the hunks and the babes. But all the rest of them are allegedly real people—real people and personal trainers. (Have you ever noticed how half the people on reality programs are personal trainers? This is a profession I warn you off of, it looks like it's already filled.)

Compression—all drama is based on compression. If you just watch life unfold, it unfolds endlessly until somebody dies. So all drama has to compress, and one of the things you get on reality TV is an enormous amount of compression. Take any of the romance shows. Now, ordinarily the course of romance as you and I both know, or you'll find out as I know, you meet somebody, you go on a few dates, you learn about them. You spend months and months and months getting to know them. And then, finally, if it clicks and everything goes right at some point six months later, one year later, eighteen months later, you ask a person to marry you if you're a guy, you accept if you're a girl, and that's the course of true love. Not on reality TV! Not only are they French-kissing after they've known one another for five seconds, but within six weeks they're getting married, or at least they're purportedly getting married because we know that only one couple has ever really gotten married, the beloved Trista and Ryan. But at least that's the idea. Compression. Everything happens really, really quickly.

In the music business you may be working years and years, hoping to get a break. On *American Idol*, in a few weeks you go from nothing to everything. Compression. Bingo! We love that, we love that idea, everything being compressed, everything happening so fast. We're impatient, we can't wait—make it happen. I don't want to wait five months, I don't want to wait eighteen months to fall in love. I don't want to wait six weeks, six weeks is too long. I don't want to wait three years to see if my career takes off. Do it now! Now! Now! Now! Reality TV gets there now!

Stakes. You're writing a screenplay, so you've got to have stakes. Something has to be at stake. *Lord of the Rings*—the entire world is at stake unless the Hobbits can get that ring and throw it in. Mankind is wiped out—the highest stakes. *Cold Mountain*—he's got to get back there, he's got to go and he walked a billion miles so he can get back to Cold Mountain, and she's going to die of a broken heart, and he's got to do it. Stakes. Stakes in everything.

But those stakes are phony. Those stakes are manipulative. On reality TV the stakes are allegedly real. Two people really fall in love. Two people really make a million dollars. Two people really eat pig guts. It's real. It really happens. It raises the stakes.

Voyeurism—and I'm going to talk about this somewhat parenthetically because it's almost a given—but when these shows first came on the air in this country, they were imported from Europe. One of the very first was a show in Holland called *Big Brother* which was, as you know, imported here. It became a phenomenon all across Europe. Now, why did it become a phenomenon? What was the big deal about throwing a bunch of people into a house? I presume you know how the show operates, a bunch of

people live in a house, and they vote people out. Why was it such a big deal? I'll tell you why it was such a big deal, because there were men and women living in this house. And in Europe, though not in America because we're very puritanical, the people would copulate. And you could watch them "do it" on the air, and if you wanted to go online you could watch them copulate online. And the audience developed a rooting interest for who was going to hookup on the show. And it became enormously popular in Holland and Germany, throughout Europe, as you watched who was going to make love with whom. What partner is going to windup with what partner?

Voyeurism is a staple of these shows. You don't have a woman on reality TV unless she's almost undressed. You don't have a guy on reality TV, unless it's one of the average Joes or the big fat obnoxious fiance, unless they have a six pack. So much of this is about sex. So much of it is about sex, but because the sex seems real, because the people really kiss, because they really may hookup, because they really may marry, there's a component that you don't get in conventional television.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is that sense of authenticity. It's all real. And you can't overestimate how important this is. Take something like *The Jamie Kennedy Experiment*, which is not considered a reality show, but I don't know why. Now, let's assume for a moment that on *The Jamie Kennedy Experiment* that Jamie is playing one of his tricks, as he always does, on some poor unsuspecting schmo. But now the schmo is not some poor unsuspecting ordinary person like you or me, but he's an actor who is on the joke. The script is exactly the same. The same things happen, but there's nothing funny about it. There's nothing funny about playing out the same situation if it's all predetermined. It's only funny because it's authentic, because it's not predetermined. The entertainment value is purely in the authenticity of the event and nowhere

else. That idea is fundamental, because ultimately so-called reality programming or non-predetermined programming or autonomous programming, whatever you want to call it, has a fundamental theme and that theme is authenticity versus inauthenticity. What you see versus what is. Appearance versus truth. And this is a theme with deep, deep bloodlines in American culture.

Europe has much stricter social hierarchies than the United States. The class lines are much stricter. You know, or at least you used to know, who belongs to what class. But in this great experiment of ours, one of the elements of genius in this culture, is the fluidity between classes, and the idea that even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century you couldn't tell just by looking at somebody who they were, or what they were. This was a society in which one always had to rely on appearance, but be suspicious of appearance.

And you know that yourself. You know that the clothes you wear don't necessarily reveal who you are, that appearances can lie, that we're always out there performing, in a sense. That we're always putting on a show and your generation, I think, is more self-conscious about self-presentation than any previous generation. You guys get it. You know what it's all about. You know what role-playing is. You know how to get an effect.

That's an idea that's deep in America. You look at the novels of Henry James, and at some point you will probably, if you take English courses. And what is Henry James largely about? He's about the idea that you've got Europe, which is kind of affected and interested in appearances and in aesthetics, and then you've got Americans and Americans are true and kind and honest and moral and decent. I've got Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, which is as much as anything a novel about appearances, about Gatsby remaking himself from J. Gats to the Great Gatsby by putting on the right clothes, by living in the right mansion.

We live in a world and in a culture where we're always asking ourselves what's true and what isn't? What can we trust and what can't we trust? And your generation is probably more sensitive to this notion than any other. And now we have reality programming and reality programming is the disposition on this very issue. Look at the shows. Look at something like *The Simple Life*. What is *The Simple Life* really about? It's not just about two morons who go to the country, though it may seem like that. It's about two morons who live in a weird aestheticized reality that those poor farm people can't possibly live in. They recognize that Nicole and Paris are different and that they live differently and that they relate to the camera differently and that they're always "on," that they're never "off." They know that and they live in a different kind of a reality, a kind of everyday reality that is nothing like what Paris and Nicole have.

And part of the fun of the show is not just Nicole and Paris being so inept, but also the poor farm people trying to see if they can negotiate their way into that aestheticized world where they can be with Paris and with Nicole, while their girlfriends are saying "What, are you guys nuts? Don't you get this? Don't you see what that world is? Don't you see it's unreal? Don't you see how unreal all of this is?" It's that clash.

Look at *Survivor*. *Survivor* is about the fact that you have to watch people and determine who you can trust and who you can't trust. You have to look at their behavior and say, "Is this person fooling me, or isn't he fooling me? How can I penetrate what it is they're trying to perform? How can I penetrate the sham that they're putting on?" Layered on that is the related theme that we have a community, on the one hand that you have to become a part of if you're going to get onto the final round or rounds, but the community is dedicated to the proposition that one person is going to succeed and emerge.

So you have a clash, which is another fundamental American idea. Community versus individualism. One of the reasons, I believe, that *Survivor* has staying power is because it taps into both of these tensions, the authentic versus the inauthentic and the communal versus the individual, which are very powerful ideas.

Let me say something parenthetically about *Survivor* and this communal idea. One of the single moments in the history of television, as far as I'm concerned, happened over this very issue, but not on *Survivor*. It happened on the first edition of *Big Brother*, because *Big Brother* operated the same way *Survivor* operated—it was a community in which ultimately you had to break apart the community so that one person could emerge and win the money. But something happened in the course of that first edition of *Big Brother*. The people in the house began to bond, as they had to do in order to get to that final round, but they legitimately bonded. They legitimately liked one another and it occurred to them that they were being manipulated. CBS was using them and using their good feelings, their true feelings of warmth toward each other, using them to break them apart and finally anoint one winner.

And so one figure on that show, a middle-aged man named George, who got the name Chicken George on the show, decided, "We can take back this show. There is no reason why we have to go through with this. We can make a statement, we can do something that is a lot more important than winning the money. What we can do is we can walk off the show. We can tell CBS, 'Screw you.' We're all leaving the show together." And since the show is on, I think, three times a week, one episode of which was live, what they decided to do is walk off the day of the live episode and CBS would have blank air.

CBS went nuts. CBS told them on air, "If you walk off the show we'll just replace you. If you think you're going to stop this show, you're crazy. Nothing will stop this show. We'll just get other people in here who don't care about the sense of community. You think you're going to make some kind of statement about brotherhood, forget it." And on their Web site, CBS attacked the leaders of the revolt. You read nasty stuff about these people.

So the night comes and George is sitting around the table with all the members of the *Big Brother* house, and they're saying, "Okay, now let's take a vote and let's do this, let's walk out of this house. Let's ruin this show. Let's take back the show. Let's destroy the whole premise of the show. Let's do it." And then, ironically enough, Eddie, who becomes the winner at the end of the show, as they're all ready to walk off says, "I don't want to walk off," and it all falls apart and they then become just like everybody else on *Survivor* and every other reality TV show—they play it out, and Eddie, the man who won't leave, ultimately becomes the winner.

You take a show—and there are any number of them—all the romance shows, and what are they really about? Whether it's *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *For Love or Money* or *Joe Millionaire*—they're all about the same thing. They're about whether you can see through the way things look, see through the money, see through the ugliness in the case of *Average Joe*. See through all of that stuff to find something that's true, to find something that's real, to find true love through all of this, to be able to determine who is not scamming you. In the case of *The Bachelorette*, who is the player and who isn't the player? Who is the guy telling you what you want to hear? Who is the guy who just wants to get in bed with you and who isn't? To find some kind of truth, some kind of authenticity—that's what those shows are about.

*Fear Factor*. What's it really about? It's really about the fact that when they eat those things, when they do those things, when they dangle from a helicopter, when they plunge into the ice cold water, whatever it is, they're really doing it, they're really doing it. They're not faking it. It's happening in a world where almost everything is fake, so ultimately what you get down to is that these programs purport to give us the tension between the unreal and the real and they allow us to see people making those choices.

The problem is that it is ultimately unsustainable. And this is why. For one thing, these programs, as they proceed, begin to conventionalize themselves in the same way that conventional TV does, and by that I mean if you watch the first *Survivor*, and I know you were kind of young back then, but if you watched the first *Survivor* there was Richard Hatch, the man that America loved to hate, and he became the winner and there were these interesting groups of characters that made the program somewhat unique. Then you got to the second version, and by the second version you saw the new participants trying to determine which of them was going to be Richard Hatch and which of them is going to be Rudy and which of them is going to be—as if roles had been established the first time around and they had to determine who was going to fulfill the role, almost as if it were a scripted series.

Or in the last *Survivor*, Johnny Fairplay, a guy who actually assumes a new identity, a new name, an ironic name obviously because he's the meanest, wickedest guy, the guy you cannot trust, the guy you have to see because Johnny Fairplay is anything but Mr. Fairplay. But what does he do? He assumes a wrestler's name, because he's playing a role. Almost all of these shows move to conventionalize themselves so that ultimately, as we move to successive chapters, they're really not all that different from the things they were supposed to supplant, which is the *ER*'s, the *CSI*'s, the *Friends*, and all the other conventional programs on television.

This process started a long time ago, long before you were born. In the late 1950's, there was a movement in television that was every bit as popular as reality TV, and it was about quiz shows. There were a zillion quiz shows on TV, they dominated television—*The \$64,000 Question*, *21*—they were all over television and ordinary people, just like on these reality shows, would go and answer questions and make tons and tons of money, except there was one thing wrong.

The audience didn't like some of the people who won, and some of the people who couldn't answer the questions were off the air and the audience liked to see a sustained character through different episodes. They started rigging the game, so that the "right" people would get the answers and stay on the show. Essentially they had to script the show to get the result that they thought the audience wanted so the audience would keep watching.

Reality television is a misnomer because it's not reality. In fact, reality TV may be an oxymoron. You can't have reality and have TV. You can have TV and you can have reality, but ultimately once you put reality on TV it's no longer reality. What it is, what you help create, and what you're responding to, and what they ultimately see through as the process proceeds, as you realize after eight versions of *The Bachelor* that only one couple is ever going to get married, Trista and Ryan. The rest of them all break-up and so there's nothing at stake ultimately. It's just as phony as everything else, because reality TV is a sophisticated, complex illusion of reality, but not the thing itself. It's just another version of fiction that looks like reality but isn't.

In fact, Trista kind of got this. Trista, who is something of a philosopher, said, “When we tell our grandchildren how we met, they are not going to believe it—nobody is ever going to believe that we met on a reality television program, knew one another for six weeks and got married.”

And another great philosopher, Amanda Marsh from *The Bachelor II*, put it even more succinctly, when she said after she was jilted by the man who chose her, “I thought I was falling in love. Looking back, it’s just not possible. It’s not reality.”

**Martin Kaplan:**

We promised we’d have questions and I am thrilled to see people hustling towards the microphones. Maybe some of them will actually ask questions. I’ll get things going, but please don’t be shy, stand-up, come to the mike, upstairs or down here.

Neal, one question, it strikes me one theme you didn’t mention that unites most of these shows is that it’s humiliating for the participants in them.

**Neal Gabler:**

Well, not in all of them, but that is a component. I think it’s an important component in something like *Fear Factor* or in the beginning of *American Idol* where the people go up there knowing that Simon is going to humiliate them, knowing that he’s going to tell them they stink and they should go home and do something else.

In other countries, in fact, there are whole genres that are just built on humiliation. Some of you may know that in Japan there are programs that are predicated on hurting people. Putting electrical currents to people, plunging them into cold water—not as on *Fear Factor* so that they can test their mettle—but so that the audience can get the glee of seeing them suffer.

There's a certain element here, and I think it gets back to the notion of genuineness, that when we laugh at the people on *American Idol* in the early episodes or when we watch the people on *Fear Factor* humiliating themselves and going through very degrading things, this is one of the few times that it is socially permissible to exercise our sense of sadism. In other social situations, you can't say, "Geez, I love seeing these people get hurt, this is great." It's just not something that's socially acceptable. In the same way that reality television purports to be real in terms of the things it shows us, it also elicits responses that purport to be real from us, and this is one of the responses—the response of humiliation that it gives us license to feel.

**Martin Kaplan:** You will not be humiliated, I promise, if you have a question to ask. Do I have a question in the balcony?

**Student #1:** You talked about how our generation is more skeptical and how our country even is more skeptical and that's why we're interested in the effect of television. What measure do you have to judge the amount of skepticism within the culture and the generational gap?

**Neal Gabler:** That's a good question, and I don't have any direct measure. I don't know that there's any way of directly measuring it. I can tell you from my own focus group in my own house, which are two teenaged daughters who are roughly your age, and seeing how they approach things, and then looking at the culture generally and seeing that there is an increasing sophistication in the way that your generation looks at the world.

It seems to me that it is only reasonable, only logical, when you live in a world that is full of manipulation and a world in which you are aware of the manipulation because you're told about it all of the time. My

generation, when we were growing up, we had a vague sense that we were being manipulated for all sorts of things—by marketers and by politicians, but it was nowhere near as overt. For example, it’s remarkable to me, in terms of our innocence, to think that a book like *The Selling of the President 1968*, which is a book that most of you I’m sure are not familiar with at all, but it was an enormous bestseller. The author, Joe McGinniss, had access to the inner workings of Richard Nixon’s presidential campaign in 1968 and what he revealed in the book was how cynical the system was, how the Nixon campaign—and this is certainly, now we know, not limited to the Nixon campaign—was so cynical, how the whole process was dependent upon how they could manipulate the voter, manipulate the viewer. In 1969, when that book came out, people said, “My gosh, I had no idea that the system operated that way.” Now you would say, and most of the people in this room would say, “Man, how naïve can you be?” because every day in the newspaper, on television or even in your own conversation, if we want to limit it to politics, now you know how the political system works. You know how cynical the political system is. Growing up in an environment where you know how things operate inevitably, in my estimation, makes you more skeptical.

**Martin Kaplan:** Yes, sir.

**Student #2:** One of the things that drives most of these contestants to go on these shows is the thought that this could be their stepping stone to stardom and yet with all of these reality shows we haven’t really seen anyone really emerge to stardom except for maybe the *American Idol* people. Why do you think people keep going on these shows if they have it in the back of their head that this is not going to catapult them to stardom?

**Neal Gabler:** Well, hope springs eternal, but I think there are several factors here. One, just being on the show, for even a short period of time, anoints you. We

know, if we have any collective memory whatsoever, that some of these individuals are now part of our consciousness. But there are individuals, like Elizabeth who is now on *The View* who was sprung from *Survivor* and is now a television personality and Jordan has a radio show in Minnesota. I would almost guarantee you that Rupert will find himself getting some kind of gig somewhere. And so it's not entirely true that none of these people have made it.

*American Idol* is an interesting kind of not anomaly. I think it fits the theory that I'm proposing but it has a different component to it, and we didn't talk about it here and so I'll talk about it briefly now. *American Idol* is very interesting in terms of reality versus appearance because it's predicated on the idea when you look at the people who have succeeded, when you look at Kelly Clarkson and you look at Ruben Studdard and you look at a Clay Aiken, who might as well have won, these are people who never, never, never would have made it through the normal course of the recording industry. Kelly Clarkson is too chunky. Everybody wants the next Britney Spears. Give me a babe and we'll manipulate the voice. I don't need a voice, I want a babe. Ruben Studdard is chunky, and I'll say that only to spare his feelings. Clay Aiken, particularly when he started, is a complete nerd. But the process was interesting because the audience was saying, "I'm going to anoint people who you, the recording industry, would never anoint. I'm going to take back the power." And I have to admit when I watched Kelly Clarkson—and I wasn't a huge fan of the show—but I have to say when I saw her, there was something moving about the fact that this girl—who had that big, powerful voice but not the drop dead good looks that everybody in the recording industry now seems to have to have—was made a star by the audience. The audience said, "This is real. The other stuff—Britney Spears may be gorgeous, but she's not real. Kelly Clarkson, Ruben Studdard, Clay Aiken, they're real, they belong to me, and I will make them stars."

**Martin Kaplan:** Neal, if I could take back the power for a moment, just in the interest of getting a few more questions? Yes, please.

**Student #3:** My question is about the future of reality TV, and you argued that part of why we watch is because we don't know what's going to happen next and we want to see real things happen. We're finding out more and more that more of these shows are becoming scripted and coached by producers to get higher ratings. Don't you think that that'll just add to the skepticism that our generation has and eventually will lead to the demise of reality TV, as we're going to become more skeptical of what it's doing versus even conventional television?

**Neal Gabler:** Absolutely. I believe that there are three courses for reality television. One, the most likely for many of these shows is that, as you said, they have the seeds of their own demise because it will become conventionalized to the point where they're just like everything else on television. Another possibility is that as you push the envelope, you reach a point where an audience is no longer fascinated, they're disgusted. And the third possibility is against the idea of compression, but which I happen to think is going to be one of the routes that reality TV takes, and that is something that plays out in real time, on cable and on the Web. You will watch, for example, an apartment building that is rigged with cameras everywhere. In real time for a couple of hours a night, twenty-four hours a day on the Web, you can watch what goes on in that apartment in real time. You'll lose compression, but when you're losing compression you'll compensate for it by heightening all the other elements, and so we'll all be watching everybody.

**Martin Kaplan:** Up in the balcony. Yes, please.

**Student #4:** Why do you think people respond to shows like *Nip/Tuck* and *Extreme Makeover*? They're kind of reality TV, but they have predetermined outcomes.

**Neal Gabler:** I think *Extreme Makeover* is different than *Nip/Tuck*, because *Nip/Tuck* is a conventionally scripted program which has other kinds of appeal to it, whereas *Extreme Makeover*, the appeal of *Extreme Makeover* is the reverse of finding the real through the phony. It's essentially saying, "Look, we can take the real and we can make it more attractive," and that's a very appealing thing vicariously. We all love the idea that we can all be beautiful, that we can all live our fantasy. That's not very different from the appeal of *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*. Who doesn't love the idea that within this vast, diverse world, a Miami Heat cheerleader and a fireman from Aspen, Colorado can find one another and find true love?

**Martin Kaplan:** I would like to be able to say that this is an actor playing Neal Gabler! You have all just been punked! Unfortunately, I can't, but I have to say that it's 8:15. We promised to let you out. Please thank Neal Gabler again!