ABSTRACT

REID, GWENDOLYNNE COLLINS. The Rhetoric of Reality Television: A Narrative Analysis of the Structure of “Illusion.” (Under the direction of Steven B. Katz.)

In the last ten years, the reality television phenomenon has transformed the face of television in the United States. Much of the programming real estate previously occupied by traditional narratives, such as miniseries, sitcoms and movies of the week, has been replaced by reality shows. Because the term reality television is used to refer to a diverse range of programs, defining it has proven difficult for scholars and viewers alike; however, reality television is generally understood to refer to unscripted programs without professional actors filmed using a fly-on-the-wall observational style that blends the notions of public and private. This observational style and reality television’s historical roots in documentary has led many scholars and critics to condemn it for its perceived lack of formal appropriateness and for how it breaks the faith with viewers by using documentary conventions for entertainment or sensational purposes.

My thesis, however, takes a different position, arguing that reality television has more in common with the narrative programs it replaces than with documentary: its rhetoric is a narrative rhetoric. Whereas documentary most often uses argument as a primary mode within which narration may figure, reality programs operate within a primarily narrative mode. Indeed, through a variety of means, including editing and show design (as opposed to scripting), reality programs use narrative structures to tell dramatic stories about (or using) real people. After surveying over eighty reality shows, I defined four categories of narratives consistently told through reality programs: le panoptique, les jeux, la reconstitution historique, and la métamorphose. I then selected
Based on the premise put forward by several scholars such as Walter Fisher and Donald Polkinghorne that narrative is “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” and indeed may be the means by which we order and comprehend all of our experience (Polkinghorne 1), my thesis proposes that the success of the reality television phenomenon may be due to the narrative structures that order and construct its reality. In order to better understand the stories reality programs tell and the rhetorical situation reality television operates within, my thesis analyzes the selected reality shows using the method of narrative analysis suggested by Fisher’s paradigm of narrative rationality. Fisher suggests that audiences accept or reject narratives based on whether they meet or fail the tests of narrative coherence (structural, material and characterological) and narrative fidelity, and that successful narratives are rhetorical in the sense that they becomes guides “to thought and action in the world” (90).

Though reality television may be historically rooted in a set of economic exigencies and technological opportunities networks experienced in the late eighties and nineties, my narrative analysis suggests that the programs are also coherent according to Fisher’s criteria and are likely to resonate in terms of values with their audiences, at least partially accounting for the phenomenon’s continued success. I conclude, however, that we may also need to add Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality to our critical vocabulary in order to situate and understand reality television as itself part of a larger progression of what we call “reality” that includes blogs, video games, chat rooms and virtual communities.
THE RHETORIC OF REALITY TELEVISION:
A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE STRUCTURE OF “ILLUSION”

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

ENGLISH

Raleigh
2005

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DEDICATION

For Jerry, denizen of the hyperreal, for awakening my curiosity.

Without you this would not have been possible.
BIOGRAPHY

Gwendolynne Collins Reid was born on September 8, 1977 in Bordeaux, France. Moving to the United States in 1982, her youth was divided between Augusta, Georgia and Lenoir, North Carolina, where her family moved in 1987. In 1994, she left high school two years early and entered Simon’s Rock College of Bard in Massachusetts with a full scholarship. Interested in the role language plays in constituting and marking cultural identity, Gwendolynne spent a semester abroad in San Sebastián, Spain before writing her senior thesis, *Spain and Euskera: A Study of Basque Cultural Identity and the Question of Bilingualism*. In 1999, she graduated *summa cum laude* with a Bachelor degree in Intercultural Studies. Having grown up for the most part without television, Gwendolynne next became interested in the role audiovisual media play in shaping our culture and social dialogue. After working for two years in the development and alumni affairs department at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, she began a low-residency Masters program in Film Studies and Screenwriting at Hollins University in 2001. In 2002, Gwendolynne married Jerry Reid before beginning her Masters in English with a specialty in Rhetoric and Composition at N.C. State University, working as a full-time student and teaching assistant during the year and finishing her coursework at Hollins University during the summer. In 2005, she finished her full-length screenplay, *Mole Hill Mountain*, and graduated from Hollins University. She will graduate from N.C. State University in December. In the meantime, she has accepted a full-time lecturer position in English at N.C. State beginning in August.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis director, Steven Katz, for steering a sometimes messy writing process with genuine interest, good humor and unflagging encouragement. This process would not have been possible without him. I would also like to acknowledge the other members of my committee for their useful comments and the engaging classes they led that informed my research.
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Appendix 105
**Introduction: Approaching Reality**

America’s Next Top Model. The Bachelor. The Osbournes. The Apprentice. The
Showgirls. Can You Be a Porn Star? Till Death Do Us Part. For Better or For
Worse. A Wedding Story. Newlyweds. My Big Fat Obnoxious Wedding. My Life as a
Borrow and Deal. ESPN Dream Job. I’m With Busey. The Joe Schmo Show. Project
High School Reunion. I Want a Famous Face. Family Plot. Amish in the City...

To say that reality television has become a cultural phenomenon of significant
proportions in the United States is to state the obvious. No longer confined to networks like
FOX, NBC, CBS or ABC and cable channels like MTV, reality-based programming is
currently featured on a wide range of television stations and networks which now include
stations such as PBS (*Colonial House, Manor House, Frontier House, 1900 House, American High*), A&E (*House of Dreams, Family Plots, Airline*), and National Geographic (*Worlds Apart, Crittercam*)—stations better known for their “discourse of sobriety,” to use Bill Nichols’ phrase (1991), than sensationalist entertainment. And now, three new stations devoted exclusively to reality television—the Fox Reality Channel, Reality Central, and Reality TV—have already begun or are slated to begin broadcasting in 2005. Seventeen years after NBC’s first *Unsolved Mysteries* (1987), the number of stations without any form of reality-based programming might be easier to list than those with. Despite periodic predictions that the reality television phenomenon has finally run the end of its course—Richard Kilborn noted in 1994 that some producers already felt then that “a virtual saturation point [had] been reached” (426)—reality television is alive, well and has inarguably entered the mainstream. Clearly, audience fascination with reality television has not waned, and if anything continues to grow at a rapid pace.

**The Problem of Definition**

The first problem to examine regarding reality television, however, is how to define it. While realizing the ubiquity of the phenomenon today does not require much more than scanning a television guide or watching the news, defining reality television is more difficult. What is popularly called a reality show includes such a diversity of subjects, forms and concepts that it is difficult to pinpoint the defining elements. Kilborn notes its elusiveness, pointing out how “one moment [the term ‘reality television’] is being used to refer to slice-of-life observational modes of documentary film making, the next it is being used to describe types of fictional drama rooted in real-life situations” (423). A decade later, defining reality television has if anything only gotten more complicated with the proliferation of so many
hybrids and mutations of the original tabloids, crime shows and hidden camera programs that
gave the phenomenon its name. In fact, in a recent psychological study on viewer perception
of reality television, Nabi et al. found that reality-based programming has yet to coalesce into
a distinct genre for viewers; using statistical analysis of how viewers sort and categorize
programs, the study found that “reality-based programming, such as it is, clearly includes a
more diverse selection of programs than do established genres” (310).

Current reality shows televise everything from weddings, dates, births and funerals, to
makeovers, arrests, cosmetic surgery, job interviews and fraternity hazings. They range from
the more observational formats such as A&E’s *Family Plots*, in which the television audience
is given access to all the public and behind-the-scenes goings on of a family-run funeral
home (yes, all), to the openly contrived and sensational game-show format of a program like
NBC’s *The Apprentice*, in which sixteen contestants compete for the honor of becoming
Donald Trump’s apprentice and running one of his companies for a year. Other variations
include makeover shows (of both spaces and people) and even experiential history shows in
which participants recreate life in a historical period for several months. The most basic
elements these shows have in common, however, are their “unscripted” quality (no script, no
professional actors), the relentless documentation of seemingly every aspect of these
experiences, and the sense of real-time intimacy (participation, even) that the indiscriminate
access to participants’ private and public spheres creates. As TLC’s tag line puts it, reality
television is “life unscripted” and life observes few boundaries.

**Economic and Technological Factors**

Two frequently cited factors used to explain reality television’s rapid development
and proliferation are economics and technology. These, however, only really explain the
Historical conditions that made the phenomenon possible. Writing in 2000, Bethany Ogdon notes that the costs of producing traditional fiction-based entertainment were so high by the 1980s that “by 1986 producers were losing up to 100,000 dollars per half-hour episode and 200-300,000 dollars on hour dramas” (6). At the same time, recording technology had advanced so much that there was wide availability of both “cheap, lightweight recording equipment capable of producing images of broadcast quality” and “go-anywhere” cameras that could be “concealed discreetly in clothing, accompanying luggage or in a traveling or stationary vehicle” (Kilborn 427). The low cost of this technology in combination with greatly reduced costs on everything from writing to talent made the reality show concept very appealing financially to producers. In fact, according to Ogdon, a reality television program’s “production costs are so low that it is able to recoup its makers’ investments from network license fees alone. It earns back production costs with the first US network showing; further syndication represents pure profits” (7). An added economic factor in favor of reality programming over traditional programming has been the increased consolidation and globalization of the media (Fursich; Kilborn; Ogdon). Reality shows are “concepts” or “situations” that can be easily and cheaply reproduced and re-filmed to adapt to any culture, language, or market. The financial appeal of reality shows as compared to traditional dramas and comedies may be shifting, however, as more is spent on locations and sets and as talent, producers and everyone else involved demand higher salaries to match higher ratings.

**Reality TV and Documentary**

Socioeconomic and technological conditions, however, only go so far in explaining where the reality television phenomenon comes from. Historically, reality television owes much, both aesthetically and substantively, to the documentary filmmaking tradition as well.
Critics often trace the phenomenon back to PBS’s landmark 1972 documentary, *An American Family*, which recorded seven months in the lives of the Loud family, a tumultuous year that included their divorce and their son’s coming out of the closet (“Lance Loud”). Twenty years later, MTV’s *Real World*, another landmark in reality television’s history, was created through a collaboration between Mary-Ellis Bunim, a soap opera producer, and Jon Murray, who had a background in journalism and documentary (“About Us”). Together, they combined elements of soap operas and documentaries to produce “dramatic story structure[s]” that turned “the tales of ordinary real people into extraordinary television programming and filmed entertainment” (“About Us”).

That reality television as a phenomenon is historically grounded in both documentary and soap opera is significant in several ways. First, it explains why so many scholars and critics choose to analyze reality television in relation to documentary (e.g. Corner, Goode, Hird). It also sheds light on why this critical discussion of reality television often leads to debates on the authenticity or inauthenticity of the “reality” presented by reality programming. For many, the formal features reality television shares with documentary breaks the faith with viewers, who may or may not be able to differentiate between information and entertainment (Getz). But most importantly for this analysis, it emphasizes the need to balance a critical approach grounded in documentary concerns with an approach that may better account for the elements that fall outside those concerns.

**Narrative**

A significant question scholars and critics alike seem to always come back to regarding reality television is the question of why viewers find it so fascinating. The most common reason given for reality television’s widespread appeal to audiences is an
“inordinate fascination with voyeurism on the one hand and fame on the other” (Andrejevic 253). Ian Goode’s analysis of *Big Brother* corroborates this general conclusion: “[The show’s] format can be broadly described as a scopic mechanism of image and sound that combines the desire to look and to peer (voyeurism), with the desire of the housemates to be watched and to behave in a manner that attracts attention (exhibitionism), through the controlling look of surveillance” (109). Indeed, a certain element of voyeurism seems to be the driving force behind an initial viewing of a reality show. Many film theorists, however, and Laura Mulvey in particular, have attributed the pleasure audiences experience in watching *any* cinema to voyeurism and scopophilia. Granted, reality television, with the perceived access it gives to unscripted, ordinary people, may provide a unique opportunity to satisfy this drive. However, if a simple, widespread obsession with watching other people’s private lives were enough to sustain audiences’ fascination, then uncut, surveillance-style videos of people’s private lives would suffice to satisfy this need. Yet, this is not the case.

In fact, critics increasingly agree that while reality television’s initial draw may very well be a curiosity about other people’s lives, what seems to convince audiences to keep watching is the quality it shares with traditional television programs: narrative. Far from the monotonous surveillance videos voyeurism might be satisfied by or the haphazard stunts sensation-seekers might find satisfying, reality shows are *stories*, stories that are told. Numerous accounts, from Debra Seagal’s account as a story analyst for *American Detective* to Katie Johnson’s critique of *COPS* or Kathryn Kuhn and Scott Harris’s analysis of *A Wedding Story* confirm that many reality programs use traditional narrative structures to tell those stories. Johnson, in particular, shows how the structure *COPS* uses closely adheres to the pyramidal dramatic structure Gustav Freytag identified in the nineteenth century:
“introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and catastrophe (or resolution)” (5). What all these accounts underscore is that through a variety of means, including editing and show design (as opposed to scripting), reality programs use narrative structures to tell dramatic stories about (or using) real people: its rhetoric is a narrative rhetoric. What these accounts also underscore is that the approach that may best account for the elements of reality television that fall outside documentary concerns is a narrative approach.

Method

The focus of this thesis is to examine how narrative may in part constitute the convincing “reality” of reality television while retaining its claim to be an unstructured presentation of reality, as well as to identify what kinds of stories reality programs tell and what some of the phenomenon’s larger cultural implications may be. This focus is based on the assumption that, as its name implies, reality television argues for, at the very least, a version of reality—a version argued for by the structure of its narratives and their diegeses. Although reality television’s use of documentary formal conventions, conventions that signal to viewers the authenticity and seriousness of the material before them, would seem to sufficiently account for the rhetorical effect of reality television, all narratives work rhetorically to, as Wayne Booth puts it, “impose [a] fictional world on the reader” (qtd. in Fisher 160). This suspension of disbelief is generally temporary, however, but in the case of reality television, audiences seem to be convinced of the “reality” of the programs beyond the time they spend watching them (Getz), clearly extending their rhetorical effect into the world beyond. The goal of this thesis, then, is to examine the role narrative might play in this rhetorical effect.
Within the past two decades, several rhetoricians as well as social scientists have examined narrative and the role it plays in communication and in human life as a whole. One of these, the psychologist Donald Polkinghorne, contends that narrative is “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” and indeed may be the means by which we order and comprehend all of our experience (1). Similarly, in his work, Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action, the rhetorician Walter Fisher proposes a narrative paradigm for understanding all human communication. Fisher argues “that all forms of human communication need to be seen fundamentally as stories—symbolic interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history” (xiii). Fisher’s model of human beings as homo narrans positions narrative as the primary form of rationality and communication within which other forms such as argument and logic reside.

These theorists’ positioning of narrative as our primary means for ordering and making sense our experience, the means by which we construct a meaningful reality, is helpful for recognizing why narrative may dominate so many mediums of communication and why reality television may have had more success as a popular phenomenon than argument-based documentary. Most useful for this examination of the narrative dimension of reality television, however, is the analytical method suggested by Fisher’s contention “that human beings are inherently storytellers who have a natural capacity to recognize the coherence and fidelity of stories they tell and experience” (24). Fisher’s paradigm of narrative rationality provides a series of “tests” for analyzing stories, which he claims reflect “the mental moves that will be made by auditors or readers in interpreting a work” (161). The first series of three tests evaluates the structural, material and characterological coherence of a story, or
how it “hangs together.” The second test assesses the fidelity of a story to a reader, auditor or viewer’s prior experience and worldview, or whether it “rings true” satisfactorily. Fisher suggests that audiences accept or reject narratives based on whether they meet or fail these tests, and that successful narratives are rhetorical in the sense that they then become guides “to thought and action in the world” (90, emphasis in the original). Fisher’s methodology, and the fact that it accounts for the rhetorical function of both narrative structure and mythos—“ideas that cannot be verified or proved in any absolute way” (19), provides a useful framework for answering questions about how reality television successfully orders and constructs its “reality” through narrative, as well as the types of stories these reality narratives tell and some of the possible larger cultural implications of these particular stories resonating at this point in time.

My study begins, in the following chapter, with a more developed examination of the documentary concerns that have informed much of the critical discussion surrounding reality television. This discussion is significant, not only as historical and theoretical context, but also because it provides some understanding of the formal elements that have shaped reality television and viewers’ understanding of it. This is then followed by an examination of Fisher’s narrative paradigm, the tests of narrative rationality and the concept of narrative arguing through aesthetic proof. Finally, this theoretical discussion is followed by the heart of my inquiry: a narrative analysis of representative reality programs.

Although the present work focuses on reality television as a phenomenon rather than on the success or failure of any single program, this narrative analysis necessarily requires selecting specific stories for analysis. My method of selection consisted of first surveying approximately eighty reality programs (see page 1 for the list), then grouping these based on
the types of narratives they seemed to tell. This preliminary analysis revealed four broad
types of narratives needing to be represented in my analysis, which I named, *le panoptique*,
*les jeux,* *reconstitutions historiques* and *métamorphoses.* Programs in the first category, *le
panoptique,* were characterized by fly-on-the-wall observation most reminiscent of
documentary or cinema vérité. This category, with the sense of all-pervasive surveillance its
narratives often project, also evokes Michel Foucault’s criticism and extension of Jeremy
Bentham’s concept of the panopticon as a dangerously powerful form of social control, hence
the French term rather than the English. Although everything from *Newlyweds* to *BirthDay*
fit this category, I chose to analyze MTV’s *Real World* because it is a landmark series that
has continued to attract viewers each season from its debut in 1992. The next category of
narrative, *les jeux télévisés,* is perhaps the most sensationalist category as it blends
observation with the idea of the game show to form a narrative of competition. Prominent
*jeux télévisés* include *The Apprentice,* *Survivor* and *American Idol.* Another popular
example, and the one which I examine, is ABC’s *The Bachelor*—a sensationalist competition
in which twenty-five eligible women confined to a set-like mansion for a period of several
weeks compete for “one handsome, successful and likeable, single man in search of the
woman of his dreams” (“Bachelor Casting”). The next category my preliminary analysis
discovered is perhaps the smallest category, but continues to be produced on a regular basis.
Programs within the category of *reconstitutions historiques* expose historical narratives very
explicitly through reenactments of specific historical eras. PBS has become well known for
these, as has the U.K.’s Channel 4. The example I have selected is also the most recent:
PBS’s *Colonial House* reconstructs a 17th century New England coastal settlement for 24
“settlers” for a period of six months. The last category of narrative, *métamorphoses,*
encompasses the many makeover shows that have recently multiplied. These all revolve around the transformation of a person or space, often in a fundamental way. MTV’s *I Want a Famous Face* is a rather disturbing example of this trend that poses some difficult questions about the relationship between reality television and culture and behavior; each show documents someone’s journey (through reconstructive surgery) to physically “become” their favorite celebrity.

Each of these four categories of reality narratives engages with a different narrative function of reality television for viewers—whether that narrative is the narrative of objectivity (*Real World*), the narrative of romantic competition (*The Bachelor*), or the narrative of American history (*Colonial House*). The last category, however, engages very explicitly with the question of what these narratives’ relationship to what we call “reality” is. When a teenager undergoes reconstructive surgery to “become” Jennifer Lopez, the television program that documents that journey no longer seems to be documenting a reality outside of itself; as the camera records this emulation of television personalities—television reality—it is documenting a real-life simulation of that reality. In many ways, the show documents the mediating effect television and cinema has on our experience and conception of reality. And so my analysis of the rhetoric of reality television’s narratives leads to my concluding discussion of reality television’s larger cultural implications and how Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality—the state reached when simulations no longer simulate any fundamental, pre-representational existence—might help us to situate and understand the reality television phenomenon as itself part of a larger progression of “reality.”
Chapter 2: Theorizing Reality

The Documentary Connection

A more thorough understanding of the connection between reality-based television and the documentary tradition is necessary both for the context it gives on scholarly examinations of reality television up to now, as well as for the perspective it gives on the formal elements that have shaped reality television and viewers’ understanding of it—a large part of the ethos these programs project rhetorically. For example, in one analysis of the reality series *Big Brother*, John Corner finds it necessary to first discuss where we should locate the program, and hence how we ought to study it. Though he initially begins with the notion that *Big Brother* might belong in the history of the game show, or the talk show, or possibly that it might be seen as “an experiment in a kind of drama,” he finally settles on documentary as its primary mode (“Performing the Real,” 255-6). This placement of reality television within the documentary tradition is very common among scholars.

Although *Big Brother* operates completely within the controlled confines of a house that could just as easily be called a theatrical set, Corner’s sense is that what is “at the heart of the series is the idea of observing what is a mode of ‘real’ behavior” (256). The show’s interest in human behavior leads Corner to align *Big Brother* with what he calls “the ‘postdocumentary’ culture of television,” a culture within which “the legacy of documentary is still at work, albeit in partial and revised form” (257). For Corner, documentary has traditionally held three functions: civic, journalistic, and interrogative (259), to which “popular factual entertainment” has recently added another: “documentary as diversion”
In this way, reality television remains a form of documentary for Corner (and for other scholars) despite fundamental differences in practice and function.

Though most scholars and critics differ on how they specifically define the connection between reality television and documentary, the majority of them do approach reality programming through this lens. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, for example, label reality television a “hybrid documentary form” (38). Corner, in a previous article on reality television and documentary, calls reality television documentary’s “threat from within” (“Documentary Values” 142); if reality television is a form of documentary, then it is capable of destroying documentary by blurring the line between information and entertainment. However, Corner also notes that the debates surrounding reality programming might also be responsible for a “renewed enthusiasm for examining the [documentary] genre” (140).

Similarly, Christopher Hird, a documentary filmmaker, evaluates reality television’s ability to inform and edify, traditionally documentary values, concluding that some reality programs can be “watched simply for entertainment, but [that] they also inform us, challenge us to think differently, and take us to places we may not have been” (5). Even the popular press sees reality television as inherently related to documentary filmmaking (Jones).

Certainly, reality television is related to the documentary tradition at a historical level. A 2000 Rolling Stone article on the long-running reality show Real World traces co-creators Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jon Murray’s inspiration for the show to the PBS 1973 documentary An American Family (Marsh). Jacque Jones also cites An American Family as one of the central documentaries that “paved [the] way for [the] success of unscripted shows”:

Before Survivor and long before The Apprentice, there was the Loud family.

Each week viewers were captivated by the Santa Barbara, Calif., family that
willingly allowed cameras into its home as the lives of family members unraveled. The family’s travails—a divorce and difficulty dealing with a gay son’s lifestyle—might seem tame to today’s viewers, but at the time the PBS program was considered a groundbreaking documentary. (Jones)

Joanne Morreale adds *The Family* (1974), another documentary that “recorded the lives of ordinary people over the period of a year,” to reality television’s documentary pedigree (5). For Morreale, “reality television is an offshoot of observational or ‘fly-on-the-wall’ documentary,” filmmaking that records “everyday occurrences using ordinary people in unscripted situations, with minimal intervention from the filmmaker, in an attempt to represent ‘reality’” (5).

Beyond the historical connection, however, reality television shows also continue to exhibit many formal features and practices commonly associated with the documentary tradition. Documentary filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha lists some of the formal strategies generally used by filmmakers who seek to reflect the documentary values of objectivity: “the long take, hand-held camera, sync-sound (authentic sound) overlaid with omniscient commentary (the human science rationale), wide-angle lens, and anti-aestheticism (the natural versus the beautiful, or the real/native versus the fictional/foreign)” (57). Many of these correspond with the formal features observed in reality television shows. In his study of *Real World*, George Bagley concludes that “the use of jump-cuts, natural lighting and sound, and hand-held cameras” creates a sense that *Real World* is “real, unmanipulated action and interaction.” These techniques, rather than erasing the camera, draw attention to it, as if to remind viewers that no “suspension of disbelief” is necessary; the camera does not lie—what you see is authentic, unmanipulated, raw, *real*. This formal ‘realism’ suggests
that, as Katie Johnson argues, “much like documentary films, reality-based television represents itself as reflecting the ‘objective truth’” (8).

Reality television’s formal features in combination with its “unscripted” quality, both reminiscent of documentary and journalism, inevitably lead to questions of objectivity, truth, and reliability. Citing a study by D.M. Neapolitan, Bagley suggests that,

By resorting to formal features such as natural sound, narration tracks, and on-scene interviews, non-news television programs such as Rescue 911 and America’s Funniest Home Videos convey the same kind of credibility as the former [non-fiction genres], even though the latter often include constructions such as reenactments as part of the program. The implicit transforms the explicit in these instances; recording strategies merge with deliberate construction and direct viewers to the conclusion that the program’s true aims reside outside a commercial context. (Bagley)

Bagley’s analysis confirms what other studies of audience response, such as Glenn Getz’s, demonstrate, namely that many people perceive reality programming to be, at some level, “real,” and have difficulty differentiating between authentic filmed events and commonly used reenactment scenes or stock footage. The authoritative, credible ethos generated by formal features originating in news and the documentary tradition lead the critical discussion almost invariably to questions of “information versus entertainment” and the documentary values of objectivity, truth, and reliability. Predictably, reality television is generally found wanting in this critical discussion as it is seen as “perverting” nonfiction forms and “duping” uncritical audiences.
Documentary Concerns

The filmmaker Robert Flaherty provides a noteworthy example, however, for illustrating how the concerns reality television brings to such a head for contemporary scholars and documentarists have actually plagued documentary itself for most of its own history. Best known for his landmark film *Nanook of the North* (1922), Flaherty is generally regarded as a pioneer in documentary filmmaking (Plantinga 35). *Nanook* records the traditional lifestyle of Inuits in Alaska: a way of life already jeopardized in the 1920s by increased intercultural contact and therefore in need of being preserved and recorded for future generations. Even this early documentary, however, which pursues “the observational ethic while deliberately staging activity” (Bagley), already underscores many of the problems with the assumptions behind documentary—assumptions that the reality television phenomenon exposes to even wider scrutiny. Jill Godmilow, a documentary filmmaker, points out that despite the best intentions, Flaherty saw and recorded just what he wanted to see:

The ‘Eskimo’ represented was not named Nanook: his name was Allakariallak.

Eskimos are not monogamous: they usually have more than one wife, as did Nanook [outside the film]. Eskimos are not even Eskimos: they call themselves Inuit. In 1922, they were not living in igloos: they were living in wood houses, in villages, and they owned radios that they used to follow fur prices in San Francisco and London. (7)

The wide discrepancies between the lives Inuits led in 1922 and the way of life depicted in Flaherty’s landmark film underscore the objectivity, truth and reliability we expect from documentary filmmaking. Godmilow finds the traditional documentary “stance of truth” to
be such an irreconcilably false position that in order to “avoid making Nanook of the North” (7) every time she picks up a camera, she “stopped making classical documentary films around 1980” (8).

The assumption behind the documentary “stance of truth,” and behind audience interpretation of documentary as truth, is the belief that photographic media capture or record material reality in an unmediated way; “they involve a chemical or mechanical process (later electronic, with the advent of video), unencumbered by the kind of human cognitive or emotional filtering associated with other visual media such as painting” (Bagley). The very name documentary supports the notion that film can record and document what can only be imperfectly documented without its technology. Through the lens of Charles Peirce’s semiotic system of signs, all photographic media would fall closer to the realm of index, possessing a “direct physical connection” to the objects signified, than to the categories of symbols or icons (183). Because like a footprint, the objects of moving pictures too leave a physical (chemical) imprint of themselves, film as a whole is often read as indexical: “film, adopting the recording technologies of the photograph and later the phonograph, shapes and fixes the very notion of reality itself by registering seemingly objective, indexical images of the world-as-it-is” (Black 3). In fact, two of the most influential film theorists, Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin, both base their separate theories of film on what they see as this essential characteristic of the medium: its ability to objectively record unmediated reality.

Joel Black reminds us that “we need to bear in mind that the documentary impulse in film is derived from the sciences with their supposedly progressive, enlightened endeavor to “know” nature” (29). Indeed, Kracauer points out that the rise of photography coincided with the rise of positivism, with its reliance on scientific, material proof and knowledge, in
the nineteenth century (5). The first moving picture was used to determine whether there was a moment during a horse’s trot when all four feet left the ground. And the Edison and Lumière shorts were “simple projections of uninterrupted life, the novel and the mundane” which bore out “the medium’s presumed positivistic connection to scientific discovery, that is, impassive observation” (Bagley). Throughout film’s eleven decades, it has been used not only as art but also for scientific discovery under the assumption that film can provide unmediated access into physical reality that is inaccessible to the naked eye.

The assumption of objectivity and truth through film’s indexical quality is one also shared by viewers (e.g. the proof infomercials and commercials offer viewers through demonstration, magnification, before and after shots, freeze frames, etc.) and partially explains viewers’ belief in the world reality television supposedly gives unmediated access to. However, Black clearly sees this supposed access as fundamentally questionable:

The basic cinematic principle of ocular fusion, whereby the eye is deceived into perceiving an illusion of continuous movement out of a sequence of static images (or digital video’s extension of this principle to produce the illusion of movement out of sequences of bytes and pixels), is a simple reversal of film’s grandest illusion of all: its fulfillment of the scientific impulse to arrest natural movement, to freeze it as still life or dead nature (nature morte) so that it can be exhaustively studied and systematically manipulated. (53)

Black questions whether the knowledge and power gained through film and photography isn’t rather an illusion, but it is this belief that photography presents objective, factual knowledge that gives it its authority. For Carl Plantinga, “the nonfiction film not only makes truth claims, but poses as a re-presentation of phenomenal reality” (34).
Documentary’s ethos of objectivity resonates with viewers because of the belief that film, ontologically, has unmediated, indexical access to material reality. In fact, for many, film or photography is considered more reliable than human beings for confirming the truth or existence of objects or phenomena. Consider the use of photographs as legal evidence, as public record, or as proof of the existence of anything from weapons of mass destruction to the Loch Ness monster. Black notes that at the extreme end,

Some literalists have adopted the extreme view that only what can be filmed exists, or at least can be known with certainty. Thus in 1999 the Kansas Board of Education decided to remove evolution and the big-bang theory from the state’s science curriculum on the grounds that these phenomena have not been directly observed or recorded and thus are open to doubt. Such radical skepticism is rooted in a faith in graphic realism fostered by film culture whereby events must be confirmed by eyewitness testimony or photographic evidence. (8)

The common belief that what reality television portrays is “real” and “true” is partly based on this strong tendency to view the technology of the camera, like all technology, as infallible, as incapable of lying and as, in fact, capable of proving and documenting truth.

This understanding of photographic media, however, has come under increasing suspicion, most explicitly manifested in the critical discussion surrounding documentary. Bill Nichols calls documentary an “already suspect tradition” (Blurred Boundaries, 45). The documentary filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha goes so far as to proclaim, “there is no such thing as documentary—whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques. This assertion—as old and as fundamental as the antagonism between names and reality—needs incessantly to be restated despite the very visible existence of a
documentary tradition” (29). For her, “the link between the name [documentary] and what is named is conventional, not phenomenal” (30). Nanook, in staging Inuit life in igloos and a walrus hunt with harpoons no longer used by the Inuit at that time, clearly shows the constructedness of the texts called documentaries, and in fact of all film. Certainly, a discussion of reality television—“nonfiction” programming with a clear imperative for entertaining, much less so for informing or truth telling—based on this indexical understanding of the photographic image is naive at best, misleading at worst.

Trinh is not alone, however, in recognizing documentary as a mode and tradition, rather than something that can be ontologically defined. Nichols, for example, in defining documentary, also avoids claiming its indexical relationship to reality, but rather that “documentary film can be considered as an institutional practice” (Representing Reality, 15). Documentary shares more with other nonfictional systems participating in the “discourse of sobriety” than with fictional forms: “Science, economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion, welfare—these systems assume they have instrumental power; they can and should alter the world itself, they can effect action and entail consequences” (Representing Reality, 3). For Nichols, documentary “mimics the canons of expository argument, the making of a case, and the call to public rather than private response” (Representing Reality, 4). Documentary, then, as a form of inquiry and argument, relies as much on standards of reason and argument as on the indexical relationship between object and the trace it leaves on film. In this sense, documentary is a constructed text operating as part of a system of conventions with specific goals and functions. The indexical quality of film in this context becomes evidence within a larger argument rather than documented fact, documented reality, that cannot be disputed or interpreted:
The rationalism and logocentrism that characterize the documentary tradition and its nonfiction kin in the realm of journalism, television news reporting, editorializing, and the yet broader web of legal-rational discourse that supports our political-economic system can be understood as a distinctive mode of social inquiry and conduct without any ontologically superior basis. (Representing Reality, 108)

Without a truly unmediated, objective relationship to reality, and the ontological superiority this would confer on nonfictional filmmaking, Nichols places the responsibility of keeping the faith with viewers, who believe in the ethos of objectivity documentary projects and the authority this lends to its arguments, on the filmmakers themselves as investigators, reporters, and rhetors. In this spirit, some documentary filmmakers have made their own roles in shaping their documentaries more transparent (e.g. Michael Moore stepping out from behind the camera and giving viewers access to both his interview questions and his respondents’ answers), while others strive to balance and complicate their films with multiple perspectives and counterarguments, in effect complicating our notion of truth and objective “reality.”

If Not Documentary, What?

Although many reality television programs borrow aesthetically from the documentary tradition, one cannot make the claim that their practices follow the basic documentary spirit of keeping the faith with viewers. While the visual “look” these programs borrow often signal to viewers to read them as serious information or inquiry in the same way they would documentaries (the ethos of objectivity), reality programs function primarily to entertain. Filming for entertainment seems to have meant leaving behind most
of the ethical and social concerns (and constraints) associated with documentary in favor of commercial interests and giving audiences “what they want.” For example, in a 2000 interview, *Real World* co-creator Mary-Ellis Bunim explains how the very houses used for the show are designed to provide producers with the footage they need to serve their ends: “We’ve designed the kitchen so that it’s hard to have your back to the cameras...and over the years, we finally eliminated the dining-room table and just put a bunch of stools around the kitchen counter so that kids would all face the same way” (qtd. in Marsh). Cast members describe being told “to drink Dr. Pepper, one of the show’s sponsors, from the can, but to drink Coke, not a sponsor, from a glass” (Marsh). Their refrigerators “were always stocked with sponsors’ products, such as Hi-C, Minute Maid and Diamond Head water” and “they were given Pond’s skin-care products (another sponsor) at the beginning of the show” (Marsh). Measured against the values Nichols and many other documentarists try to use as guides (e.g. accuracy, honesty), these filmmaking choices seem to be using a different measure altogether. Though formally the show appears to use fly-on-the-wall conventions of documentary filmmaking, in truth it serves commercial interests and breaks the faith with any viewers who expect the choices participants make are entirely their own (this is what “unscripted” is generally thought to mean).

Integrating reality television into the documentary tradition leads almost invariably to questions of what Corner calls “technico-aesthetic-propriety” as well as to questions about the “seriousness of content and approach in relation to social purposes” (“Documentary Values,” 142). However, reality television’s standard practices ensure that it will always be found lacking using either set of criteria. Reality shows such as *Survivor* or *The Bachelor* are not inquiry or argument by any means; they do not attempt to generate knowledge or call the
public to civic action. They entertain, they titillate, and they do so by seemingly any means possible. How does one study *Joe Schmo*, in which one hapless “real” participant is recruited to participate in a reality show that is completely fabricated and populated by actors, as a documentary? What does one make of the fact that *Trading Spaces* participants (including host, carpenters, designers, etc.) wear the same clothing both days so that footage can later be easily edited for conflict and suspense rather than chronology? What about *The Osbournes*, in which members of the family are listed in the credits as “creative consultants”? Or *The Apprentice*, which lists in fine print at the end its credits that Donald Trump consults the producers on firing decisions?

But the real issue is that although a documentary approach to reality television reveals much about our own cultural understanding of film and its relationship to reality, as well as much about documentary’s own conventions and problems, it does very little to extend our understanding of reality television’s popularity with audiences or what it is these audiences come away with. For one, it is very unlikely that viewers would suddenly start consuming documentary films at such a dramatically increased rate. This means viewers must perceive reality shows as somehow different from documentary. An appetite for the real in and of itself is not a sufficient explanation since conventional documentary films and news broadcasts, among other types of programming, could satisfy this need as easily. Another problem is that though the formal borrowing from documentary helps explain the ethos of objectivity reality programs project for viewers, evaluating reality programs as documentary, as so many film scholars and critics do, often leads to debates exclusively on what Corner calls the “technico-aesthetic-propriety” of using certain formal elements for entertainment purposes, and by extension evaluations of the social dangers or benefits of reality television.
Although criticism of this sort is important, it leaves the elements of reality television that fall outside the documentary tradition unexamined and unaccounted for.

What has become apparent to many scholars is that reality television shares as much with traditional dramatic television programming (e.g. soap operas) and cinema as with documentary. Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray’s partnering of soap opera and documentary conventions to create *Real World* in 1992 is telling evidence to this effect, but other evidence points to this as well. The measure reality television producers seem to be using that does not coincide with that of documentary is the measure of dramatic storytelling over argument—narrative. In fact, in *Blurred Boundaries*, Nichols wrestles with how to distinguish between reality television and documentary and ultimately concludes that the difference lies in reality television’s use of narrative over argument:

A variety of evidence ranging from reality TV to how-to publishing points to a pervasive hunger for information about the historical world surrounding us. But our hunger is less for information in the raw than for stories fashioned from it. The global reach and structural complexity of late twentieth-century reality calls for story telling that can appear to encompass it. We hunger for news from the world around us but desire it in the form of narratives, stories that make meaning, however tenuous, dramatic, compelling, or paranoid they might be. (ix)

The use of storytelling in reality television is borne out by many accounts of those working within the industry as well as critics trying to make sense of the shows. Debra Seagal, for example, describes her experience as a “story analyst” for the reality-based *American Detective* and shows how each eleven-minute police case was edited into a three-act drama:
The standard fare: Act I, Bunnell’s suspenseful introduction; Act II, Bunnell leads his team on a raid; Act III, Bunnell captures the bad suspect and throws him in the squad car, etc. The format of each drama must fit into an eleven-minute segment. So it is that although *American Detective* and its competitors seem a long way from *Dragnet, The Mod Squad, The Rookies*, et al.—all the famous old cop shows—they follow the same formula, the same dramatic arc, because this is what the viewers and advertisers have come to expect. (Seagal)

Seagal explains how as a “story analyst,” her team would log between 100 and 200 hours of tape a week finding the nuggets of footage that would create their story: “We are to hope for a naturally dramatic climax. But if it doesn’t happen, I understand, we’ll ‘work one out’” (Seagal). The note tacked on her bulletin board reminding her what to look for in the footage listed: “DEATH, STAB, SHOOT, STRANGULATION, CLUB, SUICIDE” (Seagal). The editing process, from which finished videos emerged “with ‘problems’ fixed, chronologies reshuffled, and, when necessary images and sound bites clipped and replaced by old filler footage from unrelated cases” fascinated Seagal as did the fact that “by the time our 9 million viewers flip on their tubes, we’ve reduced fifty or sixty hours of mundane and compromising video into short, action-packed segments of tantalizing, crackfilled, dope-dealing, junkie-busting cop culture” (Seagal).

Others, such as Katie Johnson in her analysis of the long-running reality series, *COPS*, similarly notes how,

Strangely, hyperreality in television is achieved by resorting to very traditional dramaturgy. Every *COPS* show, which runs thirty minutes, is divided into three or four segments. The segments are predictably constructed like mini well-made
plays, mimicking Freytag’s nineteenth-century pyramid of dramatic structure: introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and catastrophe (or resolution).

Likewise, Joanne Morreale, in her analysis of MTV’s *The Osbournes*, points out the dramatic structure of that show and its similarity to traditional programming: “As with contemporary sitcoms, *The Osbournes* offered several storylines, typically with one taking precedence. Episodes varied in their allegiance to the narrative structure of exposition, disruption, and resolution that characterizes most sitcoms” (5). And Kathryn Kuhn and Scott Harris trace several recognizable narrative themes in their study of TLC’s *A Wedding Story*.

All these accounts suggest that despite documentary’s clear historical role in shaping reality-based programming and the ethos of objectivity it lends this programming through borrowed formal elements, reality television deserves to be examined through a narrative lens as well. And in fact, such an approach may further explain the convincing “reality” these programs construct by exposing the dramatic structures that keep viewers watching and the types of stories told by them.

**Narrative Rationality**

In the last two decades, rhetoricians have renewed their interest in the rhetoric of narrative. As a landmark in this renewed interest, Walter Fisher’s *Human Communication as Narration* is a useful starting point for examining the rhetoric of reality television’s narrative. Fisher’s paradigm of narrative rationality provides a helpful model for examining how audiences evaluate certain stories, either accepting or rejecting them based on the two tests of narrative rationality he outlines: narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. This model provides a useful method for examining how reality television structures its convincing
“reality” for viewers, but before using this analytical method, it is necessary to examine the theoretical framework Fisher uses as its basis.

Fisher’s larger argument is that narrative can be seen as a descriptive paradigm for all of human communication. For Fisher, human beings are fundamentally storytellers who use stories to “give order to human experience” and “to establish ways of living in common, in intellectual and spiritual communities in which there is confirmation for the story that constitutes one’s life” (63). In short, stories are how we make sense of ourselves: our communities, our lives, our past, present, and future, our reality. This notion is supported by other scholars, such as Wayne Booth who suggests that “even the life we think of as primary experience—that is, events like birth, copulation, death, plowing and planting, getting and spending—is rarely experienced without some sort of mediation in narrative” (14).

Narrative, according to Booth, is “every presentation of time-ordered or time-related experience that in any way supplements, re-orders, enhances, or interprets unnarrated life” (14). This may be the story of how your parents met and married, how the United States expanded to its present shape and size, or how your latest success, failure or change fits into your own life and identity. It may also be the story of a field, like science, and how current or future research fits into the story of its beginnings, values, protagonists and antagonists. More than simply relating a sequence of events, narratives structure those events into a shape that creates meaningful, unified relationships between them—through both the causality between those events and the motivation of the characters driving them—and that points outward to our lived experience.

Fisher’s narrative paradigm is useful in recognizing that not all narratives are created equal, however, as audiences judge the individual stories they hear to determine whether they
are truly successful, satisfying stories. Some stories live on; others are rejected or simply forgotten. The narrative paradigm asserts that people “judge the stories that are told for and about them” (67): “people are reflective and from such reflection they make the stories of their lives and have the basis for judging narratives for and about them” (75). For Fisher this process of creation and evaluation of stories constitutes a form of rationality, of reasoning, that is innate in human beings and transcends other learned forms of rationality such as formal logic or argumentation. Rather than sometimes operating within a larger argument, for Fisher, narrative is the larger meta-text within which arguments and technical logic (those more traditional bases of rationality) occasionally play a role. Fisher contends, “Human communication in all of its forms is imbued with mythos—ideas that cannot be verified or proved in any absolute way” (19). Yet we act on these ideas and comfortably evaluate them every day. Relying on technical logic or even argumentative proofs as the standard for rationality and reason would mean for Fisher that the majority of our actions, decisions and values are by their very nature unreasonable. This is a notion he vigorously rejects, asserting, “all instances of human communication are imbued with [both] logos and mythos, are constitutive of truth and knowledge, and are rational” (20). For him, narrative rationality is the most basic form of reasoning and evaluation by which human beings assess communication and action.

According to the paradigm of narrative rationality, then, all human beings are rational and can evaluate the values and meanings of stories and the reality we construct through stories without the expert, specialized knowledge of technical (formal) logic or the rhetorical logic of argumentative proofs. Fisher’s narrative paradigm proposes:
(1) a reconceptualization of humankind as Homo narrans; (2) that all forms of human communication need to be seen fundamentally as stories—symbolic interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character; (3) that individuated forms of discourse should be considered as “good reasons”—values or value-laden warrants for believing or acting in certain ways; and (4) that a narrative logic that all humans have natural capacities to employ ought to be conceived of as the logic by which human communication is assessed. (xiii)

In the case of reality programs, the paradigm of narrative rationality allows us to do something the documentary approach will not: analyze and understand them without assuming their inexpert audiences are incompetent or irrational. In fact, through the dual tests of coherence and fidelity, which respectively account for how stories make sense structurally to impose fictive worlds on their audience and in terms of values to resonate in morally convincing ways, Fisher’s model provides a useful method for better understanding reality programs as effective narratives and for better understanding their audiences. A critical approach to studying reality television grounded in the documentary tradition bases the “reality” of reality television on its relationship to the material, historical world and judges it according to the appropriateness of its formal choices and the soundness of its arguments. Reality programs tend to fail these tests. Analysis founded on narrative rationality, however, bases the “reality” of reality television on its narrative dimension within which its realism (those formal choices and the ordinary people featured) may play a part, but not account for the whole phenomenon. The seemingly “unscripted” quality of reality television, in this paradigm, adds to its rhetorical force as somehow being relevant to the real
world and real human behavior, but does not obscure the role other elements, such as narrative structure and values, play for viewers.

**Narrative Coherence and Fidelity**

The two main tests outlined in Fisher’s paradigm of narrative rationality, coherence and fidelity, assume that human beings create and evaluate stories not only for their internal logic and soundness, but also for their values and the effect enacting their advice would have on our lives and the world external to them. Fisher’s paradigm attempts to make what he believes is an innate, implicit process, explicit, allowing us to use those mental moves to arrive at a critique of narrative-based discourse; the narrative paradigm offers, “a way of interpreting and assessing human communication that leads to critique, to a determination of whether or not a given instance of discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action *in the world*’ (90). According to Fisher, narratives provide guides for behavior in the world through warrants, or “good reasons,” for acting in a certain way. This means that a narrative analysis of reality television based on this paradigm should take into account the value-systems in conflict within the stories in question as much as how those stories fit together coherently. Applying Fisher’s tests of coherence and fidelity to reality programs can not only help us understand what about them might make them “good stories,” but also how they might resonate with viewers in ways that affect their attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

The first test, *coherence*, is a three-pronged test of narrative probability. Fisher locates the “formal features [of narrative as] attributes of narrative probability: the consistency of characters and actions, the accommodation to auditors, and so on” (75). Coherent stories gain authority with their audience, who are then more willing to have the
world of the story (the diegesis) imposed on them. Fisher suggests audiences assess a narrative’s coherence, “by its argumentative or structural coherence; by its material coherence...and by characterological coherence” (47). They ask questions such as whether the story “hangs together” structurally in a reasonable, probable way, whether themes and subjects treated completely and believably in ways consistent with other known stories, and whether characters behave consistently and reliably. These tests determine whether a narrative is internally consistent and therefore whether it can even operate at the level of values or “good reasons”—“elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered by any form of communication that can be considered rhetorical” (48).

Testimonies from both critics of reality television and those working on various reality television projects suggest that shows are developed with at least the concerns of structural coherence in mind, and that characterological coherence may be considered as well when editing reality programs (Johnson; Kuhn and Harris; Morreale; Nichols; Seagal). Analysis of the four representative shows I have chosen should provide more insight into how viewers might see them as structurally and characterologically coherent and whether they seem to be materially coherent as well.

Once audiences are satisfied that a story “hangs together” in a probable way, Fisher proposes that they then consider its fidelity. Fidelity, the second test, relates the diegesis (the internal world) and values of the narrative back out to the exterior, known world as audiences consider how truthful and reliable the story is as an account and as advice for believing or acting in certain ways. Fisher proposes that fidelity “is assessed by applying what I call ‘the logic of good reasons’” (47). Logic, for Fisher, is more than the formal system that cannot account for values, emotions or aesthetic responses; instead, “logic [means] a systematic set
of concepts, procedures, and criteria for determining the degree of truthfulness or certainty in human discourse” (27). Narrative fidelity may assess questions of fact and validity using elements of formal logic or argumentative proof, but it does so in a storied context that also accounts for experiences, knowledge and values these systems may not explain. Fisher explains that audiences evaluate a story’s fidelity,

with critical questions that can locate and weigh values. These are questions about fact, relevance, consequence, consistency, and transcendental issues. In other words, narrative rationality does not deny that discourse often contains structures of reason that can be identified as specific forms of argument and assessed as such. Narrative rationality incorporates this fact but goes beyond it to claim that reason occurs in human communication in other than traditional argumentative structures. (48)

Using the “logic of good reasons” to examine reality television means going beyond a focus “on authorial techniques or specific individuated forms” to a focus “on audience response, the mental moves that will be made by auditors or readers [or viewers] in interpreting a word [or image]” (161). Not only do audiences interpret reality programs for their formal appropriateness or validity, but in assessing them as stories audiences also determine the values at play in them and,

whether or not they are pertinent to the story or case at hand; whether or not their impact on one’s concept of self, one’s relationship with others, and the process of rhetorical transaction is desirable; what would follow from their confirmation or disconfirmation of one’s life, the lives of those whom one admires, and the best
life that one can conceive; and the evaluation of their effects on the quality of life generally. (89)

This emphasizes that although fidelity is partially retrospective, in that audiences use previously held experiences and values to evaluate narratives, it is also prospective in that they also consider how those values play out in the narrative and whether the resolution of the conflict between values adheres to the best life they can conceive for themselves. Because transcendental values have the potential to be interpreted in so many ways (e.g. beauty, good), narratives provide situational contexts for audiences to reconsider those interpretations and their future actions based on those values. In this way, fidelity refers not only to the past, but future action as well. This is significant because it shows that narratives have the potential to not only maintain the status quo, but also produce change.

Fisher’s paradigm of narrative rationality can be and has been used to examine everything from technical communication (Katz), to naval history (Carpenter), to children’s television (Schrag), and jury decision-making (Williams). Within the field of psychology, Donald Polkinghorne also has studied the narrative approach as another research model for scientific research, particularly in the human sciences. Fisher himself chooses to apply it to three different contexts: Ronald Reagan’s political rhetoric, Plato’s philosophical dialogue Gorgias, and two literary examples, Death of a Salesman and The Great Gatsby. Although Fisher’s application of narrative rationality to political and philosophical narratives is compelling, his discussion of dramatic and literary narrative and how these can form the basis of “aesthetic proof” (rather than “argumentative proof”) is most useful for the purpose of examining reality television. Part of what Fisher finds in analyzing literature is that dramatic and literary works argue through suggestion:
Through the revelations of characters and situations that represent different value orientations in conflict with each other and/or with the environment, the reader or auditor is induced to a felt-belief, a sense of the message that the work is advancing. This felt-belief of message is at first aesthetic. (161)

This belief is “not based on deliberate thought or reasoned analysis,” but rather is “based on an immediate, emotional, intuitive response to a representation of an enclosed fictive world” (161). In the case of reality television, that world has additional persuasive power because it seems to be a recognizable part of our own experience, but we interpret it, are moved by it, and assess it in the same way we do fictional stories. In fact, Fisher explains that “aesthetic proofs are representations of reality that fall somewhere between analogies and examples” (162). Reality television, with its ethos of objectivity, seems to fall closer to providing examples of the world rather than analogies for it. Presumably, this reduces reality programs’ potential for allegorizing, but increases its ability to create a convincing nomos (normative universe), situation by situation.

The fact that aesthetic response is initially an emotional, intuitive response does not mean, however that it cannot become a more reflected, reasoned, rational understanding of the values and message of a narrative. In fact,

The felt-belief sense of a message can ... give rise to a reasoned belief and conviction—a clear and forceful rhetorical phenomenon ... The actions, the characters’ words, and their results, which first provided an aesthetic sense of the work’s message, now become the bases for a reasoned justification of a critical interpretation. The elements may be viewed now as “proof” invented by the
author, experienced by the auditor or reader, and now used by the respondent to substantiate his or her judgment of the work’s message. (162)

Fisher calls these proofs aesthetic proofs “to distinguish them from experiences of direct assertions or formal argumentative structures” (162).

As narratives consumed in much the same way dramatic programming has been (they occupy the same real estate, after all), reality shows create meaning and “aesthetic proofs” through much the same process. Audiences test reality programs for their internal coherence and their fidelity to their own lives and values, and in this way create felt-beliefs about the shows that may become powerful aesthetic proofs for a particular worldview or way to live and act in the world. These have the potential to confirm previously held beliefs, but may also alter them. If, as Fisher and other scholars claim, our lives are already shaped by narrative structure, reality television’s seemingly direct connection to unmediated “reality” may make its narrative structures that much more persuasive for those who believe in the existence of such a reality. My analysis, then, through Fisher’s tests of narrative rationality examines what sorts of “reality narratives” these programs tell in order to consider what some of the larger cultural implications of this narrative phenomenon may be.
Chapter 3: Realizing Theory

**Real World: le panoptique**

Real World in many ways marks the beginning of reality television as a popular and rapidly proliferating phenomenon. After first collaborating on Quintex’s *Crime Diaries* and Fox’s *American Families*, the show’s creators, Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jon Murray, combined their respective experiences in soap operas and documentary to find a new way of creating serial dramas; the formula they came up with and pitched to MTV changed the face of television and is still the basic recipe for what we call reality television (“About Us”). This identity as a landmark program in reality television’s evolution makes *Real World* a useful place to start an inquiry of the phenomenon’s rhetoric. The fact that *Real World* has survived since 1992 and has continued to gain viewers throughout its fifteen seasons also demonstrates its adaptability and continued relevance to its teenage and young adult audience. I have chosen to analyze *Real World*’s first season because it is such a landmark and because the conflicts those initial character-participants experienced and reflected on provide such valuable insight into how the narrative structures of other reality programs came about. Similarly, the *panoptique* narrative is a useful place to begin because it signifies the curiosity about others and the urge to see that initially draws viewers to reality television.

The first season’s episodes, just like each episode of *Real World* since then, begins with the same descriptive voiceover:

This is the true story of seven strangers, picked to live in a house and have their lives taped, and find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real. *The Real World!*
This introduction is followed by a half-hour episode structured around a conflict or problem occurring in the *Real World* house during the participants’ three-month stay together. The premise suggested by both the title and introduction is that strangers living together over an extended period of time will at some point necessarily “get real” with each other; and that the camera will provide viewer access to behavior and conflict between people who would never otherwise live together or confront each other in any substantial way. As Kevin from *Real World*’s first season put it: “this project shows the possibilities in this society if people are forced to live in a situation for a certain period of time—what can happen in terms of us growing and living and sharing together” (*Real World*). In other words, the reality offered by the show is that of behavior and social conflict. As a program featuring young adults between the ages of 18 and 24, the “real world” referenced for viewers by the narrative is the larger world outside of their families. Cast members come from diverse backgrounds and ethnic groups, yet all engage with new independence and responsibilities, and the identities that go with them. For MTV’s viewers, who are mainly teenagers and young adults, identifying with the characters and those conflicts likely comes quite easily.

Unlike some reality programs such as *Big Brother*, which don’t allow cast members to leave their house, *Real World* does allow this precisely because the themes and stories engaged with on the program have to do with the transition from teenager to young adult. Cast members work, play and meet people outside the *Real World* house. Crewmembers, however, follow participants during all of these activities; each aspect of participants’ lives is subject to the cameras and to possible editing and broadcasting. This constant visibility (in later seasons, producers even include fixed cameras with night vision capability in all rooms, including bedrooms and bathrooms) invokes the idea of the *panoptique*: participants live in a
state of constant surveillance without the reciprocity of seeing their viewers. This theme of surveillance is occasionally engaged with in the first season’s narrative, perhaps because of the novelty of constantly being watched for participants. In one “confessional” interview, Eric does admit, “If there is a camera in your face, it definitely is going to change the way you’re going to be” (Real World). The question of whether (or how much) the cameras and microphones following participants influence participant behavior is a constant subtext to the more explicit narratives in Real World and other similarly structured programs. The concept of the panoptique also illustrates why although Real World is inspired by the documentary ideal of objective observation, the final product is necessarily far from this illusive ideal.

Viewed thirteen years later, Andre, Eric, Julie, Heather B., Norm, Becky and Kevin’s televised journey together seems refreshingly innocent about their developing roles in the reality-based narrative. Though many of the themes begun in the first New York season (the city changes each season) remain present in all subsequent Real World seasons, the first season’s participants seem to engage most directly with their positions in relationship to the camera, crew and national audience. In fact, one of the most memorable episodes is the final, thirteenth episode, when the cast storms the forbidden “control room,” turning the tables and cameras on the crew. Another memorable episode that engages with this artificial line between the show’s “reality” and the tools necessary to document it, “the process,” as the Real World producers have dubbed it (Marsh), is the eighth episode when Becky falls in love with one of the on-site directors—a forbidden relationship in the same way some documentary filmmakers, journalists and anthropologists avoid interfering with their subjects for the sake of objectivity. This transgression of “the process” results in the director losing his position as a crewmember and becoming a character within Real World’s constructed
diegesis; in fact, Becky introduces him as “the director I have sucked through the fourth wall” (*Real World*). This statement suggests a certain level of awareness of the performed nature of the narrative developing through the participants’ conflicts and experiences, as well as the artificiality of that performance. The fact that this developing awareness became part of the first season’s story and text, yet was embraced by its audience and deemed somehow real, makes a narrative analysis of *Real World*, using the “mental moves” generally used by viewers to assess stories (Fisher 161), useful for shedding light how the show constitutes such a convincing “reality.”

The first test viewers are likely to use, according to Fisher’s theory of narrative rationality, is that of coherence: structural, material and characterological. As Fisher puts it, this is the test of whether a story “hangs together” in a satisfying and probable way. Before assessing stories for narrative fidelity, whether they “ring true” and whether they provide “good reasons,” audiences first test stories for whether they are internally consistent, both thematically and structurally, consistent with similar stories that treat the same subject, and whether their characters behave reliably. If a story does not make sense at these basic levels, it ultimately fails and cannot be said to argue or provide any reasons, good or otherwise, as a basis for future action, attitude or belief. Applying the test of coherence to *Real World* means asking whether it is internally coherent (structural coherence), consistent with relevant narrative knowledge (material coherence) and whether the participants on the reality show are indeed reliable and consistent as characters (characterological coherence).

The narrative structure of *Real World* is evident from each individual episode, which is structured around and named after a central conflict (see Appendix A). MTV’s website
summarizes the first season for potential viewers in much the same way a fictional series might be summarized:

In 1992, *The Real World* spawned a new genre of television with its fresh documentary/soap opera formula. Seven diverse young people from all over the country moved into a New York apartment in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan. All seven pursued their own dreams in the big city—a model, a dancer, a writer, a rapper, a rock singer, an artist, and a singer—we witnessed their triumphs and failures. A possible romance developed between two of the roommate Eric and Julie, [sic] the lone gay castmember, Norman embarks on a serious relationship, and racial tensions heat up between Kevin and the roomies. (“Season 1”).

MTV’s write-up presents the season as a unified story with a beginning (moving into the New York apartment), middle (pursuing dreams, relationships and conflicts) and end (triumphs and failures, the closure of the show). Although the season’s thirteen episodes together are only loosely organized in the traditional “Freytag’s pyramid” of introduction, rising action, complication, climax and resolution, each episode is a miniature narrative within itself, often with both an “A-story” and “B-story.” The whole, then, is structurally more episodic than pyramidal, a narrative structure Aristotle found inferior, but an alternative and coherent narrative structure nevertheless (“Narrative,” 391).

The first season maintains this structural coherence thematically, unifying what might otherwise seem to be a fragmented narrative structure. The two main themes running through the thirteen episodes are that of growth as young adults and self-expression as artists. In particular, the participants grow through interpersonal conflict as well as direct, honest
engagement ("realness") with the new freedoms and responsibilities of young adulthood away from parents and family. For example, Julie, the young, sheltered girl from Alabama, must confront her received Southern, traditional values by living with two African-American and one gay roommate. At the beginning of the show she hopes to “learn a lot about [herself]” (Real World); by the end she reflects having “met more personal and emotional goals than [she] even wanted” (Real World). Another participant, Kevin, must in turn face his own anger as a young African-American male living in white America, by living “with the enemy.” His conflicts with his roommates over race make up a major part of the show. At one point he even accuses Becky, who simply wants to understand better, of being a racist: “You’re a racist. Race plus power equals racism. If you and I went to a job interview, who would get the job?” (Real World). Norman, the gay roommate, must risk being open about his identity as a gay man to learn that he will be accepted as he is: “I was definitely neurotic about how to bring my sexuality in to six people that I didn’t know. Would they treat me differently? Would I be treated differently? And I learned that they didn’t” (Real World).

The secondary theme, artistic expression, runs throughout the narrative but does not create as much conflict. In many ways, the participants’ artistic endeavors become a backdrop for the interpersonal conflict inherent in the narrative of personal growth. We see Julie attend dance classes and Kevin write poetry, but they do not reflect as much on their arts and their arts don’t generate much conflict. In fact, what Real World’s first season seems to demonstrate, and model for all subsequent panoptique reality narratives, is that diversity is enough to create narrative conflict. Though the producers’ initial casting choices reveal the framework for their anticipated narrative about artists, this “B-story” is subsumed by the
larger narrative of “real” growth. Later seasons do away with the narrative of the arts altogether and focus exclusively on personal growth and diversity. By the first season’s end, however, this larger narrative is resolved as each roommate achieves varying levels of change and triumph over his or her own personal challenges and the group as a whole achieves a certain level of understanding and cohesion. As Becky puts it in the final episode, “A lot of youthful delusions [have been] washed away” (Real World).

The next interpretive and evaluative move Fisher proposes viewers are likely to make is to test Real World’s narrative for what he calls material coherence. This test asks whether the story fits with other related stories in a relevant, believable way. Identifying Real World’s story as a narrative about youthful growth, whether through interpersonal confrontation, exposure to ideas and experiences outside of the sphere of the familiar, or the enforced reflection of the “confessionals,” we can see that the story fits within many common stories our culture tells about youth and how people become adults. In many coming-of-age stories, protagonists leave what they have known before to encounter the world and ultimately themselves; David Copperfield and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn are just two such examples. Although Real World is not a journey, its participants do travel from their homes to encounter life in a large urban, and sometimes international, center. In Real World’s first season, this thereafter-implicit journey is made explicit by Julie’s documented journey from Alabama to New York City. Real World, in fact, begins with innocent, protected Julie amid her Southern family and ends with the more experienced Julie in her new cosmopolitan, diverse “family.” The “growth” in this context is not only that of adapting to new responsibilities and independence, but also that of owning personal
(rather than familial) values through engagement with and learned tolerance of other values. Perhaps the “real” in *Real World* not only refers to “real” growth but also “real” education.

And in fact, *Real World*’s narrative is not only reminiscent of coming-of-age stories, but also of common stories about college and even military service. Roommates in college generally learn to live with more diversity than they would have staying at home. This type of growth is part of the college experience and learning process. Similarly, many stories about military service focus on the bonding that occurs during war. People of diverse backgrounds must learn to get along in a confined environment in order to survive. *Real World* certainly doesn’t have the same kind of extreme consequences as military service, but the confinement is real. What is common to all these stories is the catharsis people experience once they have confronted “the Other” and learned to live together. This is evident in *Real World* as differences are ultimately put aside between roommates for the takeover of the production room and the final, goodbye pajama party between friends. The final interviews also point to this catharsis as cast members express having learned something from the other cast members and about themselves. In this sense, *Real World* meets the test of material coherence as the themes and stories it tells are familiar and quite relevant to the current “reality” of growing up in the twenty-first century. The cathartic narrative closure is also an expected and appropriate resolution to the otherwise episodic, character-driven narrative.

Characters, however, are a significant part of how narratives work. Fisher proposes that the final test of narrative coherence is that of characterological coherence. Characters tend to have arcs that parallel and drive story arcs. A story’s characters change and drive the chain of causality that structures a plot. For a story to be satisfyingly coherent, for it to be
well structured, its characters must also be reliable and consistent in their behavior, emotions and their stage of narrative “learning.” The disruption that initiates a narrative’s actions is often caused by characters and, at the very least, happens to a character. In most satisfying stories, the characters must overcome the challenge presented by the disruption or overcome their own character flaw, and in the process learn something significant about life or themselves. Central characters who do not overcome their flaws tend to be a tragic hero. Coherent characters are consistent not only in terms of character traits and behavior, but also in their motivations and their progression towards overcoming the challenges presented to them within the story.

Episode six of the first season presents very relevant insight into how each participant functions reliably as a character. Kevin, an aspiring writer with his own apartment in the city, has been spending less and less time at the loft. In fact, he is absent for a group dinner he had volunteered to help cook. At dinner, the roommates come up with a prank to play on Kevin. They each write down a “persona” and put it into an empty fishbowl. Whatever persona they draw, they must become convincingly enough to fool Kevin into thinking they had changed while he was away. Norman must become “a complete hippie: peace, love, the whole thing and a kleptomaniac” (Real World). Eric draws “a nerdy gay” (Real World). And Julie announces, “I get to be a whore!” (Real World). When Kevin comes back, he falls for the joke. Peeking into the communal bathroom he sees Norman pinch Eric’s butt in the shower. In disbelief he exclaims to the camera, “I know Norman is very open about his homosexuality, which I don’t have a problem with, but I didn’t know Eric was gay!” (Real World). A conversation with a red-lipped, negligéed Julie, who he openly admires for her innocence and virginity, disturbs him further: “I can’t believe this. It’s like abrupt! Julie, I
thought you were the last sincere person on the planet” (Real World). Completely distraught, Kevin protests: “Everyone’s changing personality in this house. Yo, people are losing their minds in this place!” (Real World) When Julie suggestively counters that she had to “grow up” sometime, he questions her authenticity: “You’re really changing your image? This is not you. If you’re not true to yourself you won’t be true to anybody else. If you’re doing it to please other people or to fit in, that’s kind of phony” (Real World). Finally, Kevin is so shocked by the utter transformation of his roommates that he runs away.

The chaos and confusion that occurs when the roommates act contrary to their normal personas underlines how consistent they truly are as characters. Julie’s innocence and sincerity carry through from the first episode to the last. Though by the conclusion she’s lost some of her naiveté, she retains her openness and trust in people. Her 180-degree turn in behavior during episode six shocks Kevin and is obvious to viewers as inconsistent with her character. The fact that Kevin believes the charade shows an interesting self-absorption on his part. This is consistent as well, however, as his interactions with his roommates tend to be short and often angry, focusing on how they do not understand him or cannot be in his shoes. During the prank, Andre is upset that Kevin buys his assumed persona: “The thing is that he actually bought the fact that I was joining a bluegrass band. It says he knows absolutely nothing about me. Absolutely nothing” (Real World). Clearly, Real World’s participants have consistency and reliability as characters.

Rather than setting a narrative about artists, as Real World’s producers obviously intended, the participants in the first season show how diversity of backgrounds, personality and life stories (that larger master narrative we all have) produce the best narrative conflict. In many ways, these participants established a set of archetypal characters that have carried
over through the seasons: Julie is the innocent country bumpkin; Kevin is the angry black man; Norman is the gay character; Becky is the loose woman; Eric is the street-smart, pulled-up-by-the-bootstraps guy; Heather is the minority woman; and Andre is the quiet peacemaker. Although not every season has every one of these “stock” characters, the qualities embodied by them are present in varying combinations of personality, gender and ethnicity throughout Real World’s fifteen seasons. Their competing life stories create the conflicts for each reality narrative.

If viewers find a story satisfyingly coherent, then Fisher proposes they perform a final test: the test of narrative fidelity, or whether the narrative “rings true.” This type of “truth,” however, goes beyond internal consistency to questions of values—whether the values argued for in a narrative are relevant to and consistent with the world outside the diegesis, whether the consequences of enacting those values are desirable, and how those values fit within the larger transcendental, ethical scheme of things. If so, then the narrative might become a powerful “aesthetic proof” for a particular worldview and for action “in the world.” Before this type of rhetorical proof may occur, however, audiences first locate what those values are through their intuitive, emotional “felt-belief” of the message it argues for. This emotional understanding of a narrative arises from “the revelations of characters and situations that represent different value orientations in conflict with each other and/or with the environment” (Fisher 161). Thus, examining the conflicts within Real World sheds light on what the narrative’s message might be for viewers.

Real World’s first season seems to revolve around three interrelated conflicts: between independence and family, between isolation and community, and between self-expression and self-repression. These conflicts are sometimes manifested through characters
and their conflicts with each other, sometimes through characters’ conflicts with the external world outside the loft, and sometimes through internal psychological struggles we as viewers become privy to through the numerous “confessionals.” The narrative unifies these structurally, however, and ultimately provides a sense of closure through the final interviews, the goodbye party and the storming of the control room; by story’s end harmony seems to have been restored and the seven participants seem closer to self-actualization.

The conflict between independence and family is evident for most of the seven cast members. In fact, we meet family members from all but Becky’s and Norman’s families. Julie, the baby of the crew at 19, is constantly struggling to differentiate her identity and values from those of her family. We begin the season, in fact, with her boldly confronting her father for not listening to any opinions but his own; presumably, the cameras have emboldened her to speak her mind. Later, when she meets a homeless woman her own age named Darlene in one of New York City’s many “Reaganvilles” and decides to spend the night with her on the street, she doesn’t tell her parents because she knows the response will be “Oh, you’re gonna be a damn social worker” (Real World). Norman accidentally spills the beans to her mom over dinner one night during her visit putting him in the hot seat with Julie. He explains his blunder: “I thought she would have told her mother about this. So it kind of caused some stress with Julie because I don’t think she wanted to explain that” (Real World). Later, her mom guilt trips her, not understanding the process Julie is going through in trying to work through her own identity and values outside her parents’: “Is it the thing to do not to get along with your parents? Like when you’re a little kid, the thing to do is not to like school. Nobody says they like school” (Real World). Throughout the season, Julie debates whether to stay in New York to pursue a career in dancing or return to Alabama to be
near her family. Towards the end of the season, Becky articulates the struggle many of them are having, or have had, in learning to be independent:

At some point, it’s really weird, it happens real quick, but there’s a certain plunge you take and you just gotta go by the seat of your pants. If you look at it, in a way it’s exciting because you know inside what you believe in and who you are and it’s kind of putting yourself to a certain amount of test. (Real World)

Becky’s advice to Eric, another roommate deciding how and when to become independent from his family, is that he’s “going to have to leave [his] home and take the plunge we all took, which is how you become a self-sufficient adult without your family” (Real World).

Ultimately, it seems the Real World experience has brought cast members closer to understanding themselves and how to find their way in life.

The second, related, conflict is between community and isolation. Within the loft, the roommates are in constant flux between living together communally and fracturing into isolated individuals or subunits. Conflicts abound about sleeping arrangements, schedules, cooking, cleaning, meals, spending time together—all the frictions of establishing a communal life together. On top of the logistical questions, this “family,” however, also has to work out differences originating in the social differences between them: race, gender, sexuality, culture. At many times, the group is faced with whether to place a value on their “community” or go the path of least resistance and look out for their own self-interests. This is evident with Kevin’s tendency to spend long periods of time away from the loft. His often-heated exchanges with Becky also show the ease with which roommates could settle for misunderstanding each other rather than working to understand each other. Kevin states many times that, as a black man in America, all he wants “is the opportunity to have an
opportunity” (Real World). Becky feels that though there are many problems in America, the potential for opportunity and equality is still there. Kevin, however, has difficulty letting go of his own anger and often lashes out in a personal or unproductive way: “You want to know the reality? If you look at the statistics, white women benefited more from the civil rights movement than black people did. Look it up. Where’s the opportunity is my question to you” (Real World). Becky remarks in an interview that strangely, “we were arguing the same thing but we had different ways of talking about it . . . I’d love to have conversations with Kevin but if it ends up that you’re a slut and your mother’s a whore, then forget it” (Real World). Ultimately, all the roommates do learn to make the compromises and commitments necessary to work as a community. This tension, however, is also apparent in the roommates’ relationships with the outside world. Julie’s experience with Darlene, whose welfare check is $215 a month when a room costs $450, shows this need to connect with the larger human community, as does the roommates’ decision to vote in the primaries and to attend a pro-choice rally in Washington D.C. Speaking of her night with Darlene, Julie reflects, “It’s just a lot more real than giving someone change and walking away . . . Who’s to say that I couldn’t be Darlene if I didn’t have the family and the friends that I have to support me?” (Real World).

The last central conflict of the first season is the tension between self-expression and repression. Along with the urge to become independent and participate in a community, the Real World participants constantly engage with how and when to express themselves. This is certainly evident in the many interpersonal conflicts; though it may be easier to repress feelings and ideas rather than speak them, the roommates reward each other’s honesty and openness with understanding and reciprocality. The cast members’ art, however, is another
dimension of this in the first season; the cast consists of one dancer, writer, rapper, painter, fashion model and two musicians. All of them struggle with their art and how to get their art to an audience. Decisions on how to present themselves and their identities to the world are another manifestation of this conflict.

Perhaps because the roommates are artists and because of the constant scrutiny and enforced reflexivity of the Real World process, the question of “image” and self-presentation or expression became central to the narrative at this level. At the beginning of the season, Heather mentions that she “didn’t create an image” or a persona “separate from [herself] to sell records” (Real World). She feels that “Eric,” however, “has a serious problem with his image. He’s too concerned with how he looks and what people think about him and what he says when people are listening and watching” (Real World). In her final interview, Becky contemplates the intensity of the scrutiny: “I learned a lot about myself—it was a constant mirror. That’s very intense. Everything is being reflected back at you instantaneously” (Real World). For most of the roommates, however, the experience seemed to reinforce their decision to be “real”—to be themselves. Kevin’s disappointment at Julie’s “phony” change during the joke on him supports this. As does Norman’s reflection on his decision to be open about his sexuality: “This is who I am and I’m not going to go away. I’m very proud to be who I am” (Real World). Heather sums it up nicely in her final interview on what Real World means to her: “The real world is not being someone else to me. You always have to deal with yourself and I think I learned that it’s really important to be happy with yourself. You can deal with anybody just starting from that point—just being happy with yourself and loving yourself” (Real World). The way the two ideas of “the real world” and Real World coalesce for Heather also underscores how the show argues for a definition of reality.
The felt-belief *Real World*’s first season might provoke in a viewer, then, is a belief in the “realness” its narrative structures—authenticity in self-expression, engagement and individuality. If these values resonate with viewers’ experiences and with “the best life that [they] can conceive” (Fisher 89), this intuitive response to the narrative’s message may become an argument for specific “thought and action *in the world*” (Fisher 90). It becomes an aesthetic proof. And indeed, as reality shows have become an increasing part of the television landscape, this landmark season’s argument for this variety of reflexive self-expression, engagement and individuality seems to have been rhetorically effective. The compelling narrative it was able to construct through conflicts between diverse life stories has also proven to be a model for other *panoptique* narratives. Other *panoptique* shows such as *College Hill, Simple Life*, and *Surreal Life* all tend to follow *Real World*’s narrative example. Seeing the clashes between personalities and worldviews, as well as the consequent actions that unfold, seems to hold special fascination for viewers.

**The Bachelor: les jeux**

Though *le panoptique* looks to conflicts between diverse worldviews and life stories for developing its narrative structure episodically, almost organically, this next reality narrative, *les jeux*, uses competitive conflict to develop a much tighter, pyramidal structure. The shows using this narrative form have been among the most popular reality programs, thus are what many people think of when reality television is mentioned. Shows that fall in this narrative category include *American Idol, The Apprentice, Nashville Star, America’s Next Top Model, Road Rules, The Amazing Race* and *Fear Factor*.

*The Bachelor*, another popular *jeux* narrative, this time about “a charming young bachelor searching for the woman of his dreams” (“Bachelor Casting”), debuted on ABC in
2002. Despite its romantic subject, as in other *jeux télévisés*, *The Bachelor*’s narrative is that of a game and is structured competitively—complete with competitors, judge, challenges, eliminations, winners and losers. The original 2002 season featured one bachelor, Alex Michel, choosing a fiancée from among “twenty-five fantastic women who are also looking for love” (*The Bachelor*). Each of the six episodes featured numerous group and individual dates during which Alex (and viewers) became acquainted with the “bachelorettes.” Unlike *Real World*, which attempts to record each moment of participants’ lives, *The Bachelor* leaves out anything not directly related to the competition; though the women must have eaten, slept and talked during their cohabitation in the Ladies’ Villa, the episodes reveal only moments when Alex or the competition are the subject of discussion, or moments revelatory of character traits that play a part in the larger narrative. This filmmaking choice means that the competition precludes any other types of narratives from forming.

Looking once more through the lens of Fisher’s narrative rationality, *The Bachelor*’s competitive narrative easily meets the first test of coherence: structural coherence. Each episode is structured around the conflict of the bachelor finding “the one” among so many possible partners and leads up to the climax of a Rose Ceremony—a ceremony of elimination or promotion, depending on whether a woman receives a rose or not. The six episodes together also form a larger narrative of courtship that climaxes with the final Rose Ceremony, and hopefully a proposal of marriage.

The first episode represents the initial “meeting” stage of courtship as Alex and the twenty-five women meet for the first time at a party. Based on first impressions, Alex eliminates ten contestants, leaving fifteen women he would like to get to know better. The second episode constitutes the “group date” stage; the women go out with Alex in groups of
five and from this experience, he chooses eight women he would like to continue “courting.”

During the third episode, tensions mount as Alex chooses three women for “individual
dates,” leaving the remaining five to compete in a group date. At the end of this episode,
Alex chooses four women to court more seriously. The fourth episode represents the
“meeting the parents” stage of courtship as Alex visits each woman’s hometown to meet her
family and friends, and see the woman in her environment. After this experience, Alex
chooses the three women he feels most compatible with. The fifth episode comprises of
three “exotic overnight dates”; Alex meets each woman in a different location for an
overnight romantic getaway after which he eliminates one woman. In the final episode, the
tables are turned as the last two women, Trista and Amanda, get to meet Alex’s family before
being flown back to California and the Ladies’ Villa for the final Rose Ceremony. Though
the expectation is that this ceremony might also be a marriage proposal, Alex ultimately
offers Amanda a final rose but no ring, as he feels he has not had enough time to get to know
her. As a gesture of commitment and seriousness, however, Alex does show Amanda the
engagement ring he has acquired and asks her to move in with him in San Francisco.

On the subject of form in literature, Fisher quotes Kenneth Burke: “Form in literature
is an arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a
reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence” (160-1). In the case of The
Bachelor, as with other jeux télévisés, the structure of the competition itself seems to propel
the show’s narrative in this sense as everyone involved eagerly anticipates the next stage of
the game—the next challenge, the next winners, the next losers. It seems other important
dimensions of courtship are subsumed for both viewers and participants as the competition
itself becomes the narrative. For example, though the bachelorettes have the option to
decline Alex’s roses if they feel romantically incompatible with him, none ever do. Host Chris Harrison never fails to remind the contestants of their freedom of choice: “You are totally empowered here. You don’t have to accept [Alex’s] invitation if you don’t think that the bachelor is someone you might end up marrying or want to marry. You can reject his invitation and prepare to leave the show” (*The Bachelor*). This “empowerment,” however, rings as defeat in the context of the game. Within the confines of the competition, all twenty-five very different bachelorettes seem to find Alex the perfect, most desirable match for themselves. *The Bachelor*, along with other *jeux télévisés*, structures its episodes for viewers as well as the internal reality of its participants very deliberately so that both are propelled along to the anticipated climax and conclusion. For viewers and participants, Alex and Amanda’s final kiss in the sunbathed, idyllic garden overlooking the Pacific is the fulfillment and gratification of the expectations aroused by each tightening round of romantic selection and rejection.

Looking at the next element in determining narrative probability, whether or not *The Bachelor* is likely to be materially coherent for viewers, it seems clear that, for Western viewers at least, its narrative invokes familiar stories and knowledge. *The Bachelor*’s coupled themes of competition and romance evoke fairytales such as Cinderella in which a powerful, successful man chooses a suitable consort from among a group of eligible women. Like these stories, *The Bachelor* manages to couple the idea of true love with what is otherwise a competition laden with real material and social consequences. Alex is successful in the conventional sense of the term: he has a degree from Harvard, an MBA from Stanford, and he works as a management consultant at a “top-tier firm” in San Francisco (*The Bachelor*). He is also attractive in that he comes from a good family and is ready to settle
down. The bachelorettes on the show behave much as the women in these traditional narratives do; they present themselves as well as possible, accommodate Alex’s interests as much as possible, and try to outdo each other in performances of suitability and compatibility with Alex, reinforcing traditional gender roles through the competition’s structure. The Bachelor’s ultimate outcome is also reminiscent of these fairytales as the woman chosen, Amanda, comes from a modest background, is young, attractive and uneducated, and stands to gain the most from the relationship. Notably, the women Alex eliminates in the first round are also the women who are most obviously his equal; these candidates include a neuropsychologist, a physician, an attorney and a business development director. Alex’s pairing with Amanda is in many ways the most unequal that might have come out of the process, reinforcing the traditional storylines and gender roles of the fairytales. The Bachelor is thus quite consistent with the stories and knowledge an audience is likely to know. In this sense at least, the narrative “hangs together” easily for viewers.

In terms of Fisher’s third test of narrative coherence, characterological coherence, The Bachelor hangs together as well, though the characters don’t grow and change as visibly as those in Real World. Alex’s easygoing, attentive enjoyment never lapses. Neither does his focus on finding “the right one.” After the second rose ceremony, Alex expresses his discomfort at having to disappoint women by eliminating them, but recalls this larger objective: “I can’t be playing to other people. I have to honestly ask myself which of these women has more potential for me as a wife” (The Bachelor). After an individual date with the mysterious, statuesque Shannon from Dallas, Alex also frames the experience in those terms: “It was one of the most romantic nights I’ve ever had. I literally had visions of her as the mother of my children” (The Bachelor). Alex’s sentiments in episode six that he needs
his family to advise him for his final choice also reinforces that he is interested in selecting the right candidate to commit to: “I’ve let go of twenty-three women already. Twenty-three women have come into my life for varying lengths of time and are now gone. I feel really good about who I have as the final two, but because I’ve been in a bubble with no advisors I can’t wait to hear what my family has to say” (*The Bachelor*). His words to Amanda when he tells her she’s the one also reassure viewers that in terms of this quest at least, he is a reliable character: “Before we walk down the aisle together I want to make sure that we feel the same way about each other outside the fantasy world of mansions and limos . . . I’d love it if you’d move to California so we can be together” (*The Bachelor*). Personality-wise, Alex is so consistent, he could be labeled a static character. His commitment to his objective, however, and his developing relationships with a few of the women and finally with one show that he does have a character arc that parallels the narrative arc as well.

The “bachelorettes,” in turn, tend to be coherent characters viewers would find reliable as well. The women we get to know the most are the three Alex ultimately chooses between: Shannon, Trista and Amanda. This fact actually reinforces the structural coherence of *The Bachelor* in addition to the characterological coherence, as it demonstrates the narrative choices the show’s creators made in editing the footage together. Although Alex must have met each of the twenty-five bachelorettes during the initial meeting in the first episode, viewers are only privy to a handful of these first encounters, notably all three of the final candidates. Early on, viewers also have access to conversations among the bachelorettes that have to do with these three main characters. For example, in the second episode, one woman expresses her insecurities that “Trista is 29 but has the body of an 18-
year-old” (*The Bachelor*). Through this extra coverage of these three main candidates, we get a sense of their importance to, and coherence within, the larger narrative.

Trista is the first of the three that we get to know. During the first episode, we sense that Alex is interested in her and finds her vibrancy attractive. In her initial meeting with him she explains her dual careers: “I work as a pediatric therapist so I treat all ages up to 21, but I see mostly babies. And I also dance for the Miami Heat basketball team” (*The Bachelor*). Alex obviously finds Trista’s careers intriguing: “It’s a good combo, a good mix of activities” (*The Bachelor*). But though she is appealing physically and stresses her femininity—she “play[s] with babies and then go[es to] dance on the court”—she is also the oldest of the three final bachelorettes by five years. A “child of divorce” (*The Bachelor*), Trista’s character quickly comes across as both very honest and cautious relationally. Throughout the season, she repeatedly expresses her sense that Alex should get to know everyone equally in order to be certain his commitment is genuine and reflected: “I really want him to get the full experience out of everything. I want him to get to know those girls as much as possible so that he knows for sure who he wants to be with” (*The Bachelor*).

Although Trista is very friendly during their initial dates, Alex apparently finds the emotional wall she has around her frustrating. She is unable to behave as openly to his advances as many of the other women. Later, Alex asks her to “put yourself in a situation where you are feeling like we’re exclusively dating—I’m asking you to open yourself to getting hurt” (*The Bachelor*). Trista, however, explains that she can’t: “I can’t picture that we’re being exclusive because that would mean you’re cheating on me” (*The Bachelor*). In the final episode, Trista takes Alex’s family aback with her honesty about where she is regarding their son: “I really am ‘in like’ with your son but I don’t think either of us is in love
per se and I don’t want to get a divorce because I was a child of divorce; when someone proposes to me I want to know that it’s above and beyond all reasonable doubt the right thing to do” (The Bachelor). By the end of the episode, she does feel she could accept a proposal from Alex, and openly cries when he tells her he doesn’t think they are meant to live their lives together. She has clearly given in to possible hurt. Throughout The Bachelor, Trista is consistent in her honesty and the gravity with which she approaches her relationship with Alex. Of all the bachelorettes, she seems to focus least on the competitive nature of the process though she alludes to the artificiality of the scenario when she discusses her inability to “picture” being exclusive with Alex since in real emotional terms that would mean he was cheating on her.

Similarly, Shannon, a 24-year-old financial management assistant from Dallas, is a very serious character, confessing that she has been hurt by cheating boyfriends before (The Bachelor). For this reason, and because of her conservative upbringing, Shannon takes all signs of affection and commitment seriously and has created a set of “rules” for what various stages of courtship and intimacy mean to her. Within the larger narrative, her traditional values and her “rules” evoke chivalric codes and romance the most. They also create much narrative conflict. Shannon is initially pleased by Alex’s chivalry and respect for her boundaries during their first individual date together: “I am really falling for Alex especially with the fact that he’s respected me so much this evening. There are so many times where he could have put me in an uncomfortable situation and he hasn’t” (The Bachelor). Their behavior together most resembles that of chivalric love with her giving him very little encouragement and him in many ways trying to “prove” his love to her through gifts and symbolic gestures. However, she is often shocked by Alex’s behavior in other contexts—
especially his kissing some of the other women on dates and admitting to having cheated on a previous long-distance relationship. These are serious breaches of the code she lives by.

When Alex meets Shannon’s family in his visit to Dallas, she explains how this, too, breaks that code: “This is a little odd because I normally don’t bring guys home. My parents know that to bring them home means something. This isn’t just about Shannon anymore, it affects other people’s lives too” (The Bachelor). In the limo after this encounter, Alex makes the mistake of asking Shannon bluntly about her rules and sexuality: “I want to know about these rules and what it means to be a good girl and how that relates to sex” (The Bachelor). Shannon is shocked that he would broach this subject on camera and rebuffs him for it: “I think you see how awkward I feel right now but you just don’t care. You care about your answer. You don’t care about how awkward these questions are making me feel” (The Bachelor). Later, Alex confesses he’s not sure how to relate to Shannon but is still blown away by her: “I’m angry, upset, confused. I’m literally going insane and I just wish I could catch my breath but I can’t” (The Bachelor). The intensity and “realness” of everyone’s emotions at this point in the constructed narrative structure, the jeuX, is notable. One might ask if the reality isn’t an emotional rather than phenomenal or situational reality in this context.

Alex and Shannon’s last date together, an overnight getaway to Lake Tahoe, is consistent with their other encounters. Shannon continues to hold Alex to a high standard, almost demanding total devotion in return for any sign of affection. At one point, Alex sends the cameras away so that he can talk to her privately. The sudden reference to the cameras and their influence in constructing both situation and behavior is jarring. When Alex and Shannon retreat from their visibility, we get the sense they are retreating from the constructed
reality to another plane of real. When Alex returns, however, the sense is that he may have made symbolic promises he’s not sure he’ll be able to keep within the structure of the show:

I feel like I’m dating Shannon. I feel like she’s my girlfriend and we’ve had some fights and want to make it better. And last night, I did, actually. And we got through it. But I have some big concerns. She’s going to be mad if she doesn’t continue and she’s going to feel like I misled her by being so affectionate. *(The Bachelor)*

When he doesn’t extend a rose to Shannon during the fifth rose ceremony, her betrayed reaction is consistent with her previous behavior within the narrative. In this sense, Fisher would call her a coherent character. She also grows, however, as she suddenly confronts Alex as she leaves with a demand for an explanation from him; at this point, she comes to the realization that Alex may not be the person she thought he was. The constructed nature of their situation seems to dawn on her, as well as its very real effects on their emotions, allowing her to leave with no regrets.

Amanda, the last bachelorette, also fits Fisher’s description of characterological coherence. As a character, Amanda contrasts sharply with both Trista and Shannon, as does Alex’s relationship with her. At twenty-three, she is one of the youngest women on the show. Although the show describes her as an event planner, she introduces herself to Alex as being “interested in” event planning *(The Bachelor)*; she clearly doesn’t have an established career. But though she is inexperienced in terms of education or career, she seems very comfortable relationally with Alex and is able to put him at ease. During their first date, a group date to a spa, she sits next to him in the mud bath. Afterwards, Alex showers the mud off her and she reciprocates. Amanda’s sensuality and physical attractiveness quickly
becomes a feature of her character. Alex notes to the camera that Amanda “has a rockin’
body but maybe doesn’t realize it” (*The Bachelor*). We later learn that she has had a breast
augmentation so this supposed naiveté about her body seems unlikely.

Unlike Trista and Shannon, Amanda never expresses any doubts about Alex as a
potential partner and if anything could be characterized as unswervingly admiring and
appreciative of him. After the mudbath, she confesses, “Alex looks pretty good in mud. He
was pretty sexy” (*The Bachelor*). Later, in a discussion with the other women on whether or
not they would refuse a proposal from him, Amanda is unwaveringly approving of him: “If
anything it has raised my standard in guys because he is so fun and his humor is what’s so
important to me. And the way that his eyes when I stare at him makes my stomach drop”
(*The Bachelor*). Amanda consistently knows how to arouse Alex’s interest and make him
feel admired and wanted. On their first individual date together, Amanda tells Alex that she
has “a cowgirl outfit with a little top and a little thong for chaps” and that she “just thinks
that [sort of thing] is fun!” (*The Bachelor*). Alex admits she revealed “adventurous things
about herself that [he] found very appealing” (*The Bachelor*). After making out during a
traditional Japanese dinner, Alex gushes about Amanda: “She has this incredibly creative
sexuality that more or less no one has ever appreciated and here I am getting it like a gift”
(*The Bachelor*). Clearly, Amanda is consistent in her sensuality and relational behavior in a
way that conforms to Fisher’s concept of characterological coherence. From start to finish,
she is reliably warm, inviting and flattering to Alex. She reliably plays a traditional feminine
role by consistently working to please Alex while making it seem she’s pleasing herself.
And she reliably offers Alex a traditional, easily gratifying alternative to the challenges either
Trista or Shannon offers.
The contrasting traits and personalities of Alex’s three main relational choices offer insight into how The Bachelor might “ring true” for viewers. Fisher explains that viewers assess a story for how faithful it is to their knowledge and values (its narrative fidelity) by evaluating the message the work seems to be advancing. This understanding of the message, however, develops “through the revelations of characters and situations that represent different value orientations in conflict with each other and/or with the environment” (161). In many ways, Alex’s choices are between three conflicting narratives on relationships between men and women, though the structure of les jeux privileges one over the other: Trista offers the choice of an egalitarian relationship based on friendship as well as love; Shannon offers the courtly love model of servus (servant) and domina (mistress); and Amanda offers the reverse—the traditional gender roles privileged by the competitive nature of the show. These narratives each resonate as narratives relevant to the choices we face in contemporary American society. Which narrative choice we favor as viewers is likely to coincide with our own values; however, the felt-belief inspired by The Bachelor’s narrative structure and aesthetic choices is likely to be a conservative one based on a traditional patriarchal model of gender relations, for the competitive structure promotes neither equality between the sexes nor female dominance. Rather, the structure encourages viewers (and Alex) to view the bachelorettes as commodities to fit his life and needs, and encourages participants to please Alex and compete with each other rather than exert their own needs and desires.

The conflict between these three paradigms of male and female relationships, each based on a different value system, is evident in Alex’s own struggle to choose. Trista, Shannon and Amanda each catch his attention early on, but each seems to require a different
relational way of being. While Trista is not ashamed to admit that she is “in like” rather than “in love” with Alex and wants to get to know him better, Shannon demands the utmost loyalty and sincerity early on. Amanda, on the other hand, is easy-going, deferential and eager to please. For Alex, the demanding nature of the relationship with Shannon ultimately encourages him to let her go first out of the three. Unsure how best to please her and unused to the devotional, serving nature of the role she puts him in, he decides the relationship would be simply too difficult: “We’ll struggle with each other too much . . . I don’t want to make [Shannon’s] life hard and I fear that I would” (*The Bachelor*). Trista is much harder to let go of, however. Speaking with his family, Alex reflects that though Amanda seems to like him more, he’s “more wrapped up in Trista” (*The Bachelor*). Trista obviously challenges him more as she takes the entire process very seriously in light of her parents’ divorce. For Alex, her thought process and needs aren’t always transparent. During episode six, Trista expresses that she might be open to an engagement with Alex, but for Alex this development is just too complicated: “It’s like a curveball, hearing you say this now” (*The Bachelor*). Even during his final date with Amanda before his decision, he reflects he’s still “wrapped up with trying to unwrap the mystery of Trista and what Trista thinks” (*The Bachelor*).

However, the ease of being with Amanda, who puts his desires first, overpowers Alex’s attraction to Trista: “It’s just easy being with her” (*The Bachelor*). During the final rose ceremony, he reflects, “One of the reasons I love Amanda is because she makes me feel good” (*The Bachelor*). Clearly, the competitive structure of the show and the extremely ritualized and rationed nature of Alex’s interactions with the bachelorettes favors selecting an “easy” relationship, a traditional relationship based on established behavioral expectations, rather than a more complex relationship that might require work and a revision of traditional
roles. The position Alex is in as the “eligible bachelor” making his choice, also favors his considering the women in light of what they’ll be able to do for him, how they’ll fit within his own life and envisioned future, rather than as equal partners who may complete each other in unexpected ways and collaboratively build a future together.

Undoubtedly, *The Bachelor*, like other reality *jeux* narratives, offers a coherent story that quite likely fits comfortably within viewers’ cultural repository of narratives. Whether the traditional values privileged by the competitive structure of the *jeux* narrative “ring true” for viewers depends, however, on how many of those traditional values they already share. The persuasiveness of the competitive narrative structure as a competing story about men and women may also depend on where competition lies within viewers’ worldviews. For many within a capitalist society, the concept of “survival of the fittest” is so natural a thought pattern that the social Darwinism implied in turning human relationships into competition isn’t a factor in determining this type of narrative’s fidelity. The narrative structure’s convincing coherence likely also plays a role in this; the competitive structure propels viewers along through the anticipation of finding out who will win, promoting the values of the winning paradigm, in this case a traditional, patriarchal one. The compelling and propelling nature of the *jeux* narrative also throws into relief the way reality television’s narratives can structure that “reality”—both within the diegesis for participants as they live the structure, and for viewers as some of them integrate the narratives within their cultural repository of stories about the world.

*Colonial House: reconstitutions historiques*

Though most reality-based programs engage with contemporary narratives and realities, a smaller subset of programs has emerged that engages with historical narratives.
The “House Series,” a series produced through a partnership between PBS and England’s Channel 4, currently includes *1900 House* (1999), *1940s House* (2001), *Frontier House* (2002), *Manor House* (2002), *Regency House Party* (2004) and *Colonial House* (2004). The next of these, *Texas Ranch House*, is set to film in summer 2005 and air in 2006 (“Texas Ranch House”). These *reconstitutions historiques* reproduce the physical conditions and some of the cultural conditions of a certain period in history, allowing a group of people to experience life as it might have been for them during that era for several months. *Colonial House*, the most recent of these, allowed 26 American and British participants (and two dogs) to experience 1628 New England for four months (*Colonial House*).

The “colony” on the show is a reproduced seventeenth-century village comprising of four houses built by colonial experts from Plimoth Plantation. Rather than being set near Plymouth, Massachusetts, the original colony it is modeled after, this village is set on “a wild, thousand-acre plot off the coast of Maine,” in order to give the colonists the experience of the untamed, undeveloped land the original colonists found here (*Colonial House*).

Ironically, the pristine land hosting the project belongs to the Passamaquoddy, a Native American tribe reduced from over 10,000 members to just 150 by European colonization—a fact that becomes significant to *Colonial House*’s narrative during several interactions between the colonists and two Native American tribes. Arriving at the colony site on a reproduction seventeenth-century ship, the colonists are divided into the four prebuilt houses by family and status: the Wyers family and their two indentured servants live in the nicest, most “finished” of the houses because of Jeff Wyers’ status as the governor; the Heinz family and their servant receive the second nicest house due to Don Heinz’s status as lay preacher and assistant governor; the third house belongs to the Voorhees household; and the fourth,
most primitive house without even a chimney, is shared by three single freemen. Midway through the project, when another ship arrives “from England” with more colonists, the colony pulls together to build a fifth house for the Verdecia family.

Although Colonial House more resembles the episodic structure of Real World than the competitive and tightly controlled structure of The Bachelor, it too satisfies Fisher’s test for structural coherence. The story, and the conflicts that comprise it, develop naturally from the historical conditions and “laws” of the colony, the competing modern and historical worldviews, and the participants themselves as they all “[struggle] to create a functioning and profitable colony, like those of America’s first settlers, using only the tools and technology of the era” (“Colonial House: About the Series”). While the show’s creators clearly influenced the direction of the colony by educating participants in the material culture of the time period and by providing colonists with bylaws and colony goals, these influences are much looser than on a show like The Bachelor where everything from when and how participants spend time with each other to how many participants will be eliminated on which days are predetermined by the competitive structure. In many ways, Colonial House’s producers had no way of predicting their final narrative product as it arose from conflicts and hardships derived from the participants themselves. In fact, the eight episodes are named after conflicts and events developed from the participants’ communal experiences, though those names also refer to external historical and religious narratives: “A New World,” “Harsh Reality,” “City of God,” “The Outsiders,” “Regime Change,” “The Shake Up,” “The Reckoning,” and “Judgment Day.” A second narrative within this narrative structure is the historical narrative of what a seventeenth-century colony might have experienced between June and Michaelmas (September 29th) of 1628: planting, trading, developing exports, building, and finally, the
harvest. *Colonial House*’s narrative loosely parallels this historical narrative, giving viewers some narrative landmarks to anticipate. Together, the conflicts arising from the modern colonists themselves combine and engage with the historical narrative to form a coherent narrative structure complete with a climax and resolution that viewers would anticipate and recognize, namely, the harvest.

The harvest occurs in the eighth and final episode. After so many conflicts and hardships within the colony, some of which threaten to fracture and destroy it, the harvest functions within the narrative as a climactic test and judgment. Viewers anticipate the outcome of those conflicts. Will the conflicts have outweighed the collaboration and hard work of the colonists? If we reap what we sow, the harvest not only reflects but also defines the colony’s preceding four months. Ultimately, the harvest is as good as the colonists’ Michaelmas celebration is joyful. Part of the narrative’s resolution involves a group of historical experts assessing the colony on its financial and social goals, as well as on its chances of surviving the winter. Representing the company financing the colony, they decide whether or not the company would have continued the colony or stopped financing it as an investment venture. One of these experts, historian Emerson Baker of Salem State College, explains how unrealistically the first American colonies were viewed by those in England: “In the seventeenth century, pretty much every colony had unrealistic expectations placed upon it. Seventeenth-century colonies in New England and in America were seen as get-rich-quick schemes by the investors. They were the internet stocks of their day and, of course, like those stock investments of today most of them ended up being tremendous disasters” (*Colonial House*). Although he and the other experts recommend that the colony continue, the narrator points out “more than fifty percent of the early settlements failed as
commercial ventures and were shut down” (*Colonial House*). The show ends with the colonists returning to the modern world and their modern lives and reflecting on the experience—how it has changed them, as well as what the fundamental differences between their lives now and their lives “then” are. For viewers, this journey through time book-ended by insight into participants’ modern lives forms a satisfying narrative structure as well as a story and characters they can identify with.

In fact, Fisher proposes that, “The operative principle of narrative rationality is identification rather than deliberation” (66). An effective and persuasive story is one that audiences can identify with at some level. In terms of material coherence, *Colonial House* engages with a narrative quite relevant to most North American viewers and resonant with British viewers as well: the historical narrative of America’s birth, the origin of American ideals and the American dream. If as Fisher notes, “The most compelling, persuasive stories are mythic in form, stories reflective of ‘public dreams’ that give meaning and significance to life” (76), then it makes sense that *Colonial House*’s story is compelling to viewers as it actively engages with the ‘public dream’ and myths of America’s founding. Throughout the show, the narrator compares the common narrative we tell about colonial reality with the historical narrative told by primary sources and archaeological evidence.

For example, one of the freemen, Danny Tisdale, is African American—more than likely a surprising and counterintuitive casting choice for many viewers. When Danny is introduced, the narrator explains the reality most viewers may not be familiar with: namely that “chattel slavery had not begun in New England in 1628, [though] by the end of the 1700s, up to 10 million Africans had been enslaved in the Americas” (*Colonial House*). Many blacks arriving in British colonies during the seventeenth century were indentured
servants, as most of their white counterparts were, who became freemen after their period of service. And in fact, the first blacks arrived in New England in 1619, before the Mayflower, as indentured servants on a Dutch ship. Danny and the other participants constantly and explicitly reflect on the historical and patriotic narratives engaged by the project during the numerous interviews used to tell the project’s story. Danny explains his own perspective on his modern identity in relation to the racial history being evoked: “Going through this process has already helped me redefine how I talk about myself. I no longer call myself an African American but an American of African descent. I emphasize the American. This is my history and I love it. I love the ideals this country was founded on” (Colonial House). In this way, Colonial House engages both with historical and patriotic narratives and with modern reality, itself part of the larger story that is history.

Other historical stories and myths Colonial House evokes include the Thanksgiving story, the Plymouth Rock story, the story that colonists founded America for religious freedom, the fabled friendship between colonists and Native Americans, and the idea that all colonists were Puritans who abstained from alcohol and brought Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter to the New World. Colonial House does not destroy these stories, but rather subtly tests them against historical knowledge. Fisher explains that viewers test stories for material coherence by “comparing and contrasting stories told in other discourses” and that “a story may be internally consistent, but important facts may be omitted, counterarguments ignored, and relevant issues overlooked” (47). Reconstitutions historiques such as Colonial House are distinctive narratives in that they ask viewers to test for material coherence in two directions. Viewers test the show against their knowledge and the ‘public myths’ they’ve known, but the show also asks them to test those myths against the story and
truths it creates and presents. The consistency between the two stories compared and contrasted is close enough for viewers not to reject the show’s version of the historical narrative outright, but different enough for them to reconsider and engage with their historical knowledge as well. The show’s ethos—it was produced by and aired on PBS, historians and colonial experts make several appearances, the narrator cites primary sources as evidence—gives the slightly altered public myth the kind of credibility that allows viewers to at least accept it as a starting point for rethinking America’s story and that story’s manifestations in current society and modern identities.

Part of that acceptance stems from the characters themselves. *Colonial House*’s participants come across as very sincere in how they approach the project and each other. Though it becomes clear they all had different motivations for participating, they are all credible and coherent as characters. Prizes, glamour or celebrity-status are clearly not part of the equation for this experience. The physical existence of the project, as of the seventeenth century colonies, is dirty, primitive and labor intensive; the Heinz’s indentured servant, Jonathon Allen, describes the colony as a “labor camp” (*Colonial House*). Several participants, such as Jeff Wyers and his family, joined the project “hoping to capture some of the depth of the faith that it took to make this voyage” (*Colonial House*). Carolyn Heinz, on the other hand, confesses she may “have come for political reasons,” primarily out of a desire to “get to a place where [she] could rethink what this nation was intended to be from its earliest founding commitments and where we have got to in 2003” (*Colonial House*). And as Michelle Voorhees conveys, the Voorhees family is here for a very different reason: “Some people are here to be in the headspace of these people to try to think the way they thought, to try to experience religion and politics the way people did in the 1620s. [We’re] not here for
that reason. We’re here to see how you can live closely to the land without modern conveniences” (*Colonial House*). Regardless of the differences in original motivation, all the participants come across as genuine in those motivations and are consistent in both trying to satisfy those goals as well as rebelling against their roles within the historical narrative being “reconstituted.”

In fact, one of the central conflicts that emerge in the narrative is the conflict between modern individualism and the communality necessary for a functioning seventeenth century village. Whether the community will function as such or break under the pressure of individual needs becomes a major running question throughout the eight episodes. The participants come to the project with very different experiences and emotional baggage. Diverse in their histories and worldviews, most of them would more than likely not have had any context for rubbing shoulders with each other so intimately outside the project. As Don Heinz puts it in describing the differences between himself and Jeff Wyers, “you can’t get too much further than being a Texas Republican Baptist living in Waco and a very liberal academic living in California. Even though we’re both Christian families, that is an enormous difference” (*Colonial House*).

Ultimately, however, the community does cohere. What is interesting is that at the same time that the participants struggle with their modern individualist sensibilities, they also function within the narrative as the prescribed roles assigned to them. In assessing the characterological coherence of the participants, this conflict between individualism and community, as well as the artificial class distinctions imposed on these modern individuals (who live in a time and culture where people try very hard to ignore class and have a need to believe in social equality), becomes part of how we understand the participants as characters.
Although viewers might remember them all individually by name, the modern individuals also become subsumed by their seventeenth century roles and the conflicts surrounding them. Although Jeff Wyers is a likeable, interesting character in his own right, he is most memorable for his role as the colony’s governor. The same can be said for Don Heinz as the lay preacher and assistant governor (and later governor). The freemen, indentured servants and women individually have diverse and compelling personal stories, but within the project each group fills a specific social and narrative role. When Jonathon Allen complains about “not [being] used to serving anybody” and feeling like “a nobody…the lowest of the low” (*Colonial House*), we understand it as what all the indentured servants must be feeling. As a character, Jonathon is subsumed by his social role and the conflicts that ensue within that hierarchy. In a way reminiscent of how *The Bachelor*’s narrative structure shaped participants’ emotional reality, *Colonial House*’s narrative structure based on historical narrative seems to shape the participants’ behavioral reality and the relative importance each plays within the larger narrative.

A good example of how consistent the participants are as characters in *Colonial House* is Michelle Voorhees. As John Voorhees’s wife, she is mistress of one of the four original houses; by contrast, a single landowning woman, the widow Amy-Kristina Herbert, lives under her roof and is under her hierarchically because she has no husband. John and Michelle have a son, Giacomo, and we find out that Michelle owns her own business as a seamstress in the modern world. Early on, it becomes clear that Michelle has more trouble, or at least is more vocal, than most of the other women with adjusting to her seventeenth-century role, her social “place.” During the ceremony on the ship when everyone finds out what their role will be in the colony, she articulates how very hard it is “to take a twenty-first
century woman and throw her back 400 years, and to lose all the freedoms that we’ve
gained” (Colonial House). The narrator explains how, “The freemen might be free but none
of the women will be. In 1628, women were not even allowed to speak in a ceremony like
this” (Colonial House). As viewers, this introduction foreshadows difficulty and conflict, a
narrative prediction that ultimately pays off. Time and again, Michelle’s actions confirm the
initial assessment of her as an independent, freethinking, vocal, but very warm and
passionate character.

Although this comes across in many situations, the primary conflict this crops up in is
in her stance towards the mandatory Sabbath services. She explains her concern “about
having to say prayers that I really don’t believe in” and that she’s not “good at being told
what I need to think, believe, say, do” (Colonial House). Ultimately she attends the first
Sabbath service out of a sense of community, but later the Voorhees skip service to go on a
picnic and skinny dip in the ocean. The narrator explains that “the Voorhees would likely
have suffered a slow, painful and public execution” as punishment for this transgression of
the colony’s laws (Colonial House). Jeff Wyers does not reproduce history to this extent, but
this does begin a cycle of crime and punishment that includes many sessions in the public
stocks and many scarlet letters for various colonists for everything from blasphemy,
profanity and immodesty. Michelle, however, is undeterred by punishment and public
humiliation and continues to resist going against her personal beliefs and convictions. At the
end of the show, however, she expresses the deep feeling of community that has sprung from
the experience and even from the conflicts with each other:

We’re not just individuals here. We are a colony. We are a community that
without each other could not survive. It’s just not possible. In the twenty-first
century, you have an argument with someone and you decide ‘I’m just not going
to deal with them anymore.’ But the difference is, here you need to just move
beyond it. We need to take these lessons back with us” (*Colonial House*).

Throughout *Colonial House*, Michelle’s actions and comments are consistent with the initial
expectations set up in the first episode; she demonstrates the characterological coherence
Fisher says we look for in stories. And as her final interview shows, she experiences a
character arc (she “learns”) that parallels the narrative’s dramatic arc as well.

The final test of Fisher’s narrative rationality is narrative fidelity—whether the story
“rings true” in terms of its values, whether it argues effectively for a particular worldview.
Because *Colonial House* is meant to be a historical reproduction of America’s beginning, the
myth of our origins as a nation, the conflict between participants’ current values and those
founding values comes as a surprise. The expectation of both participant-characters and
viewers is that those core values (the Puritan work ethic, love of freedom, faith) have guided
America’s progress and remain fundamentally unchanged through history. What becomes
apparent, however, is that those values have changed; they have responded to other cultural
changes over time leading us to interpret them quite differently today. The struggle over
faith within the community is an excellent example of this.

Jeff Wyers, as a Baptist minister from Waco, Texas, had hopes of connecting to the
depth of faith of the pilgrims through the *Colonial House* experience. He explains that
though he knows “there were people who came here for money,” his interest is in those “that
came here fleeing religious persecution and looking for freedom of religion” (*Colonial
House*). As a common story we tell about the original pilgrims, this motive seems perfectly
reasonable, but the narrator clarifies how “it’s a myth that most colonists came for religious
reasons” and that “the Puritans were actually a small minority” of the original colonists (Colonial House). The first conflict or difference viewers notice is between the Wyers family’s faith and that of the other participants. He and his family have a very specific interpretation of Christianity that most of the other participants, even other Christian participants, don’t necessarily share. His daughter Bethany expresses her surprise at these differences in her post-project interview: “I just imagined that at least the Christians would all in a way believe the same thing. I really had no idea how many different angles there were to even the Christian belief. It was very difficult just coming to grips with that” (Colonial House).

What also becomes clear during the show, however, is that none of the participants share the same religious beliefs as the original colonists. That value system has changed completely. This is most evident when Jeff struggles between enforcing Sabbath attendance as governor of the 1628 colony and following his convictions as a 2003 minister. His belief is “that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not to be spread by force of arms nor by coercion” (Colonial House). For Jeff, punishing people “for lack of faith and for not wanting to go to a church service” risks putting him in the position of “a wall between people and the belief in Jesus Christ,” a role that could cause them “eternal harm and eternal damage through heaven or hell” (Colonial House). This possibility is very real for Jeff and causes him to question his previous perception of the colonists: “The sad thing about the colonists…is that they fled religious persecution and then came here and fell back into it [in] their own form and their own brand” (Colonial House). For viewers, this calls the original values and worldview of the colonists into question as well. Although Colonial House is meant to be experiential history, a reproduction of a historical era that allows participants to relive it, what it shows is
that it isn’t as simple as going back in time and acting out roles that we think should still “fit” at a fundamental level. Instead, the conflicts within the narrative’s diegesis, but made that much more compelling by the characters’ status as real-life participants, demonstrate to viewers that we’ve progressed beyond our roots, beyond the first British settlers’ values. And even if we don’t completely agree with Don Wood’s assessment that “these cute Puritan people in these funny hats and shoes…had [something] in common with Nazi Germany” (Colonial House), the enormous amount of conflict between the two worldviews asks viewers to reconsider the larger historical narrative of where we came from, where we are, and where we’re going.

Colonial House’s narrative also complicates the ethnic and racial narrative that we tell about American history through the personal conflicts several of the participants experience. Danny Tisdale, for one, decides to leave the project early as a matter of conscience. The amount and nature of the work necessary for the colony not only to thrive as an economic venture but also to survive demonstrates to him the easy slide that occurred from the paradigm of indentured servitude to slavery: “Fifty years later we have slavery that come out of these colonies that I’m sure evolved from the same kind of complaining we have today about work, about economic ventures and [about] somebody else doing the work—cheap labor. And here in a strange way, I’m part of it” (Colonial House). As a protest to the historical narrative and to his role in recreating it, he leaves early. Amy-Kristina, the other African American on the project, leaves for a similar reason, reflecting on how the colonies and America itself would not have even been possible without the labor of African slaves.

The other intercultural narrative Colonial House directly engages with is the story of the relationship between the colonists and Native Americans.
John Voorhees is half Peyote and grew up on a reservation, leading him to be especially sensitive to this dimension of the historical narrative. The other factors contributing to this conflict in Colonial House is that the project’s village is built on Passamaquoddy land and that members of the Passamaquoddy and Wampanoag tribes visit the village as part of the historical reenactment. During the first encounter, Tammy Wyers tries to get her young son David into the spirit of reenactment by stressing how “real” the encounter is: “These [Indians] are real. They’re still dangerous. Don’t you watch the 10 o’clock news?” (Colonial House). But this only underscores how misunderstood this part of the historical narrative still is. Later, John Bear Mitchell, one of the Passamaquoddy, explains to the colonists the full historical and modern implications of the British colonization for his tribe; the Passamaquoddy were reduced by contact with the Europeans from 10,000 to only 150 members. They have been the center of “the largest genocide, the largest holocaust on the soil of the United States” (Colonial House). During the Wampanoags’ visit in the seventh episode, the matriarch, Ramona Peters, also describes the Native American point of view and experience of the colonies: “There has been some serious oppression and attempt to wipe out our culture. Our land being stolen…You get a colony and then it expands and then they say, ‘oh, they aren’t using that land over there.’ And pretty soon there’s a shift [with] more people moving over there and making it on us to try and push you out” (Colonial House). This makes many of the participants uncomfortable in a way they had not expected to be. Paul Hunt, a British participant, is especially uncomfortable about how she referred to the English: “She kept mentioning the English and she kept looking at me in particular…[and saying how] the English came over and you did this and you did that…you came over and took our land” (Colonial House). With only a week and a
half left of the four-month experience, the full weight of the historical narrative they are
reenacting is finally driven home for the “colonists.” Their narrative role suddenly is far
more uncomfortable than desirable. The “fit” of identity and values is no longer there.
Carolyn Heinz expresses the epiphany and how it colors both the whole experience and the
whole narrative of American history and modern identity:

> It suddenly sunk in, in a way it hadn’t up till then, that I’m going along with
> being an imperialist. I think I’m going to go away and people are going to say,
> ‘Carolyn, what did you think you were doing?’ I’m reenacting a whole system
> that I don’t believe in and disapprove of and yet it’s the roots of our own nation
> and who we are…One of the reasons I wanted to be on this project was because I
> was so stressed for a year about the direction our country is taking in
> international relations. And so I thought how good it might be to go back and to
> relive an earlier, purer, simpler point in our national history. So here I am and of
> course what I am discovering is there were no such moments in our national
> history. This was not a pure moment. We were already moving in. We were
> already driven by greed and ambition and we were willing to shove away the
> native people so what was better than the now? I don’t know. (Colonial House)

What Carolyn seems to find is that though the colonial era and culture gave birth to the
United States and its core values and “self-evident” truths, it was not a pure time either. In
fact, it was a time as fraught with inconsistencies, hypocrisies, and injustice as most others.
So rather than interpreting “the now” through an intentionalist lens, Carolyn seems to say
that we, both viewers and participants, should perhaps be more critical of those intentions
(which led to slavery and genocide), as we reflect on what is and isn’t working today. In this
way, the Colonial House experience shifts the narrative arc of our national history as the historical narrative becomes more complex than the national myths it replaces.

As the values between participants and between the modern and the historical clash, the values that transcend the others are those that allow the village’s diverse individuals to live together as a coherent community while maintaining their individual human dignity. The colonial village, then, becomes a metaphor for and bridge between both the originary American village and the modern American national village. As Michelle’s character arc shows, all the conflicts in Colonial House ultimately argue for community as the core value. Despite differences, the colonists learn to work together and listen to each other for the common good. Whether they disagree over social roles, faith, chores, language use, the colony’s priorities or attendance at service and town meetings, the issue is always how to define the community in a positive, workable way as well as the individuals who comprise it. Despite all the pushing and pulling, or perhaps because of it, the community coheres, accepting and supporting all of its members through various crises and hardships.

The positive nature of the show’s narrative and its sensitive rereading of the larger historical and national narrative allow the story to “ring true” for viewers. The participants, together, don’t revise the values our public myths say the nation is founded on, but reexamine them, refine them, deepen them even, to account for the greater complexity of both the historical and modern contexts. The reconstitutions historiques narrative becomes more than a reenactment of history—it becomes the most engaged kind of reading and critique while, through the conflicts and challenges the characters overcome throughout the narrative, remaining compelling for its viewers.
I Want a Famous Face: métamorphoses

MTV’s *I Want a Famous Face* (2004) exemplifies a radically different narrative from
than *Colonial House*, but an increasingly common one: métamorphoses. This is a
transformative narrative of (usually physical) change and new beginnings. Participants may
get a style and wardrobe redesign in shows like *What Not to Wear*, *Dress for Less*, *Makeover
Story* or *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Or they may have their home redecorated in
*Trading Spaces*, *Monster House*, *Get Color* or *House Rules*. Other shows, such as *Made*,
*Making the Band*, *Faking It*, or *Starting Over*, might transform a person for a career or goal
they’ve dreamed about. And the latest development along this storyline features complete
physical transformation through cosmetic surgery: *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*, and *I Want
a Famous Face*. The métamorphoses narrative seems to suggest that “being” is “seeming”: if
you can transform yourself physically into $x$, then you can be $x$. If you look like a rock star,
then you can be a rock star. If you dress like an academic, you can become an academic. If
your bedroom is sexy and “tantric,” then your relationship will be. And if you look
glowingly beautiful, you’ll be glowingly happy. Part of this may simply be increased
rhetorical awareness of varying social contexts and conventions (i.e. dressing appropriately
for a job), but plastic surgery makeovers take the level of change and seeming to a whole
new level as it fundamentally alters participants in ways that may be irreversible. *I Want a
Famous Face* is especially significant in that the participants are not just “enhanced” but are
shaped and sculpted by surgeons to resemble someone else.

Each episode follows one young person through plastic surgery to become more like
his or her favorite celebrity. The show explains that MTV does not pay for the participants’
surgery and that each participant “has decided on her own to get plastic surgery” (*I Want a
Famous Face). MTV simply asks, “to document her journey” and present it: “Here is her story” (I Want a Famous Face). The first season is comprised of six episodes featuring young people wanting to “become” Britney Spears, Brad Pitt, Jennifer Lopez, Pamela Anderson, Kate Winslet and Elvis Presley. The opening narration of each reveals that plastic surgery is a growing trend among young people, a trend akin to people emulating celebrities through clothing and hairstyles:

So, you want to look like your favorite celebrity? It used to be that people just checked out the rich and famous to see how to dress or cut their hair. But today it’s easier to take this infatuation with celebrity to a whole new level of obsession. We’re talking cosmetic plastic surgery. And in the last six years, the number of young people getting it, over two million in 2002 alone, has almost tripled. And shockingly, many of them are going under the knife to resemble their favorite stars. (I Want a Famous Face)

This narration suggests that the next logical step in an evolving narrative that “seeming” is “being” is that looking just like a celebrity will make you that celebrity. A recurring refrain among the show’s participants is that they want to “be” their favorite celebrity and ostensibly, plastic surgery will help them do just that. For example, for Mia, the Britney Spears look-alike turned professional Britney Spears impersonator, drawing the line between the two identities becomes increasingly fuzzy as she admits to not always revealing her true identity when children ask her whether she is Britney Spears. Before surgery, Mia already gives autographs as Britney Spears and considers herself “a representative for Britney” (I Want a Famous Face); afterwards, when she wears her Britney clothing she only feels that “much more confident” as Britney Spears (I Want a Famous Face).
Looking once more at Fisher’s first test of coherence, structural coherence, the half-hour episodes are well-crafted stories with beginnings, middles and ends that build logically from each other. Each episode begins with a teaser shot of a dramatic moment from the episode meant to draw the audience into anticipating the upcoming drama; in Mia’s episode this shot is a close-up of her post-surgery breasts (nipples blurred) and of the doctor inspecting them—“are those beautiful or what?” (*I Want a Famous Face*). The narrator then explains the show’s “concept” over footage from all the season’s episodes. This quickly segues into an introduction of that episode’s participant, or main character, and of his or her dreams and motivations.

In the first season’s second episode, two twin brothers, the Schlepp twins, want to look like Brad Pitt. The opening sequence quickly shows the twins in their natural habitat, looking ugly, awkward and socially inept. They then proclaim what the footage and narrator has already told us: “we’re ugly and we are going to correct that—we’re going to get plastic surgery” (*I Want a Famous Face*). At this point in each episode, the narrator ratchets up the suspense before the first of two commercial breaks: “Are the high risks of surgery worth the rewards? The scalpels are sharpened, ready and waiting. Find out next on MTV’s *I Want a Famous Face*.” The “middle act” of the episode gives viewers more insight into the character through extended footage of them working, playing and interacting with family and friends and culminates with their first consultation with the plastic surgeon—a god-like character who gets a halo and angel choir for each scene entrance. The surgeon examines the participant, makes his (always his) recommendations, and provides his estimate, which range from $5,750 to $15,890 in the first season.
At this point, the main narrative is generally interrupted with a B-story of an entirely new character who has already been through plastic surgery and for whom it did not go well. These stories serve both as cautionary tales (presumably MTV wants to leaven what otherwise seem to be narratives promoting the benefits of cosmetic surgery), and as contrast for the main narrative that increases its suspense and drives the full import of the main character’s actions home. The narrative climaxes with the very graphic surgery sequence set to a heavy-metal soundtrack. The resolution consists of a sequence of post-operative follow-ups and reveals as bandages, casts and staples are removed, swelling goes down and finally participants are able to reflect on the changes in their lives since their surgery. Structurally, *I Want a Famous Face* is a very tight, very coherent narrative. The show’s structure gives every scene and statement an important role in the chain of causality and anticipation that forms the plot. However, is this narrative also consistent with the narratives and knowledge viewers are likely to know? Does *I Want a Famous Face* meet Fisher’s criteria for a materially coherent as well as structurally coherent story?

The answer seems to be yes—*I Want a Famous Face* is materially coherent as well as structurally coherent. First of all, viewers are likely to already know some of the dangers of plastic surgery. The cautionary B-story addresses that knowledge directly, confirming it and allowing viewers to accept the more positive results of the main narrative as credible. Other common “knowledge” viewers are likely to compare the show with include the cultural common wisdom that tall, thin and beautiful people make more money and are hence happier than the rest of us. The saying that “blondes have more fun” belongs to the same category of thinking. Transformation itself is a strong cultural narrative as well. Fairy tales such as *The Ugly Duckling* and *Cinderella* both feature radical physical métamorphoses resulting in
beauty, then happiness. Christianity has the story of Saul converting to Christianity and becoming Paul to signify this change and his new beginnings. And within contemporary popular culture, everything from movies to comic books such as Spider Man feature transformation stories.

The physical change leading to psychological change featured in I Want a Famous Face—all the characters claim to be more confident and happier as a result of their surgery—is a narrative viewers are likely to find consistent with a whole host of stories within their cultural repository of stories. In fact, change, growth and learning are the most common features of any narrative as this forms the basis of any character arc; by the end of any story, the protagonist is expected to have changed in some way. The physical changes participants undergo in a show like I Want a Famous Face could be read by viewers as the outward sign, the physical manifestation and catalyst, of a deeper life transformation. Of course, these changes have to be more than physical for viewers to accept them; the biggest reason a makeover show might not “hang together” for viewers is if the changes are seen as only “skin deep”—in this case, “body deep!”

The characters themselves, then, and how they are presented are vitally important for viewers assessing the narrative coherence, or probability, of I Want a Famous Face. The characters must have goals and motivations beyond physical appearance. The participants in the first season all have career aspirations varying from actor to model to Playboy Playmate to professional impersonator, making the transformation ostensibly more than physical; however, this is still the place where many viewers might begin questioning the coherence of the show as these changes hinge completely on physical transformation. Though the characters might grow as their careers grow, they may or may not learn anything, a big part
of what protagonists in traditional narratives do. Usually, characters who don’t learn anything in a story are tragic as they don’t fully realize themselves—as the saying goes, “character is fate.” Characters need to learn to overcome their character flaws to become whole, actualized and to successfully negotiate their problems and lives. The participants in *I Want a Famous Face* are certainly coherent, consistent characters in terms of being reliable and changing in some way, but whether they learn is questionable.

The fourth episode, for example, is about nineteen-year-old Sha from Texas. Her ultimate goal is to look like Pamela Anderson and become a Playboy Playmate. The latter half of her goal is within reach as she has already been featured in the *College Girls Playboy Special Edition* and based on this work, a higher-up at Playboy has asked to test her for her potential as a full-blown Playmate. Her first goal, however, becomes the character flaw that may interfere with this career aspiration because, in the words of her agent Mikki, “Pam Anderson, big boobs, and the big lips, that would be eighties. What’s in now is all the real stuff. The fake stuff is yesterday” (*I Want a Famous Face*). Mikki confesses that cosmetic surgery “could be one of the biggest mistakes [Sha] makes” (*I Want a Famous Face*). Despite being advised against surgery by those in the industry, those with expert knowledge and with the power to help her achieve her goals, Sha is her own worst enemy. She goes through with the surgery, following the advice of a surgeon who tells her that the photograph she shows him of Pamela Anderson is from her “retrograding” phase and that what Sha “really” wants is a full D cup size rather than the C she asked for. During surgery, the surgeon completes the breast enhancement and with Sha still unconscious turns to the camera announcing, “If Playboy doesn’t like that, I don’t know what they like” (*I Want a Famous Face*). Afterwards, her agent and the Playboy scout are shocked by her surgery. Luckily for
Sha, they still decide to use her for the *Playboy Voluptuous Vixens* issue, though there doesn’t seem to be any hope of her getting into the magazine’s main issue. Sha does not appear to have learned anything or changed in a significant way, however, as she revels in having “more features that look like Pamela Anderson”: “Now, after the surgery, going out I see more and more heads turn—people thinking I’m hot, I’m sexy. Comparing me to Pamela Anderson. And now I get the attention I want from men” (*I Want a Famous Face*).

The fact that most participants on *I Want a Famous Face* don’t change substantially, don’t overcome what might be seen as character flaws, raises the question of how the characters function for viewers. Are they meant to be tragic heroes? The tone of the show doesn’t corroborate this. A common theme in participants’ post-operative interviews is the movement from a place of low self-worth to higher confidence and self-esteem. Although culturally, confidence is likely to be seen as a step in the right direction, many viewers will see the way this confidence is acquired as problematic since it doesn’t stem from any fundamental self-acceptance and is therefore inherently temporary. Perhaps the problematic nature of the program’s characters was at the heart of the outcry against it from the plastic surgery industry, many of the celebrities being emulated, the press, and the general public. That it took MTV over a year to put out a second season of the show suggests this outcry gave them at least a moment of pause. In terms of Fisher’s test of characterological coherence, the characters in *I Want a Famous Face* do “hang together” in a consistent way and might be seen as fulfilling their characters, but present many problems in terms of values both of those characters and the narrative itself.

Which brings us to the question of narrative fidelity and whether the story’s values “ring true.” The only real conflict of values that could exist in *I Want a Famous Face* would
be the conflict over whether or not participants ought to go through with surgery or not. This narrative conflict, however, is weak and half-hearted at best. Mikki’s objection to Sha’s breast augmentation is not really a conflict between value systems but rather a pragmatic recommendation. In the Schlepp twin episode, Monica, Mike’s crush, wants to stay friends with Mike rather than dating him, a decision Mike chalks up to his looks. After the surgery, however, when many more girls now seem interested in him, though Monica admits that the twins “look so freakin’ sexy,” she states that “just because [Mike’s] looks changed doesn’t mean I’m going to change my feelings about him” (I Want a Famous Face). This does put the value of appearance slightly into question, as she doesn’t confirm Mike’s worldview that her rejection had to do with how he looked, but it doesn’t argue strongly for an alternative worldview either. When Jennette, in the Kate Winslet episode, says that she “want to be Kate Winslet,” one of her friends reminds her that Kate Winslet might have a problem with that. Again, this is an intimation that there may be ethical issues with physically altering oneself to look like someone else, but no real case against it is made. Later, we get the sense that Jennette’s boyfriend is unhappy with her transformation but we find out this unhappiness is really insecurity about her leaving him. And in the Elvis episode, one of Jessie’s friends strongly objects to his plans to get lip implants, but Jessie quickly silences him.

Outside the inserted B-stories, nothing in the main I Want a Famous Face narrative conflicts with the worldview being presented by its narrative structure. The plastic surgery worldview does not win over a competing value system, but rather is the only value system. So if a viewer already shares that value, the show confirms it and is likely to “ring true.” Fisher articulates “that symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them in order to establish
ways of living in common” (63). For those already sharing the value that “seeming” leads to “being,” that appearance can shape reality, the narrative structure might be persuasive in establishing a new norm for the role of plastic surgery within human experience. As the show’s introduction suggests, plastic surgery may hold a new place within the order of experience for MTV’s young viewers. As these viewers weigh the values embodied in the show’s narrative, weigh the narrative’s fidelity, they assess whether “the process of rhetorical transaction is desirable” by considering “what would follow from [its] confirmation or disconfirmation of one’s life, the lives of those whom one admires, and the best life that one can conceive” (Fisher 89). In the case of plastic surgery and altering your physical appearance, this may be seen as an improvement; the story may embody the “best life” they can imagine for themselves and thus be very compelling. It would be a stretch, however, to say that the narrative argues effectively for cosmetic surgery, as it doesn’t address counterarguments a more skeptical viewer might have in any substantial way. Those viewers may have a different vision of their “best life” that the story doesn’t fully or satisfactorily dislodge.

Outside the conflict over body modification and enhancement, appearance as a value in and of itself, the remaining conflict of values in I Want a Famous Face is over the question of the participants’ seemingly obsessive identification with celebrities. Jennette’s friend is the only character to touch the subject in even the soft-handed way she does: Kate Winslet “might have a problem with [Jennette “being” Kate Winslet]” (I Want a Famous Face). How the show is framed by the narrator, however, keeps this conflict explicitly foregrounded as in the opening sequence of each episode: “Today it’s easier to take this infatuation with celebrity to a whole new level of obsession” (I Want a Famous Face). Two
of the first season’s six episodes feature participants who are professional impersonators, one of Britney Spears and the other of Elvis. Jessie, the Elvis impersonator, has a disturbing habit of referring to himself with the pronoun ‘we’: “You may notice when we talk a lot I use ‘we’…I can’t break the habit because there’s really two people here, you got Jessie and you got Elvis” (*I Want a Famous Face*). And all of the participants seem to find they have a lot in common with the celebrity they model themselves after. We might say they show evidence of prior rhetorical transactions with other texts and popular narratives. The cultural narratives have created a very real sense of consubstantiation for them. Mia, for example, describes how,

> In doing my research for Britney Spears I found out we had a lot in common.
> She likes cookie dough ice cream. I like cookie dough ice cream. Her favorite color is blue and I like blue. Britney has an idol and it’s Madonna. I have an idol and it’s Madonna. She likes going to Starbucks and I like going to Starbucks. We kinda have a lot in common!” (*I Want a Famous Face*).  

These rather extreme statements not only underscore the obsessive quality of participants’ identification with celebrities they haven’t even met but also bring us back to the question of how the characters in *I Want a Famous Face* function for viewers. The evidence participants give for having so much “in common” with celebrities is quite sparse. The idea of someone aspiring to and being a professional impersonator is easily outside the norm. Jessica, the transsexual aspiring to be Jennifer Lopez, states she doesn’t “want to just look like a celebrity, I want to be a professional celebrity” (*I Want a Famous Face*). Social critic and anthropologist Thomas de Zengotita argues that the level of representation and mediation present in our culture today has created what he calls the “flattered self”—a self mediated by
“the irresistible flattery that goes with being incessantly addressed” (7). However, though reality television reflects this growing trend in our culture’s level of mediation and perhaps feeds the celebrity culture of people famous just for being famous, most of the characters in *I Want a Famous Face* still fall outside the norms of accepted behaviors in their level of identification and the way this obsession is manifested. Even in a culture where “seeming” is increasingly “being,” this level of seeming is extreme and is unlikely to “ring true” as a desirable guide for behavior for most viewers. The participants are also likely not to be characters viewers can themselves identify with, leaving the question of what viewers do with such extreme characters anyway if Fisher’s claim that, “The operative principle of narrative rationality is identification rather than deliberation” (66), doesn’t apply to this particular strand of narrative.

A conference paper presented by Brad Waite and Sara Booker at the 2004 American Psychological Society convention presents a disturbing alternative to how characters on reality shows function for viewers. Waite and Booker suggest reality television viewing may reflect a desire to watch others humiliated (Jaffe). Although their findings are based on a content analysis of only five shows, the fact that *I Want a Famous Face* might appear lacking in both characterological coherence and narrative fidelity for many people suggests their theory may apply for a range of reality programs. The extreme behavior and palpably low self-worth of some participants combined paradoxically with the (almost) delusional conviction that they too can achieve celebrity status (I say ‘almost’ because through the show, they to an extent *have*) provides pleasure for viewers comfortable with the knowledge that they aren’t so deluded or so crazy to endure the pain of surgery for a fool’s dream. The show is more reality freak show than complex narrative.
A related psychological study, by Steven Reiss and James Wiltz, used the Reiss Desire Profile to test whether there were differences between the collective “desire profile” of reality television viewers and a normal profile. They found that the top two motivators for reality television watchers out of the sixteen basic motivators from Reiss’s sensitivity theory were social status and vengeance (Jaffe). Jaffe quotes Reiss, “Some people may watch reality TV partially because they enjoy feeling superior to the people being portrayed [and] people with a strong need for vengeance have the potential to enjoy watching people being humiliated.” The research in this case was primarily based on the competitive *jeux* narrative as four of the five shows used were competitions (Reiss and Wiltz 371), but if borne out in more extensive research on a wider sampling of reality television programs, these findings have disturbing implications and suggest sinister reasons for why shows that only shakily pass the test of narrative rationality for many viewers continue to be watched others. The narrative structures, in this case, may not be appealing for the “best life,” “good reasons” and universal human values Fisher claims effective narratives tend to embody, but rather as structures that predictably provide the pleasure of watching other people humiliated by the propelling power of the shows themselves. If so, then this may point to a certain limitation of Fisher’s model as it seems his method may provide us with more about a narrative’s audience than about its universal effectiveness.

It is possible, however, that for some viewers *I Want a Famous Face* does pass the test of narrative rationality and does provide points of identification rather than the almost sadistic pleasure this research suggests. If this is the case, perhaps the point of identification is not in a specific “famous face” viewers are obsessed with but rather in the larger idea of celebrity itself. Within his larger argument that our reality has become “mediated,”
Zengotita also claims that concurrently we have all become method actors, performers of our lives within a reality of images and celebrities. However, as an anthropologist he asserts that our fundamental, even primal, need for acknowledgement from and significance within our “tribe” remains unchanged:

The surgical-makeover show *I Want a Famous Face* expresses the longing [for acknowledgement and significance] obviously, but all the reality shows are sustained by this reversal, and most fans would rather make their own face (plus enhancements?) famous. They are already performing their lives…Now they want to be *recognized* performers. (116)

According to this theory, what has been called the “democratization of celebrity” (Stark), the trend of “both making celebrities into regular people…and making regular people into celebrities” evidenced by everything from the popularity of blogs to memoirs to reality television (Miller and Shepherd), fulfills a fundamental human need and is a natural cultural development. The “best life” this particular *métamorphoses* narrative gives shape to is simply the state of being known, acknowledged, respected, and admired. Rather than a reality freak show, *I Want a Famous Face* may simply be the most transparently obvious manifestation of this trend and motivation. Within a growing human village, anonymity and insignificance within the masses are a frightening possibility. Quite simply, the “famous face” viewers may “want” is their own.
Conclusion: A Progression of Reality

What all reality shows have in common is the use of real people, non-actors, in situations that are more or less unscripted. This is the case for all four of the examples analyzed here: *Real World, The Bachelor, Colonial House*, and *I Want a Famous Face*. Although all four of these representative reality narratives demonstrate the “democratization of celebrity” (Stark), MTV’s *I Want a Famous Face* emphasizes the degree to which we have become a celebrity culture. The character-participants on this show are so “obsessed” with celebrities, they see themselves as so consubstantial with the media narratives told about them, that they can no longer distinguish between the media *image* of, say, Jennifer Lopez, and what she must be like as a living, breathing, inherently flawed human being. The mediated version of Jennifer Lopez, the celebrity, has become the real for *I Want a Famous Face*’s Jessica—and she wants to join Jennifer Lopez, *on that plane*. As demonstrated by the show’s continuing narrative and the number of viewers tuning in, many others would like to as well. For others, this is a disturbing, perhaps even dangerous, development.

Thomas de Zengotita, however, looks at this as a natural progression. He claims that because “for human beings, the need to be recognized is almost as basic as food[,] the force behind the virtual revolution is primordial” (117). In this context, the monopoly of wide-scale acknowledgement and significance that celebrities have had for the past few decades, with faceless mass audience enthralled, could only be seen as temporary and artificial. Zengotita goes on to say that “what [reality shows] all have in common is the celebration of people refusing to just be spectators” (117-8). For him, reality television is only part of a wider shift in audience becoming rhetor. Think, for example, of,
All the mini-celebrities…who dominate chat rooms and game sites, hundreds of
them, thousands of them—and the blogs, the intimate “life journals,” illustrated
with digitized photos. Think also of raves and flash-mobbing, mass marathons,
karaoke bars, focus groups, talk-radio call-ins, e-mails to every news show,
camcorders, home-made porn, sponsored teams for tots—and every start-up band
in the world can burn a CD and produce cool cover art and posters. (117-8)

For Zengotita, this evolving trend is simply the latest manifestation of our human need to be

known. In this context, the “democratization of celebrity” is inevitable.

But this trend makes just as much sense within the paradigm of narrative rationality.

Part of Walter Fisher’s argument is that human beings are inherently storytellers: “The
narrative paradigm sees people as storytellers, as authors and co-authors who creatively read
and evaluate the texts of life and literature” (18). What this means is that not only are human
beings able to assess stories through the tests of narrative coherence and fidelity, but they are
also able to create them—“Viewing human communication narratively stresses that people
are full participants in the making of messages, whether they are agents (authors) or audience
members (co-authors)” (18). What has slowly developed since the invention of the printing
press, and at a much faster rate since the development of radio, film, and television, is that
people’s positions as audience members have disproportionately, and unnaturally,
outweighed their opportunities to be authors within the increasingly mediated and shrinking
human village. Psychologist Donald Polkinghorne confirms the idea that we inherently use
stories to order experience and reality, going so far as to say that what we call experience “is
a consequence of the action of our organizing schemes [or stories] on the components of our
involvement in the world. Narrative is the fundamental scheme for linking individual human
actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite” (13). If human existence can be fully understood only through stories, then narrative’s influence and rhetorical persuasiveness is clear. Just as clear, however, is our need to tell stories about our lives and world. Looked at through the lens of narrative rationality, then, reality television comes into focus as more than just another compelling way of telling stories, but also as an instrument by which people have seized the means of storytelling.

What is problematic about this, however, is that though reality television is ostensibly a modern way for real people to become part of our culture’s stories and storytelling, so dominated by television as they are today, the “means of production,” the true means of storytelling, are still controlled by entities solely motivated by profit. So while carrying an ethos of authenticity and credibility, of giving unmediated access to real people being themselves and telling their own stories, those stories are controlled by organizations with other motives and with a constant eye on ratings. And as Debra Seagal’s account of her time as a story analyst for American Detective shows, the stories on reality television are really crafted by what’s left on the cutting room’s floor. So for every thoughtful, engaging story like Colonial House or the first season of Real World, we get several more problematic stories like The Bachelor and I Want a Famous Face. Where Colonial House gives us multiple perspectives on characters and their changing concepts of themselves within the larger American narrative, I Want a Famous Face gives us barely coherent characters, more freak than human, patched together from a few shocking or dramatic moments chosen in the editing room. The value of regular people “seizing” the means of televisual storytelling in this context become negligible at best, a sinister farce at worst.
The powerful ethos of reality television, whose very name argues that it is in some way “real,” also precipitates what many, such as Jean Baudrillard, have noted long before Real World’s first episode in 1992: the erosion of “the real.” Baudrillard, in fact argued already in 1981 that we had entered what he calls the “hyperreal”: “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (1). In effect, representations no longer represented anything authentically real but that rather the simulacrum had become the real. Viewers commonly say that someday, everyone will have to be on reality television. This remark clearly points towards the idea that people and things must be filmed to exist; for Baudrillard, this would suggest that the simulacrum has eaten the real. Today, a television crew signals a real event, a real person, real significance and real truth. Thus the Kansas Board of Education’s 1999 literalist decision “to remove evolution and the big-bang theory from the state’s science curriculum on the grounds that the phenomena have not been directly observed or recorded and thus are open to doubt” (Black 8). And thus reality television’s power to shape rather than represent reality.

In fact, in The Evil Demon of Images, Baudrillard claims, “there is an increasingly definitive lack of differentiation between image and reality which no longer leaves room for representations as such” (qtd. in Nichols, Representing 6). Baudrillard’s theory is that the concept of representation is no longer a useful concept because it implies an authentic “real” that no longer exists as such. In Simulacra and Simulation, he outlines what he calls the “precession of simulacra,” four stages of “the image” that progress from the most unmediated reality to the most mediated:

Such would be the successive phases of the image:

- it is the reflection of profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;

it masks the absence of a profound reality;

it has no relation to any reality whatsoever. it is its own simulacrum. (6)

When images and signs reference each other without pointing back to any kind of fundamental reality, we have entered the simulacrum. Baudrillard’s language reveals his aversion to this mediated state. He furiously criticizes “the hallucination of truth” and the “murder of every symbolic form” (8). In one example, he describes how museums actually destroy the real existence of mummies (and other historical objects) in the world by removing them from their real, organic context and creating a simulation of their contexts and roles in the world. For Baudrillard, “mummies don’t rot from worms: they die from being transplanted from a slow order of the symbolic, master over putrefaction and death, to an order of history, science, and museums, our order” (10).

Ultimately, Baudrillard claims that within the simulacra, people no longer have any sense of what is real; they have no sense of what an authentic “real” existence is because images and signs have mediated their whole lives. The simulacrum is inherently the illusion of reality. This has led some, such as Bill Nichols, to label Baudrillard a postmodern Platonist. Certainly, his theory presupposes some sort of absolute truth (reality) that images obscure illusively. Narrative theory provides an argument against the notion of this sort of unmediated, “real” existence for human beings as even in oral cultures’ stories, and arguably all language, mediate, shape or structure what we call “reality.” Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality, however, is
quite useful for designating the order of that structured reality and can be used without sharing his nostalgia for an unmediated existence.

With its ability to order events and experience into a coherent whole, narrative, as Walter Fisher, Donald Polkinghorne and so many others have argued, always had significant rhetorical effect. The realm of narrative is the realm of “symbolic action that creates social reality” (Fisher 93). Television, and photographic images in general, with their seeming ability to document and transmit truth and reality (its ability to simulate reality, as Baudrillard would say), is also quite rhetorically powerful. The two, narrative and television, combined with real people in unscripted situations, as is the case for reality television, create an immensely persuasive medium for shaping norms, behavior and values. In fact, it seems to create, or at least be a significant part of, a new order of reality: hyperreality.

The rhetorical power of this form that combines an argument for being real with persuasive narrative storytelling, or this order that subtly shifts and restructures what we call reality, raises a whole host of questions about its cultural and social effects and implications. Recent studies by psychologists, for example, reveal that reality television may have an increased potential for desensitizing watchers to human suffering and dehumanization. As the analysis of The Bachelor shows, competitive jeux narratives tend to privilege a social Darwinist, survival-of-the-fittest paradigm of human relations that doesn’t value all human beings equally or value qualities other than the ability to compete and win at all cost. Clearly, some of these narratives may be problematic and should continue to be critically examined. We must ask ourselves whether this is the best reality we can imagine, the shape of the hyperreality we’d like to exist within. Other narratives, however, show much potential for narratively shaping behavior and worldviews in a positive, constructive way. The
reflective engagement with history, culture and social systems that the *reconstitutions historiques* narratives privilege is arguably something our culture could benefit from.

Ultimately, reality television, as part of a general trend towards repositioning audiences and rhetors, and as part of a new order of reality, seems to be a tool or form that can be used well or used badly, but that is likely here to stay. The question society will need to ask is not how to resist reality television and hyperreality, but rather how to engage with it so that it reflects the best hyperreality we can conceive.
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Appendix
The Real World, New York: Episode Guide


Episode 01: This is the True Story...

It all begins with small-town country girl Julie and her family in Birmingham. Her family is nervous about the whole thing, but Julie is stoked about spending three months in the big city.

The seven strangers arrive at the luxurious loft that they'll call home for the next three months. After introducing themselves, they explore the house and find a Love and Sex book. The sex discussion begins, focusing on innocent Julie and her virginity.

At dinner, Kevin, Julie and Heather discuss prejudice and racism. Kevin is impressed with Julie's open attitude, considering where she grew up. In fact, Julie and her innocence and enthusiasm have already charmed everyone in the house.

Episode 02: Julie and Eric...Could it be Love?

Hmm...what's going on with Julie and Eric? There is some obvious flirting between the two, but they don't seem to be doing anything about it. After Eric appears in a Jovan Musk commercial that gets him highlighted on television, the whole loft discusses nudity, pornography and whether or not Eric is just selling himself and his good looks to the highest bidder.

Heather invites Julie and Eric to visit the studio where she is recording a song for her upcoming album, The System Sucks. It's clear from Heather's hard work and her producer's aggressiveness that the recording business is rough. The sexual tension between Julie and Eric continues as Julie makes her interest more obvious: harassing Eric on the phone, being overtly jealous when Eric talks about his girlfriend Missy, and, as Eric says, showing up in his bed one morning to talk about "pancakes."

But Eric seems to be into her too--he even shows off for Julie at her hip-hop dance class. Julie is excited by Eric's efforts and his willingness to take a chance. Eric later gets upset when Becky talks about setting Julie up on a blind date.

Episode 03: Leather Chaps and Sequins? What is Eric...

Julie gets lost on her way to a new dance studio because she can't follow the directions that Eric gives her. While she is getting critiqued on her performance, Eric is getting naked with a female model at a fitness magazine shoot. When Eric and the model, Taryn, get a little hot and heavy during the shoot, the photographer encourages them.
After the shoot, Taryn and Eric begin dating. But Eric is confused by the relationship, as their dates only consist of strange things like trying on "rocker clothes" (think leather chaps and sequins). Eric doesn't really understand what she sees in him.

Andre's band, Reigndance, is practicing for an upcoming show when the cops show up and shut the rehearsal down. The band plans to perform anyway, and at Julie's urging, several of the roommates watch the show. Grateful for their support, Andre dedicates the song "Redspot" to his roommies.

**Episode 04: Trouble Throughout the House**

Becky is in the studio recording her song, "Mr. Sunshine." It's clear she's looking for some action, as she cuddles with friend/producer Adam. Becky later dresses up for a party at the Limelight by putting Dixie cups in her bra. Heather is unnerved by Becky's overt sexual behavior, especially as Becky gets more out of control as the party rages on.

A house meeting is called after Heather and Becky wake up Kevin by jumping in his bed after the party. Tension runs high as the roommates gang up on Eric and his visiting sister. Eric feels like nobody gives him a fair shot. Heather suggests he either live with it or go to a hotel.

After the meeting, Kevin writes Eric a long letter about their relationship and the current conflicts. The roomies pass around and discuss the letter. Eric gets angrier about the letter as he waits for Kevin to return home. When Kevin does arrive, Eric verbally attacks him for being so passive-aggressive.

**Episode 05: Kevin and Eric Mend Their Relationship**

Kevin and Eric go outside to discuss their issues. The argument dies down as the two talk about stereotypes and their inherent differences. They shake hands.

Kevin takes Morris, a teenage boy he is mentoring, to dinner and an art exhibit and talks to Morris about having a commitment to help others. Eric is also doing some community service as a probation requirement: He works in a basketball program for troubled kids. But he's got other things on his mind as he anxiously awaits Missy's arrival at the loft.

Kevin and Eric become closer as they discuss Missy and Eric's relationship with her. Eric then cements the deal when he invites Kevin to a Knicks game, where the two meet Isaiah Thomas. Kevin gets a chance to peek into Eric's private life as he watches him interact with his dad, an NBA referee.

**Episode 06: Kevin...Come Back!**

Julie and Kevin's brother/sister dynamic continues as they discuss sex, expectations and fantasies. The roommates, however, are a little bit miffed that Kevin is spending increasingly more time away from the loft, so they decide to play a little prank on him. They toss a bunch
of personas in a hat and take on the characters, hoping to fool Kevin into thinking that things have changed while he has been away. Everyone gets into the game, especially Julie, who announces, "I get to be a whore!" Kevin returns to the loft, and overwhelmed by what he sees, rushes out of the house. His frightened roomies wonder if he's coming back.

**Episode 07: Heather Wants to Grab His Booty!**

The cast is worried about Kevin because no one knows where he went. Once he returns, they show him the video they made of the joke they played on him and he eventually forgives them. Later, Kevin confesses he considered quitting the show because he thought his roommates were so weird.

Meanwhile, Heather constantly professes her love for Hornets basketball player Larry Johnson and says she plans to grab his ass if she ever meets him. Julie and Heather actually attend the Knicks-Hornets game, and Heather flirts incessantly with Larry Johnson afterwards. No booty-grabbing though--this show is strictly G-Rated.

A package arrives, informing the ladies of the house that they will spend a week in Jamaica. Becky may need a vacation after the ugly argument she has with Kevin about racism in America.

**Episode 08: Becky Falls into Troubled Love**

The girls head off to Jamaica, Mon. They hit the beach to scope out the men, and they aren't too proud to beg for some lovin'. The guys are left at the loft in freezing cold New York and are forced to bond with each other. The girls do it all: water-ski, party and enjoy the rays. While relaxing in the spa, the girls picture the guys at home being bored and missing the girls.

Back at home, Andre and Kevin head off to a night on the town and talk for the first time. They find themselves not as different from each other as they originally thought. Norman also is far from bored as he develops a relationship with Charles Perez, who he thinks may be the man of his dreams. Julie and Heather leave Jamaica a little disappointed by the available men. Becky, however, returns to NY with a new boyfriend in tow. But he's not from Jamaica; he's from the control room of the loft. Becky is getting it on with a *Real World* director.

**Episode 09: Julie in a Homeless Shelter?**

As the gang prepares for their trip to the pro-choice rally in D.C., Norman is falling head over heels for Charles. Charles doesn't seem quite as ready to make the same commitment.

While the rest of the gang is at the rally, Julie finds a "Reagan-Ville" filled with homeless people. Julie makes a connection with one of the women in the makeshift community and ends up spending the night. The situation affects Julie deeply and the rest of the loftmates are impressed with Julie's openness to the situation.
Episode 10: He’s So Ugly He’s Cute!

The cast finds a white, "alien-like" dog on the street and name him Yoda. They want to keep the dog but decide to search for its owner. Becky and Andre say that the dog is just so ugly it's cute. Julie's mom comes for a visit and Julie plans to "tire her out" by doing the whole tourist scene in New York. They later get into a dispute about their relationship and debate on whether or not it is a good one. Andre's mom also comes for a visit and watches him play with his band.

Episode 11: Julie Thinks Kevin is Psycho!

Crying hysterically, Julie explains to Norman and Eric that she and Kevin had a fight about a phone call and that Kevin threw a candleholder at her. She is scared of Kevin, thinks he is a psycho, and never wants to be alone with him again. Kevin denies brandishing the candleholder and says that the fight wasn't his fault, because Julie was rude to him on the phone and may have cost him a job.

Kevin needs to get some space, so he goes back to Jersey City and walks through his old neighborhood with his girlfriend. The time does him some good and he decides to return to the house to deal with the situation with Julie. They go outside and continue to argue about the fight and differences. After a lot of yelling and harsh words, they finally calm down and apologize to each other. To let it all go, Kevin and Eric throw a big birthday bash. But the fighting isn't over, as Heather tussles with a guest and the police arrive...

Episode 12: WWF is in the House!

Heather gets arrested and is questioned about her fight. Heather lets it be known that nobody can give her attitude, but she sure can give them a piece of her mind. After a little while, the police let her go and even ask her for an autograph.

Heather and Eric fight like brother and sister in the loft. Her stubbornness mixed with Eric's thin skin lead to silly clashes on a regular basis. It all comes to a head when Heather and Eric wrestle through the loft like it's a WWF battle royal.

Episode 13: Goodbye to the Big Apple!

It's the last few days in the house and the gang takes over the production room in the loft. They find out how it feels to be on the other side of the cameras. Becky expresses how the Real World is a real as it gets. Andre feels he has had some great experiences. Kevin confesses how cynical he was in the beginning and how much he's learned from the other members of the cast. Norman confesses that he is not afraid anymore to express his sexuality. The whole cast says their last goodbyes to the Big Apple.