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reviews


HELEN PIPER

The ‘reality’ turn of the past twenty years may not have been quite what Nicholas Garnham envisaged when he called for directors to break free of the ‘creative trap’ of British television documentary, but it has certainly rattled the cage. As Misha Kavka notes in *Reality TV*, the relationship between contemporary factual programming and earlier genres is an increasingly moot topic, to which she responds by slicing history in two ways, revealing both diachronic developments and genealogical resemblances between programmes and genres. Reality television is identified as a broad cultural category of ‘unscripted shows with non-professional actors being observed by cameras in preconfigured environments’ (p. 5), but Kavka’s book is organized chronologically to rehearse the linear evolution of reality television, primarily in the English-speaking world. Its history is divided into three ‘generations’ that roughly correspond to a ‘camcorder era’ from 1989–99, a surveillance and competition era from 1999–2005, and a third generation since 2002, marked primarily by its ‘economies of celebrity’.

Although each historical period gives a sense of the wider moment marked by the arrival of particular texts, as with the ‘coming of age’ of the second generation when ‘television now celebrated its capacity to intervene in people’s lives’ (p. 110), I cannot help but think this excellent study is undersold by its sequential organization. The first chapter (‘Before reality TV’) is actually the least constrained by its place in the structure, and
explores most freely the division between the contrived and the observed, for example in its illuminating account of the ‘family doc’ from An American Family (PBS, 1973) to the recent The Family (Channel 4, 2008–10). Other chapters address phenomena such as the production of ‘entertainment from the trivia of reality’ (p. 48), which connects such disparate shows as America’s Most Wanted (Fox/USA, 1988–) and Driving School (BBC/UK, 1997), and probe the strategic positioning of the camera in pursuit of the hyperordinary. These genealogical connections fascinate, but strain at the imposed generational boundaries, and I would have been interested to read more of these conceptual links across longer periods. By its ‘third generation’, Kavka notes that reality television’s once incidental production of celebrity was folding back into itself, so that it ‘now self-consciously functions as part of the celebrity-making apparatus’ (p. 146), evoking both hatred and admiration for the way in which it dismantles ‘the hierarchical codes of fame’ (p. 173). Surprising, at least for a British viewer and reader, is the noted absence of any single programme to exemplify this latest era, and (excepting a brief discussion of Jersey Shore [MTV, 2009–12]) the study largely neglects those programmes marked by high production values, stilted self-performance and celebrity commodification that are now recognized, even by BAFTA, as ‘Constructed Factual’. Particularly salient for this new category, however, is Kavka’s substitution of the question ‘how real is reality TV?’ with the now manifestly more appropriate ‘what does reality TV do?’ (p. 113).

Such a question is clearly pivotal to an understanding of reality television’s active role in social formations, which is also the broad topic addressed in two publications by Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood. The earliest of these, published in 2011, is Reality Television and Class, a thoughtfully edited and lucidly introduced collection that has already proved a welcome contribution to a field in which class, at last, is back on the agenda. Contributions to this study are organized into three sections: those that address reality television’s terms of exchange and judgement; those that explore its emphasis on the ‘normative performative’ as the key to class relations; and those that examine reality television ‘as a node in sociality’ (p. 22). Already, it seems, attitudes and approaches to the ‘new forms’ of reality television seem to be resettling around some familiar cultural studies antipathies, and this study is being positioned at one remove from those arguments about governance that assume reality television has a direct and didactic influence, and which are collectively rejected by Skeggs and Wood.

Nevertheless, although varied in their choice of case study and national provenance, many of the contributions to Reality Television and Class do confirm a new orthodoxy around class and normativity, best summarized elsewhere by Mike Savage, that from the late twentieth century onwards, Socially recognised class conflict dissipates into individualised identities in which those who live up to middle class norms see themselves as
‘normal’ people while those who do not see themselves (and are seen by the powerful) as individual failures.3

Television formats in which (middle-class) experts intervene to judge and correct the supposedly individual failings of (working-class) subjects seem to be an obvious demonstration of this diagnosis, and this is indeed the generalized model of reality programming that Nick Couldry infers as an object in his censorious yet eloquent contribution.4 Crucially, he insists, the variety and range of reality television are ‘subtleties’ to be put to one side so that we might first ‘understand the machine of reality TV in all its symbolic force’ (p. 34). The ‘machine’ is responsible for certain ‘hidden injuries’ of media power5 in that it both produces and naturalizes class difference, creating a mode of social ‘knowledge’ sustained by the ‘special connection’ these programmes are ‘assumed to have with an underlying shared reality in common’ (p. 40). Persuasive as it is, in both reason and rhetoric, there is a broad sweep and an eschewal of detail here that is potentially problematic, and to which I shall return later. In the context of this edited collection, Couldry’s approach is counterbalanced by numerous other contributions that do work through the ‘subtleties’, whether to demonstrate how inequality is obviated through a culture of self-transformation and self-promotion,6 connected to exclusion,7 or linked to particular traditions of behaviour, such as a Victorian legacy of sexual shame.7

Notwithstanding the strengths of particular chapters, I would suggest that as a collection Reality Television and Class might usefully have included more in the way of counter-discourse, whether to contest how a particular programme might be differently read or simply to stop the book’s self-regarding consensus from resembling that of those socialists a century ago, described by Eric Hobsbawm as ‘imbued with the spirit of nonconformity at a time when dissent was on the decline’ but whose activism generally found its expression in shared contempt for working-class culture.8 The book is also missing much in the way of acknowledgement that working-class viewers may ( knowingly) extract pleasure from these programmes, and lacks a positive model of working-class values that might challenge the often abject subjects of reality television as unjust representations. As the dismissal of class politics since the 1980s has left us with no obvious such collective imaginary (at least, not with a present tense), there is a tendency for contributors to reinterpret all profilmic ‘bad’ behaviour as simply the decontextualized and sensationalized transgression of ‘middle-class norms’. This can make for a rather desperate business, as Andrew Tolson’s analysis of Jade Goody’s notorious encounter with Shilpa Shetty would seem to demonstrate, and one wonders why the discursive annihilation of ‘the working class’ should have no better form of redress than this.

The significance of class viewing identities is more robustly addressed in Skeggs and Wood’s later study, Reacting to Reality Television, most notably in the reported encounters with audience groups – one working-
class cohort of which displayed a revealing reluctance to self-identify as such but clearly articulated positive values and demonstrated modes of sociability that were quite different from their middle-class counterparts. This is an extraordinary, dense and absorbing book, some eight years or more in the making, in which theoretical ideas about reality television are worked through and challenged via the subtleties of extensive textual, theoretical and empirical research. Although recognized as problematically loose, Skeggs and Wood retain ‘reality television’ as an umbrella category characterized by an ‘emphasis upon immediacy, intimacy and indeterminacy’ (p. 11). ‘Performing personhood’ is, in their formulation, the common injunction of reality television and an essentially bourgeois project for which working-class subjects are ill equipped, and such programmes legitimize a broader social move to privilege ‘the reflexive telling of the self’ as ‘the method of individualisation’ (p. 219), which further obliges the working class to publicly perform its lack of personal value. However, the authors also note how the affective dimensions of viewing are evident in the way audiences often reject ‘pedagogic instruction in television, taking pleasure in resisting the positions of experts or sometimes simply enjoying the ‘happiness’ of participants’ (p. 14).

The emphasis on affect in Reacting to Reality TV points to a richer and more complex viewer experience than is often assumed, but because it is theorized as reaching through or beyond the text, the concept offers a more limited purchase on aesthetic textual difference. At one point the authors reject conventional textual definitions of genre in favour of a taxonomy of formats sorted by modes of social intervention (p. 86). However, they still continue to refer to reality television as a single ‘genre’, which may be a frustration to those for whom the text is itself a source of interest, especially as other academic discourses around reality television now take it to include anything and everything from first-person documentary experiments to lifestyle makeovers, and surveillance competition formats to candid journeys of self-discovery. In Reality TV, Kavka even includes Strictly Come Dancing (BBC, 2004–), a show which, I concede, does draw upon ‘reality’ tropes of self-transformation, but does so in order to reinvent itself within the more dominant tradition of feel-good, shiny-floor, light entertainment in which the pleasures of spangle and spectacle render insignificant (risible even) any implicitly didactic message about ‘hard work’. If such examples test boundary definitions, should they not also test the generalizations on which the political consensus depends? Certainly the television industry is driven by the financial rewards of creating global formats (some of which come at the expense of one-off commissions, as with docusoaps for single documentaries), but there is something a little too neat about the logic that connects its media power directly (through a hugely varied body of texts) to the enactment of symbolic class violence, and which ignores ‘subtleties’ such as aesthetic difference and production agency.

10 Although for some it may indeed, as Kavka notes, ‘resound with the age old success myth of celebrity’ (Reality TV, p. 171).
It is not only the conceits of reality television that drive its class relations, but the execution of them. Skeggs and Wood make the valid observation that the more open programme formats of self-discovery tend to be populated by articulate middle-class subjects, whilst makeover shows are more likely to feature working-class subjects in need of remedial intervention. Clearly this has as much to do with local casting practices as global formats, and one wonders whether political critique might be more effectively levelled at the reduced social mobility and significant entry bars to the media that restricts programme-making to the bourgeoisie. Lest we forget, agency rests with a largely graduate commercial–professional sector which has itself been shaped by the middle-class values and competencies peddled by the academy (cultural studies included). The representational injustices of reality television pertain to broader social structures and are neither universal nor inherent to its forms, genres or formats. Indeed, there is no essential reason why a format such as Wife Swap could not be used systematically to expose the poverty of ‘middle-class norms’ (to include, say, oppressive ‘helicopter’ parenting, petty food snobberies, and a literal and metaphorical fear of colour). This is not a recommendation, of course, but I do think there needs to be a serious engagement with the creative possibilities of reality forms that does not automatically invoke a superior model of sober, socially concerned documentary.

As much rhetorical as critical, the binary opposition between legitimate documentary and reality television is unsustainable, partly because there is now so much creative overlap between the two and partly because the breadth of the latter category means it lacks uniformity even as a ‘way of seeing’. For example, whereas makeover formats may explicitly situate the viewer as – in John Berger’s coinage – a ‘spectator-buyer’, the characteristic fascination with the ordinary/extraordinary of other reality forms can actually invert these capitalist social relations of envy. Skeggs and Wood acknowledge as much in their recognition of Schadenfreude as a common affective response which also offers to viewers ‘a respite for the judgements, evaluations and de-authorizations to which they are also constantly subject, offering a momentary position on the pedestal of the moral high ground’ (Reacting To Reality Television, p. 162). What is interesting about more recent trends in television programming is that such levelling downwards is now frequently targeted at celebrities, whose status as an object of envy is immediately undermined as soon as they participate in, say, a reality game show previously reserved for ‘ordinary’ people. I am not suggesting that inverting the axis of glamour (which was, for Berger, publicity capitalism’s dominant ‘way of seeing’) is enough to justify reality television’s implicit claim of ‘democratization’, but I do think the rhetoric of its possibility is more significant (and for that matter, symbolic) than currently acknowledged.

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11 As relied upon by many, including Couldry, ‘Class and contemporary forms of reality production’, p. 38.