

From *The Truman Show* to *Survivor*: Narrative versus Reality in Fake and Real Reality TV

by Marie-Laure Ryan

If the producers of the so-called Reality TV shows have any say in defining reality, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault are not merely towering figures of postmodern thought, they are the true prophets of this young millennium. By placing human subjects under the neverending surveillance of cameras, and by labeling the resulting spectacle reality, these shows seem to have been conceived for the specific purpose of implementing Foucault's dystopic vision of a panoptic society, and Baudrillard's doctrine of the (hyper)reality of the image in contemporary culture. Postmodern theory tells us that "reality" is what comes *out* of the media, but if we want to understand the specific working of a medium, we must also take into consideration the input to its machine and the operations this input undergoes. Moreover, if media fabricate hyperreality, it would be simplistic to assume that their products automatically become the spectator's own reality. In this essay I propose to compare the fictional TV show of *Truman* to the real one of *Survivor* with two questions in mind: (1) how dependent on other genres and media is the TV Reality show, and through what cultural patterns, especially narrative ones, does it filter live data; (2) in what sense does its output deserve to be called reality. In asking this second question I am not claiming that Reality TV has anything to say about reality in any ontological sense of the term, but by eliciting reactions in the spectator about the nature of its offering, it is instrumental to the building of a "folk theory" of what is real and what is not. Through this folk theory, it makes a significant contribution to the phenomenological study of reality.

I

In a classic example of what Bolter and Grusin call "remediation," - media striving to refashion, improve upon, or simulate other media - *The Truman Show* represents in movie form the run of a TV show, which itself exploits the fascination of the public for webcams, a phenomenon based in yet another medium. Through this cross-medial narrative embedding, *Truman* invites us to reflect upon the idiosyncrasies and differences in narrative potential of TV and cinema. Even though cinema and TV sometimes transmit the same material, the experience of a movie shown on a TV screen is significantly different from its experience in a theater. A movie theater envelopes us like a dark cave and creates the optimal conditions for an immersive experience. We are a captive audience in a magic spectacle that requests and receives our undivided attention. The film plays without interruption for ninety minutes, and when it finally releases us from its world we have a hard time adapting again to the brightness of natural light. A movie shown on a TV screen is a far less immersive experience, visually speaking, because it competes with countless potential sources of distraction.^[1] We can surf to other channels, the showing is interrupted by commercials, the screen occupies only a small part of our field of vision, and the quality of sound and image is much lower than in a movie theater. This is why McLuhan has called TV a cold medium, in contrast to the hot medium of cinema. The different viewing conditions of TV and movies have significant consequences for the type of narrative that best fits each of these media. Since movies last about 90 minutes, about the time of a theatrical performance, their narrative plots favor strict Aristotelian patterns of exposition, complication, climax and resolution. In fact, Aristotelian dramaturgy has become something of a Bible for Hollywood scriptwriters. Meanwhile, since TV runs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, its narratives may stretch over a considerable period of time, even though they occupy a limited slot in the weekly schedule. The type of narrative that takes

full advantage of the idiosyncrasies of the TV medium is not the self-contained Aristotelian plot but the never-ending serial with multiple characters, parallel plot lines and largely episodic structure. As Sarah Kozloff has observed, this endless stretching of narrative time de-emphasizes action and redirects attention toward the characters. Viewers develop emotional attachment (or passionate distaste) for the main characters of a show and for the often eponymous actors who play these characters. Because TV narrative stretches out indefinitely in time, its plot is continually in the process of being written, which means that the audience can offer feed-back to the scriptwriters, either indirectly through polls or directly through such institutions as fan clubs, fan magazines, and online chat groups. This feature makes the TV serial narrative far more interactive than movie drama.

Another narrative dimension that distinguishes TV from movies is the possibility to narrate "in real time" through the live broadcasting of real world events. This real time potential of TV narrative is a feature that does not successfully combine with the indefinite temporal extension of serials; the favorite topics of live coverage are not ongoing wars or time-consuming rescue efforts, but well-scripted and dramatically engrossing rituals of strictly delimited temporal extension, such as sports events, royal weddings and Oscar ceremonies. In addition, TV serials make up their own narratives, since they specialize in fiction, while the events shown on live broadcasts are supposed to happen independently of the camera. TV narrative thus opens two possibilities that are not available to the cinematic brand, but these two distinctive properties of the medium are mutually exclusive in commercial programming. About the only actual shows that runs *all the time* and *in real time* are the above-mentioned webcams, as well as the close-circuit *surveillance* cameras that we find in stores, banks and prisons.

The reason why we don't have TV narratives that never go off the air and run in real time are commercial rather than practical. As the webcam phenomenon has shown, it is easy to place a camera in a location where something interesting might happen, and to make this camera record and broadcast continually until some dramatic events "walks," so to speak, in its field of vision. But a show of this kind would have such a low degree of narrativity and so many dead moments that nobody would want watch it for an extended period of time. Internet webcams are indeed meant for quick "grabs," not for the lengthy couch-potato camping in front of the tube that enables TV viewers to ingest enough commercials to keep their favorite show on the air. It is only in the realm of the imagination that a continuous live broadcast could generate sufficient interest to justify sustained watching. This of course is what happens in the Truman show [2], a fictional TV show embedded in the real film by the same name. Narrative embedding has always been a convenient way to present virtual artworks that stand no chance of being actualized—think for instance of the painting in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a portrait that ages with its subject, or of the Chinese novel in Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths," a narrative that follows all the branches of the possible, and that we find paraphrased, but significantly not directly quoted, in the very real story by the same name. Similarly, in *The Truman Show*, the embedding technique is used to present a show that could never be realized in the real world for reasons that involve not only the technological and the narratological, but perhaps also the ethical, though not many people are willing to concede a sense of human decency to a medium as maligned as TV. Insofar as they use volunteers, and lure them with the promise of a rich money prize, real shows such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother* are a far cry from the carceral situation of *Truman*.

The subject matter of the show is nothing less than the entire life of its hero, a very ordinary insurance salesman named Truman Burbank. Truman was adopted by a television company—the first individual legally adopted by a corporation, we are told—and from the moment of his birth, unbeknownst to him, every instant of his life has been recorded by a camera and shown live on TV to an adoring audience. The people who surround Truman are not his genuine wife, mother, buddies, colleagues, or neighbors, but actors whose every action and utterance is scripted and piped in by the producers of the show. To prevent Truman from escaping from the eye of the camera, the TV company built a giant bubble dome that covers an entire town, a perfectly clean and well-planned island community that looks like a hybrid of California real estate development—Truman *Burbank* !- -, seaside tourist resort and suburban paradise from a TV show of the fifties. Whenever Truman attempts to take a trip to the world at large, a carefully planned “accident” brings him back within the range of the recording equipment. But after thirty years on the show, Truman begins to suspect that there is something fishy about the world he lives in, and one day he manages to sneak away from the camera and to escape in a sailboat. He eventually hits the wall of the bubble, and confronts Christof, the creator of the show, who tries to persuade him to resume his TV life for the sake of the audience: “You are the hero of a TV show that brings joy to millions.” Ignoring the plea, Truman walks off the show, to the thunderous cheers of the fans. If these cheers salute the liberation of the audience from the tyranny of the media, the euphoria of a TV-free existence turns out to be short-lived. The movie ends with the all too familiar question “What else is on,” as two dejected spectators frantically search with the remote-control for an active channel.

When a medium embeds a representation of another, the logic, discourse and aesthetics that prevail are inevitably those of the embedding medium. In the movie, by necessity, the thirty years of the show are condensed into about an hour of footage. Whereas in the TV show Truman’s life is broadcast “live and unedited,” the actual movie filters it down to its dramatic highlights. The episodic and character-centered TV narrative has been reshaped by the movie into a plot-centered Aristotelian structure, with a clear exposition, complication, climax and denouement. The discrepancy between the two logics and the prevalence of the resources of the embedding medium is particularly evident in the use of flash backs. As a real-time and continually produced narrative, the fictional Truman show would not allow a distinction of story and discourse, since organizing the presentation of a story into narrative discourse is an editing process that requires a temporal distance from the events and a comprehensive knowledge of what can be used as narrative material. In a genuine real-time situation producers have no choice but telling events in the exact order of their occurrence, and they cannot delete meaningless or non-functional events since narrative functionality is a dimension that is assessed after the facts. The only choice allowed is among the many cameras that simultaneously record the events from various points of view. But in the movie, the life story of Truman is presented in a classical non-chronological style, with a beginning *in medias res* and flash-backs to earlier episodes in the show. This rearrangement is obviously meant to arouse the interest of the actual spectator, but it is naturalized within the fictional world of the movie as the familiar broadcasting practice of rerunning earlier episodes of TV serials. There is for instance a flash-back that shows Truman’s encounter during his college years with a beautiful woman who tried to warn him of the whole scheme. When the scene is over, we see a shot of two female viewers who comment, “I can’t believe he married Meryl on the rebound.”

From a narratological perspective, the impossible character of the embedded Truman Show lies in its hybrid status between fiction and nonfiction. Postmodern literature has accustomed us to works that challenge the strict dichotomy of

fiction and nonfiction, for instance by alternating between the two modes, by exploring their fuzzy boundary, or by making the question of fictionality undecidable, but the virtual narrative of *The Truman Show* manages to be at the same time, and quite unambiguously, fiction and nonfiction, a feat that to my knowledge no real narrative has been able to accomplish. Here we have a text whose fictionality depends on the perspective of different characters. From Truman's point of view, the show is as clearly "life," as it is "fiction" from the point of view of the actors who play roles. The reason for this discrepancy is that fictionality requires a duplicity of actor/character in dramatic media, and of author/narrator in strictly narrative works. The actors are duplicitous, since they are playing roles, but Truman has only one identity. The fact that Truman's life is staged is not sufficient to make it fiction, because in real life also, we find many scripted events that count as genuine performance. One needs only think of the carefully planned protocol that regulated the life of king Louis XIV. Every gesture of the king's daily life was turned into a ceremony, and the noblemen of the court could even buy the right to attend the spectacle, but the king was really performing the actions specified by the script and not simply acting them up. In *The Truman Show*, this compatibility of staging and authenticity is expressed by the actor who plays Truman's best buddy when he tells the audience in a documentary program: "Nothing is fake. Everything is true. It is merely controlled."

The Truman show is not only a paradoxical hybrid of fiction and nonfiction, it also manages to be at the same time Reality show and soap opera. Through its combination of raw life and staged action, the show cleverly taps into the two fundamental sources of narrative appeal. We are fascinated by true stories because we are citizens of the same world as their participants, because we experience a sense of community with all human beings, and because real events may impact our personal life; on the other hand, we are attracted to the made-up stories of narrative fiction because they fulfill formal and thematic patterns that engage the imagination. If we combine these two sources of pleasure or interest, nothing should be more satisfactory than life imitating popular literature, a formula that tabloid journalism understands only too well. In *The Truman Show*, the continuous surveillance of Truman by the cameras that are hidden everywhere on the island offers a guarantee of truth. Truman has no off-camera life, and except for his inner thoughts, he cannot hide anything from the audience. This sense of authenticity is strengthened by the already mentioned impossibility to edit live broadcasting and to tamper with its narrative sequence. Christof, the producer of the show, woos the audience with the promise: "Live and unedited, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week." If the show is unedited, this means that it must go on even in the narratively barren moments of Truman's life, for instance when he is asleep. The scriptwriters of the show make up for these barren moments by filling the daytime with the kind of events that one might expect from a soap. These events introduce a "tellability" into Truman's life that rescues it from the tediousness of normal life. In his broadcast about the show, Christof titillates the audience with a preview of the excitement to come: "Meryl will soon leave Truman. A new romantic interest will develop. And watch for the first live conception on TV." (The show seems to become sexually bolder as the years go by, as does indeed the culture that produces it). The dual allegiance of the show to the randomness of life and to the control of narrative art is reflected in the ambiguous stance of the audience with respect to the hero. The insignium of belonging to the club of Truman fans is the wearing of a button that says "How will it end." The cheers that salute Truman's definitive departure from the show can be read as an expression of aesthetic satisfaction with the resolution of the plot, even though this resolution deprives the fans of the show that gives meaning to their daily life.

Through its eschatological overtones, the message "How will it end" is also the first intimation of a religious theme that becomes more and more explicit as the movie nears, precisely, its climax and its end. Truman, the ordinary man whose life is scripted from above, becomes the sacrificial lamb of a media religion that redeems the tedium of everyday life by making its banality into the object of a TV show. Through the mediation of Truman, everybody is vicariously raised to the highest glory that humanity can hope to attain in a media-dominated culture, namely to the status of TV celebrity. In the religion masterminded by Christof, Hamlet's dilemma, "to be or not to be" is reinterpreted as "TV or not to be." According to a standard mythical pattern, the fulfillment of the redemptive scheme requires the sacrifice of the redeemer's life. In keeping with the preoccupations of contemporary culture, this sacrifice does not mean the loss of life, but simply the loss of privacy. Truman's life is indeed offered to mankind by being put on public display. According to Mircea Eliade, the great historian of religions, the performance of religious ceremonies transport cult members into mythical time and makes them contemporaries of the hero whose life is being reenacted. In the case of Truman this interpenetration of profane time and mythical time is automatic, since the cultural hero fulfills his destiny in the eternal present of the live broadcast.

As is the case with most organized religions, the worship of Truman involves responsibilities as well as benefits. To earn the privilege of having the show brought to them, the audience must support the church financially through the purchase of paraphernalia that bear the likeness of their hero. Every object that appears on the show is for sale through a catalog, and even though the show is technically free of commercial interruptions, the hawking of various products is an integral part of the script. In the middle of a conversation with Truman, his wife will for instance turn toward the audience and say, "Truman, let me prepare for you a cup of cocoa 'Mococoa.' It's the best cocoa I have ever tasted, and believe me, I have tasted them all." Consuming these goods strengthens the unity of the community of worshippers and functions as mediation between the cult figure and ordinary mortals. Drinking the same cocoa as Truman is not merely an imitation of the hero, but a ritual that enables the worshipper to become one with him, just as in Christianity practicing the "Imitation of Jesus Christ" is a way to reach a state of spiritual communion with the Savior, and in the religion of sports, just as wearing Michael Jordan sneakers is a way to "be like Mike."

The obvious target of this somewhat heavy-handed satire is the tendency of TV to usurp the place of myth and to define cultural values in modern society. Recent treatments of the importance of TV shows in the popular press (daily newspapers and general interest magazines) suggest that far from being regarded as fictional worlds created for the sake of pure entertainment, these shows are credited with the power to determine what is allowed and forbidden. The currently much-maligned show *Father Knows Best* was the expression of the patriarchal values of the fifties, and the more recent *Ellen* serial was hailed as the official acceptance of homosexuality in American culture. In archaic societies the absolute truth of myth is guaranteed by the authority of the source-- gods, prophets, shamans or ancestors--but the erosion of faith in the sacred in contemporary society, as well as the general rejection of institutional forms of authority, has voided the traditional sources of authentication and turned over responsibility to celebrities. Many of these "mythical shows," such as *Roseanne*, *Ellen*, *Seinfeld*, or the *Cosby Show*, bear indeed the name of the actor who plays the leading role. The homonymy between the name of the character and the name of their real-life impersonators creates the expectation that the private life of the actor respects the cultural values expressed in the myth. By declaring her homosexuality, for instance, Ellen DeGeneres established the legitimacy of her lesbian character as role model in contemporary society. When the myth falls out of cultural favor,

discrepancies between the private life of the actors and their fictional persona are invoked to kill it off. After the death of Robert Young, the actor who plays the infallible Jim Anderson in *Father Knows Best*, the media's insistence on his private mental problems and suicide attempts was an implicit rejection of the truth of the myth. In *The Truman Show* there is no chance of a discrepancy between actor and character ever taking place, since Truman has no private life besides what is shown on the screen. As long as it maintains its panoptic surveillance of the hero, the camera functions as the guarantee of the absolute truth of the myth.

II

Truman walked off the show before the heir promised by Christof could be "conceived live" on TV, but as the several real-world imitations of the concept demonstrate, he did indeed manage to reproduce himself. In a further case of remediation, Truman's non-fictional epigones range from webcam simulations of the "live and unedited twenty-four hours a day" TV broadcast that we only glimpse at in the movie, to TV simulations of the highly edited cinematic mediation of this show.

The numerous TV adaptations of the Truman formula—the so-called Reality shows or "voyeur TV" (VTV)—all resort to various degrees compromise between scripted movie drama and the raw spectacle of the surveillance camera. *Survivor*, the most popular U.S. TV show in the summer of 2000, takes the formula as close as it can go toward the scripted pole without becoming a fully acted TV movie. (*Big Brother*, the other, less popular show of the season, stayed closer to the raw pole.) For those who equate reality with the banal, the quotidian, the spontaneous, the unstaged, the intimate—in short with how "ordinary people" behave in certain spaces culturally designated as sanctuaries of privacy—dismissing the reality claim of *Survivor* is like complaining that Las Vegas is fake. Making no attempt at hiding the camera from the participants nor at pretending to record the daily grind of a random sample of the population, *Survivor* openly exploits its own power to create behaviors. At the risk of rehashing what every reader who doesn't live on a desert island already knows, let me summarize the formula. The producers of the show selected 16 people out of a huge number of applicants (over 6000, according to *Time* magazine), and placed them in a blatantly artificial situation that severed all ties with their personal environment. Marooned, or rather implanted on an uninhabited island in Southeast Asia the participants fought to survive the doubly hostile environment of nature and their fellow cast-offs (the latter far more dangerous, since nature's parsimony was somewhat compensated by supplies dropped from the sky). Every three days a participant was voted off the island by the others, and the last one to survive received a prize of one million dollars.

If the opposition of life and art is one of formlessness versus design (a popular conception admittedly belied by the presence of pattern in nature), *Survivor* aggressively pursues the artifice of art. The weekly script of *Survivor* transposes onto the temporal level the spatial concept of windowed display. The hour-long show was so predictably divided into thematic (or strategic) units that I was able to skip the parts that did not interest me—namely the organized activities. The Aristotelian pattern favored by movies thus prevailed on the level of the weekly episode, though over the course of its 12-week run *Survivor* did generate the emotional reaction to characters that Kozloff considers typical of TV narrative. The broadcast typically began with a panning of the landscape, followed by a few shots of the cast-offs engaging in life-sustaining activities (fishing, cooking, eating), accompanied by bits and pieces of spontaneous dialogue. After an interlude of comments directly spoken into the camera on such topics as the harshness of life, interpersonal relations, or the participants' assessment of their

own chances to survive the day's vote came a contest whose winner (tribe or individual) was rewarded with a luxury item from the outside world: fresh fruit, beer, a useful piece of equipment, or a video phone call to the loved ones at home, for the show was big on family values. A second contest, after a second interlude of talk or nature shots (not to mention the commercials), was fought for the much more substantial reward of immunity. A session of comments on interpersonal relations directly spoken into the camera, which, to many viewers, constituted the crux of the show, prepared the climax of the "tribal council" (as the voting event was called) and the denouement of the loser's expulsion.

In a show of this type, the discrepancy between what Genette calls narrated time and time of narration makes selective editing inevitable. This further precludes any claim that reality is just "showing itself." The boredom of island life, a feeling born out of the temporal *durée* of repetitive experience, is for instance condensed into thirty second shots of idle people commenting into the camera about the emptiness of their days. Thanks to the weekly compression of time, as well as to the fact that *Survivor* as a whole aired some three months after the filming, the editing process often takes the allure of retrospective narration. (The *Big Brother* experiment, by contrast, ran in the same time span as the show; each installment was a selection of the day's materials, and some shows even contained live footage.) The retrospective tampering with the data was most obvious in the tribal councils. As the contestants took their seats in the designated area, the camera typically dwelled on the face of one of them, raising the suspicion that this contestant was going to be "it." When this foreshadowing became too predictable the editors resorted to another tactic: the camera framed an individual who would narrowly survive the vote. This trick too became predictable, but at that time the producers seemed to have run out of ideas; deceptive foreshadowing ruled the show for most of the second half.

Narrative shaping is not only a matter of structure and techniques, but also a matter of symbols and themes. *Survivor* plays against each other, in oxymoronic fashion, two themes that stand for the opposite ends of a cultural spectrum: capitalist materialism and native spirituality. As was the case in *Truman*, the show invests in the facile readability of cultural stereotype and mythical archetype. The Southern California planned community has given way to Polynesian clichés (exotic tribe names, tiki-room décor), but in both shows the setting provides the stage for a secularized version of religious drama. In *Survivor*, this drama rewards virtue in this life with financial heaven in the afterlife of post-show existence. The ceremonial pomp that surrounds the tribal councils tells the spectator that there is more to the moment than getting rid of obnoxious comrades and potential rivals: the vote expresses the communal wisdom of a sacred entity named Pagong, Tagi or Rattana. As they write down a name on the ballot, many participants movingly speak of their love and respect for the person they are about to cast off, for sending people back to the world beyond the ocean is the hard rule of life, not an expression of personal resentment. The voting takes place in a circular area separated from the profane space of the island by a suspended bridge and illuminated by torchlight: one burning torch for each surviving member of the tribe. As the participant prepare themselves to scribble a name on their ballot (this usually done with spelling mistakes), the show host speaks the ritual formula: "The voting is irrevocable, and the person voted out will have to leave the island immediately." When the vote has been tallied, the torch of the loser's life is extinguished, and another formula, "the tribe has spoken," punctuates the walk of the newest victim of tribal wisdom across the symbolic bridge that leads from life to death. Eliminated contestants may have been unable to get along with the other members of the tribe during the day, but in the moment of expulsion, they are revered as dead ancestors, and their memory is kept alive through the extinguished torches that

decorate the ceremonial area. In the final weeks of the show, these dead ancestors (or at least, those who survived long enough to become truly venerable) are invited back to the voting ceremony to observe the living, for they will be the ones who cast the final vote. During the last installment, the remaining three participants are made to perform a rite of passage by walking on (symbolic) hot coals through a double row of palm fronds held by their "fallen comrades." Their faithfulness to the tribal spirits is tested by a contest that grants immunity to the player who can answer the most questions about the Dead Ancestors. In another contest, they must hold as long as they can onto a wooden pole that stands for an idol. (The winner, Kelly, held on for more than three hours.) The contestant who was best able to please the Dead Ancestors during the Last Judgment is rewarded with mythical gold, but in the end everybody gains access to Heaven. The show concludes with a happy reunion of all participants, during which all feuds and grudges are erased by Love Triumphant. Thanks to the miracles of cosmetics, the bodies we saw battered by nature and deprivation are gloriously resurrected for their affluent after-island-life; for thanks to media appearances, book contracts and endorsements, everybody walks out a financial winner.

The kitschy New Age spirituality of the native theme is thus undermined by the cynicism of the capitalist theme. Many of the immunity contests are so silly that they seem to have been designed for the express purpose of demonstrating how much public humiliation people will tolerate for a chance to win a million dollars: eat worms, stay on a plank in the ocean and under the sun for many hours, or, as already mentioned, "hold on for dear life" onto a wooden pole. Relishing in their power to give and take away, the omnipotent gods of the networks tantalize the materially deprived contestants by dangling before their hungry eyes the luxuries of conspicuous consumerism. After winning a contest, for instance, a player is flown to a yacht off the island, where he is served Champaign by a tuxedoed waiter. When the two tribes merge into one, a representative of each group is taken to a sand spit to negotiate a symbolic marriage. While the tribe members left on the island gripe about having nothing to eat but rice, the two ambassadors, not coincidentally male and female, and both young and handsome, are treated to a gourmet candlelight dinner in a glorious sunset, before retreating into a night that we are made to imagine rich in other pleasures.

The capitalist theme is so openly flaunted that its ideology almost negates itself. In typically late-capitalist, postmodern fashion, *Survivor* anticipates and cleverly disarms objections to its philosophy through ironic self-consciousness. The blatant consumerism of the show is acknowledged through the playful interplay between the commercials and the game itself. While the contestants ecstatically feast on the product of one of the sponsors (Budweiser), the commercials display the same setting as the show, reenact some of its most memorable moments, such as the infamous worm eating contest, and even feature some of the participants voted out in the early stages. In a self-reflexive move reminiscent of Borges, the contestants are rewarded late in the show with a viewing of the first episode. Similarly, in the *Arabian Nights* (at least according to Borges [195], for I have been unable to verify this claim), Scheherazade begins the 602th night with a retelling of the frame tale. The contestants themselves practice self-consciousness through frequent allusions to the made-for-TV nature of their situation: "Its like being in a game show," says Colleen. "Which of course it is." Or Susan, before an archery contest, which she lost: "I am going to beat a guy. And on national TV."

Where is reality in all of this ? The two dominant themes create a overflow of meaning that seriously compromises the credibility of the show as "Reality TV";

for, as Roland Barthes observes, it is the meaningless, the random, the found object that create "l'effet de réel" (reality effect). Through its forceful pursuit of thematic and dramatic legibility, *Survivor* offers a classical example of what Baudrillard calls the hyperreal, namely a copy that kills the desire for the original, because it is better shaped, more coherent, more predictable, and therefore more intelligible. Baudrillard explains our fascination for the hyperreal as a self-seduction, a phenomenon which involves a more or less willing abdication of defenses ("to seduce is to weaken"; *On Seduction*, 162). This idea of seduction can be understood in two ways. In one interpretation, which I would like to dismiss right away, critical faculties are so debilitated by the rhetoric of the show that the audience becomes blind to its artifices; the show is consequently taken as the authentic, unmanipulated image of life. But today's TV audiences are far too sophisticated to miss the work of the camera, the dramatic scripting of the data, and the intertextual borrowings from other TV shows. If this sophistication weren't sufficient to kill off illusion, the self-referentiality of the show should dissipate any remaining chance of taking *Survivor* as a candid window that "catches in the act" the fully spontaneous behavior of true representatives of ordinary humanity. To the idea of a gullible audience thrown into mental arrest by the mystifying power of the media, I prefer the thesis advanced by Cynthia Freeland with regard to other types of Reality TV, such as *Rescue 911* or *When Animals Attack*: these programs are so badly acted and so amateurishly produced that they have "gotten to the point of parodying themselves." *Survivor* achieves the same effect through the opposite route of overproduced, technically perfect images. According to Freeland, audiences watch these caricatures "in a subversive, ironic spirit," deriving their pleasure from the thought that this is not reality but rather its made-for-TV version. This attitude falls along the same lines as the fascination of many supermarket shoppers for the headlines of tabloids such as *National Enquirer* or the *Weekly World News*: these readers (here I speak for myself) do not view the stories as something to believe, but rather enjoy them in a spirit of *schadenfreude*, as examples of "what other people are dumb enough to believe." (These other people, of course, are a construct of the reader's imagination, so my *schadenfreude* may ultimately rest on delusion.) If indeed the spectator is not fooled by the reality-claim of the image, we must opt for an interpretation of seduction as the deliberate choice of the fabricated over the authentic. As the current popularity of personal history, "true fiction," "true crime," or memoirs of traumatic events indicate, neither raw life nor well-made fiction can rival the appeal of "true" facts cast in a properly dramatic mold. But since life does not offer itself as a well-made plot, as Hayden White argues, a compromise must be achieved between form and authenticity. The need to compromise may pose a dilemma to historians and biographers, but in the entertainment sector, allegiance to "the real" weighs little against the seduction of plot, because it is not a value in itself, but a means toward an end. As the victory in the ratings of *Survivor* over its less scripted relative *Big Brother* indicates, American audiences want a flavor of reality, but they want their reality properly cooked and dressed. [3]

The claim to reality of Reality TV has been so widely deconstructed by critics, however, that rather than joining the chorus line, I would like to play the devil's advocate. If *Survivor* and its kin achieved viable ratings for at least one season, it is because something genuine, something worth calling reality took place in their artificial environments. The claim that what happened in the fishbowl does not capture reality because participants were selected by the producers, were aware of the presence of the camera, and were placed in an artificial situation presupposes an essentialist interpretation of human reality. In this view, the real equals the normal, the everyday, the private and the intimate. We are only truly ourselves in the familiar circumstances of our daily life, and preferably behind closed doors, when we no longer play the game of social behavior. The "false,"

controlled self of public life is thus opposed to the “true,” impulsive self of privacy, which the Reality show can only hope to capture when the participants forget the camera and let raw feelings speak out. This hope of seeing “what happens when people stop being polite and start being real” (slogan of the MTV show *The Real World*) is admittedly a strong motivation for watching *Survivor* and *Big Brother*. According to this conception, “reality” happens in flashes on the show, for instance when Susan places a curse on Kelly, when Jenna wipes a tear thinking of the loved ones at home, or when Greg and Colleen disappear into the night for an alleged dalliance. “We don’t see real life in these series,” claims Paul Romer, a producer of *Big Brother*. “But sometimes, we touch on real personalities. There is a momentary reflection of the real self—and those moments make great television” (quoted from Sella).

For the sensation-seeker, the “real self” is something hidden behind the surface that reveals itself in short bursts when the masks of civility are dropped. For those who have assimilated the lesson of phenomenology, on the contrary, human reality is something continuously produced and presented to others, something that arises from the interaction between a subject and an environment. Human reality, if it could be mapped, would be the sum of all the possible selves that we create in all possible situations. This reality can emerge no less from the confrontation of individuals with a made-up environment than from their insertion in a naturally occurring one.

Ramona, the chemist who was voted out in the early weeks of the show, aptly described the situation when she called it “a Petri dish for conflict.” The stage may have been designed to maximize the chances of interpersonal friction, since audiences want drama, and drama needs conflict, but once they entered the closed world of the island, the participants wrote their own character by interacting with their social and natural environment. *Survivor* can be compared in this respect to an experiment in artificial life—with the emphasis on life rather than on artificiality. As N. Katherine Hayles describes it, artificial life is the name given to computer programs that create a complex self-organizing system by placing a number of digital objects, each endowed with specific behaviors, in a closed environment. The dynamics of the interaction between these silicon-based creatures causes them to evolve and to develop new behaviors that weren’t scripted in the original software. They are alive in the sense that they achieve autonomy with respect to their creator. As in all artificial life environments, the evolution of *Survivor* depended on the initial conditions of the system, namely the personalities of the characters: “Casting the people for *Survivor* was as much fun as I’ve ever had—and it’ll be the same with *Big Brother*,” said Leslie Moonves, president of CBS. “You get the chance to speculate about whether, say, these two people here will have conflict. Or that this girl and this guy might get together. Sometimes you are right and sometimes you’re so far off you can’t even imagine” (quoted from Sella).

In contrast to Christof in *The Truman Show*, who insisted on an absolute control over his creature (and whose show was destroyed when the creature rebelled), and to the producers of *Big Brother*, who tried to intervene when the ratings began to fall [4], the gods of *Survivor* kept a relatively light hand on the development of the show. They set up the stage, selected the actors, appointed a host who functioned as narrator (Jeff Probst), but they let the plot evolve at least partially by itself. Nowhere does the autonomy of the creatures with respect to the creator express itself more forcefully than in the subversion of the game by some of the participants. The idea of the game was to let the voting process select the most deserving player, the one with the best combination of social and survival skills. Voting was supposed to eliminate those troublesome individuals who posed a threat to the cohesion of the group, even though the group had

been created for the sole purpose of being methodically dismantled one member at a time. But two participants decided to play by their own rules. Sean opted for randomness, by voting out people in alphabetical order, while Richard Hatch, who eventually won the game, opted for strategy. As already mentioned, the "alliance" he organized from the very beginning with Rudy, Kelly and Susan stipulated that they would all vote for the same person, in order to maximize their chances. He and his co-conspirators took their fate into their own hands, rather than leaving it to others and to chance. The subversion of the voting process from popularity contest to the protection at all costs of personal interests allowed some of the stronger, but also more abrasive participants to survive until the final round, thereby preserving the narrative interest of the show, for every good story needs a villain. Whereas the plot of *Big Brother* lingered on in love and harmony because the jury (a real-world audience) systematically voted out unpopular players, Richard Hatch became the bad guy everybody loved to hate. By helping to maintain the ratings, the small rebellion of the alliance-mongers eventually served the interests of the producers as well as their own. The gods seem indeed to have learned something from their creatures, for the advertisement to the sequel of *Survivor*, filmed in the winter of 2001 in the Australian outback, extolled the ability to control group dynamics through clever maneuvers: "Surviving social politics, it's what the game is all about."

III

As an allegory of our media-crazed society, *The Truman Show* leaves us with a bitter taste, a feeling only alleviated by the demise of the show. The prospect of an absolute and complete truth about a human being is more disturbing to the contemporary mind than the lies and fabulation for which media have traditionally been blamed. *The Truman Show* inscribes itself in a long tradition of fear of new media, but it also demonstrates the displacement that the object of this fear has undergone since the early age of print and the birth of the novel. The main threat to our ability to relate to the world and to its members no longer comes from escapes into the fictional, as it seemed to be the case in the days of *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*, but from the transformation of life itself into a spectacle. Whereas Don Quixote and Emma Bovary innocently lived fiction as if it were life, we are now so jaded that we watch the representation of life as an entertaining fiction, mindless both of the violence done to the individual whose privacy is being invaded and of the life we sacrifice when we live vicariously through televised hyperreality. We are more alienated from the real by its supposedly exact copy than by the worlds openly made up by narrative imagination.

Does the popular success of *Survivor* confirm these fears? Has the idea of human life as spectacle become so well accepted that we no longer notice its revolting implications? It is not my intent to analyze the psychic and cultural roots of our society's fascination for voyeur Web sites and Reality TV, especially since this fascination, at least in its mass form, may not survive the novelty of the technology that supports the concept. But I would like to advance one argument in defense of *Survivor* and its relatives. These shows make no secret of being artificially designed environments, but they are designed in such a way as to encourage emergent behaviors. In *Truman*, life becomes a spectacle that oppresses life. In *Survivor*, by contrast, as in Artificial Life programs, the spectacle breeds life. Without putting the two on the same pedestal, couldn't we say that in its best moments, the maligned, low-brow genre of Reality TV shares at least this one feature with art? [5]

Marie-Laure Ryan is an independent scholar and software consultant. She is the author of *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* and the editor of *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*. Her

latest book, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, recently won the MLA award for best book in comparative literature. Her current project, *Symbol Rock* (a pure labor of love destined to a handful of kindred spirits) is a multi-media hybrid of computer game and local history in which the user investigates the life of the settlers of an abandoned ranch in Colorado.

Notes

[1] In *Narrative as Virtual Reality* I distinguish three types of immersion: spatial (a sense of the presence of a world), temporal (being caught in suspense), and emotional (attachment to the characters). The immersive deficiency of TV compared to movies concerns mainly the spatial variety. In the emotional domain, TV may have an edge over movies, since shows that run over a long period of time allow a deep acquaintance with the characters. [back](#)

[2] In this paper, *The Truman Show* refers to the actual movie, and the Truman show to the fictional show within the movie. [back](#)

[3] European audiences, whose RTV programs were more of the *Big Brother* type—less script, more surveillance --, display more tolerance for raw spectacles. Europeans seem also much more fascinated than Americans by webcams. According to Sella, France contributes a disproportionate amount of hits to the webcam show Nerdman, "the real life Truman" (found at www.nerdman.com). [back](#)

[4] In the final weeks of the show, due in part to the fact that the voters were the audience at large, not the participants themselves, all the villains were voted out, and the remaining participants got along so well that there weren't any conflict in the house. No conflict, no drama.. The producers tried to boost the ratings by luring out some of the remaining participants with cash prizes, in the hope of replacing them with more colorful players. But no participant took the bribes, and the show had to stick to the end with the happy family that it had inadvertently created. [back](#)

[5] I would like to thank Emma Kafalenos for inspiring exchanges of e-mail about *Survivor*, and for providing me with a surrogate eye on *Big Brother*. [back](#)

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