

FLOW Conference 2008

"Talent-Based Reality Shows and the American Dream"

A'Keiba Burrell

University of Texas at Austin

Radio-Television-Film Student

Reality television should really find a different name to hide behind, since it has evolved into something completely different than its title suggests. Recently the majority of these shows have been centered around certain skills, such as cooking, modeling and the ever-popular singing. Thankfully, the talent of the contestants are the "real" element that give merit to the term "reality tv." I have witnessed the growing fascination and addiction to shows like Top Chef, America's Next Top Model, and Project Runway. It cannot be denied that audiences embrace this television genre, but that is not the main reason it has claimed so much success. Large companies recognize this as an extremely effective means of advertising, and are quick to feature their products as the "prize" at the end of the contest. "Why not give the people what they want, and encourage them to buy what we want them to?"

The best way to explain the outbreak of talent-based reality shows is to take a look at human nature. We are very competitive, and many of us believe that, if given the chance, we could do better than those we see on television. How many times have you watched Rachel Ray on 30 Minute Meals and said to yourself, "My recipe is better than that!" Or maybe you sit back and watch American Idol, making comments like, "She's horrible! I sound better in the shower!" The fact is, we all believe that we are better in some way than those who have been granted a coveted opportunity. It gives us pleasure beyond belief to know that we, too, have a chance to fulfill our American dream. Anything is possible, if we can just make it on that show!

How does the industry cash in on this trend? Simply by cutting production costs, and increasing the amount of money brought in

from companies wanting to advertise. On Top Chef, the contestants cook in a Kenmore kitchen, a clever way to imply that professionals and aspiring professionals only use Kenmore. Housewives everywhere will want new appliances. It also means that Kenmore provided all of the appliances used on the show, one less thing that came from the production budget. It presents a more dynamic way to pedal products, and you don't even have to wait for the commercial break.

It would be an injustice to discuss talent-based reality shows without mentioning my personal experience with the genre. Earlier this year, I was a contestant on MTV's first venture into live singing shows. It was called Rock the Cradle, and it was based on the offspring (that is the word they used) of pop icons competing for a chance to step out of their famous parent's shadow. The prize was a \$100,000 recording contract with Jive records, and a chance to be managed by Larry Rudolph (yes, Britney Spears' manager). Unfortunately, I did not win. However, I did finally figure out just how unreal reality television can be. The live performance aspect was real, but the rest of it was "encouraged" by the story teller (who replaces the writers), also known as the truth manipulator. MTV believed that its audience wanted to see dramatic, spoiled brats, and that is what they attempted to portray. It is safe to say that reality tv shows, even those that are talented-based, are shaped to suit what the network thinks its audience wishes to see. My father's experience was much the same, when he appeared on the first season of The Surreal Life. This show first aired in 2003, and it was before the compete-for-a-prize era, though they did have different challenges and a camping trip in Las Vegas. From the time that my dad appeared on the VH1 show to my recent participation on Rock the Cradle, reality television has completely evolved into a consumer's dream machine.

It seems to me that these shows have become more based on product advertisement than entertainment value. Have you noticed that Toyota has been featured numerous times on Top Chef, providing their Rav4 model for the contestants to drive? Ford cars were a staple on America's Next Top Model for quite some time, until

the prize was no longer a contract with the Ford Modeling agency. If consumerism is defined as thinking that greater consumption of goods is economically beneficial, then the creators of these most recent talent-based reality shows must have sworn to uphold the theory. From the apartments that contestants on Project Runway live in, to the grocery store that Top Chef participants shop at, nothing is counted out as being necessary to fulfill your American dream.