

## Reality TV: Déjà vu All Over Again? Eric Freedman

### The Culture of Trauma

Trauma is found across the contemporary television landscape, and seems a particular focus of A&E, with its holy trinity of *Intervention*, *Hoarders*, and *Obsessed*. These programs in part signify a return to early broadcast models of therapeutic exchange, born at a moment when television was still defining its social function as a mediator between the family and the economy, and when “reality” had not yet been delimited as a generic arena (for it permeated the discourse of the medium).

The therapeutic relation is rather malleable, and in the case of reality television we find it being woven into quite distinct formulas—from game shows to docusoaps to procedurals. There is a certain power to the open text that the therapeutic relation produces, and its discursive strategies seem to overcome the technological limits of one-way communication. For therapy engages in relational transactions rather than fixed hierarchies; participants are given the ability to constantly reassert their centrality and to claim the discourse as their own, even when they are listening to the confessions of others. Power is a dynamic force in psychotherapeutic practice, and participants are envisioned as agents who might regulate their own behavior; in this manner, patients can choose to assume positions of authority despite the presence of competing professional voices. In the case of television, it is within this discursive context (contoured by broadcast standards) that the public is willing—and is invited—to participate. The therapeutic transaction provides the grounds for understanding the appeal that much of reality television holds for viewers (even as a generically-sanctioned narrative grammar takes root), and also the readiness with which individuals are willing to confess personal problems to the mass television audience.

How has television reconstituted the therapeutic exchange since the birth of the medium? When *Queen for a Day* premiered on local television in 1948, consumption was being promoted as a healthy domestic enterprise by an industry that addressed the American family as a uniformly knowable body. *Queen for a Day* pitted four female contestants against each other; each had a tale of woe, and each made a personal request that might make her life circumstance more tolerable. After the women told their stories, the studio audience registered its vote for the most beleaguered woman, with the popular vote tallied by an applause meter. *Queen for a Day* showed women in crisis actively relaying their potential to resolve unique familial problems, while its advertisers in their own way sought to give these women the tools to resolve a whole host of other (manufactured and generic) familial problems. The rift that the program exposes between actual and constructed need is only positive in that it points to the ability of individuals to recognize themselves as citizens first and consumers second. Yet the list of unanswered social concerns (aired by these women) speaks to an institutional failure echoed inside the medium.

There are other curious moments that follow the lead of *Queen for a Day*, most of which are equally dissatisfying attempts at serious therapeutic engagement. The brief series *Road to Reality* (1960-1961) was responsible for bringing psychoanalysis to daytime television, and teased out some of the underlying social tensions of the day,

perhaps to let *Queen for a Day* continue its more fantastic project. And the televised quiz show *Strike it Rich* (1951-1958) tethered the crisis narrative of *Queen for a Day* to more trivial pursuits, and trafficked in illicit fund-raising.

These programs suggest that the legacy of reality television is marked by therapeutic attachments that depend on both confession and personal trauma, and on close inspection they reveal the contested nature of narrative cohesion and closure when subjectivity takes center stage. Contemporary programs such as *Intervention*, *Hoarders*, and *Obsessed* share this dependence on therapeutic discourse, and though they are uneven in their execution of such an exchange, when taken together as a networked affair they too reveal the limits of the medium's commitment to (and prospects for) serious and ongoing therapeutic exchange. The three A&E shows highlight the uneasy conjoining of clinical and nonclinical discourse, and I find they are only productive on those occasions when they restore agency to their subjects. While *Hoarders* never pushes beyond its declarative nature to fully explore the stories embedded within its episodic embrace (the series invests too much faith in the image—there is a certain irony in this misplaced engagement that privileges debris fields and displaces the central subjects), *Intervention* and its pressing testimonial narratives open up difficult questions about observing, affect, and televisual knowledge, as the program situates the addict as a subject in flux (individualized and universalized, traumatized and synthesized). Yet when considered collectively, these programs return us to one of the essential quandaries that formed during the medium's infancy—how to successfully monetize even the most traumatic private-to-public migrations.