

Reality TV: Deja Vu All Over Again? Julia Lange

Reality show formats are far from new. In order to understand the proliferation of current reality television programming, the success of the genre's historical predecessors need be analyzed. The 1947 Cold War response to fears of surveillance that led to the creation of *Candid Camera* in the late 1940s serves as a historical building block for contemporary, global, reality shows such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, and *American Idol*. Further, contemporary reality dating television shows stem from 1965's *The Dating Game*, and perpetuate the appeal of viewing and emotionally investing in people's romantic dating lives. Reality dating shows such as *Flavor of Love* and *Rock of Love* build off the format of the reality dating show predecessors. Newer reality dating shows have adapted to the contemporary trend of involving celebrities, through slightly altering the content while still following the basic formula of dating shows' historical predecessors.

As in *Candid Camera*, *Big Brother* provides audiences with an insider's look into every day people's lives, and the audience has more insight into what is going on or will happen than do the people being filmed. Having that extra insight into what is happening in each show creates a particular show/audience relationship, where the viewers hold a privileged, knowledgeable position over those within the show. The voyeuristic position of the viewer facilitates a feeling of being immersed with the show, as well as provides the viewer with privileged information (over the other contestants on the show, for example) about what future decisions should be made (i.e., who will be voted off next, and for what reason).

Current reality dating show formats, such as on *Flavor of Love*, *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*, *Elimidate*, and *Next*, can be understood as stemming from the original reality dating show in 1965, *The Dating Game*. In *The Dating Game*, the live audience and home viewers were given a glimpse into every day people's dating lives. The audience knew more information about the contestants the person trying to find someone to go on a date with had to choose from. Viewers were able to see what the potential dates looked like, whereas the person choosing could only hear their voices. On *Next*, for example, the contestants are placed together on a bus, and one contestant comes off the bus at a time for an individual date. When the person deciding does not like the contestant, they say "next" and the contestant returns to the bus, and one different contestant exits the bus to go on the individual date. Audiences are given a glimpse into the conversations on the bus, and what each contestant, after being eliminated, has to say about the person who they are vying to date. Thus, the format of reality dating shows can be understood as continually perpetuating the original format of *The Dating Game*. In order to understand current formatting and audience appeal, it's important to understand that this formatting has not significantly changed since the original 1965 show. Understanding these formats as continuations of the 1965 predecessor provides insight into not only the past of reality television formatting and audience appeal, but also to what might be expected in the future of programming.

In today's reality dating shows, multiple contestants still vie for the ability to date (and "love") the "main" person (or two people, in the case of shows like *The Ikki*

Twins). Just as with *The Dating Game* audiences and fans were given a special look into people's dating lives (they can see more than the person choosing can), viewers of current reality dating shows, such as *Rock of Love* were able to see the conversations and interactions that occur when Brett Michaels is not with the contestants. Audience's fascination with viewing and being "a part of" people's dating lives is apparent in past and current reality shows. Though contemporary dating shows have become more of a spectacle and might alter the types of people on the show, it is important to understand that current reality dating formats are built off *The Dating Game*.