

New Domesticity vs. Motherhood in Reality Television (RTV)

My response begins by situating the relationship between motherhood and class within its historical context. Next, I focus on an opposition between home as an upper class retreat (new domesticity) marked by an absence of motherhood and home as a source of conflict where motherhood takes center stage. Finally, I describe two formulas used in mother-centered RTV programs.

With industrialization and urbanization, a separation emerged between home and work and, by extension, between waged and unwaged labor. Within the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity, good motherhood, morals, and domestic skills (such as needlework) offered the ability for upper class women to display their upper class status and to further distance themselves from those could not afford the luxury of full-time parenting. Today, domesticity continues to serve as a way to display class and to be judged as either classy or trashy. Ideals from the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity have transformed into a modern fantasy of new domesticity in which the home is, yet again, a haven... for those with both disposable time and income.

Mothers (and their families) are placed in class categories based on the presentation of their home, children, and fit within dominant beauty norms. Television has become a primary site for the display of these standards. The Google description for “TLC: Family, Home, Style, Cooking, Weddings” neatly summarizes the primary areas of new domesticity. Furthermore, as one of the first successful networks devoted to RTV programming, TLC achieved their popularity through such new domestic-centered programs as *Trading Spaces*, *The Wedding Story*, and *A Baby Story*. These shows helped jumpstart the popularity of not only TLC, but also RTV and new domesticity.

RTV programming reinforces dreams of upper class domestic perfection and retreat as seen in a variety of programming: *Martha Stewart*, HGTV, *Extreme Home Makeover*, *Top Chef*, and Bravo's *Real Housewife* franchise. The contrast between the images of home presented on these programs and one's own home contributes to an artificial need to make and spend more money – arguably the very goal of such programming. These shows feature domestic perfection (decorating, cooking, clothing) as a gateway to a better life. Frequently, such shows focus on material goods or tasks (decorating, cooking, entertaining), while leaving out what most people considered the very essence of the home, the love of the people who live in it. Ironically, while labors of the domestic are foregrounded in these programs, the labors of motherhood are almost absent or are taken care of by invisible others.

In contrast, motherhood becomes visible in RTV when the home is (re)framed as a site of conflict vs. retreat. Two RTV formulas make this clear. The first formula creates conflict by positioning a mother within a set of extreme circumstances. The second formula creates conflict by replacing a bad mother with a good mother and then resolves this conflict by providing lessons of good motherhood.

The first “extreme circumstances” formula is also split between good mothers and bad mothers. Good mothers are placed in these extreme circumstances for reasons primarily outside their control, such as having too many children due to fertilization or religion, and are shown as coping well under almost crisis conditions. Examples of this formula include *Jon and Kate plus 8* (the early years), *19 kids and counting* (the Duggers), and, in rare instances, *Teen Moms*. In cases of bad motherhood, the extreme circumstances result from a set of poor decisions by the mother. We see this on *16 and pregnant/Teen Moms*, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, *Honey Boo Boo*, and *Dance Moms*. This formula supports the argument that,

through hard work, “good” mothers are able to cope with even extreme circumstances; on the other hand, bad mothers inability cope is attributed to their own poor (or even crazy) decisions.

The second formula involves the replacement of bad mothers with good ones, a replacement which dramatically transforms the home from a place of chaos to one of control (reinforcing a control society). This formula can be seen in *Supernanny* and *Wife Swap* as bad mothers are replaced and/or taught “good” mothering. In this formula, mothers become the independent variable or dividual. The mother becomes the lynchpin of success or failure of the family and, by implication, of society.

In both of these formulas, RTV presents the foibles and failures of mothers as proof of neoliberal beliefs that it is the individual (the mother) who is to blame for their inability to achieve middle-class standards of care. Consequently, we can feel free to pass blame onto these mothers as well as humiliate them, rather than questioning broader structures of oppression (class and gender) within which they are situated.