

Consuming Reality

The Commercialisation of Factual Entertainment

By June Deery

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Consuming Reality is an examination of the growing phenomenon of reality television and its cultural significance to consumer society. Based largely on American programming, but with significant references to British programmes (which tend to follow suit), Deery presents a critical exposé of the underlying motivations, power relationships and gender stereotypes contributing to the commercialisation and commodification of all life through this popular genre of television show. Examining ideology through the lens of reality programming, Deery aims to demonstrate that the message is overwhelmingly to continue to consume, and these programs serve as guides as to how to do this most effectively. Concerned particularly with the ‘twin ideas of mediation being a form of consumption and consumption being a form of mediation’(p.2), Deery shows how homes, bodies and lives have become commodities to be sold and consumed in the marketplace.

The book is organised into well-structured and easily digestible sections. Each chapter is split into subheadings, with a useful notes section at the back detailing sources for further reading and additional information on key points. Deery’s style is accessible and the text is pacy with a conversational tone that will appeal to all readers. The argument follows a logical structure, beginning from the simple mechanics of the selling of consumer goods through product placement and sponsorship in TV programmes, and deepening throughout to identify the cultural and ideological structures underpinning the production of these shows.

Deery begins her argument with a detailed examination of public relations and its increasingly important role in mediating our reality, pointing out that the majority

of reported news now relies upon prepared press releases and, as a result of this, many popularly held beliefs are the result of ‘commercially sponsored discourse’ (p.47). In relation to this she discusses the creation of ‘pseudo-events’ which, in this type of programming, audiences are encouraged to accept as reality. Referring to the definition of pseudo-events provided by Daniel Boorstein, Deery asserts that reality TV falls within this category being planned purely for the purposes of being reported. This is an important aspect of how reality TV ‘embraces and normalises PR techniques’ (p.46) and effectively numbs us to its effects, making real life seem less commercialised in comparison. Here Deery provides a strong foundation for her argument that this type of programming manipulates our perceptions of reality in order to either sell us consumer goods, or consolidate and scaffold the consumer culture generally.

From chapter three onwards, Deery’s analysis develops further and begins to deal with the ideology, socioeconomic relations and particular cultural circumstances that contribute to the creation of this television genre, including national identity, war and financial crisis. Drawing extensively upon the theories of Baudrillard and Foucault, and using *Home Edition* as the ultimate example, Deery demonstrates the ways in which this- largely American - programming reflects back the prevalent late capitalist neoliberalist ideology and attempts to compensate for failings in politics and society. Themes such as the privatisation of public life and the focus on volunteering and charity versus public support, along with the professionalisation of every area of private life including parenting, shopping and cleaning are dealt with. The ‘American Dream’ and the sanitised fairy tales of the Disney conglomerate feature heavily as powerful motifs in shows like *Home Edition* and *American Idol*, where buying the right consumer items can allow one to achieve the ‘happy ending’ we are encouraged to aspire to. Romantic love and religion do not escape the commodification process and Deery writes thoroughly on both subjects, analysing wedding shows and themes of confession and salvation in some detail. Her analysis of wedding shows demonstrates that we are encouraged to believe that the acquisition of goods and services signifies and expresses love, and that ‘limitless spending’ equates to true love and that desired ‘happy ending’. She also effectively demonstrates that the structure of many reality shows begins with a ‘sinner,’ whether in terms of style, housekeeping or physical appearance, who must

confess, and is then 'saved' by the professionals who guide them in buying the items that will 'right the wrong.' Thus, shopping replaces religion once the market becomes the church with goods and services both fetishised and idolised, demonstrating 'a transfer of power from spiritual to commercial authority' (p.114).

Appropriately, the book culminates in examining the most extreme of reality shows involving the actual reinvention and rebuilding of the body in cosmetic surgery makeover shows like *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan*. Here lies the ultimate example of the body as property with the product being 'available for various forms of economic exchange' (p.163). Deery concludes with the suggestion that a desire to control and change the body may be rooted in feelings of helplessness and an inability to influence wider society, which suggests a deeper 'cultural and political ill health' (p.174). She then goes on to paint a frightening vision of a dystopian future in which beauty, money and rank are firmly linked and those who choose not to improve are subversive or invalid—and politics becomes simply the 'pseudo-events' mentioned in chapter two:

Beyond this, if the focus rests on body as the locus for change this inward turn promises to provide little political counterbalance to the prioritisation of public image, whether of the individual or of larger social bodies, thus contributing to a future when both micro and macro politics could implode entirely to media-advertising and PR. (p.174)

Deery maintains a critical stance throughout, and her opinions and distaste for certain practices and participants are evident. At times this comes across as a little disapproving and possibly not entirely fair, as there is little examination of the motivations behind participation in these programs. When Deery is not implying a self-serving narcissism on behalf of the participants, she seems to suggest a passiveness that warrants deeper examination. Moreover, how participants are selected, the editing process, and what they may or may not be encouraged to do and say is not examined; this seems an important element of the mediation process that is overlooked.

Throughout the book many reality shows are mentioned: at times the constant referencing back to *Home Edition* does make it appear an almost singular attack, but overall Deery does find a rich seam of material here to mine. However, there are some genres of reality programming that are noticeably absent, such as 'fly on the wall'

police shows, customs shows, the myriad teen pregnancy programmes and, of course, the ever present weight loss shows like *The Biggest Loser*. Deery does mention in her introduction that not all reality programming focuses on consumption and she has deliberately chosen those that do, but there could be useful additions in looking into the ways in which these programmes reinforce her position. The weight loss shows contribute to Deery's assertion about the 'imperative to work on the enterprising self' (p.163), and the focus on the material body that exemplifies this; whereas, the police and customs shows could strengthen the arguments around the paranoia and preoccupation with national security following 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan.

These criticisms notwithstanding, this is an enjoyable and convincing book that would be very useful for undergraduate students of media, cultural or consumption studies and those interested in Baudrillard's theories on mediation and simulated reality. The argument is fluid and convincing, and the writing engaging. It provides an interesting and compelling critique of the reality television culture with a useful analytical reading of the underlying socioeconomic, political and cultural relationships contributing to it.

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