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## ***No Business Like Schmo Business: Reality TV and Fetishistic Inversion***

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Since Laura Mulvey (1975) posed the pivotal question of whether female spectators could avoid the patriarchal temptations prompted by the realist conventions of mainstream cinema, feminist film theorists have remained pessimistic about the potential for realist modes of representation to challenge cultural norms. For Mulvey, the gaze required by mainstream cinema is male. Under the male gaze, woman becomes the object of “fetishistic scopophilia,” enabling the spectator to take pleasure from both viewing the woman’s body and identifying with the male protagonist, all the while shielding himself from castration anxiety. In this view, the female spectator is sentenced to either give up the pleasure of viewing or take up one of two equally unsavory viewing positions: narcissism (through identifying too closely with the desired woman on-

screen) or masochism (through taking on the masculine desire for the female sexual object).

Although the problem of female spectatorship is an old one, it has continued to endure. The roots of its tenacity grow from its commitment to: 1) an adherence to a model of ideology based primarily upon resistance; and 2) a model of the gaze based upon mastery rather than uncertainty. In this account, I seek to shift the terrain away from these assumptions and call, instead, for a view of a potentially subversive female spectatorship position that foregrounds the limitations of traditional ideology-critique, and locates the gaze in the place we cannot see. In this way, I hope to restore the possibility of pleasure for the female spectator, without sentencing her to the two disappointing patriarchal viewing options that Mulvey entertains.

In particular, against Mulvey, and following Tania Modleski, I contend that “there must be *other options* for the female spectator than the two pithily described by B. Ruby Rich: ‘to identify either with Marilyn Monroe or with the man behind me hitting the back of my seat with his knees’” (Modleski, 1998: 6, my emphasis). The “other option” that I develop here involves rejecting both of the positions that Rich suggests. In particular, rather than dismissively indicting the fetishistic structure for upholding patriarchal formations, I suggest that it is precisely through exploiting the tensions gnawing the split at the heart of the fetishistic inversion, between “knowing very well” “but even so” acting to the contrary, that one can arrive at a subversive spectatorial position that avoids Mulvey’s objections.

I argue for the possibility of this subversive viewing position by considering the American faux reality TV show, *The Joe Schmo Show*, a program intended by its creators “to parody reality TV.” I suggest that this show promises a virtually irresistible viewing position of mastery, only to pull the ground out from underneath, leaving the spectator to flail among the contradictions that the position of mastery seeks to erase. Thus, rather than simply inverting the position of mastery and displacing it by one of ignorance and captivation, the viewing subject is left to inhabit the gaps between the two. Jacques Lacan associates this position with the “feminine masquerade.” Such a position, I will argue, carries potential for a subversive feminist spectatorship.

Critical indictments of reality television often claim that it foments voyeuristic tendencies by enabling audiences to feel as if they are privy to the spontaneous unfolding of intimate moments. Barbara Creed, however, rejects this criticism by suggesting that “watching movies *per se* is a far more ‘voyeuristic’ act...[since] it hides its modes of production and pretends that the spectator is viewing unmediated reality” (2003: 37). *Big Brother*, according to Creed, through its overt generic structure and its potential for audience interaction (in the form of casting votes regarding which participant will be made to leave the house) “makes no such pretence” to transparency. For Creed, not only does reality television free the spectator from voyeuristic entrapment, but it also works to “subvert the conventional ethnographic gaze in order to represent the dominant culture looking at itself ‘warts and all’” (2003: 40).

But does reality television work to facilitate this blunt confrontation with our

flaws? Or has Creed fallen for the temptation against which she warns: seeing reality television as an unmediated and revealing engagement with our most intimate realities? Creed concedes that participants on reality television shows comport themselves, largely, in accordance with the expectations of the genre. The radically unexpected action of Merlin Luck, a participant in Australia's 2004 *Big Brother* series, accentuates just how tightly the participants conform to implicit generic constraints. As Luck entered the audience-filled studio for his live-to-air "eviction" interview, he pulled out a banner bearing the words "FREE TH REFUGEES" (according to Alex Broun of the *Green Left Weekly*, the "E" fell off in his haste to unravel the sign) as well as a strip of wide black tape, with which he quickly sealed his mouth. His protest and silence resulted in audience jeers and his eventual removal from the studio by security guards. Luck, in effect, inverted the expectations of reality television by doing something truly unexpected.

Luck's intervention undermined the illusion of critical distance and related anonymous pleasure of voyeurism that is confidently offered to cynical viewers of reality television. But, I argue, it did so merely by encouraging viewers to discard one spectatorial position (the mastery of distance/voyeurism) in favor of another (the impotence of captivation/suture). To be specific, the power of Luck's protest depended precisely upon its inversion of the implicit, yet rigid, constraints of the genre; and by inverting them merely confirmed them. By contrast, I shall argue that in *The Joe Schmo Show* the positions of distance and captivation remain perpetually provisional, their seductions serving as a

persistent reminder of the impossibility of symbolic closure. Thus, although Creed is right to point to the subversive potential of reality television, in my view it is to *The Joe Schmo Show*, rather than to *Big Brother* that we must look to find it. But before considering *Joe Schmo*, let me set the scene.

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Early November 2003—the “sweeps” period for network television—three made-for-TV movies, *Saving Jessica Lynch* (NBC), *The Elizabeth Smart Story* (CBS), and *The Reagans*, garnered much press attention. Lynch was a nineteen-year-old supply clerk for the US Army, stationed in Iraq during the 2003 invasion. She was injured when her convoy took a wrong turn and was ambushed. Lynch was taken to an Iraqi hospital, where after eight days of being listed as a POW, a special force of the US army stormed the hospital to “rescue” her. Subsequent media reports suggest that the rescue mission, which the army filmed, was a publicity stunt, aimed to counter resistance to the war. As described by a doctor at the hospital who witnessed the scene: “It was like a Hollywood film. They cried 'go, go, go', with guns and blanks without bullets, blanks and the sound of explosions. They made a show for the American attack on the hospital - action movies like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan” (Kampfner, 2003). Two days prior to the rescue, Lynch’s doctor at the hospital had made arrangements for Lynch to be transported by ambulance to the American army. The subject of the second made-for-TV movie, Elizabeth Smart, was abducted in 2002 at the age of fourteen from her Utah home by a local indigent man who had once worked as a handyman for the Smart family. After

being missing for nine months, the police discovered Smart (wearing a disguise), walking with her captor and his accomplice just several miles from her home.

The two made-for-TV movies, *Saving Jessica Lynch* and *The Elizabeth Smart Story*, aired opposite each other days after the real-life Lynch and Smart each made the talk show circuit recounting their respective experiences of captivity and rescue. The sequence of these media events—real-life figures telling their own stories closely followed by movie versions of the same events—would seem to indicate that these teledramas embraced something other than a purely documentary function. Lynch’s and Smart’s televised appearances, it seemed clear, served as promotional devices for the dramatizations of their tales, each of which followed disclaimers reminding viewers that some of the events may have been created for dramatic purposes. The reminders reinforce the remark by NBC’s head of movies and miniseries, Jeff Gaspin, that ratings have very little, if any, relation to a made-for-TV movie’s truth claims. As Gaspin explains about an NBC program chronicling the rise and impending fall of Martha Stewart: “we still don’t know what she did yet [regarding her indictment on financial misdoings] but it was a very compelling movie, a very highly rated movie, a very successful movie” (Owen, 2003).

Now consider the third made-for-TV movie, *The Reagans*, slated to air later the same November on CBS, amid enormous pressure from the political right who decried what they saw as an unflattering portrayal of the former president?<sup>1</sup> These protests would seem to presuppose the existence of viewers naïve enough to believe fictionalized narratives. I argue that, on the contrary, it is

precisely the fact that viewers do *not* believe—that they “see through”—these representations, that validates the concerns of the detractors of *The Reagans*. Made-for-TV movies like *The Reagans*, *Saving Jessica Lynch*, and *The Elizabeth Smart Story* work by inviting viewers to distance themselves from the movies by taking up a position of mastery—of one who knows better. But rather than such distance functioning to disrupt ideology, it contributes to ideology’s success. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, “the lesson is clear: an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it” (1997: 21). This, I claim, is how we should understand the protests by opponents of *The Reagans*. Their protests indicate their implicit and correct recognition of the Žižekian point that the acknowledged fictional nature of made-for-TV movies reinforces rather than weakens their ideological hold, and thus that “seeing through” a fiction implicates, rather than extricates, subjects from its ideological grip.

But perhaps rarely is the position of “seeing through” made simultaneously so inviting and yet so unsustainable than in another television show that received much attention in the period leading up to the November sweeps, Spike TV’s (the station that boasts being “the first network for men”), *The Joe Schmo Show*.<sup>2</sup> The show’s premise rests upon a cast of actors fooling an earnest participant, Matt Gould, that he is involved in a “Big Brother”-style reality TV show. As Tom Keogh explains *The Joe Schmo Show*’s premise:

[it is] a real-life variation on the Jim Carrey comedy *The Truman Show*, in which Carrey played a man unaware he is the star of a television series, living on an enormous set and surrounded by actors playing family, co-

workers, neighbors, etc. *Joe Schmo* fools a gregarious, likable 27-year-old fellow, Matt Kennedy Gould, into believing he's part of the cast of a reality-TV program called *Lap of Luxury*, competing for a \$100,000 prize by surviving humiliating trials and those inevitable, once-per-week evictions of unlucky contestants (Keogh)

Safely scaffolded within this parodic framework, viewers of the show were both in on and yet safely distanced from the ruse. Rather than read parody as a form that undermines the ideological force of the text, for Žižek, such mechanisms (as parody, cynicism, irreverence, mockery, irony, etc) strengthen viewers' ideological investment in the text. Ideology *depends upon* subjects' ability to distance themselves from it; thus such seemingly non-conformist positions turn out to be the very requirements for making an ideology "workable." It is, conversely, an "over-literal" relationship to ideology that has the potential to make an ideology untenable, by collapsing the necessary distance between it and its subjects. This paper, then, considers how *The Joe Schmo Show* escapes the reactionary function that, for Žižek, characterizes the parodic form.

Fans of *The Joe Schmo Show* admit a curious attachment to the show in spite, or perhaps because of, its contrivance. As one fan admits, echoing the structure of the fetishistic inversion: "even though we know its rigged, we still want to know the outcome...even though I knew it was all planned out, I still got tense during the eviction ceremonies" (Allspark.COMmunity). But, and here is the feature of this show that distinguishes it from other reality programs, including the made-for-TV movies that I mentioned: rather than try to disavow or explain away this contradictory experience, viewers take pleasure in it. They revel in the



possibility that rather than occupying a position of mastery, they may very well turn out to be the dupes.

Viewers openly speculate on fan sites that a “twist ending” might reveal that Matt, the unsuspecting Joe Schmo, was in the know all along and has fooled both the hired actors and the viewers alike. Matt’s rare earnestness and enormous attention to detail continually posed unforeseen challenges to the actors and viewers. For example, in an early episode showing the groups’ first dinner, Matt interrupts just as his housemates are about to take their first bite. It occurs to him that “Molly,” a character who has introduced herself as a virgin with strong religious convictions, might like to say a blessing before they eat, an unexpected, though totally appropriate, comment which temporarily discommodates the actors. In the show’s third episode, the eviction of his pal, “Earl,” brought Matt to tears. At the news he collapsed on the stairs in despair and sobbed into his hands that “no amount of money was worth this pain.” Could it really be possible that Matt has bought the premise so thoroughly? Or has he caught on and is turning the tables?

The case of *The Joe Schmo Show* seems to suggest a precariousness within parody. Through a series of hitches and gaffes, it tipped over into something more like *trompe l’oeil*, enticing viewers to play with their own implication in its ruses. But unlike traditional *trompe l’oeil*, in which what appears at first glance to be “real,” turns out on closer inspection to be fake, in the case of *The Joe Schmo Show*, what viewers are convinced is mere artifice, turns out to contain authenticity. As a result, the distance characteristic of the fetishistic

inversion collapses.

With standard reality TV shows, the fetishistic inversion remains firmly intact. As viewers, we know that reality TV is, in fact, a sham. Through a combination of casting decisions, generic conventions, celebrity aspirations, etc., the participants of these shows are, in effect, not acting “authentically,” but are rather “playing roles.” Nevertheless, we enjoy watching them as if we think of them as “real people.” This convention is mocked by *The Joe Schmo Show*’s planned inclusion of the familiar reality TV “characters” in their cast list: the “Virgin,” the “Rich Bitch,” “Dumb Jock,” and even the “Smarmy Host,” etc., a mockery to which the audience is alerted intradiegetically. Nevertheless, as viewers we enjoy watching them, as if they were “real people.” As one fan explains on his web blog, this contrivance actually lends the show an air of authenticity: “To make this [ruse] seem authentic, the cast has specific parts to play which are satires of the types of people you tend to see on the Real Reality shows” (frazierhome.net, 2003). In short, in the case of *The Joe Schmo Show*, the producers explicitly expose the sham that we know reality TV to be, leaving us nothing to “see through.” Thus, there is no fetishistic inversion; instead we encounter a coincidence between what we “know” and how we “act.”

It would seem to follow that, as viewers, our position with regard to Matt should be to align him with participants in standard reality TV shows. And since, as far as Matt knows, he is entering a standard reality TV show, we would expect him similarly to adhere to its generic expectations. Matt, however, does not hold up his end of the bargain. The fetishistic inversion becomes untenable as a

result of his (unintentionally) disruptive actions; Matt took the show's fake premise more sincerely than participants of actual reality TV shows do. Indeed, the show's co-creators, Rhett Reese and Paul Wernick, were so troubled by the depth of Matt's "investment in the show and the people around him" that, they tells us, "there were times we wanted to stop the show" ("Joe Schmo," 2003). The show continued with the aid of a series of emergency meetings in which ideas were discussed for recalibrating the narrative in the light of Matt's unpredictable behavior. Thus, rather than sustaining the split between "knowing" and "acting," Matt's involvement in the show led to its suturing. Our "knowing" (that Matt is a reality TV participant like all the others) was troubled by Matt's "authenticity" to the point that it came into coincidence with our "acting" (as if we were indeed watching someone's genuine actions), thus canceling the fetishistic inversion.

I suggest that Matt's spontaneity functions in a more subversive way than the Australian participant, Merlin Luck's overt attempt at subversion. Luck's intervention worked to secure our identity as spectators who cynically "see through" the pretense of reality TV. His act confirmed what we already knew: that reality TV could not accommodate a truly "real" act. Luck's unambiguous break from the reality TV show format leaves spectators without any uncertainty regarding their viewing position, and thus, reinforces spectators' confidence in seeing through the purported "realism" of reality TV.

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Finally in this essay, I suggest that my analysis of *The Joe Schmo Show* facilitates a response to the key question posed by feminist film theory: what are the possibilities for a feminist spectatorship in the context of realist modes of representation? In order to develop my argument, I make three shifts. First, unlike much scholarship in this area, I suggest that we do not consider intradiegetic characters as examples of representations of men and women. Instead, I suggest that we focus on how a text may promote, in Jacques Lacan's terms, "sexuated" ways of looking. In other words, I take the issue to be what it means to look *as* Woman rather than *at* Woman—a move away from thinking about how a woman *is looked at* (how she is *seen*) to thinking instead about how a woman *looks* (how she *sees* as woman.) In this sense, my project elucidates Jacqueline Rose's recommendation that feminist film theory must seek to elaborate "not just what we see, but how we see" (1986: 231).

My account involves a second shift—a move away from exploring the relationship of "reality TV" programs to notions of reality, in favor of discussing "reality TV's" relationship to the domain Lacan calls the Real—anxiety-provoking anomalies in the order of symbolic representations. The Real marks the traumatic "nothing" around which the symbolic is structured. It is the job of what we think of as "reality" to protect us from the Real, by providing us with a symbolic framework that covers over the Real's disruptive effects.

The third shift entails moving away from a focus on "sex" and "gender" to a focus on Lacanian processes of "sexuation," through which subjects cope with the threat posed by the Real to their sense of identity. Sexuation, it is important

to note, refers to Woman and Man not as biological categories (sex), nor as cultural overlays (gender), but rather to the two possible positions that a subject can take in response to the failure of the symbolic system to confer identity. In short, the sexes “male” and “female” mark the two logically possible ways in which the symbolic fails.

The key question then becomes whether a subject responds to this failure through the structure of what Lacan calls “masquerade” (the domain of Woman) by exercising his/her libidinal economy around the active questioning of sexual identity. Or does the subject, instead, take up the position of “imposture” or “display” (the domain of Man), by confirming his/her sexual identity through investing in the authority of the symbolic to act as a guarantor (i.e. shoring up all of “reality’s” resources for blocking out the Real). A spectatorship position based upon the logic of “the feminine masquerade automatically poses a question [i.e. “who am I for the Other”], while masculine identification with law, logos, or authority tries to stop the question” (Ragland-Sullivan, 1991: 75). In particular, when viewers face a challenge to their comfortable position of mastery, the viewing strategy of Man entails attempting to “refuse that moment...by trying to run away from it or by binding it back into the logic and perfection of the [visual] system itself” (Rose, 1986: 219). Such efforts yield reactionary results by attempting to reinscribe lack back into the symbolic order.

Reality television, in its usual incarnations, would seem to facilitate a spectatorship position based on the strategy of imposture. Viewers’ investment in the “symbolic fiction” is rewarded by the pleasurable unfolding of predictable

events. For example, by enabling us to “see through” smoothly the fictionalized scene, shows like *Saving Jessica Lynch*, *The Elizabeth Smart Story*, and *The Reagans* consolidate the viewer’s own identity as one who knows, thus facilitating the spectatorship position of Man. A parody of the structure and rituals of reality television would seem particularly welcoming of this strategy. But, in the case of *The Joe Schmo Show*, we have seen, just as the viewers’ position of mastery seems most certain, the symbolic fiction begins to falter. Yet, rather than try to ignore or cover over these disruptive moments, viewers relish the uncertainty.

Here, then, we see a different viewing position emerging, namely the viewing position of Woman, which undermines a symbolic system’s coherence by inhabiting, rather than concealing, its points of lack and excess. In this sense, I argue that the Lacanian position of Woman provides a structural model upon which a subversive viewing practice may be based. This spectatorial position involves identifying with the gaze, but in the Lacanian sense of the gaze, not in the sense that Mulvey invokes in referring to the male gaze. For Mulvey, “the male gaze” refers to the position of mastery through which viewers identify with the male protagonist and see the on-screen women as an erotic object that possesses what she calls a “to-be-looked-at-ness.” For Lacan, by contrast, the gaze has nothing to do with mastery and possession. Indeed, as Elizabeth Cowie emphasizes, “the gaze is the inverse of the omnipotent look....[it is what] surprises the subject in its desiring” (1997: 288). Thus, in Lacanian parlance, what is usually called the “male gaze” more precisely describes his notion of “the

look.” The gaze, for Lacan, resides not on the side of the subject, but rather emanates from the object. It rouses us out of any complacent viewing position that seeks to master its object and instead confronts us with a fascinating uncertainty. Identification with the gaze, in this Lacanian sense, is associated with the position of Woman.

A final irony: it appears that Spike TV, the “first network for men,” has effectively positioned its viewers in the Lacanian position of Woman. Indeed the irony is doubled since, if I am right, then this viewing position carries the radical potential for which feminist critics, like Creed, have looked to the reality TV genre. But, it turns out, (contra Creed) that this potential is located not in reality TV itself, but in its parody, a point which, in turn, requires a reconsideration of Žižek’s formulation of parody’s reactionary function.

<sup>1</sup> *The Reagans* aired at the end of November on CBS' sister station, *Showtime*, to one fifth of the expected audience.

<sup>2</sup> This paper deals solely with the first season of the show, whose first episode aired September 2, 2003. *The Joe Schmo Show* was followed by *The Joe Schmo Show II*, which premiered June 15, 2004. Rather than continue its parody of the *Big Brother* style show, this second incarnation involved both a male and a female "schmo" in spoofing the genre of reality TV dating shows, most notably, *The Bachelor*. After just a few episodes the female "schmo" caught on that the show was a hoax, a suspicion the producers confirmed. She was then invited to join the cast of actors who would perpetuate the ruse on her (still unsuspecting) male counterpart and a new female "schmo" was selected to take her place.

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