TV in Me

Dan Schulz

The fireplace: flickering images of flame and shadow reassure me that domestic life is in motion. Likewise, TV is the tick-tock of domestic time. TV programs for dogs confirm that something about watching the flickering of light is fundamental to creatures with eyes or emotional intelligence, or sentient things easily distracted by recognisable forms. Indeed, it seems that we like TV. As prime-time audience numbers for free-to-air television decline and streaming services such as Netflix and YouTube threaten the structure of traditional television, what's left of TV is reality TV. Mostly driven by low production costs, reality TV endures, and with mysterious appeal.

'It's just mindless entertainment', my father continues to say about watching *The Bachelorette*. He is entirely aware of the illusions of the program; he jeers and laughs at the contestants' crude falseness while also advising me (but really himself) of the hidden intentions lurking beneath the character facades: 'He doesn't really love you, Sophie!', he says, as if, as an audience member, he can influence the events taking place. His relationship with TV not only entertains narratives and theories about the program itself but also relates the program to his own life: 'I would treat Sophie the way she deserves'. The conclusion of the show confirms a predilection, 'He deserved to win because he's a good bloke', or causes outrage whereupon he announces, for a second or third time, the stupidity of the whole TV-watching thing: 'I'm such an idiot for watching this stuff'. Sometimes at the beginning, often in the middle and always at the end, he justifies: 'When I get home from work I usually just want to be zonked'.

In the meantime I have bitten my thumbnail nearly to the root. I've just seen my father celebrate, upbraid and pity himself in the space of an hour, all the while distanced from his flailing emotions, like a loose sleeve in a windy street. While fully aware of the constructed nature of it all, he takes it lightly for entertainment, compares himself to its protagonists for reassurance, and mocks it when it has transgressed. Altogether, the artifice of reality TV oscillates between the everyday and the sensational, the sincere and the ironic, the documentary and the fictional, authentic and performative, real and illusory. Positioned outside the viewer, my father watches himself watching others who watch each other, neither perceiving nor hallucinating—a strange form of dreaming indeed.

He is a man of maintenance, my father—a pragmatist with an astute eye for the innumerable ways dirt might accumulate between two jointed surfaces, or how a finish might react to various weather conditions, or how often he may have to re-sand, re-paint, re-trim or re-scrub an object or area of his abode. When seeking a new thing, or building a new thing, he rounds the proportions to a whole number, makes it a 'bee's dick' wider, longer, bigger or smaller than might be necessary and achieves what he calls 'leverage'. His objects are chunky and symmetrical. There is never any question as to the purpose of their engineering; if it is to be sat on, it will appear appropriate for sitting, the driveway for parking, the garden edging for guiding, and a culvert an aqueduct for capturing flow. The Father retreats to the couch, grey moths thwack the flyscreen, and he watches TV.

His TV is ransomed by reality: *Masterchef*, *My Kitchen Rules*, *The Block*, *The Bachelor*, *Instant Hotel*, *Gogglebox*, *Little Big Shots*, *First Date*, *Family Food Fight*, *Biggest Loser*, *Farmer Wants a Wife*, *Border Security*, *Struggle Street*, *Bondi Rescue*, *Big Brother*, *Australian Idol*, *X Factor*—reality TV about animals, children, houses, families, immigrants, poor people, rich people, horrid people, beautiful people, lucky, unfortunate, talented and hopeless, a nationwide obsession with everyday drama.

But reality TV's stakes are far loftier than the question of where I left my car keys. It is domestic fiction without the tuneless rhythm of maintenance: dishes washed in green bubbles, or the spouting that drip drips onto the shed roof after it has rained. Heroic passage, jeopardy and war; villains, heroes, hooligans, misadventures, confessions and magical kisses; dynamic patterns make dramatic turns and form slow arcs across a season's ten or twelve episodes. Reality TV reveals the strange patchwork of the Australian imaginary: our fears, ambitions and conceits—unchanging constructs that mutate in an agar jelly of economic and technological innovation.

The Airbnb phenomenon, a new apparatus for domestic pride, lifestyle aspiration and untaxed revenue, is captured in Channel 9's newest program, *Instant Hotel*. From the humbly rural Murray River to the more shouty Bris-Vegas, contestants compete for the title of Australia's best house-hotel. These homes are a synecdoche of person and place. They must either capture the 'vibe' of the location or the identity of the owners through the arrangement of the interior decoration; as on *The Block*, Kmart furniture and Bunnings materials are assembled as symbolic compositions of something larger. An open-plan kitchen, a dirty dish or an ugly argument are conducive to the lifestyle or character they represent.

'If Terry and Anita want to win this competition, well, there will have to be some significant changes to their instant hotel', says expert judge Juliet Ashworth. 'I'm curious to see whether they injected any personality into this instant hotel because it sure did need it.' 'We've listened to the criticisms and it was too much like a display home. Not enough "us" in the room', replies Terry.

Dan Schulz,
185 centimetres,
76 kilograms,
O positive.

Image from David Cronenburg's **Videodrome**

TV Terry appears to be haunted by the prospect of actually occupying a room, such that Terry exists only if he can find himself in an object—not just any old object, but something accessible to us all; an object that will provoke the necessary feedback from the other participants, gratifying and expanding the possibility for what is consistent in humans in lounge rooms across the continent. TV is the technological enabler of networked solidarity.

What's more is that 'objects' are not really important at all in televisual culture. The push-button laugh of TV sitcoms is only one example of how TV circumvents the object itself (the joke) and goes straight to the response. While canned laughter is the evidence of a fictional public, crucial to the cessation of the gag, another more untraceable phantom audience looms large around the edges of reality TV: an audience that is not my father or me, neither is it in the screen, behind the characters, or the atomised eye of the nation made whole, but whatever it is it's very large and many. As with the internet, the cinematic world is measured by the collective atmosphere that contains the object images: single-syllable descriptors are preferred—happy, sad, bad, good—as these atmospheres cue us to feel either agreement or reactionary outrage ('He doesn't really love you, Sophie!'). Footage of a room that is essentially the same as the cover of every *Domain* magazine that has ever existed cannot be understood until the next frame of contorted facial expressions instructs me of its qualities, and in Terry's case, 'I am speechless'. We share the load of emotional decision-making in the atmosphere of the crowd. Experience without the necessity of its labour.

While I don't aspire to own my own world-class Airbnb, I do long for a world without work, plugholes without hair, buses that run on time, grass mowed, food delivered, a degree of ordinary luxury and, of course, tidy resolutions to complex interpersonal tensions. The uncomfortable truth is that, as a child, I had my own automatic smart home appliance—we called her Mother. The search for a workless world began there, and in a very real way my mother made absent the presence of everyday work.

Insight into Mother's own childhood was gleaned by visits to my grandparents' farmhouse on the hill of a remote island community somewhere in the wind-whipped ocean of Bass Strait. The Grandmum boiled the water in the copper stove, whether it was forty degrees or five, and the laundry would be washed, run through the wringer, and hung in the wind, this task occupying the Thursday of every week of her life. The ghost of Christ was in the creaking floorboards and in the draught that blew under the too-small doors. Cleanliness, order and tea that ran on time were Grandmum's quiet form of worship.

Father grew up in a household similarly haunted by Christ, and he would escape to his neighbours' lounge to watch exotic adventure programs such as *Tarzan* (1966–68) and to idolise the working-class morals of the characters from *Homicide* (1964–77):

> **Insp. Jack Connolly:** A gruff but warm-hearted, pipe-smoking Irishman who worked his way up through the ranks from constable.
>
> **Det. Sgt. Frank Bronson:** A capable and calculating detective, married with children, Bronson can be very tough when necessary but is generally easy-going, with a strong core of humanity and humour.

Det. Rex Fraser: Young, impulsive and single, Fraser is a ladies' man and a milk (instead of alcohol) drinker, and only recently assigned to the squad.

Det. Snr. Sgt. David 'Mac' Mackay: Known as 'Mac', Mackay is a tough cop with high ideals about justice. Initially he has a large chip on his shoulder—he had been a detective sergeant before but was demoted to senior detective because of a report by Bronson.

TV mediates domestic time and historical time, enabling Father's own life and work to be imagined as the moral backbone of Australian society. Since the miserable days of hand-washing and holy voyeurs and blue-collar pipe-smokers, domestic work has been declared an outdated form of moral expression. All work should be work upon one's own self—a form of artistic labour and human enlightenment. In reality-TV land excesses of selfness are just that: excessive. Successful communication through TV means you should feel, without needing to understand, the emotional response of its participants. This pincer movement of appealing to and producing approximations of identity re-territorialises, 'mutatis mutandis', the Randian vision of society as a landscape peaked with self-actualised individuals. Instead of virile modernists building uncompromising visions of monumental cities and heroic character, a very different vision of utopia is in the offing; a purportedly lucky few are famous for being famous, both spectacular and ordinary.

The desire for automated living, ownership and salvation signpost reality TV's ambitious narrative: the transformation of self into something transcendental by validating something utterly mundane. *Masterchef*'s premise revolves around a non-visual experience—the eating of food—but it is not the object itself (taste) that is important but the biography and journey of its creator.

'Part of the excitement about *Masterchef* is the adventure of great home cooks coming in and really morphing into something very, very special'—ambient piano—'For so many contestants *Masterchef* isn't the end of their journey, it's the start of their dream'—reverberating timpani drums while former contestants list their successes, including restaurant and cafe ownership, book publishing, celebrity-chef status, cooking schools et cetera—'Seventy-five per cent of people who come into this amazing kitchen go on and change their lives; that's an unheard-of proportion'—dramatic drum beat and strings section build to the end—'I've learned that the potential of these home cooks is almost limitless...limitless... limitless....limitless....'.

Reality-TV stars occupy the role of today's artists, and their products are their narrative biographies. In reality TV, this rather circular exchange is called 'being yourself'. Through 'being yourself' you can become exceptional without compromising who you really are—who you are on the inside; the true self, ordinarily speaking. 'Being yourself' is something forward from yourself, not behind. In the case of the fifth season of *The Bachelor*, men are cool, women are zany. For bachelor Matty J 'being himself' is a reductive thing; his moral good and ultimate happiness will arrive when he completes Her by providing a vessel into which she puts her surplus energy. The strength of the stoical and self-made man is his generous unexceptional-ness, and without a Her, He is empty and pathetic. 'I've really enjoyed the relationship between the women—more so than the man, because he's not really a very interesting man. He's got great teeth', says Julia via text message. For the women, 'being' is to provide performative extremities, seeking the attention of the large, muscular husk who has made a sacrifice of his own excess to accommodate hers. In summary: the Husk watches bundles of chaotic bubbliness perform tasks, some bundles unravel from the strain and are removed from set, and other bundles bounce with the appropriately controlled levels of energy. The Husk chooses: not too hot, not too cold, but just right. They live happily ever after.

In her ABC Radio National program, *Life Matters*, Natasha Mitchell interviewed the 'bad' feminists who watch *The Bachelor*. ABC's Melanie Tait is a proud feminist and *Bachelor* addict. She says, 'I am a bad feminist for watching *The Bachelor*. The whole show is basically a competition between women... So when I really think about it, I feel guilt for watching it. To alleviate my guilt, for every episode I watch, I donate $10 to a feminist organisation or a cause, or something that furthers the cause of women'. For cultural commentator Clem Bastow, *The Bachelor* is a sociological study and a cautionary tale: 'I see it as a rose-filled metaphor for the vagaries of the dating world, and with each episode I feel more and more certain that there's more to life than nailing down a relationship'. Lee, who texted in, said she mostly watches it for escapism—'you can be a feminist and not take everything seriously all the time!'.

We are tourists in our own narrative life... Life takes on televisual form.

Unlike my father, these women are highly educated. They are also emotionally intelligent and ideological and yet they still go through the same processes of detached irony, self-accusation and pity. *The Bachelor*'s powerful bundles of excessive labour and chaotic energy have much that modern self-empowered individuals can identify with. The exhaustive efforts of chasing oneself in images is precarious and admirable in a culture where the creeping extension of economic production from the eight-hour working day into other areas of our life, notably the production of self, is a measure of one's success. *The Bachelor* is ablaze with productive work; fraternity, liberation and salvation are expressed in the gasping, weeping, yawping and epileptic cinematography of reality TV. The work demands attention.

I watch my father watching people watching others who watch themselves and he flickers like an image, sometimes on the couch, sometimes in the TV, ogling himself sitting opposite, or crooning uncomfortably close to my own human-like form, sometimes leaping out of the cushions in a thunderclap of energy, and then slumped, wondering—what?

It is interesting that cinema and psychoanalysis both emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. Both are conducted from the couch. Hypnosis, fascination, identification, testimony and construction of narrative meaning are common to both practices of dream interpretation. The innovation of the cinematic, as distinct from the psychoanalytic, tradition substitutes the practice of a treatment that confronts the

Image from Steven Spielberg's **Poltergeist**

spectral self and aims instead to affirm what you already do and believe. A self-help program aptly entitled 'HOW TO TV ME' follows these four simple philosophical truths:

a) Your always-already mundaneness is in fact awesome or has the potential to be as awesome as that of TV protagonists.
b) Lives are episodic. Incidents inevitably progress to a resolution.
c) Emotionalisation makes others do the work for you. The power is in the performance.
d) Nudge-nudge, wink-wink. It's a construct, dummy—be entertained!

The latest in tele-technological platforms, social media, takes on the task of documenting and validating our leisure activities. Not quite watching the mountain, or the Vietnamese soup, we watch others watch ourselves slurp noodles, expressing our leisure time in vignettes of discovery, all the while producing meaning and identity among the debris of pixelated smiles. We are tourists in our own narrative life. Networks of stories, memories and relationships, postcards and personal memos construct a public narration of self—psychoanalysis that exists between a curated lifespan and the trace of a phantom public, the public itself needing interpretation in the likes and retweets and ambiguity of exaggerated and often ironic commentary. Life takes on televisual form.

In this generational evolution of domestic life and labour you can trace its ghosts, from Christ, who bridged the washing line to the heavens, to the Forgotten People who saw through a screen how their ordinary production carried the ship of the nation, to a more postmodern tradition, where the unhumble force of my own emotionalised labour promises me stardom—and if my network is to have any value at all, stardom is obligatory. This is a story of class, but it is equally a story of technology and vernacular aesthetics.

Umberto Eco writes in *Travels in Hyperreality*, 'The Middle Ages have never been reconstructed from scratch: We have always mended or patched them up, as something in which we still live'. The qualities of good and bad in the protagonists of TV storytelling have changed very little from the folk tales of semi-nomadic medieval people making unsafe journeys, overcoming bandits, barbarians, demons and wild animals to eventually acquire honour, ownership and salvation. While storytelling has changed very little, tele-technologies have; from the stained-glass window to the iPhone, slippages in consciousness take on new rhythms and connect more of the everyday to an ever-expanding network of images. The multi-mediated self, irreducibly outside and prevented from achieving any closure of identity within an interior, is multiplied in various collaged juxtapositions of extremes. A geography of phantom Fathers echoes in shouted, whimpering, laughing and purring voices, un-locatable in any spatio-temporal container, folding and unfolding across the couch.

While free-to-air broadcasts might not see out the next decade, the last shout of reality TV is telling: we are haunted by imaginary narratives about who we think we are or ought to be, hoping that, given enough strength, power and freedom from work, dreams of completion might become real. And the really spooky thing is: sometimes they do.