Summary and Response EssaySample

Summary:

In Laurie Ouelette and Susan Murray's piece "Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture," the elements of this new medium of entertainment are explored. Much of the exploration seems to analyze and reiterate how much this type of entertainment is new and yet it has been around since 1950. The writers examine the structure of reality programming and how it has adapted to contemporary viewing habits. The commercial implications are also examined in that these shows make a large amount of profit for a small investment. The sum of the total parts leads the reader to question not the role of television reality, but really why does it draw in so many viewers.

The concept of reality television can be seen in early television programming in the quiz shows of the 1950's. The core elements involved in reality television were: the hiring of non-actors, or "contestants", who are not in any way scripted, there is also an "unpredictable outcome" (Silverman, Rader 160), and this is what viewers tuned in for. In the case of the quiz shows there were prizes as there are in many of the current shows, but this is not a core element for reality television. The continued history of reality television's conception and growth can be seen in programs like *Star Search* which established the talent search genre of reality television. The same core elements of unscripted non-actors who performed in a capacity to win a prize with outcomes being unpredictable can be seen shows like in *Star Search*. One only needs to point to contemporary television programming to see the correlation, or perhaps the template set by *Star Search*, shows like *American Idol, The Voice* and *The X Factor* contain all the same core elements. Other television shows

that helped contribute to reality television would include *Candid Camera* and *America's Funniest Home Videos*. The most common reality television show that fills the genre of a "Gamedoc or Docusoap", can attribute its creation to MTV's *The Real World*, which is the most appropriate title to claim this attribution. "Casting was made so it would ignite conflict..." (171), this technique would lead to another major core element: low budgets.

The lack of a writing staff or predetermined story arcs can be seen as a bit of an issue for television executives because viewers are not interested in boring contestants living peacefully and interacting in a manner that is respectable and civilized. There is nothing that would draw viewers to a model that included that. The producers behind *The Real World* realized that in order to put on quality programming the application of predicted conflict was evident. This practice of finding individuals with stark differences in personality has solidified itself as a core element in reality television. It quite simply works for audiences and is seemingly labor free or loose for executives. It is a cheap way to put on provocative television.

The thesis behind Ouelette and Murray's analysis is that reality television is "a pervasive and provocative phenomenon that remakes television culture," (Silverman, Rader 168). It has remade television in the modern sense because reality television has transcended the barriers of daytime and late night television. It is no longer bound to those time restraints and it has permeated critical programming. Shows like *American Idol* or *Survivor* are events in Americana. It is all inclusive and tests the viewer to analyze his or her own reactionary ability by juxtaposing it with these television personalities. Programs like *The Apprentice* have made business majors second guess strategies to their own field. *American Idol* filters out the worst of contestants and has viewers themselves wondering if he or she could compete. Reality television is interactive and fictional programs do not offer this type of element.

Response:

Reading the article makes one ponder about society investing so much time in these shows. What is the factor that makes shows like *Jersey Shore* more profitable than programs that have an educational element or documentary techniques? The answer surely appeals to a psychology professor but many from a marketing stand point could offer a simple answer. Viewers tune in because reality television often reassures that very viewer that his or her life is better than the individuals who participate in the program. It creates an ability for viewers to see how bad people's lives can be, for instance the program *Hoarders* on A&E documents the tragedy of individuals with very strong obsessive compulsive disorder who hoard or keep material items in some instances for decades. All of these things begin to pile up in the dwelling of these hoarders and makes it impossible for someone to live a normal life. Loved ones appeal to the show to offer psychological help and the genre of the show is actually defined by Ouelette and Murray as a "makeover/lifestyle" genre (Silverman, Rader 172). The issue here is derived from the idea of the show, which is to provide entertainment. This is sort of an ethical issue because hoarders themselves know they have a problem and it is very serious but the viewer watches this program and is supposed to be entertained for 48 minutes. It is difficult for one to imagine that someone can enjoy the situation which is highlighted in the series, it merely does what is said above: it reassures the viewer that his or her life is currently and relatively better than in the programs he or she watches.

Another issue one should consider when discussing reality television is the proliferation of the character. It is not up to a writer or producer to determine the behavior of a participant (with the exception of choosing the participant of course, but after this the producer is powerless to determine the behavior). This is a disadvantage to those who run the show but one could argue that it dilutes the ability to create a dense and complicated character. Surely there are exceptions to the prior statement but in general it holds true. The advantage writers and producers have on scripted shows have produced

treasured characters not only in Americana but globally. One could observe fictional characters like: *Superman, Jack Bauer, Carrie Bradshaw* or even *Tony Soprano* that provide the ability to channel themes, ideas and premises to an audience that have substantial density. It would take several sessions in a university course to accurately evaluate these fictional people. Then one could transpose this concept unto a character like Nicole Polizzi, also known as "Snooki" from MTV's *Jersey Shore*. It may even be the case that you the reader perhaps smirked at this comparison because it is true. The lack of character density in participants on reality television may be responsible for a viewing audience being cheated out of some sort of brevity in television. It is tragic.

Another issue resulting from the model of reality television is that it provides for low budgets. The implications of this can explain the exponential growth of reality television in the previous decade. Anyone with a camera could produce a reality television program. If an idea is clever or wacky enough that can achieve higher ratings, than a program currently in broadcast. If the show premiers are with the high viewership, the rate of return on a low budget program can be staggering. What then happens if the idea behind a television show has alternative intentions: it tries to make money and it has not invested in quality. If the executives do not invest in quality what one has is a program where real is the selling point and the only thing that is real is that it is not scripted. The real in that sense is deviation of the truth, which is not just ironic, but it also causes confusion.

When Ouelette and Murray discuss having the "real as a selling point," it would be hard pressed to find the actual real. Of course the participants are real, or "ordinary people," and these people are put into extraordinary circumstances. The reaction of the participants is why people watch but these reactionary goals are fallacies because the circumstances of the situation they are in are not real. The majority of Americans, for instance do not eat bugs or are buried alive like in NBC's *Fear Factor* yet, somehow, the situation participants are in, is supposed to be rooted in reality. No, it is not rooted in reality, and

furthermore to put real people in non-real situations should require a disclaimer of the facts.

The core elements that were unintentionally developed at the half of the 20th century, such as unscripted actors or unpredictable results have become the modern template for reality television. With the rise of reality programming the issues or rather techniques modernize the casting participants with opposing personalities. The ethical implications of these ideas surely rise questions about viewing habits and whether they have been positively effected or not. Low budget programming has also seen a dilution of character amongst television personalities, and perhaps mirrors contemporary society itself... which is most certainly the worst implication of reality television.