

REALITY / TV / CELEBRITY

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ABSTRACT

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This research addresses the construction of personae on reality television series. Given Richard Dyer's formulation of stardom as a balance of ordinary and extraordinary qualities, this paper seeks to understand how a reality television participant, lacking any traditional performance talent, could be articulated as extraordinary. Kenneth Burke's concept of "mystery" as a desirability attached to objects atop a social hierarchy is used to help explicate the qualities of extraordinariness in reality TV stardom. Comparative formal analyses of three reality "star texts" delineate the differences between two women who attain limited fame and one who achieves wider stardom. It is concluded that two qualities are necessary to transcending the usual limits of reality television fame: the articulation of social power (closely tied to class); and the appearance of freedom and agency, even when under the constant surveillance of producers and camera operators.

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In the pages of popular celebrity gossip magazine *Us Weekly*'s October 10, 2005 issue, an unusual story appeared in a decidedly usual form. Allegedly, one starlet was upset after walking in on another sharing a bed with her beau, intensifying the mutual antagonism sparked in their competition as nominees for cable network VH1's "It" Girl of '05. The award's eventual winner, Lindsay Lohan – the jealous starlet of the article¹ – earned the distinction through traditional enough practices: rising from child actress status to summer movie headliner; releasing a successful pop album; and cultivating a compelling persona through a party-girl reputation, an alleged eating disorder, and vindictive acts toward her deadbeat father. Lohan's competition in love and statuettes, however, was a "star" of a different pedigree.

Kristin Cavallari's fame in 2005 came entirely from her central role on MTV's reality series *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County*, which follows the social lives of a clique of wealthy high school students in Southern California. In the same week *Us* publicized her confrontation with Lohan, the magazine *Rolling Stone* ran a story on Cavallari in its annual "Hot Issue," neatly capturing the peculiarities of her celebrity:

If hotness has a face in 2005, it has to be Kristin Cavallari. The Laguna Beach bunny can't sing. She can't act. All she can do is play herself in an MTV reality show. In a world of model-*slash*-actresses or designer-*slash*-promoters, she is nothing but *slash*. Kristin tells us, "I think of it like I play a character on a TV show," and she's not kidding. Any kind of actual talent would just gum up the works... Hotness is a crazy thing, and in 2005 it's crazier than ever ("The Hot List," 49).

Since reality television exploded on the American prime-time scene in the summer of

¹ Lohan's publicist denies the bed-sharing conflict ever occurred.

2000 with shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, it has been remarked publicly in the papers and privately among many a citizen that our culture is fast realizing Andy Warhol's famous declaration that everyone would gain his or her fifteen minutes of fame. But fame is one thing, and stardom is another thing entirely. While most reality television participants never find the national spotlight again – or, at most, find it in the reality recycling bin that is MTV's *Real World/Road Rules Challenge* and VH1's *The Surreal Life*, among other shows – “reality star²” Cavallari has found herself embroiled in gossip page dramas with movie idol/pop divas like Lohan and, more recently, Jessica Simpson. Ostensibly, reality television was making celebrities out of ordinary citizens, but until Cavallari the form kept hitting up against a cathode ray ceiling. What makes *Laguna Beach*'s – or rather, *Laguna Beach*'s – starlet the exception to this upper bound of reality TV celebrity? The answer ought to reveal a multitude of intricacies of the discursive and productive relationship between reality TV and stardom as a cultural phenomenon.

In order to explicate the “exceptionality” of Cavallari's star text, this article analyzes her case comparatively with two reality television participants who have *failed to* transcend its usual limits of fame. Trishelle Cannatella, of *The Real World: Las Vegas*, and Adrienne Curry, winner of *America's Next Top Model: Cycle One*, are seemingly as likely as any to parlay their initial reality TV turns into further fame. But each followed nearly the same path in exhausting the reality circuit. Both appeared on seasons of *The Surreal Life* – a *Real World*-esque show that, as part of VH1's “Celebreality” programming block, chronicles the household interactions of six eclectic B- and C-list famous people, from one-hit wonders to 1980s sitcom actors to porn star Ron Jeremy – and both have cashed in by appearing in

² This is a designation *Us Weekly* bestows on Cavallari.

Playboy. Their careers seem to exemplify a television tautology: anyone who appears on these multi-character, serialized, reality soap operas invites whatever fame she receives.

By analyzing the structural and formal aspects of *The Real World* and *America's Next Top Model*, as well as analyzing the positioning and construction of Cannatella and Curry within their respective diegeses, I want to explore the standardized rhetorical production of reality television personae and the ways such production militates against stardom. This involves an appropriation of the definition of stardom developed in "star studies" that focuses less on stardom's historical cultivation than on its rhetorical construction. This definition positions Cavallari's star text in contradistinction to those of Cannatella and Curry, for hers alone fits very well within the parameters of stardom defined in star studies. The question ends up being about the implications of a star text that does not depend on any traditional performance talent. In other words, Cavallari exhibits a stripped-down stardom; her star text is an articulation of stardom for stardom's sake.

In one of Richard Dyer's extensive and canonical essays on the star image, he asserts that promotional interviews, gossip columns, candid shots, and the like constitute "an infinite regress by means of which one more authentic image displaces another," ("Authenticity" 136). These materials appeal to our Marxist and psychoanalytic sensibilities, proving appearances not to be what they seem. They paradoxically reinforce the authenticity underlying the star image in the process. But in the case of reality television, this sort of "material" constitutes the entirety of the star image. The soap-style reality series ought therefore to be categorized *with* the various "activational" texts of the publicity industry. In this sense, reality TV *is* the reality of publicity. But what, if anything, does it activate?

In attempting to answer this, I want to discuss stardom in a very particular way,

highlighting the role of rhetoric in the phenomenon. Insofar as the canon of star studies has always concerned itself with the discursive nature of celebrity, the discipline has always shared a number of interests and perspectives of rhetorical theory. But, in making this relation explicit, the criteriology of stardom can be more usefully applied to the contemporary case studies herein. Dyer and those influenced by him discuss the star as a tenuous balance of the *ordinary* and the *extraordinary*, but I want to extrapolate from this the respective connection of these concepts to two of Kenneth Burke's defining terms of rhetoric, *identification* and *mystery*. While identification is usually paired with *division*, mystery envelops division as a principle of attraction. In this way, *identification* and *mystery* galvanize the *ordinary* and the *extraordinary* as qualities that make star images attractive.

Bringing these concepts to bear upon reality TV celebrity, I want to move further toward an analysis of what could constitute the extraordinary qualities of a star whose image circulates in publicity materials alone. The issue reflects the implications of the changing configurations of representational apparatuses.

I. DEFINING STARDOM

Stars, at least in the eyes and ears of audiences (as opposed to acquaintances), exist only as symbolic communication; they are signification *in toto*³. Stars are images, Dyer asserts. They are, for him, "complex configuration[s] of visual, verbal, and aural signs," (*Stars* 34). Image, as a term in the Burkean system, reflects a similarly structuralist approach. These "ideas of the imagination" have a dialectical significance in their poetic nature – they do not

³ The question of stars outside of signification, in their unmediated lives, is a curious one that, unfortunately, gets lost in most scholarship. Andy Warhol has remarked glibly on his own fame, saying "A good reason to be famous is so you can read all the big magazines and know everybody in all the stories... I love that kind of reading experience," (*Philosophy* 78). *Us Weekly*, too, lends self promotion a surreal kick by frequently displaying paparazzi shots of stars reading the magazine.

simply describe in scientific terms, but rather enable symbolic manipulations that transcend positivistic uses. Such poetic images are “built on *identifications*,” (Burke, *Rhetoric* 84). The star, as image, is not so much an empirical as a poetic phenomenon worked into the codes of cinema and activation media texts. The production and deployment of the *image* of stardom should be the central rhetorical practice of the celebrity apparatus.

Dyer’s approach to analyzing stardom concerns itself primarily with star images as ideological phenomena that reflect particular values prized and/or longed for in a given time’s cultural status quo. Appropriating Burke’s rhetorical system, I want to discuss the star image as fulfilling the terms of continual *courtship*. That is, what qualities of the image are necessary for the star to achieve lasting success? And, whether the values underlying the contemporary star system are inveterate or novel, what do they signal about the cultural understanding of the mechanisms of the distribution of star images?

Richard deCordova brings a historical perspective to bear on the star image in his essay “The Emergence of the Star System in America.” In the earliest discourses surrounding cinema, advertisers and journalists sold the film event through the allure of the motion picture apparatus and the spectacles it could produce. The people who stood before this grand and novel technology were merely “posing,” as acting was thought a nobler form of performance restricted to the stage. In the second decade of the twentieth century, film genres grew more standardized and performers became associated with particular cinema styles. The “picture personality” could thus be used to signify the sort of film on offer for viewing, individuating the product. Not until the 1920s did anything resembling the contemporary publicity industry – and with it, “stars” – take shape (19-26). This transformation is perhaps best defined by Christine Gledhill, who writes, “Actors become

stars when their off-screen life-styles and personalities equal or surpass acting ability in importance. Stardom enacts the power and material success of individual lives. Thus stars... become an object of cultural politics,” (xiv). In bringing off-screen text into the construction of the actor’s persona, the star became scrutable, closing the gap “between the ideal and the status quo,” (Dyer, *Stars* 22-3). During this period, stars moved out of the realm of pure idolization and into that of *identification* (ibid 21).

The balance of identification and idolization remains the central contradiction of Hollywood success. While a star’s persona must retain some connection to the unexceptional, average American – that is, a connection to the ordinary – she must somehow evidence that the system rewards extraordinary talent and character. Similarly, while luck and breaks may figure heavily into a star’s career, so too must hard work and professionalism (ibid 42). These criteria reflect the star’s nature as a commodity within capitalism. The capitalist system maintains an overarching ideology that, with talent and/or hard work, anyone can earn great reward. Although celebrities must to some degree exemplify this, they are also in the business of displaying how commodities can fill in for the grandest luxuries and make better living widely attainable. The star as commodity is bought and sold – in gossip magazines, and in films and television programs – and the “star image” that is attached brings a symbolic transcendence to the consumer.

The historical example of Clara Bow makes this interplay of commodities, the ordinary, and the extraordinary clearer. This ‘20s starlet began her Hollywood career by winning *Motion Picture* magazine’s “Fame and Fortune Contest.” Here, aspiring young women sent in photographs in the hopes of being selected to appear in a movie. (Think of it as a common form of reality TV *avant la lettre*.) Her direct connection to the average fan was accentuated

by films such as *It*, in which she plays a shop-girl who acts out her desire for her boss through the new modes of consumption offered in that period of booming mass production. Though Bow's celebrity peaked just before the arrival of sound in films, she was constructed as the people's star through the same sorts of fan magazines that had granted her break. The grooming tips dispensed in those magazines – regarding, for example, the henna that she used to give her hair its wild red color, even though her films were shot in black and white – served to associate the original “It Girl” with the commodities that were coming to play a more and more significant part in the lives of the time's young women. On the cusp of the moment Dyer deems as demystifying stars, Bow thus provided a perfect advertisement for the growing consumer culture. This is precisely because she never attained the *separation* from fans that other stars worked so hard to achieve. The magazines that created and sustained her brief success functioned through a clearly developing star-audience dynamic: readers were not only interested in celebrities objectively, they spectatorially identified with the stars (Orgeron 77-83).

Identification, it should be clear by now, is a crucial concept for star studies in this manner. This argument undergirds Dyer's seminal *Stars*, in which he notes early on that viewers' favorite stars tend to be of their same sex. Working from this empirical fact, he posits celebrity adoration as more an issue of identification than attraction (consciously bracketing out the homosexual element of this dynamic [17].) This much is patently evident in the aforementioned study of Clara Bow. Dyer and other scholars, however, seem content to discuss the dynamic of identification without ever addressing its meaning or rhetorical consequence.

“If I had to sum up in one word the difference between the ‘old’ rhetoric and the ‘new’,”

rhetorician Kenneth Burke wrote, “I would reduce it to this: the key term for the ‘old’ rhetoric was ‘persuasion’ and its stress was upon deliberate design. The key term for the ‘new’ rhetoric would be ‘identification,’ which can include a partially unconscious factor in appeal,” (Day 270). Burke elaborates on this key term in his tome *A Rhetoric of Motives*:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so... You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his (20, 55).

For Burke, language – and, moreover, *all* symbolic communication – provides a mode of transcendence by which humans can become *consubstantial* with each other. Though physically and biologically separate, communication enables a sort of integration, a sharing and working together. (Call this the pragmatist side of Burke.) Yet, of course, all rhetoric is not meant to unite people under identification, as Burke elaborates upon in this same volume:

The *Rhetoric* deals with the possibilities of classification in its *partisan* aspects; it considers the ways in which individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another... To begin with “identification” is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of *division* (22).

If stars were simply ordinary, truly just like average consumers, then why should one take an interest in them? Or, conversely, if stars are divided into an insular group, why should one wish to identify with them?

Division is a fundamental precept of the Marxist analysis of capitalism. Without division, there is no order, no hierarchy, no concept of class. But division alone cannot sustain a social system. Carried to an extreme, in division alone lies the Hobbesian state of nature, a war of all against all. If we grant the single allowance of class identification, we still have the real result of a war of every class against every class. In other words, if, in some hypothetical

social system, identification was limited purely to employment *within* factions and not *across* factions, these factions would exist in constant, irreconcilable antagonism. Some generalized principle needs to work across the divisions of capitalist societies to sustain any peaceful coordination.

Marx developed a concept of *ideology* as this unifying principle, and in his formulation a *mystification* occurs whereby inherently factional *bourgeois* interests are recast as benign, universal interests. By the Marxist terms of mystification, the average consumer comes to see the self-serving economic interests of capital owners as a universal interest of the nation or public. The state, too, presents these relations as universal and equitable through its laws protecting private property. Though these laws are universally applied, they are factionally beneficial. As Burke puts it, “Private property makes for a rhetoric of mystification, as the ‘ideological’ approach to social relations sets up a fog of merger-terms where the clarity of division-terms is needed,” (*Rhetoric* 108-9).

The consumption of the commodified celebrity image, however, presents a different relation of consumer and property. In the relation of consumer to star, the star’s existence in an elite stratum – a stratum that makes the star’s life more worthy than the average citizen’s of being photographed and read about – is clearly asserted. Division is ineluctably present. The relation of the consumer to the star text is entirely an *affective* relationship, one built upon the peculiar pleasures of symbolic identification. In investing in star culture, one does not usually acquire physical property, but rather the means to identify with and construct an identity through the socially fetishized, image-based celebrity.

A fan’s *in-vest*-ment in stars therefore shares a unique consonance with the role of fashion in modern United States culture. Clothing, too, offers a consumer the ability to transcend her

biological and demographic identity through the identifications associated with brands and styles. That fans of Clara Bow wanted to know via what products and techniques she dyed her hair attests to this overlap of identification with celebrity and fashion; celebrities take on the qualities of brands. If, by Burke's definition, this sort of identification entails a consumer sharing an interest (or believing herself to share an interest) with a celebrity, then this interest must entail presentation, style, and attitude. The fetishized celebrity thus helps to sell the commodities of *self-fashioning*.

Is this a form of mystification? Surely. But where the terms of mystification imply the concealment of division under yet another layer of ideological fog, the rhetoric of stardom functions through an unmistakable division – there must be an acknowledged distance between fan and star for there to be a desire for identification. This desire is the work of what Burke terms *mystery*, which is mystification's eulogistic sibling.

Burke works to understand mystery, and its relation to mystification, through Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, a philosophical treatise on – what else? – clothing. To Burke, Carlyle is “writing a book about symbols, which demand reverence because, in the last analysis, the images of nature are the Symbols of God,” (*Rhetoric* 118). Images of the social, then, are symbols of order. For Carlyle, clothes are a prominent signifier in the social order, as men are “clothed with Authority.” Burke summarizes his source's argument as such: “In clothes, as thus symbolic of distinguished office, there is mystery,” (ibid 118-21). Carlyle, presumably belonging to the upper class, takes a reverential attitude toward the same social-symbolic form of order Marx sees masking imbalances.

Mystery, unlike mystification, encourages “genuine”, witting identification. Where mystification dupes its subjects into sharing the “universal” interests, mystery is the principle

engendering their aspirations to be like and identify with the higher levels of the social order. Mystery does not operate through interests that purport to serve the people universally; it operates through interests of social desire. “Mystery arises at that point where different *kinds* of beings are in communication,” writes Burke in the *Rhetoric* (115). Accordingly, the conditions for mystery may be set by a variety of factors dividing the social: nobility and rank, role in leadership, wealth, race, and occupation, among others. Burke later continues, “[The principle of hierarchy] includes also the entelechial tendency, the treatment of the ‘top’ or ‘culminating’ stage as the ‘image’ that best represents the entire ‘idea,’” (ibid 141). Herein lies the crux of mystery: the capitalist division of labor extends a principle of hierarchy to all subjects, and this principle tends to treat the top of the hierarchy as its ideal, representative image. Stars, as images, come to represent the ideal of the hierarchy and elicit the reverence of common consumers. Burke recognized as much about stars, writing “‘Glamour’ is now a term, in the world of publicity, for mystery,” (ibid 210).

In the end, while all images of stardom are overdetermined, one crucial dynamic of stardom’s rhetorical power cuts through. “Rhetorically, there can be courtship only insofar as there is division. Hence, only through interference could one court continually, thereby perpetuating genuine ‘freedom of rhetoric’” (ibid 271). That is, for the star system to function in perpetuity, or for an individual star to succeed over a long period of time, courtship by identification must always, simultaneously or in rapid succession, reassert the very mystery that cleaves the social. Such is the dynamic balance of the ordinary and the extraordinary that defines stardom.

In the three case studies of the construction of personae on reality series that follow, I want to examine this precarious balance in its constituent parts of *identification* and *mystery*.

By focusing more heavily on mystery, in the context of reality TV formats that can make *anyone* famous, the analysis seemingly should reveal any novel qualities that differentiate *stardom* from *celebrity* in reality programming – and, perhaps, publicity – today.

II. WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE FISHBOWL

Why does Kristin Cavallari receive the star treatment and have her image articulated through select networks while other reality program participants fall short? Perhaps a better way to phrase the question is this: what about Cavallari's star text makes it unique among reality TV personae? Assuming for the moment that there is some particular quality, then the answer to this, I believe, does have something to do with her role within the narrative and textual space constructed by the producers of *Laguna Beach*. But it has even more to do with the formal and rhetorical consonance shared by the depictions "inside" the text of the show with definitive images of stardom.

Looking only at reality programs that feature sociality among numerous participants who return in each serialized installment – i.e. reality soaps⁴ – I want to delineate the discursive construction of Cavallari in its opposition to that of two other aspirant reality starlets. One first gained national exposure on MTV's *The Real World*, the original and standard-bearer of the reality soap format. The other first appeared on UPN's *America's Next Top Model*, a reality soap/game show hybrid – similar to *Survivor* and *The Apprentice* – whose producers explicitly set out to find the next glamorous star. After performing formal analysis on these star texts and exemplary episodes of their series, I find that a very different power dynamic

⁴ *American Idol*, which is, at the time of this writing, both the most popular show on television and the most successful at producing stars, belongs in a different genre of reality series: the talent show. As the participants are not surveilled in all their daily activities – and as the live performances form the bulk of the show – the production of celebrity centers heavily on stage performance rather than on backstage personae.

does in fact exist in Cavallari's text and pro-filmic space. Unlike the other participants, and nearly all others on reality programming, the *Laguna Beach* star's image is not bounded by what I call the reality TV "fishbowl".

Like any common fishbowl, this fishbowl has two primary characteristics. First, its inhabitants, coming in various (though limited) shapes, sizes, and colors, are put together at someone else's discretion. The fishbowl is a form of social experiment. Second, it has walls which serve both to limit movement and to allow outsiders to peer in. Both of these characteristics ultimately reflect the existence of a higher authority – i.e., a producer. When the fishbowl is evident in a reality TV text, the discursive production of an inhabitant's persona is marked by a lack of significant power. Consequently, the inhabitant's potential to maintain mystery, or to achieve extraordinary status, is mitigated. She becomes nakedly ordinary.

II.i. *Trapped in The Real World of Trishelle Cannatella*

In the season premiere of *The Real World: Las Vegas*, Trishelle⁵ presents herself to the camera in a direct interview as an innocent country girl from "Cut Tooth, Louisiana." She has a thick drawl, and a sense of wonder about Las Vegas and her beautiful, ethnically diverse roommates, but passing mentions of a family history she'd like to leave behind make Trishelle hard to pin down at first.

Trishelle's innocent pose vanishes by the second episode. In that narrative period, Trishelle drunkenly makes out on the dance floor with Brynn, a self-described wild girl, and

⁵ In each of the reality series analyzed, participants are presented and referred to within the shows by their first names only. Throughout my formal analyses, I will use first names to refer to characters within discrete reality TV programs (e.g. Kristin on *Laguna Beach*), and last names to refer to personae that exist across activational texts (e.g. Cavallari on the red carpet).

shares a bed with Steven, the all-American with more than a few notches on his headboard. Trishelle and Steven continue to have exclusively sexual relations with each other throughout the season. Because of Trishelle's relationship with Steven, a conflict arises between Brynn and Steven (and Trishelle by association) that is demonstrative of how the show's aesthetics and structure of content inhibit Trishelle from transcending the realm of the ordinary.

The Real World operates through five different types of footage: 1) handheld video, frequently featuring the use of zoom lenses, shot by camera operators who follow the participants' actions inside and outside the apartment; 2) static, medium close-up interview footage, for which the participants are presumably prompted by the producers with questions about events involving the cast; 3) static, medium-shot footage, in which one or more participants speak their minds to a solitary camera in a confessional booth set up in the suite; 4) static surveillance footage, often in black and white night-vision mode, taken from cameras installed in the upper corners of the bedrooms; and 5) second unit, b-roll footage used primarily for scenic montages of the city, but also often used to set the scene in the dance club, or to show the apartment at rest. The audio from the interview and confessional recordings is constantly laid over video of the participants involved in some activity. This lends a form of reflective narration to the events. An extra-filmic instrumental score, made up primarily of dance beats and electronic hooks of varying tempos, throbs behind nearly every scene.

On the sixth episode of the season, Brynn, evidently frustrated at her own failure to hook up in Las Vegas, lashes out at Steven, to whom she is attracted. Jealous of the sex that Trishelle and Steven are having in the apartment while she is not, Brynn's aggression is directed at Steven. Apparently, she takes out her frustration on him because he does not

seem even to acknowledge her attraction to him. Or, at least, this is how the narrative is presented.

The episode opens with a series of nighttime aerial shots around Las Vegas, finishing with the Palms Hotel and Casino. This resort contains both the suite and the dance club that the cast regularly frequents. A sensual dance track plays as a cross-dissolve brings us inside the darkened club. Steven and Trishelle are shown dancing quite sexually. A post-production effect in which the images leave trails lends the moment a drunken, ethereal quality. The following interview narration is overlaid:

Trishelle: Steven and I have this like, really, really weird connection. It's like there's nobody else in the room.

Steven: Not only is she beautiful and smiling, but she has, like, this positive aura around her. And her breasts are always on my mind.

Immediately after this, narration by Frank – another cast member – tells of Brynn's jealousy.

We are then shown Brynn alone in the club, shot in silhouette.

Later, back at the apartment, Brynn interrupts Steven and Trishelle in bed together – in the room Trishelle and Brynn share – and lightheartedly expresses her jealousy that they're having sex while she's not. After Steven responds that he and Trishelle are just going to sleep, Brynn leaves and the non-platonic pair move to the room Steven and Frank share. There they find a somnolent Frank, but this does not spoil their sexual plans. Frank is awakened, then goes into the hall to complain to the others, while surveillance camera, black and white footage shows us Steven and Trishelle in bed, pulling up the covers. Subtitles clarify their dialogue, whispered between sexual panting. This dialogue concerns the fact that they can hear Frank complaining in the common area about being awakened by their having sex.

The black and white bedroom surveillance camera footage of the lovers is not only mildly

redolent of amateur pornography – it also serves to underscore the difficulty of maintaining any *mystery* within the “fishbowl”. Steven and Trishelle cede power to the apparatus, which invasively captures and displays acts that, according to the standards of polite society, are not to be performed publicly. If mystery entails exhibiting some ideal quality of the hierarchy in America’s capitalist democracy, this relatively explicit representation of sex negates any claim Trishelle could make to the ideals of liberty and agency; she is free to do as she pleases, but only within a mediated captivity

The events of the next night make clearer the lack of autonomy members of *The Real World* suffer. After a proposal is floated by Frank that Steven and Brynn switch rooms so that Steven and Trishelle can have their own room, Brynn reacts unenthusiastically. Steven asks why she has to give him such an attitude while rejecting the idea, and the dispute escalates to more offensive name-calling. Interview footage of Steven and Brynn each expressing their history of uncomfortable relations fills the gap of a few dramatic minutes of real time. The events of this time are told retrospectively to the other cast members, in cross-cut accounts by the two actors.

As a monotone pulse picks up speed on the audio track, Brynn tells her side to two roommates. “I got up in his face and said ‘Don’t fucking call me a bitch’ ... And I was eating spaghetti with a fork and he said ‘You’re fucking stupid.’ I threw the fork at his arm.” Another roommate interjects, in interview footage, that it could have hit Steven in the face or eye. A cut-away to a close-up of the fork on the wood paneling is inserted. “She threw that fork with some malice force,” the roommate adds. The fork is now shown again, this time in a series of three progressively tighter shots – done digitally in post-production, so the image gets progressively grainier. This is accompanied by the sound of a flashbulb at each cut.

After each party has related his/her account of the events to some roommates, Brynn and Steven again meet in the common area. The other roommates have to restrain them, and a cameraman is visible darting across the background. Steven goes to the apartment's lone phone and calls a *Real World* producer named Tracy. "If I would have touched her in any way in anger," Steven says, "that would have been it." We cut away to Brynn crying and shaking her leg nervously, and the audio from Steven's phone call continues. "You don't hit people. We cannot have a double-standard in this," he adds. "I want her gone." Cut to commercial.

This event exemplifies both the formal and material conditions of the program's production. At the moment of greatest drama, Steven's only resort is to knock on the walls of the fishbowl and call the producer. Stars, insofar as their images embody ideals atop the social hierarchy, must exhibit the *freedom* that capitalism ideally promises its subjects. P. David Marshall, in his book *Celebrity and Power*, puts it this way:

[Celebrities] are given greater presence and a wider scope of activity and agency than are those who make up the rest of the population. They are allowed to move on the public stage while the rest of us watch. They are allowed to express themselves idiosyncratically while the rest of the members of the population are constructed as demographic aggregates (ix).

Marshall's claim that stars are granted the capacity for idiosyncratic expression strikes me as dubious. To be sure, the star image is always subject to various representational apparatuses over which the celebrity himself has little control. Nevertheless, these apparatuses usually efface themselves, lending stars at least the appearance of agency. And Marshall's point about the power bound to their freedom of movement and greater presence is thus well taken.

In the realm of *The Real World*, however, movement is restrained and power subjugated by the production apparatus. This "fishbowl" condition is evoked through a number of the

textual details included in the preceding description. The momentarily visible camera operator certainly could have been edited out, but his presence at the tense moment signals the limits of the cast's enclosure. His presence foreshadows Steven's call to the higher authority. In a different way, the series of grainy close-ups on the fork bespeak the same power relations. These images overtly sensationalize the interactions of the flatmates. By framing the events in the generic mode of a dramatic recreation within a true crime show such as *America's Most Wanted*, the producers of *The Real World* assume and announce all responsibility for giving a persona "idiosyncratic expression."

The cast of *The Real World* are given "greater presence" and do "move on the public stage." But they do so not *because* of their greater freedom, but at its *expense*. This restriction is emphasized by the overall formal style of the series. Following a niche the producers carved in the early 1990s, this style should be classified somewhere near the "interactive" mode of documentary that Bill Nichols defined. In this mode of documentary, the hand of the filmmaker is evident: the handheld camera may frame shots in unusual or distracted ways; and intertitles may add a subjective twist to the object of the photography, interrupting the "fourth wall"-like boundary maintained in the "observational" mode. Additionally, an interactive documentarian may interview her subject, putting her own voice into the pro-filmic event and emphasizing her presence on the scene. This creates a power relation between interviewer and subject that hinges upon the confession. Its televisual analogue is the genre of talk show (45-50). Clearly, the confessional relation is central to the form of reality TV that *The Real World* exemplifies. And clearly, the representation of these social actors evidences a particular style of production established by the producers and consciously distanced from any classical, invisible continuity. These actors are what the

producers make of them, and in this unmistakable submission they are denuded of much freedom and power.

Bringing this home, the episode resolves itself on a moral note. Morals on this program, like all thematic components of reality programming, are both constructed in the editing room and provoked by the particularities of casting that is consciously directed toward seeking out certain frictional combinations of temperaments and demographic features. After a suite-wide meeting to discuss Brynn's status in the apartment, the others agree that Steven reserves the right to make the decision on her eviction. If he feels unsafe or uncomfortable with Brynn in the house, the others agree, then she must go. Steven holds steadfast to his argument, demanding that Brynn leave. Crying before her friends on the show, and evoking both her lower class roots and upper class dreams, Brynn says, "I left my job. I left everything. I thought this was, like, my chance to finally do something besides get pregnant and have kids. I guess that's what I'm going to have to do."

Fortunately for Brynn, a sympathetic roommate convinces Steven to hear Brynn out, one on one. As Brynn explains to Steven that her nature is to keep her emotions to herself and keep everyone else out so as not to get hurt by them, Steven begins to soften. She adds, "I'm finding out so much more about myself, and that scares me. The last person I want to be is like my parents... I want to be different." "You're like me when I was twenty," Steven responds. Succeeding in the rhetoric of identification, Brynn spares herself from eviction, as Steven knows that the twenty-year-old version of himself needed someone to cut him a break, too. Steven and Brynn have each, undoubtedly, learned valuable lessons⁶.

⁶ In "Country Hicks and Urban Cliques: Mediating Race, Reality, and Liberalism on MTV's *The Real World*," Jon Kraszewski further examines the morals worked into every season of the show. The growth experience the series purports to provide its participants seems to me also to contradict stardom. The greater morality that participants achieve on the show is very much related to the planned diversity of the cast and the tight quarters

By this point in the series it is clear that Trishelle, who showed so much promise as a sweet ingénue, has submitted all power of self-representation to the apparatus. She has been quite literally *stripped* of control by the camera. Her personal dramas have been turned into generic staples of television. Her presence on the public stage has been a captive presence. Trishelle has exhibited herself for the *sake of fame*, whereas stars are exhibited *because of* their fame and its qualities of mystery. It comes as no surprise, then, that Cannatella's only means to continue celebrity is to swim around in other fishbowls.

II.ii. *The Model (Reality TV) Behavior of Adrienne Curry*

The UPN series *America's Next Top Model* adheres to the formal guidelines of *The Real World*. On-the-scene video is intercut with confessional and interview footage, the audio from which frames and reflects upon the events. Instrumental dance tracks rise and fade under the action, all at a slightly less kinetic clip than on MTV's forerunner. Skyline montages segue between scenes and in from commercials. Racial, sexual, and religious conflicts are similarly provoked as dramatic fodder. Black and white footage is again used, this time not from night vision cameras, but rather in the form of color-desaturated video used to indicate a flashback to events from earlier in the series. The effect is largely the same, and the show grounds itself in a variation of the same "interactive" documentary mode.

But there is one enormous difference from *The Real World*: the narrative of *Top Model* is focused around a competition. When not fighting through the social and emotional conflicts of life in the fishbowl – this time, anchored in a flat in midtown Manhattan – the young women must perform tasks that test their modeling abilities. Beginning with ten aspiring

they must share. While a star's persona may shift from "bad boy" to benevolent through the course of his career, this appears to happen organically in aging – not from the specific experience of being a public figure.

models, each week finds them judged in their performances by a panel of modeling and fashion experts, with one girl sent home at the episode's end. The last contestant remaining will have earned a modeling contract.

While this additional element of competition is notable for the particular serial narrative it inspires, it also gives the participants a different relation to the apparatus that forms the fishbowl. As with *The Real World*, the inhabitants are placed together at the producers' discretion. But their experience of the fishbowl's walls is quite different. The producers – and specifically supermodel Tyra Banks, the on-camera liaison to the producers – are not only contacted as a last resort to conflict resolution; rather, the producers frequently come in contact with the contestants to give them direction, chasten them, reward them, and judge them. Again, power and freedom are ceded by the participants to a representational authority – but in this case the power dynamic is openly worked into the typical events of the program.

Tyra Banks, supermodel-cum-creator/producer/host/judge of *America's Next Top Model*, introduces the series' pilot episode with the following monologue:

I want to make a top model in eight weeks. I want to take somebody from obscurity to fame, and I want to chart the entire process and show America how it happens. Some of these girls you would not look at twice in the streets, but I'll know when I can make them into something... What I'm looking for is a star. That's all.

Accompanying Banks's voice is a series of her photographs from advertisements and magazine spreads, intercut with video of her working the runway. *This is Tyra Banks's show*, we are emphatically made to understand. Her biography now proves what a boon it has been to her career: she is now entering her sixth season as executive producer and star of the show, and the aging supermodel recently began hosting a daytime talk show, too. If only the winners of her competition should be so lucky.

In the pilot episode, we meet twenty girls who are brought in for a second round of

interviews, after which the field will be whittled to ten. Just before the first cut, the contestants have a sort of collective anxiety attack. The season's eventual winner, Adrienne, puts her feelings this way, "It's just weird when you're this ghetto poor girl, and you come here and you're like 'I'm a queen!' and then you have to go back." A self-described tomboy from the boondocks of Illinois, in whose home town cow-tipping is a pastime, Adrienne is presented as one rags-to-riches hopeful among many. Her working class roots will resurface throughout the Pygmalion narrative of the season. In one instance this actually occurs through her elocutionary failure with the word "passion" while shooting a commercial. "Blue collar upper Midwest" is not sexy, the judges inform us about Adrienne's verbal gaffe. Can the producers perform a makeover on a girl's heritage as easily as they can on her face and body?

The answer is both yes and no. On the show, Adrienne is reformed. Outside the show, the modeling contracts she receives upon winning will not be extended. Curry will go on to circulate through other reality series before shooting the aforementioned *Playboy* photo spread. Time and time again on the show, photographers and judges chastise contestants for looking "too *Playboy*," not enough "high fashion." The producers' success in creating what they most belittle again comes back to a relationship between participants and apparatus that holds the former in check as arrantly ordinary.

The girls vying to be the next top model are really put through the ringer. Shortly after first arriving at the midtown Manhattan loft they will share for seven weeks, a personal trainer storms in to measure and weigh each of them. In a series of quick shots of the girls on the scale, each one's name and bodily statistics are shown in subtitles. Immediately following this public display, the competitors receive another set of visitors. As the strains of

ominous, choral music reminiscent of a Tim Burton film begin, one girl chimes in, “And the second visitor was a bikini-waxer, with her entourage of lab-coated minions.” Many of the aspirants express their trepidation toward the Brazilian bikini waxing. But the music turns to dance-pop, and a close-up of hot wax on the applicator then signals that fun and games are beginning instead.

The sequence that follows is humorous and full of humiliations. Cutting back and forth between the girls as different strips of hair are ripped from their groins, we see each in her turn on the waxing table – first, legs splayed; then, legs together, up in the air, and bent at the knees, as though preparing to do an abdominal crunch or trying to enhance the likelihood of conception. Close-ups of their faces reveal that nearly all the girls give a short yelp with each pull of the wax and then laugh through the pain, and we are meant to share in their sporting good humor. “I better be a damn supermodel after this,” says one. But as the show proves, the stock-and-trade materials of reality TV and supermodel stardom do not mesh well.

In his essay “Extraordinarily Ordinary,” Derek Kompare argues that reality television functions not as polemical documentary, but as exhibition. Programs are structured to emulate traditional genres, such as sitcoms and soaps, and cast members are suitably telegenic to meet the attached norms. With the conventional codes thus primed, reality shows can proceed to play off of public displays of *ignominy* – that is, recorded actualities “used for their violations of generic norms,” (106)⁷. In other words, reality participants are selectively placed in the fishbowl specifically to induce events of public humiliation. It is a

⁷ Anna McCarthy’s essay “Stanley Milgram, Allen Funt, and Me” addresses the political lineage of this sort of *ignominy*. In the historical cases of *Candid Camera* and Stanley Milgram’s sociological experiments with hidden cameras, producers used the spectacle of people’s “real” behavior in ways meant for social edification. Contemporarily, McCarthy argues, such spectacle is employed under a political imaginary more attracted to vulgar entertainment than enlightenment.

social experiment that entertains without edifying. Where stardom highlights the mysteriously extraordinary, reality TV highlights the plainly excessive. Put in this position of revealing too much information, the contestants on *Top Model* openly relinquish any mystery, freedom, or power in the pursuit of those very same qualities⁸.

Models are found, not made, we are reminded. While Tyra Banks claims to be looking for a star – *and she'll know her when she sees her* – the entire process contradicts the ideal. In fact, as the veritable god of the show, as the adjudicator and producer controlling the movements of the apparatus that forms the fishbowl, power and mystery are transferred to Banks⁹. She herself becomes the selling point: her picture is centered and the largest on the DVD cover. When she enters the room, the girls' heads turn. When she demonstrates the dos and don'ts of the catwalk, or points two fingers at her eyes, full of intensity, and says, "It's right here," we are reminded of how ordinary the contestants are.

Like the inhabitants of *The Real World* fishbowl, those in the producer-defined space of *Top Model* exchange their freedom for fame. It is a fool's bargain – stars are captivating, not captive. The narrative of competition on *Top Model* highlights this truism by contrasting the submissive participants with Tyra Banks's authority figure. Banks, an established supermodel, has her star power bolstered by her role as producer. Banks is given the "greater presence" and "wider scope of activity and agency" that Marshall credits stars as holding over "the rest of the population." The ten girls competing on Banks's show, then, are at best no freer than the general population. Like Trishelle Cannatella, Adrienne Curry's experience

⁸ If *Top Model*'s producers were truly most interested in developing a supermodel, they could take a cue from *American Idol*. Following that program's successful format, the show could consist of a weekly modeling challenge before a live studio audience – e.g. a photo shoot, or strutting the catwalk in a few different outfits – in which each contestant's performance is preceded by a short interview/training montage from the interim week, and succeeded by judges' critiques. But clearly, *Top Model* is more TV spectacle than actual star search.

⁹ The same dynamic of power transfer worked in the favor of Donald Trump on *The Apprentice*.

on reality TV has created for her a persona irrecoverably lacking in mystery. Her only recourse for continued fame is through other outlets that prey on this lack.

II.iii. *How Kristin Cavallari Plays the Games of Laguna Beach*

In *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County*'s first season, Laguna Beach High School senior Lauren could be fairly described as its star. She both narrates the introductory "Previously on *Laguna Beach*" montages and occupies the most screen time. But by the middle of the season, her quasi-boyfriend Steven has chosen to be with junior Kristin instead, who by season's end has pulled away from any commitment with him.

Clearly the most powerful and desirable member of the cast, Kristin assumes the central role and narrator position when the seniors move away to college for the second season. By this time, Kristin is dating the soon-to-be Heisman Award-winning quarterback Matt Leinart. (This was reported in the gossip pages, and is alluded to in the show's narrative by references to "Matt from USC".) For this second season, Kristin acquires the feckless sidekicks Jessica and Alex H. to round out her alpha female persona.

In the episode titled "Hate the Game," the sidekick duo – sunning on the beach, the sound of waves lapping in the background – lead off the show with this entertaining exchange about their troubles with boys:

Alex H: What's that saying? It's, like, don't hate the player, hate the game. Is that how it goes?

Jessica: Don't hate the game, hate the player.

Alex H: Don't hate the game, hate the player?

Jessica: Yeah.

Alex H: I hate the fucking game. Look, "I like you," "I don't like you" – why does he have to mess with you? I hate that.

Jessica: If there was an answer to that –

Alex H: Ohmigod.

Jessica: – my, like, problems would be solved.

Alex H: And it sucks because, like, you know how the girl can play the game, too? I don't know how to play the game!
Jessica: I don't know how to play the game either!
Alex H: I don't know how to do that! I feel like every time I, like, talk to a guy, I screw it up somehow because I'm not playing the game right.
Jessica: Cause you don't know how to play the game. I feel the exact same way.
Alex H: I hate that... Whatever. I need to learn how to play the game.
Jessica: Don't hate the game, hate the player.
Alex H: (Getting up to leave) Let's play the game with some boys. [Roll opening credits.]

The saying is in fact “Don't hate the player, hate the game.” But the girls' mistake only highlights how foolish they are when it comes to social games. In *Laguna Beach's* reality TV scenario – in which the participants are not competing for a prize, and are not cast specifically to provoke conflicts based on identity politics – games of dating and friendship constitute the bulk of the drama. Absent the usual, representational games of the apparatus, Kristin is able to enjoy the privileges of power and freedom that accrue to those atop the social hierarchy.

Despite the obscene banality of Alex H. and Jessica's dialogue when read from the page, when viewed the show is easily mistaken for scripted drama. In fact, many actually do accuse the producers of scripting it¹⁰. This accusation likely stems from the production quality of the show, whose form – if not content (which, devoid of classes and homework for its homogeneous cast, focuses only on dating, cheating, shopping, partying, vacationing, and gossiping) – really is more like FOX's *The O.C.* and *Beverly Hills: 90210* than it is like *The Real World*. After shooting over the course of an entire school year – though never in the school, because the school board denied them permission – the producers had an exceptional

¹⁰ *People Weekly's* article “High School Confidential,” Vanessa Grigoriadis's article “Hot Reality Girl” in *Rolling Stone*, and Lynn Smith's article “There's Laguna, and Then There's MTV's ‘Laguna’” in the *Los Angeles Times* all broach the subject of this program's scripting. Cast and producers all maintain that the greatest level of input into dialogue the producers have is merely to prompt the participants to discuss certain issues.

amount of footage at their disposal for use in filling holes and maintaining narrative continuity. But more importantly, the producers developed an aesthetic regimen for the camera operators and editors that quite successfully emulates and tweaks the conventions of prime time teen soaps.

Exploiting the verdant hills and shimmering ocean that frame the locale, the footage of *Laguna Beach* is submitted to a digital enhancement process that makes the town's colors even more lush. Further, these glossy images are shot in 16x9 widescreen, a format that has grown more and more standardized in prime time drama ever since *ER* began employing it. This cinematic sheen – along with the swooping aerial views used in establishing shots and scene transitions, the pop music soundtrack, the shot/reverse-shot close-ups and reaction shots during dialogue, and the constant cross-cutting between action – all lend this Southern California reality soap a definitively Hollywood feel. Some formal analysis will make these distinctions from the modes of other reality series clearer, and should also highlight how Kristin's alpha role within this narrative presentation grants her additional power and mystery, enabling her entrée into glossy magazines and the trendiest awards-show after-parties.

After Kristin's typical introductory narration of the scenes from the previous episode, the episode "Our Last Prom" finds her lounging on the porch with Alex H. and Jessica. Just as occurs any time a player first appears in an episode – or, frequently, with a new scene – subtitles of each girl's name appear. (To the unpracticed viewer, the participants' similar fashion styles, accents, and mannerisms apparently make them easily mistakable.) The three girls discuss their ideal prom dates. Kristin says her on-again-but-mostly-off-again-beau Talan "would be a fun date." Still, she's slightly concerned nobody will ask her.

Cut to the opening credits sequence, which consists of a pop song playing over visual character introductions. This usually includes one shot of each cast member in a bathing suit/bikini and another shot of the cast member in more formal clothes, as well as stock footage of palm trees, waves crashing upon rocks, and the like. As the music fades out, this particular episode opens with a steady shot from a helicopter flying over the Pacific, slowly approaching the coast. We then cut to an aerial bird's-eye-view and drift over the mansions of a Laguna Beach residential neighborhood. Such shots suggest much more open spaces than the claustrophobic montages of *The Real World* and *Top Model*, which are used to transition between scenes in ultimately inescapable dwellings. We cut to an exterior shot with "Talan's House" printed along the lower edge of the frame, and a new pop song begins. Inside, Talan discusses his prom plans with two friends, joking about what would happen if he didn't ask Kristin.

A later scene opens with a shot of a lifeguard, then a beachfront café. We find Alex H. and Jessica eating together, cross-cut with two boys putting on gorilla costumes outside one's car. They walk toward the café carrying large, yellow, banana-shaped signs reading "PROM?" We cut back to the girls, who, unsuspecting, squeal when the two gorillas pop up behind them. The boys unmask themselves, and the girls hug them excitedly – *of course I'll go to the prom with you*, we infer.

After a few scenes involving other supporting cast members asking and being asked to the prom via comical ruses, we find Alex H. and Kristin shopping at a boutique, still wondering whether Talan will ask her. Cross-cut to Talan, at Kristin's house, setting up an elaborate invitation – one that will not be presented in a humorous manner. He lays a note with balloons attached on the driveway, then sprinkles rose petals throughout her garage. As the

garage door slowly closes, we see him in a medium shot turn to a silhouette. We cut back to Alex H. and Kristin, now driving to Kristin's house.

As they pull up in the car, a slow, sweet pop song is cued. Kristin finds the note on the driveway and acts excited, if slightly wary from all the prank invitations pulled on friends. Following the note's instructions, she closes her eyes and counts to ten as Talan makes the automatic door raise, revealing his romantic gesture. Kristin's eyes now open, her mouth gapes, "Oh my god!" The music swells. Cut to medium shot of Alex H. at the end of the driveway, cooing. Cut to medium shot of Talan, grinning. Return to medium shot of Kristin, adored and smiling. Cut to a two-shot from within the garage, behind Talan. Kristin walks toward him slowly, collected. "Will you go to prom with me?" "Yeah," she says, delighted. Cut to a two-shot from the side in which he kisses her cheek and hugs her. Return to Alex H. looking on, smiling and blissful. Cut to a close-up on Kristin, now separated a step from Talan, still wide-eyed and beatific. The camera holding on Kristin in close-up, Talan pulls her back into his chest for another embrace. She glances out at Alex H., then up at Talan. She's the queen, and Tyra is proved right – it *is* in the eyes. Kristin's not just a player – she *owns* the game. The image fades into slow motion. Cut to commercial.

What is most significant about this program's slick aesthetics and tight narrative structure – each resembling prime-time teen soaps – is that they efface the fishbowl. This is contrary to most other reality programming, and it puts *Laguna Beach* in the formal domain of Nichols's "observational" documentary category. The "observational" mode stresses the lack of intervention of the filmmaker, letting events unfold as they may and then editing to re-introduce a sense of real-time. This framing often resembles fiction film, in the sense that it turns the participants studied into "social actors." The filmmaker's "unacknowledged,

nonresponsive presence clears the way for the dynamics of empathetic identification, poetic immersion, or voyeuristic pleasure,” (41-4). Though we may be educated viewers with knowledge that this program is the “real” *O.C.* – as the full title, *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County*, asserts – we may easily forget this in the narrative frame that remains undisturbed by evidence of the apparatus. Editing out any producer-cast interaction, abstaining from the interview and confessional footage of *The Real World* mode – as well as the eye-contact made with the camera in such footage – the program persuades us via its “observationality” to forget that these participants *want* to be on reality TV, that they *want* to be seen.

Naturally, given their wealth, surroundings, and high cheekbones, the televised teens of Laguna Beach come equipped with the trappings of glamour. Put in a reality series in which the apparatus is effaced and all indications of the walls of the fishbowl are removed from pro-filmic events, the recorded inhabitants of the town appear to have the freedom of movement requisite to stardom. Further, because the apparatus observes the cast without holding them captive, power tilts in favor of the people desirable enough to warrant watching. They are followed, not trapped.

The power advantage held over the apparatus by the cast members is emphasized in a later scene leading up to the prom. While Kristin and the rest of the central cast arrive in a white, stretch, sport utility limo at one classmate’s house atop the coastal palisades for pre-dance hors d’oeuvres and drinks, their parents – making a rare appearance – gather on the back patio and prepare to snap photos. Camcorders and digital cameras abound. Kristin, Jessica, and Alex H. lean against a balustrade overlooking the ocean and make goofy faces for their pictures together. We cut to Talan with his mother, off on the lawn. “There’s my date,” says

Kristin. “Finally, I found him. Don’t count on me holding on to him.”

Pictures are taken from all directions; clicks and mechanical whirs become white noise. After a few photos, Talan slips away, evidently miffed at Kristin’s earlier remark, but he is hailed back by her. He returns grudgingly, annoyed. As Kristin and Talan pose together, one parent says, “Why don’t you guys pretend like you like each other or something.” Talan flashes a fake smile, and in this moment the apparatus is more authoritatively effaced. While *Laguna Beach*’s camera operators follow the cast everywhere, presumably in double-digit numbers at such a large event, they are never acknowledged; but when the cast get dressed up and have to pose for photos before their parents, it becomes work.

The events of “Our Last Prom” demonstrate the unique consonance this particular program shares with the celebrity magazines like *Us Weekly* that Cavallari’s image would soon frequent. Such magazines – including *In Touch*, *Star*, and, with minor variation, *People* – depict stardom through three primary content areas. There is bountiful *banality*, presented in the paparazzi photos that suggest stars are “just like us.” As with the photos of celebrities *Us Weekly* prints with accompanying captions such as “They pump their own gas!” and “They shop for shoes!,” the *Laguna Beach* gang may be shown filling up the tank, or buying flowers for friends, or talking on their cell phones in the park. In these magazines there is also a focus on *glamour*, presented through photos of stars at red carpet events, after-parties, and fashion shows – just as Kristin and company may be shown going to the prom, or even just out on the town, dressed to the nines. And there is endless *gossip*, week to week, about who’s been spotted where with whom, who said what about whom, who purchased what mansion, and so on. Similarly, half the content of *Laguna Beach* consists of small groups of friends, in living rooms or at the manicurist or on the beach, gossiping about the latest hook-

ups and break-ups. In this way, MTV's latest hit fulfills the reality soap form better than any other – this reality TV *is* the reality of publicity.

Cavallari's transcendent success can thus be pegged to one apparent theme: she is not a captive in any game. The reality TV apparatus set up around her is invisible, mobile, and non-invasive. She controls its movements, and therefore she is not victimized or made ignominious by it. In performing the voice-over narration that opens each episode, Cavallari further aligns herself with the producers who operate the apparatus, displaying her power over its actions. Similarly, as the program's alpha female, the confident Cavallari seems to act as puppeteer of the other players, craftily leading them at her beck and call. After Talan's unpleasant prom experience with Kristin, one of his friends characterizes her bluntly, saying "She plays such gnarly games." As Cavallari's presence on the A-list of young celebrities evidences, these aspects of her persona dovetail with the essential qualities of stars. Her life as we see it is sufficiently banal for many to identify with it, but in her role atop the social hierarchy she attains mystery.

III. *From Posing to Starring and Back*

The differences in the construction of personae through *Laguna Beach* and the more standardized reality formats exhibited by *The Real World* and *America's Next Top Model* speak to some critical issues enmeshed in the public understanding of stardom. While all of these texts could be fairly described as doing the work of publicity for their aspiring stars, those that depict life in the fishbowl inherently make their participants confined and vulnerable. These shows restrain the likelihood of stardom by presenting their "real" cast members as most certainly *not* living an ideal lifestyle, *not* enjoying power and freedom.

Laguna Beach actually presents its resident personae in ways that fit with the activational texts of the publicity industry, whereas the other programs establish personae primarily in the service of their activation in displays of onscreen excess. Such excess is constituted in: social conflicts involving identity politics, relatively explicit sex, deference to authority figures, and the undergoing of mildly painful bodily acts for the sake of fame. These are not the things that constitute stardom. On *Laguna* and in gossip magazines we get the opposites of these conditions: a lack of collective conflict resolution and personal growth; sex only suggested by scenes from the night before and the morning after; no representation of anyone telling them what to do but the stars themselves; and extensive primping and grooming by choice. I would argue that in the cases of *Laguna* and gossip magazines, Dyer's formulation of the star as a balance between the ordinary and the extraordinary is exemplified. The ordinary in these texts is tied to quotidian forms of sociality, consumption, and self-presentation; the extraordinary is tied to the power, freedom, and mystery embedded in the capitalist hierarchal ideal.

In importing Burke's theories into the academic discourse of stardom, I wished to delineate some clearer sense of "the extraordinary." The format of reality television, which promotes a sort of culture of celebrity populism in which nearly anyone can attain a degree of fame, should logically produce personae exhibiting ordinary characteristics with which viewers can identify. But if, in the case of Kristin Cavallari, the reality format has produced a "star" worthy of interacting with more traditional Hollywood stars, then on what basis is her extraordinariness produced? The concept of the *mystery* attached to objects atop the capitalist cultural hierarchy opened up analysis upon this very question.

Because Burke's concept of mystery is defined through the capitalist hierarchy, it may

seem inevitable that my argument should return to the power and freedom associated with wealth and the upper class as the basis for extraordinariness in a star text lacking a traditional focal talent. But this inevitability does not make the argument erroneous. In the lone case of Cavallari, whose star text transcends the usual reality TV networks of articulation, images of the power and freedom of the upper class are patently in evidence. These images are not shared in the star texts of the appreciably less wealthy Cannatella and Curry, who needed to confine themselves in the fishbowl for a chance at fame. Accepting the continued importance of class divisions to American cultural ideals, the questions that seem most worth asking are those addressing reality TV as a new mechanism for a turn to issues of class.

Despite the persistence of a definition of the star image rooted in the mystery of class distinction, the networks of the star image's circulation are changing. Television, first and foremost, is changing. It is becoming the new "killer app" (Caldwell 41). That is, in a moment in which televisual media is growing more easily available online, the old-fashioned TV set's greatest claim to importance is that it remains, by far, the most popular conduit for such media. Television is a *privileged* method of distribution. As reality programming becomes a crucial expression of this privileged medium, we must be attentive to the format's various articulations of television's representational power. One such power is over the production and denial of stardom.

On the one hand, in the cases of *The Real World*, *America's Next Top Model*, and the like, the apparatus of reality TV grants fame while militating against stardom by announcing its own presence. On the other, in the exceptional case of *Laguna Beach*, the apparatus, operating in conjunction with a number of social and economic factors, hides itself and selectively represents subjects in adherence to the virtues of stardom so as to promote the

possibility of stardom. Both scenarios lead to the same conclusion, one arrived at – though never elaborated upon – by Mark Andrejevic in *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*:

Cultural critic Walter Benjamin got it right – sort of. The apparatus of mechanical reproduction helped contribute to a form of demystification; but the aura, rather than disappearing, has been displaced onto the apparatus itself, which is endowed with the mystical power of creating or negating celebrity, seemingly regardless of the individual talent (5).

In this sense, television returns us to cinema’s original discourse of posing. As deCordova detailed, the selling of cinema turned screen performers from posers to picture personalities to stars. Today, once again, the apparatus is at the center of the spectacle of screen performance, as participants on reality programs pose before it. Benjamin held this all along, however, describing how stage actors inhabit roles, while screen actors are cut up, alienated from their labor, and turned to props. The film industry “responds to the shriveling of the aura [of the actor’s unique performance] with an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio. The cult of the movie star... preserves not the aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity¹¹” (229-31).

The publicity industry that produces and disseminates the “spell of the personality” treats the performer as no less of a prop. Traditionally this personality-as-commodity that is produced is used to promote and “activate” the film product. But, as the case of Clara Bow makes clear, the image of stardom has a long history of deployment in the interest of promoting more tangible commodity consumption. Bow’s short-lived career seems to stand as a cautionary tale, though. By Orgeron’s reasoning, Bow failed because, in addition to her *definitively* ordinary personal history, she was cast in publicity as an everyday commodity spokeswoman – and this kept her from attaining the separation and strangeness inherent in

¹¹ This passage suggests that Benjamin foretold Andrejevic’s argument all along – i.e. Benjamin did not “sort of” get it right; rather, he was very careful about his use of his term “aura.”

mystery and extraordinariness.

While Cavallari may have thought of herself as “play[ing] a character on a TV show,” that show has long since gone off the air. Cavallari now has no media product to promote, and her image’s continued appearance in celebrity gossip magazines seems, paradoxically, to hint at the waning of her stardom. Her recent appearances at the public events at which stars are often photographed for these magazines – such as awards shows, fashion shows, and movie premieres – seem less and less an indicator of her A-list status, and more and more an indicator of her desire to be seen. The publicity apparatus, it appears, is no longer following Cavallari around; she is following the apparatus. Should her “It Girl” stardom fizzle more quickly than Bow’s, it won’t be for a lack of the trappings and signifiers of mystery. It will be from her willing submission to the authority of the apparatus.

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