

# **REALITY CHECK**

A Cross Analysis and Case Study of Reality Based Media

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# ABSTRACT

This research project proposes a cross analysis of reality TV and documentary genres. Its goal is to establish a working definition of each genre and contrast the conventions within each form. It does so through case studies of Catfish, a documentary from 2010 and Catfish TV, a reality TV show loosely based on the same premise as the documentary and starring the same creator/narrator. Classification systems and conventions within each genre will be explored in order to engage in a cross genre analysis. Texts from popular culture will be analysed to juxtapose intentionality of the cultural creators with audience perception and academic theory. This comparison will be performed through a lens of fidelity and specificity in order to determine if deviations in form are genre specific or based on an underlying ideological premise.

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# INTRODUCTION

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.” Oscar Wilde

This research project stems from an interest in how concepts of the real are represented in reality based genres. This interest was initially piqued by watching documentaries that were popularised during the early part of the millennium. During this time frame, there has also been an escalation in the production of reality TV programs. I became interested in the difference between the two genres when pondering how technology has changed audience viewing habits. If a person was to watch a segment of both a documentary and a reality TV program on a portable device without a priori knowledge, would a difference be discernible? If such a difference could be perceived, what elements serve as indicators of difference? Werner Herzog’s new documentary *From One Second to the Next* clearly demonstrates this conundrum. At only 35 minutes, its length is similar, albeit slightly shorter, to an hour long reality TV show, once commercials are factored in. *From One Second to the Next* contains drama, heightened emotion, conversations with law officials, portrayals of the Amish community and graphic scenes of wreckage. Even the title is one which could be imagined as the name of a reality TV show. Yet within seconds, it is obvious that this is a documentary rather than a reality TV show. Based on experiential knowledge gained from watching hundreds of documentaries (and admittedly far less reality TV, but enough to have familiarised myself with the genre), I am beginning my research from the premise that there is a discernible difference between the two genres but these differences currently constitute a certain *je ne sais quoi*.<sup>1</sup> It is this unknown set of variables that this research paper intends to explore.

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<sup>1</sup> I am not alone in this, over the past eight months while conducting my research I have engaged in discussions with several dozen people regarding my thesis. I consistently receive the same three reactions: 1. The topic is very interesting. 2. Surprise that this research topic hasn’t been previously undertaken by numerous people. 3. Acknowledgement that the genres are indeed very different but unable to provide an explanation of why this is so, rather than by stating that they do not watch reality TV as it is crap. How one can know this without first watching reality TV is another thesis topic entirely, one which was the previous focus of this thesis until lack of available information resulted in a change of focus.

I initially decided to consult academic literature with the hope of having a base to build my research on, but was very surprised to discover that each genre is associated with disparate schools of thought. Although both purport to represent reality, each form is treated as a separate area of study. Studies in documentary film tend to focus exclusively on theory and form, while academic research on reality TV favours audience personality traits and content. As I could not find studies on each genre that lent themselves to comparison, I realised that it was necessary to treat each form as a separate entity. Academic review in each respective discipline could assist in defining and classifying each form, enabling a cross genre analysis of the two types. The results of this analysis could then be applied to a representative cultural product from each genre to serve as case studies. Both texts would need to be similar in terms of subject matter, date of creation and cultural background in order to diminish variances. Catfish seemed the best match possible, as there is only a two year gap between the documentary's release date of 2010 and the reality TV premiere of Catfish TV season one in 2012. Both shows are filmed in the United States, feature Yaniv (Nev) Schulman as the narrator and focus on the practice of using the internet to fabricate online identities.

# METHODOLOGY

The research conducted incorporates a multi-faceted interdisciplinary approach. Primary and secondary scholarly publications are utilised for the purposes of defining each genre and exploring the classification systems for each. The purpose of this approach is to clarify how, aside from medium, each particular genre differs from the other. Once an understanding of the definitions and classification systems of reality TV and documentary are clear, *Catfish* and *Catfish TV* will be placed on a spectrum within each genre, to ascertain if each is typical or atypical of its genre. When *Catfish* and *Catfish TV* have been placed within their respective frameworks, a cross-analysis of each form will be conducted to compare and contrast codes and conventions within each.

Case studies of *Catfish* the documentary and *Catfish TV*, seasons one and two (currently in progress), will be performed. While the case studies will primarily be from a qualitative perspective, quantitative methods will also be employed. Cross analysis within the case studies will focus on fidelity and genre specificity to examine deviations from the initial cultural text and whether these deviations are necessitated by adherence to formulaic genre conventions. Both a textual and subtextual reading will be undertaken within each case study to examine if textual deviations are genre specific or based on an underlying ideological premise. As culture does not exist in isolation, sources have been chosen from a wide array of academic disciplines. In addition to the obvious choices such as film, media and cultural studies, literature was also consulted from spheres as diverse as psychology, philosophy and consumer studies.

Finally, texts from popular culture such as blogs, forums and online articles and interviews will be interwoven throughout the study to contrast the professed motivations of the cultural creators in relation to both audience perception and academic study. This approach will work in tandem with the case studies, as textual and subtextual analyses will be performed to arrive at an interpretation based on genre specificity and/or ideological posturing.

# DEFINITIONS

There are a few definitions used throughout the paper that need to be established in order to avoid confusion. Please note all definitions supplied are my own and do not connote universal agreement on what these terms mean.

medium (n) - the cultural vehicle that is used to deliver text  
ex. TV, film, newspaper

cultural product/cultural text (n) - these terms are used interchangeably and describe a particular cultural object ex. a TV show, a film, a newspaper article

genre/form (n) - a descriptive classification system to differentiate types of cultural texts  
ex. reality TV, documentary, lifestyle column

catfish (n) - a person who creates a false online identity

catfishing (v) - the act of creating a false online identity

catfishee (n) - a person who is deceived by the catfish



# CLARIFICATION

*“There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.”*

Marshall McLuhan

When Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase “The medium is the message.” in 1964, this was a truly revolutionary concept. It cannot be argued that medium often influences audience reactions and that many cultural creators base production on the premise of medium specificity. However, with the popularity of digital media devices and internet accessibility, viewing no longer has to be site or medium specific, as viewers can watch whatever they want, wherever and whenever they want. As McLuhan passed away on New Year’s Eve 1980, he was not able to alter his theory to incorporate modern technology, but based on his above sentiment, he would have adapted his now iconic phrase to reflect technological developments. In that spirit, I am entering into my research based on the assumption that the medium is not always the message. Instances in which perceptual differences cannot be attributed to the medium, must therefore be found within the genre itself.



**Marshall McLuhan**

# GENRE ANALYSIS

## 1.1 Reality TV Definition

Since the dawn of the current millennium, there has been a proliferation of reality based media in the cultural sphere. While MTV's *The Real World* (which first aired in 1992) has often been cited as the reason for the popularity of reality TV, it would be more accurate to say that the show acted as a cultural precursor for what was to come. The millennium served as the tipping point<sup>2</sup> for the widespread popularity of the reality TV genre with both *Big Brother* and *Survivor* being globally replicated. First broadcast in the Netherlands in 1999, versions of *Big Brother* have been developed in over 40 different countries, opening the door for countless incarnations of the genre. *Survivor*, also credited with popularising the genre, first aired in Sweden in 1997, but like *Big Brother*, did not become a global phenomenon until the year 2000. This has led to the current cultural saturation point, with television stations such as TLC, A&E and National Geographic offering channels dedicated exclusively to reality TV programming.

Cultural theorists such as John Fiske cite *An American Family*, the PBS series from 1973, as the first reality TV show. The show was a twelve part series that followed the life of the Loud family and achieved notoriety when son Lance Loud came out on national television. While there is no debate that *An American Family* serves as an early example of the genre, the distinction of first reality TV show has also been credited to *Candid Camera*, the hidden camera show which first aired in 1948. This divergence in opinion is in part due to differing perceptions as to what form constitutes a reality TV show. As stated in a 2003 research paper by Nabi, Biely, Morgan and Stitt (referred to hereafter as Nabi et al):

“Although people might have a sense of the programming that falls into the category of reality-based television, no clear industry standard or definition of the genre exists.”(304, Nabi et al)

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<sup>2</sup> This fact in itself is a potentially fascinating topic for study. Did fin de siècle fears of technological failure or an impending Armageddon result in a celebration of the real? Sadly, this topic does not fall within the remit of this paper but the timing seems more than coincidental.

In this same paper, the research team developed the following criteria for creating a definition of reality TV:

- people playing themselves
- performed at least partly in living/work environments, rather than on set
- without a script
- placed within a narrative context
- created primarily for the purpose of entertainment

Using these criteria as a reference point, *An American Family* would be considered part of the reality TV genre, while *Candid Camera* would not, as the show is not placed within a narrative context. As stated in the paper:

“This definition excludes programs captured by other genres, such as news programming, talk shows, and documentaries, as well as programs featuring re-enactments (e.g., *Americas Most Wanted*) and simple video clips not placed in a narrative context (e.g., *America’s Funniest Home Videos*).” (304, Nabi et al)

Strictly adhering to this criteria results in the exclusion of hidden camera/comedy shows such as *Just for Laughs*, a silent (laugh track aside) French Canadian show in which members of the public are tricked into participating in visual type gags, or *Punk’d* in which celebrities are set up in order to illicit reactions while being secretly filmed. The existence of such shows postulates the question of whether awareness, or lack thereof, of the camera should be considered as criteria. Ethics aside, is it only a reality TV show if the participants know they are being recorded? This is a point not addressed in the research, but as *COPS* is referred to as a reality TV show within the paper, it can assumed that Nabi et al consider awareness of the camera an arbitrary factor, as due to substance use, some of the participants on *COPS* are initially unaware that they are being filmed.

Although the game show is not referenced in the paper’s list of excluded genres, game shows such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* would not be eligible for inclusion within the reality TV genre, due to its lack of narrative context and the fact that it is filmed onset. However, defining a space as onset is a problematic concept, as the very act of filming within an environment, naturalistic or not, redefines the space as a set.

“The camera acts as a stimulant. It causes people to think about themselves as they may not be used to doing and to express their feelings in ways they ordinarily would not.” (217, Zunshine referencing work by Ellis and McLane)

The criteria of ‘created primarily for the purpose of entertainment’ is a problematic concept if focus is placed on the word entertainment, as this point could be construed as a value loaded sentiment. While it can be assumed that the researchers were referring to the education versus entertainment divide, the reductive nature of this concept assumes that a cultural product is primarily either one or the other. Perhaps this was a more accurate sentiment when the paper was authored a decade ago, but communicative and experiential based education theories negate this concept, as texts can be equally entertaining and educational. However, if focus is shifted to the word primarily, the subtext of the sentence changes. An implied divide between education and entertainment no longer exists and instead is suggestive of an intentional focus. While a show may be both educational and entertaining, higher value is placed on the entertainment function of the cultural text within the reality TV genre.

The work of Nabi et al is an effective starting point for creating a working definition of what constitutes reality TV. For the purposes of this paper, the following criteria will be used:

- people playing themselves
- without a script
- with or without awareness of the camera
- entertainment valued as primary function

These criteria serve as a starting point, but are not a final destination. As the research progresses, so will the definition of what constitutes the genre of reality TV.

## 1.2 Reality TV Classification System

Building on the work of Nabi et al (2003), Nabi, Stitt, Halford and Finnerty (2006) have classified reality TV into six sub-genres: crime, romance, informational, competition, talent and drama. And yet by Nabi et al's own definition from 2003, the talent show should not be considered part of the genre, as it is filmed on set and contains little narrative context. This inconsistency does not entirely discount the 2006 research, but like its predecessor, provides a foundation for further elaboration. While the general classifications have been provided by the Nabi (2006) research team, the examples, inferences and explanations are mine alone.

The crime/court show can follow the classic good vs. evil scenario of COPS or the slightly more ambiguous courtroom dramas such as Judge Judy where it is not always initially clear who the viewer should support. The dating/romance model can also take several forms, such as; First Dates, in which the camera records a restaurant full of strangers on their first date, or shows such as The Bachelor(ette) in which groups of people compete for the affections of the show's namesake. According to research from Nabi et al (2006), romance and competition are two components that viewers of reality TV respond most favourably to, which possibly explains the success of a show such as The Bachelor(ette). The informational show is a vast catch-all of a category, covering topics as diverse as travel, the makeover show in which a person's home/vehicle/wardrobe/physical self is refurbished, or lifestyle shows in which the participants learn how to budget money, cook, survive in the wild, etc. The actual information covered in this category varies across the spectrum, from Pimp My Ride, in which the focus is on transformation (there is explanation of what has been done, rather than how to do it), to Emmy Award winner No Reservations, in which Anthony Bourdain travels the globe in search of cuisine, while providing cultural insights along the way. The competition show includes programs such as Survivor or Fear Factor where teams or individuals vie for a prize. Survivor features challenges of physical endurance such as hiking or diving, as well as puzzles that are more dependent on mental agility. While Fear Factor also focuses on overcoming challenges, they are of the graphic variety such eating cow bile, walking on broken glass or being covered with live rats. Talent shows like X-Factor, So You Think You Can Dance or Master Chef contain

contestants who compete for a prize and public acknowledgement of their talent. The drama sub-genre (sometimes referred to as the docusoap) is probably the form most associated with reality TV. This would include the aforementioned Big Brother and The Real World in which the camera acts as witness for the sole purpose of recording the daily lives of the participants. This category could also include celebrity family shows such as The Osbournes or Gene Simmons Family Jewels. The difference between these groupings is that one type of show functions on the developments between a group of strangers while the other portrays familiarity dynamics.

While Nabi's classification system is based on content rather than form, a cursory acquaintance with reality TV provides an example of the many forms represented in the shows, with programs utilising hosts, voiceovers, fly on the wall techniques, interviews and confessional participant directed dialogue. Such diversity in form suggests that reality TV is not dictated by form.

Like the definition of reality TV, the classification system could also be modified. The competition and talent sub-genres could be combined to create one category, as all of the competitions involve challenges in one form or another, even in the case of Fear Factor, which is further towards the exploitive end of the reality TV genre. As the informational subgenre is very broad, the title is misleading as many of the shows are not primarily informational in nature. To acknowledge this, the subgenre would be renamed informational/lifestyle to better reflect the subject matter. While Nabi et al (2003) do not consider the humour/joke show as reality TV, it fits within the confines of this paper's newly formulated definition of reality TV, and as such, will be considered a subgenre and added to the new classification list. The addition of the joke show to the classification system results in the inclusion of Just for Laughs to the reality TV genre. With such an addition, it can now be surmised that reality TV is not necessarily dialogue dependent. In summary, the 2006 classification system would remain with six subgenres but would change from; crime, romance, informational, competition, talent and drama, to; crime, romance, informational/lifestyle, competition/talent, humour/joke and drama. There may be overlap, as in the case of The Bachelor(ette) which is classified as a romance, but also functions as a competition. This overlap should not be construed as a weakness in the classification system, but rather as an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of our current cultural climate, in

which hybridisation, from punk tinged bluegrass to Moroccan stir-fry, is a way of life.

Based on the above observations, the criteria below can be added to the definition of reality TV:

- subject matter, form and thematic content do not define the genre
- form and content are not rigid and cross pollination may occur
- dialogue is usually present but this is not a necessity
- informational content can run the spectrum from low to high

### **1.3 Documentary Definition**

Created in 1922, Robert Flaherty's staged ethnography, *Nanook of the North* is credited as being the first documentary film. Prior to this time, single shot films, called actuality films or actualities, depicted everyday life without the use of a narrative structure. The term 'documentary' was first used in 1926 by John Grierson to describe the creative recording of life events. This definition did not receive full acceptance, as filmmakers such as Vertov believed that the function of the documentary was to be more objective in approach and to capture life as it occurred. This same debate still continues today with a multiplicity of opinions based on the acceptable proportion of objectivity vs. creativity when attempting to capture reality. Noted documentary theorist Bill Nichols provides the following sentiment about attempting to arrive at a definition for the form:

"Documentary can no more easily be defined than "love" or "culture". Its meaning cannot be reduced to a dictionary definition in the way that "temperature" or "table salt" can be." (20, Nichols 2010)

The theories of Nichols seem to have been developing in reverse, as he wrote his often cited *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* in 1991 followed by *Introduction to Documentary* almost 20 years later in 2010. For the purpose of clarity, citations by Nichols will be accompanied by date, with the intent of representing an historical chain of thought. While Nichols believes that building a definition of a documentary is a challenge, we only have to look as far as the mockumentary form, to find a starting point. Bunuel's *Land Without Bread*, a surrealistic critique of authoritarian voice over techniques and satire on accepted documentary

conventions of the 1930s, is perhaps one of the first examples of the mockumentary form. As the creation and perpetuation of the mockumentary is dependent upon understanding the current codes and conventions of documentary in order to imitate them, these same codes and conventions can be examined in order to construct a working definition of the documentary form. While it is often more straightforward to arrive at a definition based on its relation to another related concept, it is not possible to use the mockumentary form in our search for a working definition of the documentary form, as the mockumentary utilises the same codes and conventions that we are in search of. Section one provided a working definition of reality TV and as this paper focuses on the similarities and differences between the two forms, an attempt will be made to construct a definition of documentary based on its relational aspects to the reality TV genre. In summary, the working definition of reality TV is as follows:

- people playing themselves
- without a script
- with or without awareness of the camera
- entertainment valued as primary function

It is immediately obvious to anyone who has even a limited knowledge of documentary, that the first three criteria can be applied to the genre of documentary as well reality TV. However, the fourth point is one which needs to be further explored. According to Nichols (1991) one of the most important aspects of a documentary is that the point of its creation is to further an argument or make a specific point. As this particular theory was developed over two decades ago, it can be modified to incorporate more recent cultural products. Crumb, based on the life of comic artist Robert Crumb is a good example of the need to update Nichols theory. While Crumb is considered a documentary, it does not promote a particular argument or viewpoint. It does however, educate the viewer on the life of Robert Crumb. And while it is an entertaining piece of work, the imparting of information takes precedence. From low budget to high budget, and the objective to the highly subjective, imparting information is an important commonality amongst documentaries and can therefore be added to the working definition of the documentary form. While it might sound contradictory, the need to impart information should not be correlated with the amount of information imparted, which can range from the high information content of An



Inconvenient Truth to the low information content of *My Date with Drew*, documenting a man's attempt to get a date with Drew Barrymore.

For the purposes of this paper, the working definition of documentary film can be identified by the proceeding points:

- people playing themselves
- without a script
- may or may not contain narrative structure
- with or without awareness of the camera
- information provision valued as primary function
- informational content can run the spectrum from low to high

#### **1.4 Documentary Classification System**

Nichols developed a classification system in 1991, consisting of six sub-genres: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative. While Nichols has provided the general classifications, once again, the examples, inferences and explanations are mine alone. His first category is the poetic documentary which abandoned continuity editing and fully formed characterizations in favour of associative images and patterns. Grierson's *Night Mail*, from 1936, an ode to overnight postal delivery, serves as an example of this type of sub-genre. Expository documentaries are rhetorical and contain authoritative (voice of God) voice-overs in an attempt to persuade the spectator. Many nature documentaries, such as 2005 Academy Award winner *March of the Penguins*, which depicts the migration and mating rituals of penguins, fall within this sub-genre. Observational or fly-on-the-wall documentaries such as *Titicut Follies*, a film from the 1960s focusing on inmates in a mental health hospital, strive for minimum intervention and attempt to minimise their influence or alter the outcome. Ethnographic films would also fall within this classification of documentary. Participatory documentaries contain a participant/observer dynamic and demonstrate how the documentary is influenced by the filmmaker's presence. *Kurt & Courtney*, a study of the circumstances surrounding Kurt Cobain's demise, is a good example of this sub-genre with filmmaker Nick Broomfield being threatened on camera by Courtney Love. A reflexive documentary is exactly as its name suggests, drawing

attention to their representational nature. The difference between the participatory and the reflexive forms is the manner in which the curtain is pulled back, so to speak. The participatory documentary calls attention to its constructedness by erasing the boundary between cultural creator and subject matter, while the reflexive documentary references the filmmaking process itself. Vertov's *Man with a Camera* is an example of the expository form of documentary. Performative documentaries are very personal, subjective and act as an emotional response to the world. 2009 Academy Award winner, *The Cove* which tackles Japanese dolphin hunting, is a good example of a performative documentary.

As Nichols himself states, documentary is continually evolving and without clear boundaries, which does not make the task of classification any less challenging. Best practice would suggest considering Nichol's system to be based on fluid guidelines rather than rigid parameters, as *March of the Penguins* could simultaneously be viewed as both expository and observational. Such an approach acknowledges that a documentary may fall into more than one category. In addition to cross pollination, the classification categories are mutable, with placement on the spectrum being dependent upon subjective perception. The work of Michael Moore serves as a strong example of the subjectivity inherent within Nichol's classification system, as theorists have identified his films and his style as participatory, reflexive and performative. For the sake of classification it makes more sense to apply the classification system to individual work rather than on an auteur basis, as the subject matter may cause a particular documentarian to take different approaches with each new film. However, even adopting this tactic, clear delineation within the documentary classification system is not always possible and contains redundancies. The separation of participatory and reflexive documentaries into two different categories seems unnecessary as films of a reflexive nature often reference themselves both through interaction and apparatus. Merging the two forms into the reflexive category achieves a less complicated yet equally descriptive subgenre. The term participatory documentary could then be utilised to describe the modern practice of peer created, collective and/or crowd sourced cultural products.

While Nichol's system is focused on form over content, the examples suggested above for each category provide an indication of the content represented through the documentary genre. As

topics run the gamut from mating to postal trains to mental health rights, it is safe to say that the documentary genre is not dictated by the confines of content. These respective documentaries also contain themes such as love, working class heroism and dignity , thus indicating that the documentary form is not defined by theme. Like form, both thematic content and subject matter are not rigidly defined or confined to a certain documentary. Surprisingly for a genre in which relaying information is one of its main criteria, dialogue is not an imperative component on the form, as proven by *Koyaanisqatsi* (and the entire *Qatsi* trilogy), a reflection on how technology is shaping human reality, which manages to communicate more through image, than 90 minutes of speaking in other documentaries.

Based on the classification system and brief thematic and content analysis, the following criteria can be added to the definition of documentary:

- subject matter, form and thematic content do not define the genre
- form and content are not rigid and cross pollination may occur
- dialogue is usually present but this is not a necessity

### 1.5 Summary: Genre Inherent Difference

Incorporating the information gathered through academic, observational and analytical research, a working definition of the two genres emerges. Surprisingly, of the eight criteria points supplied for each genre, seven are consistent across genres. The primary difference between each form is the inherent values and previously undefined *je ne sais quoi* that constitutes difference in each genre.

REALITY TV	DOCUMENTARY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• people playing themselves</li> <li>• without a script</li> <li>• with or without awareness of the camera</li> <li>• <b>entertainment valued as primary function</b></li> <li>• subject matter, form and thematic content do not define the genre</li> <li>• form and content are not rigid and cross pollination may occur</li> <li>• dialogue is usually present but this is not a necessity</li> <li>• informational content can run the spectrum from low to high</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• people playing themselves</li> <li>• without a script</li> <li>• with or without awareness of the camera</li> <li>• <b>information provision valued as primary function</b></li> <li>• subject matter, form and thematic content do not define the genre</li> <li>• form and content are not rigid and cross pollination may occur</li> <li>• dialogue is usually present but this is not a necessity</li> <li>• informational content can run the spectrum from low to high</li> </ul>

Within the genre of reality TV, entertainment is valued as the primary function of the genre, while in documentary, information provision is regarded as being more important. As a main point of difference has been isolated, it is now possible to proceed with a cross genre analysis. The next section will introduce the documentary *Catfish*, and *Catfish TV*, its reality television based predecessor, with the intent of establishing how these different inherent values manifest themselves within each form.

# CATFISH

Catfish is a documentary from 2010 featuring Yaniv (referred to hereafter as Nev) Schulman, a young man living in Manhattan who begins an online romance with a young woman living in rural Michigan. Catfish was turned into an MTV reality TV show featuring Nev, who travels around the United States assisting people to meet their online loves. Season one aired late 2012, while season two is currently broadcasting on MTV. The name Catfish was popularised by the documentary and refers to the deceptive practice of creating a false online identity in order to pursue deceptive online romances. For the purpose of this paper, the term catfish will refer to a person who creates a false online identity, but it does not presuppose that the reason for doing so is for romantic purposes. For the sake of clarity, Catfish will refer to the movie and Catfish TV will be used to describe the reality TV show.

## 2.1 The Documentary

Catfish begins on November 24<sup>th</sup> 2007, when photographer Yaniv Schulman (known as Nev) has a photograph of a dance performance published in a New York newspaper. Three months later he receives a painting of his photograph from Abby, an 8 year old girl in rural Michigan. Nev shares an office with his older brother Ariel (Rel) and Ariel's best friend Henry Joost.



**Ariel Schulman & Henry Joost**

Both are aspiring filmmakers who are in the practice of filming a large segment of their waking lives. It is decided that Abby would make a great documentary subject. Abby continues to mail paintings to Nev but she is not aware that she is the subject of a documentary. Through Abby, Nev soon becomes acquainted with the entire family; mother Angela, father Vince, older brother Alex and older half-sister Megan.

By April 2008, Nev and Megan have become online friends, begin to regularly correspond and soon enter into a distance romance facilitated by phone, email and Facebook.



**Megan**

About a third of the way into the film, Nev and company take a trip to Colorado to film a dance event and through internet sleuthing become suspicious of some of the information provided to Nev by Megan. The trio decide to embark on a road trip to Michigan to meet with Megan and uncover why she has been dishonest. They arrive in Michigan and discover a much different scenario than they could have anticipated.

The name of the documentary is inadvertently supplied by Abby's father Vince, who provides an analogy towards the end of the film:

“They used to tank cod from Alaska all the way to China. They'd keep them in vats in the ship. By the time the codfish reached China, the flesh was mush and tasteless. So this guy came up with the idea that if you put these cods in these big vats, put some catfish in with them and the catfish will keep the cod agile. And there are those people who are catfish in life. And they keep you on your toes. They keep you guessing, they keep you thinking, they keep you fresh. And I thank god for the catfish because we would be droll, boring and dull if we didn't have somebody nipping at our fin.” (Vince Pierce, *Catfish*)

The twist at the end should perhaps not be too surprising for fans of documentary, as Andrew Jarecki and Marc Smerling of *Capturing the Friedmans* are both credited as producers. However,

when *Catfish* was released in 2010 as a documentary, it was greeted with varying amounts of disbelief. Countless online forums included debate on the authenticity and alleged staging of the documentary, with many different viewpoints being generated, although few, if any, viewers accused *Catfish* of being an outright fabrication. Many viewers believed that Nev and company knew what they would find in Michigan and that the latter portion of the film was staged. Others claimed that the first part of the documentary was filmed in retrospect in order to create a cohesive story.

In terms of theorists, the most interesting group by far are those who engaged with the documentary from a cultural and philosophic perspective. Some commentators pondered if the film itself was the ultimate catfish, created as a statement on the ability of media to deceive, while others, such as IMDb contributor, Colin George stated that it did not really matter if the movie was staged or not, as the uncertainty surrounding the perceived authenticity of *Catfish* simply adds another layer of complexity to the textual reading.

## **Fishing Scam** ★★★★★★☆☆

**Author:** [Colin George](#) from United States

11 October 2010

Much of the build-up feels stagey, and surely something is amiss, because either filmmakers Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman are considerably more talented directors than they portray themselves as, or they are not being entirely forthcoming. The prevalence of the camera during seemingly random moments that become key scenes seems perhaps a bit too fortuitous, and the placement and framing of the shots themselves seem too precisely calculated to have been captured on the fly for this amateur guerrilla venture.

Yet it doesn't matter in the slightest. "*Catfish*" is about calling our willingness to accept unsubstantiated information into question, and thus encourages a skepticism and natural inquisitiveness towards itself. The entire thing could be fabricated, and its creators have a built-in ace in the hole. Falsifying a non-fiction film about false identity could add a brilliant meta layer to the puzzle.

If a mandate of documentary is to educate the public, *Catfish* has succeeded in this regard. The word has undergone transformation from a noun to a verb and has become the fodder for at least two episodes of *Dr. Phil* (December 2012 and April 2013) and been worked into the storylines of

fictional TV shows such as the recent season five, episode six of Drop Dead Diva, in which catfishing is used as a defense to clear a defendant on trial. In essence, a documentary which is purportedly real yet accused otherwise, is worked into the cultural consciousness to the point where it is being incorporated into fictitious shows to further heighten the fabricated sense of reality. Meta indeed.

## **2.2 The TV Show**

Catfish TV premiered on November 12, 2012. Season one is comprised of 12 episodes (one of which, the Stephanie and David episode, inexplicably did not air) plus a reunion show at the end of the season. Season 2 began on June 25, 2013 and is currently broadcasting once a week on MTV. Sixteen episodes have been ordered for season two, with the season finale currently scheduled to conclude on October 8, 2013. According to Nev, Catfish TV developed as he had received thousands of emails (his email address is on his Facebook page) asking for advice from people claiming to also be in online relationships in which they had never actually seen their significant other.

“So I guess I’ve become, not a spokesperson, but the image of the online dating relationship guru. I joke about it because if there is anybody that you shouldn’t go to for advice it’s me because I’m the one who obviously was the biggest fool. But there is something about my going through the experience and coming out the other side in one piece.” (Nev Schulman, i am Rogue)

Thanks to the documentary, the term catfish already exists within the public consciousness, so awareness raising is not a necessary endeavour undertaken by Catfish TV. The show follows the same premise as the documentary, as Nev travels across the country in search of truth. Mirroring the documentary, the road trip crew is a trio comprised of Nev, his filmmaker friend Max Joseph and the person who has been catfished.

**Max Joseph & Nev Schulman**





The TV show is not educational in nature, as there are only a few basic tools used by the duo to perform their online sleuthing, and a didactic approach would result in a one episode show which would not necessitate future installments. Instead, Nev has placed himself in the role of mentor and travels around the US, helping the lovelorn to resolve their issues. As established by Nabi et al (2003) this focus is in line with the reality TV genre in which programs focusing on love are very popular with viewers.

While Catfish TV shows many signs of fidelity to its documentary predecessor, there are a few key differences which will be explored in the following section. Form, content, motif and thematic framing will be analysed in terms of fidelity to explore whether these differences can be attributed to genre specificity.

# FIDELITY

“We judge a reproduction by its fidelity to the original - its capacity to look like, act like and serve the same purpose as the original.” (20, Nichols, 2010)

## 3.1 Form



The style of *Catfish* is reflexive in nature, with an ongoing conversation between Nev and Ariel perpetuating the trajectory of the narrative. Throughout the film, there is constant awareness directed towards the filming process, as we view the results of Ariel filming Henry as he films Nev. The situation is occasionally fraught with conflict when Nev no longer wishes for the camera to be constantly recording him and puts his hand into the frame and tells his brother to go away. Applying Nichols documentary classification system to reality TV, the style of *Catfish* TV is also reflexive in form, and during the first season, Max was a familiar sight with his camera constantly filming Nev.




Max ‘filming’ Nev

However, viewer sophistication has rapidly developed since *Catfish* and message boards were littered with speculation regarding Max’s purpose on the show, as he follows Nev around with his camera, but clearly this footage is not being used, as the viewer is watching footage of Max filming Nev.

The below comment from IMDb contributor Husskade, adds a further dimension to the critique, offering observations on both product placement and continuity.

 by [Husskade](#) (Mon Mar 18 2013 07:43:31) [Ignore this User](#) | [Report Abuse](#) 

 **UPDATED** Tue Mar 19 2013 12:24:03

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Someone should tell him that swopping cameras that are hand held in shot ( nice product placement guys!) in a supposedly seamless conversation should be the same colour and not go from silver to red to silver in a matter of seconds. If you cast doubt over what should be a simple conversation then what does that say for the rest of the show.

Plus it always makes me laugh, Max filming Nev while being filmed by another crew....belt and braces 'documentary' making. 😊

Producers of Catfish TV have obviously noted online critiques, as season two offers an amplified role for Max. While he is still Nev's trusty sidekick, their roles are more balanced, with Max contributing further to the discussions this season, rather than merely trailing Nev filming rarely used footage. Each episode now includes a chat between Nev and Max that summarises the interior reality of this week's guest and the possible outcome of the situation, in the unlikely event that the painfully obvious is not quite clear to the viewing audience. These conversations are akin to the internal monologue device employed by soap opera writers in which there is no chance left open for subjective interpretation and the viewer is provided narrative direction on how to process what has just been consumed. This modification, which could be viewed as subjective pandering to the audience, is not in line with the reality TV genre, as research by Reiss & Wiltz suggests a lack of correlation between intelligence level and reality TV viewership. Yet audience intelligence does not seem to be a factor taken into account by the show. While the Catfish TV film crew and its large size is now referenced and sometimes shown in season two, Max usually still has the omnipresent camera in tow, providing product placement while simultaneously attempting to replicate authenticity.

“...the hand-held camera and live sound recording. These techniques underscore the evidentiary status of the image. Equally they can be used to foster the illusion that the staged events are "actuality" footage captured by the filmmaker.” (33, Allen)

### **3.2 Content**

Applying Nabi et al's reality TV classification system to both *Catfish* and *Catfish TV* results in both genres falling within the romance category. While both are decidedly dramatic, neither could be classified as a docusoap. *Catfish* purely for the reason that it is a nonrecurring entity, while *Catfish TV* offers a constantly revolving cast of characters. Content-wise, therein lies the fundamental difference between the documentary and the TV show. *Catfish* first began as a story about an eight year old painter and evolved into a different story entirely. Nev developed into the at times, reluctant focus, who provided details at the request of the sometimes seen filmmakers. The documentary was slightly mysterious in nature, as the viewer had no idea of what was about to transpire. *Catfish TV* also features Nev, who along with Max is the only consistent character on the show. Nev now becomes star, mentor and subject matter expert to the participants on the show. And while the viewer is still not sure what will be found on the other side of the door, there is now an awareness of the process as a whole. Viewers know in advance that the show is about online relationships and they anticipate witnessing deception. The only surprise is what particular form the deception will take. Hall (2004) found that when audience members perceived people on reality programs as real, they tended to experience greater feelings of suspense, which was associated with increased cognitive involvement. This perhaps explains why viewers continue to tune in each week, even though they are already aware of the narrative outcome.

### **3.3 Motif**

As both the film and TV show are self reflexive in nature, it is fitting that the camera motif is apparent throughout both forms. In the documentary, this is a natural extension of Ariel and Henry's lifestyle, as they are self-described film junkies who claim to film a large portion of their existence in the hope of stumbling onto something worthwhile.

“We have stacks of hard drives of random moments that may become background evidence for a developing story that hasn't yet twisted.” (Ariel Schulman, *Film School Rejects*)

As both Henry and Ariel are filming the documentary, it seems reasonable that there would be shots of either of them holding the camera included within the documentary, blending observational/fly on the wall techniques with reflexivity. Some of the marketing posters also feature a camera held by Nev which, content wise is more of a stretch, as he is the subject of the documentary rather than its creator. From a thematic perspective, the marketing material references the narrative, as Nev embarks on his adventure due to his published photo of the dancers. The camera motif is carried over to the TV show, but is slightly disingenuous. As previously cited, there are the constant shots of Max with his camera, filming footage which isn't integrated into the show. Perhaps to mirror the promotional campaign for Catfish, the marketing department also uses pictures of Nev with a camera, but Nev does not use a camera at all on Catfish TV. While Nev began his career taking photos, he now seems more comfortable on the other side of the camera, as he is present within almost every frame of Catfish TV, a point perhaps unconsciously referenced by a promotional print of Nev holding a camera phone in which he snaps a picture of himself.



**Nev filming Nev**

Social media and digital technology were a large component of Catfish, with footage from Facebook, YouTube and Google Maps integrated into the narrative process. There are numerous scenes detailing Nev's Facebook conversations with Megan, as well as Facebook profiles shots of her family. YouTube is used to conduct research into Megan's claims that she is a musician, while Google Maps plots the details of the trio's road trip in search of truth. Facebook was launched in 2004 while both YouTube and Google Maps were launched in 2005. In 2007, at the time of filming, these were relatively new additions to the media landscape and were most likely used to give the documentary a fresh and novel edge. Yet by the time of the film's release in

2010, their inclusion seemed a bit gimmicky and the film was slammed on several sites and forums as a result.

These critiques were evidently noted, as with the exception of Skype, digital technology does not feature as heavily in the TV show. While Skype was created in 2003, it wasn't yet heavily in use as a means of communication during the creation of the film and as a result, is not featured in the documentary. As Skyping is now an accepted cultural practice, each show ends with a video chat of Nev and Max receiving an update from their guests, several months in the future.

Hotel rooms and flight corridors have replaced Google Maps as a visual signifier suggestive of travel. While season one featured Google Images as a didactic device for the viewers at home so that they could protect themselves from catfishing, the focus on digital technology decreased even further during the transition from the first to second season. While Nev and Max mention tools such as Google Image and Spokeo, the camera no longer records their actions and they do not explain what they are doing, thus transferring the focus from technological tools to the hosts as subject matter experts.

Location shots have also changed from season to season. In season one, highways, signage and travel corridors acted as markers. This has changed drastically in season two, perhaps in accordance with Nev and Max's notoriety. Each new location contains a silly vignette of the duo clowning around in scenarios as varied as an old west shoot-out, dancing in Little Havana, pretending to be Sherlock Holmes and in one particularly disgusting scene, Nev wiping his hands on Max after using the urinal.

While not exactly a motif within Catfish, there is a memorable scene in which Nev is lying in bed talking about Megan and then covers his head with the bed sheet in embarrassment. Whether this is a deliberate link to the documentary or something else entirely, is unclear, but season one of Catfish TV often includes footage of Nev, bare-chested in bed. This device was utilised often enough that it became a parody performed by Maroon 5's Adam Levine in a January 2013 episode of Saturday Night Live. Like many of the online criticisms regarding Catfish TV, this motif vanished in season two.

The most iconic motif from *Catfish* is the closed door which the static camera focuses on for just a few seconds longer than necessary in order to create a sense of heightened anticipation in the viewer. While use of the door motif to communicate suspense and dramatic tension was first established in the film, it was incorporated into season one and its use has intensified in season two, with the camera lingering on car doors, and doors that have no surprise lurking behind them. Research by Baruh suggests that there may be intentionality motivating what otherwise seems like gratuitous imagery.

“Symbolic signs indicating that an interaction is taking place in a setting that implies a private rather than a public space will contribute to the voyeuristic appeal of reality programs.” (194, Baruh)

In such a scenario, the door motif does not merely act as a symbol for suspense, as it did in the documentary, but implies access to the private world of the participant. This speculation is in line with 2008 research from Lee, Im & Taylor which discovered a strong correlation between reality TV viewership and voyeuristic tendencies. The research found that reality TV viewers were attracted to the disclosure of intimate details without having to establish the bonds of trust usually required in pursuing human relations.

### **3.4 Thematic Framing**

The practice of framing alluded to in this section refers to framing as a thematic device, rather than to visual framing. *Catfish* is framed as a thriller as much as it is a documentary, with reviewers refraining from revealing the plot twist at the end. Season one continues the mystery of what is lurking behind the door, but in the TV show, this is accompanied by the knowledge that there is indeed a surprise waiting, a fact that is not presented as a certainty in the film. Season one appears to have been filmed in its entirety prior to broadcast, so there is a divide between the spectator and the participant, with the spectator knowing (increasingly, as the series progresses along) that all is not as it appears to be, while the participant remains naively hopeful. This sense of the unknown is further intensified by the intro to the show, in which Nev tells his *Catfish* story through voiceover (inexplicably accompanied by childhood photos) while stating that he is “here to help solve the mystery”. So like its documentary predecessor there is a focus on the unknown.

In the documentary the scenario is presented as a mystery to both viewer and participant, while in season one, the viewer, through either an awareness of the documentary or even simply by viewing the intro, knows that things are not as they appear.

Out of necessity, the framing changes in season two, as it is assumed that participants on the show are now cognisant of the practice of catfishing. The intro, which acts as a framing device for viewer perception of the show, has been completely restructured to account for this change. As with season one, the intro begins with the familiar, “Hi, I’m Nev.” but “and this is my filmmaker buddy Max” has been added to account for Max’s modified role in the show. Rather than mentioning the documentary, Nev speaks about season one and references the door motif by stating that “last season opened up doors to some big surprises.” The intro ends with the statement “A little bit of fiction leads to a whole lot of reality.” And thus the focus is removed from the question of whether the person is who s/he claims to be, as it is now taken for granted that their identity is a fabrication. In this new scenario, the viewer and the participant are both aware of the fictitious nature of the interchange but the focus has shifted to the anticipation of what will happen next. This building of anticipation intensifies as season two progresses, as previews of the show for the following week, now contain what could be deemed as spoilers, with integral plot elements being provided to viewers a week in advance of the viewing schedule.

“The camera is a catalyst, in this case bearing witness to things that have not been said before.”  
(19, Biressi)

While the actual details of the TV show vary each week, offering the impetus to tune in, the thematic framing remains the same. If there was one central theme that transcended almost all of the episodes in season one (as well as the documentary), it was the fact that the experience of being catfished/catfishing usually had positive consequences for both parties involved, by providing support and friendship in difficult times and/or forcing the individuals involved to become much more real within themselves as a result. Perhaps this is how a show about being duped by inauthenticity straddles the paradoxical line of trying to portray itself in an authentic light; by basing its framing on lessons learned from the experience.



### **3.5 Summary**

Both the form and use of motif within Catfish TV are modelled on its documentary predecessor. Changes in form and motif can be attributed as a response to online viewer critiques. However, the manner in which the change in form has been manifested calls into question respect for the audience's ability to process fairly simplistic information exchanges and plot developments. The change of focus from technology and social media to a greater focus on the hosts, is in line with the genre conventions of reality TV which places more importance on entertainment value than information provision. The content and thematic framing have shifted slightly to account for the frequency and duration of the TV show. These changes constitute a necessary change as the TV show has to generate interest for a topic that recurs each week, while the documentary had the element of surprise in its favour. Thus far, with the exception of the internal monologue technique, deviations in fidelity can mainly be attributed to specific genre conventions. The next section examines behind the scenes practices in the reality TV sector to ascertain if these systemic practices are in response to genre specific codes and conventions.

# STAGING

“Excess in one system can quickly become meaning in another.” (142, Nichols , 1991)

## 4.1 Hyperreality

Perhaps one of the most significant differences between reality TV and documentary is the behind the scenes staging and intervention. This is not to suggest that all reality TV shows are staged or that documentaries do not include staging at all. However, as reality TV values entertainment over information provision, staging is an accepted convention within the form. Likewise, as documentary values information provision over entertainment, staging can act as an impediment to information gathering. While documentary makers may resort to staging, it is not an accepted convention within the genre. If a reality TV travel program is contrasted with an observational travel documentary, staging would be one of the conventions which would differentiate the manner in which content was presented to the viewer. This is not to suggest that everything witnessed within reality TV is fake, but rather, that a scenario which would not have occurred otherwise has been set up for the benefit of the camera. For example, an observational documentary about Brazilian culture would most likely feature examples of Capoeira while the reality TV version would probably include a segment with the presenter (who would not be present within an observational documentary) receiving Capoeira lessons during the show.



**Capoeira**

This is not to assert that one experience is more real than the other, as both experiences have actually transpired, but the latter would not have occurred without staging and intervention .

While the staging is sometimes hidden from the viewer, research from four different sources (Baruh, Nabi et al, Lee, Im & Taylor and Papacharissi) confirms that modern audiences are aware of “the leaky boundaries between their diegetic universe and the everyday world of the viewer” (138, Fiske ). According to findings from these four research projects, watchers of reality TV are aware of the staged nature of the entertainment they are consuming, but this does not act as a deterrent for them, and in many cases adds to their viewing pleasure. Even in instances that claim to be true to life, viewers suspect creator intervention and often derive further enjoyment from their viewing experience by attempting to ascertain what is authentic versus what has been contrived. In this sense, reality TV could be compared to the wrestling boom starting in the late 1980s, in which viewers interacted with the unfolding drama as if it was real, while simultaneously searching for diegetic cracks to find definitive proof of its inauthenticity.

Both wrestling and reality TV exist within the realms of the hyperreal, which according to many cultural theorists is the result of being surrounded by the artificiality of mass production and manifests itself through examples such as; new furniture being designed to appear old, and expensive clothing undergoing distress, to look worn and ragged.

“Hyperreality” is a term used to describe the way the world is absorbed by an individual’s preference for illusory objects over authentic ones. This is done through the modification of an object or cultural icon to make it more appealing than its actual form.” (100, Torikian)

According to Torikian, the hyperreal must constantly assert its realness in order to blur the line separating real from unreal and this perhaps, is part of the draw of reality TV, never quite knowing where one ends and the other begins. Reality TV strives to perpetuate this sense of realness by adopting visual signifiers, associated with the documentary genre.

“The producers of reality TV have drawn liberally from formerly established aesthetics of intimacy pioneered by documentary makers. The tight framing and shaky hand-held cameras of Direct Cinema and *vérité* movements have been liberally adopted to signify an immediacy of filming and capturing of the real.” (16, Biressi)

“The documentary movement tended to be too genteel for most audiences and some critics.” (Saris, 111), and as such, reality TV could be construed as a postmodern response to documentary, adopting the technical codes and conventions of the documentary form, while ignoring the symbolic aspects of the genre. In such an instance, the visual signifiers, or technical codes, become part of the staging process used to imply adherence to the symbolic codes that in reality, are not being utilised. To return to the Brazilian culture program as an example, the staging of the Capoeira lessons filmed by a shaky hand-held camera may actually appear more authentic than a stationary camera. So in this manner, the reality TV show has adopted the technical codes of the documentary form, while the intervention and staging discounts acceptance of the symbolic conventions of documentary which are opposed to staging.

While the primary distinction between reality TV and documentary is their respective focus on entertainment and education, another difference between the two genres, is the viewing frequency between each form<sup>3</sup>. Reality TV offers a weekly, or sometimes even daily glimpse into the lives of its characters. In the drama sub-genre repeated viewings of the same individuals create a feeling of familiarity and additional insight into the interior reality of the characters. In other subgenres, the main focus is on an expert (such as Jo Frost in *Supernanny*) or a presenter (Anne Robinson of *WWTBAM?*) and the audience develops a viewing relationship through repeated exposure. Due to repeated exposure with the cast member(s), reality TV creates a sense of familiarity in which the spectator has an almost peer-like relationship:

“Audiences find the settings and situations of reality television programming novel enough to be stimulating yet familiar enough to permit an imaginary participation in them by the viewer.” (290, Rose)

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<sup>3</sup> Frequency has not been used as criteria in shaping a definition as, while it does act as a signifier of difference, on a standalone basis, it does not formulate the identity of a show. For example, a reality TV show that is cancelled after one or two episodes, does not cease to be defined as part of the genre although it is not airing further episodes, or exhibiting signs of frequency.

And here exists the paradox inherent in reality TV. Viewers gravitate towards the sense of intimacy generated by the hyperreal, and yet through repeated viewings, the contrivances are exposed and render the cast members as more ordinary. Thereby being demystified, the character that is playing his/herself is subject to accusations of inauthenticity.

#### **4.2 Casting Agents & Producers**

With six casting agents, ten producers and over a dozen executive producers involved with the TV show, it is easy to understand why Catfish TV is fraught with contradiction. Nev states in the intro that the show developed as a result of numerous people emailing him for catfishing assistance. However, Rebecca Rosichan, who has worked in reality TV casting since 2005, is credited on IMDb as performing casting duties during season one. This begs the question of the need for a casting agent if Nev was dealing with the participants directly as implied through the program, in which he checks his email messages to find a catfishee to visit. When questioned on the casting process for season one, Nev claims he initially checked emails himself and then casting took over, but he is not forthcoming about how soon into season one this handover occurred. However, the February 19, 2013 edition of Hollywood.com, written by former MTV employee Alicia Lutes suggests a much different interpretation of the show. She claims that all participants have agreed in advance to a meet-up, which suggests that the initial phone contact between Nev and the catfish, in which he convinces the potential deceiver to meet with the catfishee, is a complete fabrication staged for the cameras. This would however, explain the remarkably self contained reaction of the catfishee when confronted with deception after travelling across the country to meet the love of his/her life. Such reactions lend to an interpretation of re-enactment, heavy editing or participants being prompted to respond in a manner similar to Nev's reaction in the documentary.

Another claim made by the story, is that MTV is actively recruiting catfish rather than those being catfished. The decision by MTV to conceal this fact cannot be explained away by genre conventions, as the show could be equally entertaining if approached from the perspective of the catfish. However, each episode is presented in a fairly formulaic fashion:

- Nev receives an email requesting assistance
- Nev has a Skype chat with the catfishee
- Nev and Max arrive at the catfishee's house and receive details of the online liaison
- Nev (assisted by Max) performs his mostly online investigation
- Nev and Max meet with the catfishee and report their findings
- Nev calls the catfish and convinces him/her to meet with the catfishee
- Nev, Max and the catfishee travel to the home of the catfish to seek resolution

According to both Hollywood.com and The Huffington Post, which later picked up the story, MTV was contacted with regards to these claims but failed to offer a response. As executive producer of Catfish TV, Nev has been very vocal in the media, stating that he is excluded from the casting process, and participant details are arranged by the producers (evidently of the non-executive variety) of the show. In order to avoid contrivances, he and Max are entering into a situation that they have no prior knowledge of. While admirable in some respects, this sentiment rings hollow in others, as if attempting to disassociate himself from any potential accusations of inauthenticity that may arise. The waters become more murky as season two surfaces, featuring an open casting call on craigslist and the MTV website with potential participants being asked to fill out a Season Two Casting Application<sup>4</sup> which seems completely unnecessary if the show developed as a result of thousands of people contacting Nev in search of help, as he repeatedly claims during season one. There is also a video on the MTV website with Nev making a direct appeal to those who catfish and inviting them onto the show: (<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1679345/s2-casting-call.jhtml>), thus confirming the fact, that the format of the program is subject to staging. But more worryingly, it calls the entire premise behind the show is called into question, and casts suspicion on the trustworthiness of host/executive producer Nev, who was quoted as saying:

“Well reality television obviously has developed a reputation through the years of being salacious and not a lot of people view reality TV as actually having any formal grounds in reality anymore. It feels very manipulated and obviously staged. So a big part of me agreeing to be the host of a reality show was that not only would we have a lot of artistic control on how the show looked and felt, but that I was actually going to do everything I could to make sure that the experience was real, not only for the people involved but for myself as well.” (Nev Schulman - i am Rogue )

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to Appendix One

### **4.3 Summary**

This section explored the covert activity, or behind the scenes action, that contributes to the formation of a reality TV show. The concept of staging was presented as a device that often enhances the perception of authenticity in the viewer, a phenomenon linked to the preference for fabricated reality, rather than genuine experience. In addition to entertainment versus information provision as the primary difference between documentary and reality TV forms, acceptance of staging also presents a significant difference between the genres, with staging being seen as an acceptable and often anticipated practice within reality TV environment.

The discrepancy between claims of authenticity and the need for casting agents on Catfish TV was also examined. This scenario is further problematised by the fact that the show's host is also the executive producer, a relationship which will be subjected to further examination in the following section, which will focus on subtextual analysis to ascertain if deviations in each system can be attributed to genre difference.

# REPRESENTATION & SUBTEXT

## 5.1 Fandom & Multi-Platform Dialogue

If there is one lesson learned by the Catfish team, it is that the story continues even after the documentary ends. Once the documentary was released, there were countless forums, articles, blogs and Q &A sessions that not only discussed the content of the documentary, but also the outcome for its participants. The discussions generated by the documentary had the unintentional result of creating a multi-platform experience for fans and followers. Multi-platform storytelling is a device used mainly by creators or distributors of cultural content. In such an instance different pieces of the narrative are told through different mediums which encourages a fan/follower to engage with the subject matter through sources as varied as comics, TV, gaming sites etc. The practice helps to create a buzz around the product, sustain interest, build a fan base, and often generates additional revenue streams.

“Another component of a sense of community is the feeling that one’s needs are met by participating in the group. These needs may be tangible, material items or intangible wants such as emotional connection and support.” (10, Reich)

In the case of Catfish, this happened quite unintentionally, as viewers and reviewers generated the multi-platform buzz, independent of the creators, demonstrating “the power of fans to become proprietors of their own textual spaces.” (7, Booth). It was quite clear the story didn’t end at the conclusion of the film, as Angela, the mother from the story had an interview with 20/20 News in which she claims that she continued to send Schulman emails attached to fake identities and attempted suicide as a way out. While this information has never been addressed by the Catfish team, Nev has claimed through various media channels that the two remained friends, and explained that Angela was paid for participating in the film. Ariel also weighed in with the following:

“We compensated her family pretty nicely,” the filmmaker revealed. “Plus, we auctioned off some of her paintings and she made thousands of bucks. And she and Nev talked the other day for the first time in months, because Katy Perry had just tweeted that she wanted Angela to paint her portrait. So we do cool things.” (Ariel Schulman, Los Angeles Times)



As evidenced above, the Catfish creators were invited sometimes invited to offer their perspective on the discussion, but in many more instances conversations transpired without their input. There were of course benefits to the controversy, such as exposure for their film, but the situation must have felt a bit like an out of control carnival ride to novices such as Joost and the Schulman brothers.

Catfish TV is also being explored through multi-platform storytelling, but in this instance it is purely intentional and orchestrated by MTV to create the impression of an interactive viewer experience. While the show is broadcast on television, episodes are also posted on the MTV site, which includes a blog offering sneak peeks, bonus clips, a comments section, and interviews with and updates on past participants. There is also the Remote Control segment, a feature of several MTV shows, which offers insider access to the characters. This feature creates a feeling of exclusivity, when in reality, the feature is accessible to anyone with internet service. The blog contains elements that reference a tabloid, such as in season two episode six, in which the term Catfish Smackdown is used to glorify disrespectful behaviour perpetuated against a guest in this particular episode. Taking cue from the precedent set by both the hosts and the blog entry, the comments section featured several incidences of verbal abuse and threats of violence against the catfish. An example is noted below.

**BigtimeAallyhia commented | 4 hours ago**

If I ever meet this guy in person I SWARE on my own grave I would straight up kick his a\*\*. Like \*\*\*?? This guy I bet still isn't sorry about what he did to Jen and other girls he's interacted with online. I hope something REALLY bad happens to him in the future. Sharpen up on his GAME?? I hope he realizes now that ALL the females in the world who watch the show will not even hang out or date him. DISGUSTING excuse for a human being.

Since the time of writing, this particular episode and all related communication have been removed from the MTV site without explanation, thus signifying the importance of media ownership if one wishes to control (or delete) the dialogue.

Another purpose of the blog is to offer product placement to the audience. Music is featured heavily in each episode, and attention is further drawn to its nondiegetic incorporation within the show, as the song title and the artist name are displayed while the song is playing, rather than in

the end credits. Viewers can also find a listing of tracks used during the show on the website, some of which (from emerging artists) are available as a free download, while a click on more established artists transports the user to a different MTV site. Product placement also occurs in the Catfish Road Diaries which are available for viewing on Amazon and YouTube. These mini features present side trips taken by Nev and Max during their cross country travels and often highlight a tourist attraction or local business in the area.

The advantage that the TV show has over the film is turnaround time. As films are reliant on distributors, there is often a sizable passage of time between creation and broadcast. TV however, works in an opposite fashion with the practicalities being attended to prior to broadcast. For this reason, as well as the fact that a TV show is ongoing, while a film is a static entity (with the exception of sequels, prequels etc) TV can be more responsive to viewers. MTV utilises this situation by having studio based reunion shows while there is still interest in the characters, which extends the lifetime of the TV show in the minds of the audience and legitimises the aura of authenticity cultivated by the show.

While the unintentional media attention generated by the documentary also extended audience awareness, this is where the similarities end. The conversations about the documentary are often reflective and process focused, while in contrast, the talk surrounding the TV show is highly subjective and confined to the superficial. There is also another fundamental difference in where the locus of control lies. With the documentary, the dialogue was viewer generated and the trajectory determined by the responses to the initial post or conversations generated as a result of the initial post. While the MTV site gives the impression of interactivity by blurring the boundaries between producers and consumers, this is in effect an illusion. The site itself directs viewer responses by formulating the questions and providing a framework for conversations, which exclusively focus on the plot (pre-show teasers) and characters (post show bonus clips). In this instance, the medium does dictate the message and by supplying the forum, MTV controls the dialogue. As witnessed by the unexplained removal of season two, episode six, when dialogues become unruly they are removed completely without explanation or warning, which

results in a highly differentiated and segmented relationship between cultural creators and their fans.

## **5.2 Cultural Voyeurism & Catfish Values**

Catfish purports to be a movie about false identities, and on a textual level this certainly is the case. And yet there is that unspoken twist at the end, referred to as a surprise ending.. And while the filmmakers were very clear that it was not their choice to market the film as a horror, a rather unanticipated move in the documentary genre, this was the strategy chosen by Relativity Media to market the film.

“When we saw the marketing strategy, we were definitely shocked. And I, at least for me, I was upset. I didn’t like the idea of this story, this thing that happened to me, being sensationalized. It felt like there was enough of an experience that people would see it and have a reaction. And I didn’t want to mislead them into seeing it for some other reason. But what I started to understand is that it’s hard to get people to spend hard-earned money to see something instead of something else if they don’t have any reason to. And you can’t just tell someone, “See it, it’s good.” (Nev Schulman, Screen Rant)

Rogue (formerly Rogue Pictures), which is now a division of Relativity Media, has been in existence since 1997 and was previously linked with both Polygram and Universal Pictures. After showing at Sundance, a bidding war ensued, and Rogue/Relativity purchased the rights to Catfish. This fact is noteworthy as the marketing of Catfish as a horror film is not a novice mistake, but a course of action developed through an actual marketing plan thus demonstrating the clash of values experienced when a distributor focusing mainly on reality TV turns their sights to the marketing of a documentary. Rogue is clearly experienced in the marketing of films, and as it is not standard practice for a single individual to develop and implement a marketing campaign in isolation (especially one based on a product that resulted in a bidding war), it can logically be assumed that there were many people involved with the campaign who felt that Catfish could be marketed as a horror movie.

The fact that Megan is not who she claims to be should not come as a surprise to viewers, as the documentary is advertised as a story about the creation of false identities. In essence, it is not

really the deception that is used as a construct to classify *Catfish* as a horror movie, but rather, what is discovered behind that door in rural Michigan. If the marketing of *Catfish* demonstrates anything, it is the perceived fear generated by the unanticipated collision of borders when three nice young men, who are educated, articulate and presumably from upper middle class families (how else do unestablished creatives in their early 20s pay for office space in New York city?) are forced to acknowledge the unanticipated and immense need found inside the house. If such a thing could happen to these bright, young men perhaps none of us are safe. Us implying the intended viewing public, those on the normal side of the boundary. By reframing the Wesselman-Pierce family as monstrous, both literally through the now iconic image of the closed door, and figuratively by labelling *Catfish* as a horror film, the dominant cultural ideology remains intact. In a reality where this family is depicted as the horrific other, the viewer is not forced to consider the possibility that this family is not so different from many other families living lives of silence and invisibility.

In a traditional sense, the word abjection describes the state of being degraded or viewed as an outcast. Julia Kristeva adopted this term for use in post-structural critique to describe being outside of the Lacanian symbolic order, while Barbara Creed built upon these theories to further explore the role of abjection in horror films. Simply put, conventional culture is disturbed by the abject, and the spectator undergoes trauma when forced to face the unmentionable. And is abjection not what the Wesselman-Pierce family represent to a culture that equates wealth with entitlement and need with unworthiness?

The fact that the film is presented as a horror sets the viewer up with expectations of the grotesque, rather than the unexpected, as the horror genre comes with its own set of conventions. According to Julia Kristeva there are three criteria used to construct an abject female identity in horror films.

- the film abounds in images of abjection, with a focus of bodily functions and wastes
- there is a threat between the border of the natural and unnatural
- the maternal figure is cast as a figure of abjection

If we apply this criteria to *Catfish*, some similarities emerge. Towards the conclusion of the film when the catfish is exposed, there are scenes which could be described as immensely sorrowful in nature, but there is nothing horrifying or grotesque, as images of abjection do not exist within the film. However, this absence of horrifying visual imagery actually strengthens the case for a subtextual analysis of the marketing of the film, as its absence suggests that the horror is something other than physical, exemplified the by the second criteria point, elaborated below:

“Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same-to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability. In some horror films the monstrous is produced at the border between human and inhuman, man and beast (*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *King Kong*); in others the border is between the normal and the supernatural, good and evil (*Carrie*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *Rosemary's Baby*); or the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not (*Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, *Reflection of Fear*); or the border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire (*Cruising*, *The Hunger*, *Cat People*).” (49, Creed)

The character of Angela, who refuses to be either invisible or silent, symbolises abjection in the traditional sense of the word and exemplifies the second and third points of Kristeva’s criteria. By marketing the film as a horror, Angela is placed within the imaginary abjection of the horror film, becoming something monstrous, and in this sense, her identity is taken from her. The character of Angela transforms from an overburdened mother figure to a plot twist, she who cannot be named. Despite her desperate attempts to express herself, by withholding her identity, the marketers reduce her to the unnamed terror that generates a marketing buzz. And while accusations of exploitation have been lobbied at the filmmakers, in this instance, it is the distribution company that should be held accountable for their actions.

Catfish TV markets itself as a search for love, as much as it is a search, for that ever elusive truth. While on a surface level it does conform to these notions, subtextually it symbolises a culture primarily preoccupied with superficial appearances. Almost every episode follows a familiar pattern.

- the catfishee proclaims their undying love for the catfish and claim that they want help to verify the person's identity
- after chatting with Nev and Max the catfishee decides to visit the catfish even though the duo has made the catfishee aware of several red flags
- the catfishee visits the catfish only to discover the person is not who they claim to be
- the catfish claims that despite their name and appearance, everything else was authentic

The catfish is given the opportunity to explain their actions and boredom and/or insecurity are the two primary reasons provided. A common refrain is also that the catfish was not expecting to have feelings for someone encountered online and by the time the relationship developed s/he was too frightened to reveal the truth. The majority of the time, the catfishee goes from professing undying love to complete disinterest in a matter of minutes, once s/he discover the catfish does not look the same as the photos supplied, although there have been some surprises. In a recent episode the person was actually who he claimed to be and was therefore not a catfish at all. And in two other episodes, couples actually united despite the person not looking like their photo. However, in the majority of cases, both the romance and the friendship dissolve, although the online relationship has often continued for several years. The catfishee commonly states frustration that the catfish is not who s/he claimed, as if one's name and physical appearance constituted the entire basis of their identity and the years of conversation and support amounted to nothing. So far it hasn't occurred, but it would be interesting to see how a catfishee would react if the catfish in question was more conventionally attractive than the photo s/he supplied.

While Catfish TV purports to be about the search for love, it is really about the search for surface appearances, and much like the participants who are drawn to the external appearance of their cyber paramours, Catfish TV performs on a superficial level, with brief mentions of bullying, suicide and self esteem issues, but never attempts to delve deeper into the subject matter. Aside

from mentorship from Nev, participants are not offered any form of counselling, or directed to any community resources.

“My role will not only be as the facilitator of them meeting up but more importantly a mediator. Someone who is there to act as an in between should things get difficult or too emotional, to not take sides and judge but to just simply be there to offer advice.” (Nev Schulman, i am Rogue)

While the above statement acknowledges that the intent of Catfish TV is to exist within the realm of the superficial, it also serves to market Nev as the nonpartisan voice of reason. However, there has been an escalation of biased behaviour in season two, with Nev and Max lecturing participants on the show who do not have their moral compass aimed in the trajectory deemed appropriate by the duo. In several instances guests have been referred to as liars, sometimes to their faces, and the term bullsh\*t has been thrown around to describe behaviour that Nev and Max are not happy with. Episode six of season two, resulted in Max and Nev repeatedly swearing at a catfish who would not take responsibility for his behaviour. Thus communicating the sentiment - everyone is worthy of respect, except those not sharing our values. This discrepancy between word and deed is obviously lost on Schulman<sup>5</sup>, who tweeted after the show:

[Nev Schulman @NevSchulman 6 Aug](#)

Online relationships involve real feelings. Treat people the way you would want to be treated, and be honest. [#catfish](#)

Catfish TV has repeatedly distinguished itself through the variety of representation found on the show. Guests are representative of the large diversity of humanity found in the US, with multicultural, many different increments on the socioeconomic strata, all shapes, and every aspect of the LGBTQ community being represented. For the most part (the exceptions will be discussed below) the lifestyle choices made by the participants are not sensationalised, judged or framed in such a way to invite ridicule of the participants. And while the meetings between the participants are often painful and have the potential to be volatile, the tone set by the show is one of reconciliation, rather than conflict. However, it could also be interpreted that these casting

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<sup>5</sup> Who is affiliated with the LOVE (Leave Out ViolencE) charity.

decisions are a calculated move to increase the viewership base through the depiction (or exploitation according to some postings found on message boards) of what a mainstream audience would perceive as exotic. This sort of cultural voyeurism was first popularised by The Jerry Springer Show in the 1990s and is still perpetuated in that show and increasingly in other reality TV shows, particularly those focusing on redneck culture. However, what differentiates Catfish TV from these other examples is the respect afforded to the guests.

Showcasing individuals of difference has a positive aspect, as it provides visibility to underrepresented groups in a heteronormative culture. Yet inclusivity, one of the biggest strengths of the show becomes slightly problematic when subjected to a subtextual analysis. The season one participant demographics are as follows: 18% transgender, 27% homosexual/bisexual and 55% heterosexual. When the subject matter of the show is taken into account, these numbers become problematic. It is difficult to provide completely accurate statistics on sexual orientation and gender identity due to the associated stigma, particularly in a country as politically and culturally conservative as the US, but 2011 figures from ABC World News suggest the trans population of the US to ranges from 2-5%, while the non-hetero population is believed to be in the 4-10% range. Even based on the highest figures, members of the LGBTQ are vastly over-represented on the show. If this was a TV show about inventors, artists or humanitarians, such an imbalance could be viewed as an attempt to challenge heteronormative cultural ideology. However, Catfish TV is a show about deception and confusion and the normative culture is vastly underrepresented in this regard. There is no way of knowing the corresponding percentages of potential applicants versus those chosen for the show, but the numbers raise some questions, such as, “Are there more applicants from outside the heteronormative world? If so, does this suggest that there are more catfish from outside the confines of dominant ideology?”, or “Is this merely an attempt by producers to boost ratings by offering their viewers an experience of cultural voyeurism?”

At the time of writing, only six episodes have been aired from season two, so it is difficult to predict the statistics for the entire season. Yet, a different trend has emerged thus far, with 17% representation for the bisexual/homosexual community, 0% transgender and 83% presented as



heterosexual. This shift can perhaps be attributed to the online flack the duo received for the treatment of their first transgender guest on the show, as they continued to use incorrect personal pronouns throughout the program, even though they were corrected several times in this regard.

This lack of sensitivity has manifested itself in other ways, such as the time in season one when both Nev and Max both made fun of a guest's body size (not in her presence) although there had previously been much larger guests on the show who were treated with sensitivity and respect. This then begs the question of whether these types of comments are continually being made, but edited out for the sake of conveying sensitivity to the viewers. This preoccupation with appearance has manifested on other episodes when one of the duo, usually Max, wonders aloud why a particular guest felt the need to catfish as she (and it is always a female whose appearance is being commented on in this respect) is attractive in real life. If the show has demonstrated anything, it is that the catfish have various reasons for fabricating their identity and focusing solely on their physical appearance tends to send a conflicting message to the life experiences communicated by the guests. Sadly, it also points to a sexism that is so inherent, that Max believes he is making an insightful comment. Yet such a statement is at odds with the show's attempted message of inclusiveness and very clearly communicates the value that the good looking catfish are not like the others.

### **5.3 Power Dynamics & Narrative Ownership**

Towards the end of the film, when Nev hides a microphone on his person with the intent of capturing the truth for the documentary, Henry questions the ethics of what Nev is doing and reflects on the manner in which the family is being treated in pursuit of a story. As there are always several ways of deconstructing an issue, this action could be perceived as self serving, in order to deflect anticipated future criticism, but unless Joost is a remarkably good actor, it is a moment in the film that does not feel fabricated. This scene provides an alternative insight into Nev's character, who is depicted throughout *Catfish* as the affable guy who has been duped, and deals with his circumstances through compassion. Yet this perception fails to take into account the fact that Nev's brother was the filmmaker and resulted in him having control over how his image was portrayed. With a brother and a close family friend both working as codirector-

producers on *Catfish*, the boundary between the subject and the filmmakers is not intrinsically defined. Although, there is no evidence to either confirm or deny this suspicion, it only seems logical to assume that Nev had some influence during the editing process as well. But perhaps the largest difference is that Nev and crew knew how the finished product appeared prior to signing any legal agreements with the distribution company. It is unclear whether the same can be said for the Wesselman-Pierce family, as interviews with the creators tend to focus on the benefit derived from their *Catfish* association rather than discussing pragmatic or operational details.

“Albert Maysles, the great documentary filmmaker, once told me that nobody wants to die without having their story told. That’s particularly true for Angela. She’s an exhibitionist and a dramatist. So when the time came to get a [legal] release [for the footage of her], she said ‘Yes’ immediately. She knew our work and she knew her story would be told to as many people as possible,” (Ariel Schulman, *Johnston Telegraph*)

While Ariel refers to her story when speaking about Angela, the documentary only allots about 6 minutes, or 7% of screen time to Angela’s actual story. In one respect, this is perhaps not surprising, as the scenario is new to viewers, and screen time must be dedicated to establishing the narrative arc. It also could be argued that a larger segment of screen time is dedicated to the road trip in order to build tension within the story. Yet both of these arguments mirror the results of the decision to market *Catfish* as a horror film - they reduce Angela to a plot twist. Casting further suspicion on the dynamic with Angela is her media silence. While she granted one interview with *20/20 News* there is no evidence of further interaction with the media and her Facebook page has been deleted; rather contrary evidence for someone described as an exhibitionist. Angela is either keeping a low profile by choice or has signed a contract dictating that she is required to do so. In either event, her silence, in addition to her limited screen time, has resulted in *Catfish* exclusively being referred to as Nev’s story. Depicted on the show as a sometimes unwilling participant, Nev, the narrative voice in the documentary and TV show, has now become the catfishing spokesperson.

*Catfish TV* clearly markets the show as a collective experience, with Nev intoning “*Catfish* the movie was my story. *Catfish* the TV Show is yours.” during the intro for seasons one and two, yet

it can't be overlooked that the intro to both seasons begins with the phrase, "Hi, I'm Nev." On Catfish TV, Nev is the executive producer, presenter and designated subject matter expert on the show, and as a result has enormous influence on how his image is portrayed<sup>6</sup>, control further exemplified when, as a guest, he invites participants to sit down in their own homes. These same participants sign a release form<sup>7</sup> prior to filming and trust that they will be represented in a fair manner. With so little control over the framing and the outcome, can the story be considered theirs? The formulaic nature of the show seems to suggest otherwise. If everyone is an individual, surely each story would unfold in a much different way. Yet each week the audience is presented with a familiar scenario. Granted, the details of the outcome vary, but the narrative arc does not deviate from the script, nor do the moral overtones of the story, with each catfish being prompted to reflect on how catfishing was a positive life experience that provided support during a time of need.

With the exception of two catfish, all other participants have expressed remorse for their behaviour and stated regret if not for their actions, than for the fact that they hurt the catfish. Catfish TV has a unique opportunity to present each participant in a different light and explore perspectives from both the point of the catfish and the catfish, and yet only 5% of the total collective show time is dedicated to the back story of the participants. For both the film and the TV show it is important to note that the participants are on screen for longer than the stated percentages, but the time is dedicated to private and public location shots and conversations that are directed by the hosts/creators.

Where this ratio becomes more problematic is on the TV show, which is actively marketed as the catfish's story. Catfish TV claims to be the story of its cast of rotating weekly characters. Yet most of the screen time is taken up by Nev and Max performing research, engaging in their humorous travel vignettes or discussing their take on the interior reality of the catfish. When

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<sup>6</sup> Nev is very much in control, as he is depicted as the person coordinating the show's trajectory and is always driving the car on the road trip, a direct contrast to his role in the film in which older brother Ariel was both the driver of the car and the person in control of the content. Nev's need to be in the driver's seat does appear to be asymptomatic of his need to be in control in general, a point slyly addressed by Max during season one. Perhaps it is coincidental, but the one episode from season one that was not aired by MTV diverges in formula from all of the other episodes, as viewers get to see the inside of Nev's house and it is the only episode in which Max is granted driving privileges.

<sup>7</sup> The Village Voice obtained a copy of an MTV contract for cast members of The Real World. Their summary of the 30 page document is included in Appendix Two.

screen time is dedicated to the catfish and/or catfish, it is heavily directed by Nev's questions. In episodes in which Nev does not support the world view of the catfish or catfish, moralistic brow beating ensues, and Nev attempts to sway the participant into his way of thinking. In this manner, Nev is not only the self designated subject matter expert of all things catfish, he is also the moral centre of the TV show. There isn't room for debate within the structure of the show as those with alternate views are quickly cast into the role of villain until they concede that Nev and Max are correct.

Regardless of format or genre, a text functions within a network of values and rules. Looking at the choices made in the TV show, it could be surmised that whether deliberate or not, Catfish TV reduces its participants to stereotypes in order to reflect a dominant ideology within the narrative structure. In such a system, Nev is cast into the role of mentor, leader, role model, and/or subject matter expert. In order for this system to be maintained, the participants must therefore be defined as followers, or those in need of assistance.

As Richard Dyer states in his essay, *The Role of Stereotypes*: "it is not merely a short-cut...it is something more. It is the projection upon the world our own sense of value," (Dyer, 245). To paraphrase Dyer, these values are grounded in social power, as the person with more power has a better chance of imposing his/her notion of reality.

Dyer lists four elements that are necessary for stereotypes to exist within the cultural production domain:

- 1) An ordering process – The belief in the absolute certainty of the particular order, and a refusal to deal with fact and recognize its limitations and partiality.
- 2) A short cut – A short explanation of a complex situation that implies knowledge of a complex social structure. Short cuts can be constructed through the use of a few immediately recognisable and defining traits, which do not change through the course of the narrative.

- 3) Referring to the world – Social types can figure into almost any kind of plot and can have a wide range of roles in that plot (complex/multidimensional), whereas stereotypes are one-dimensional and always carry an implicit narrative within their representation.
- 4) Expressing values and beliefs – Stereotypes do not only, in concert with social types, map out the boundaries of acceptable and legitimate behaviour, they also insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none.

Applying this model to the characters on Catfish TV, a precedent emerges:

- 1) As Nev states in the season one intro, the show exists due to the fact that thousands of people have contacted him for help. In reality; the catfish contacts the show as much as the catfishee, the show is created via casting application and most worryingly, Nev himself actively recruits catfish for the show. However, these facts do not seem to influence either the show's narrative or the manner in which participants are portrayed on the show.
- 2) Nev asserts his expertise each week by returning to the hotel room with Max to conduct research which could easily be explained to, and performed in front of the catfishee. Nev also manages to quickly convince each catfish to agree to a meeting although the catfishee states that the catfish has been stalling meeting with them, sometimes for years. This formulaic approach ensures that there is a predictable narrative trajectory for the audience.
- 3) As Nev is framed as a social type, his mood and approach to the world alters depending upon the attitudes of the participants on the show. During each episode, an act of contrition is automatically assumed to be sincere, while a withheld apology is viewed as a challenge for Nev (and to a lesser extent, Max) to overcome. As both the narrative voice and moral centre of Catfish TV, Nev is never shown apologising for his behaviour, even when it is abusive towards the guests. When Nev or Max have an outburst, this is framed as a reasonable response to the attitudes of those who do not share their worldview. In such a scenario, the catfishee is presented as a victim that Nev must defend while the

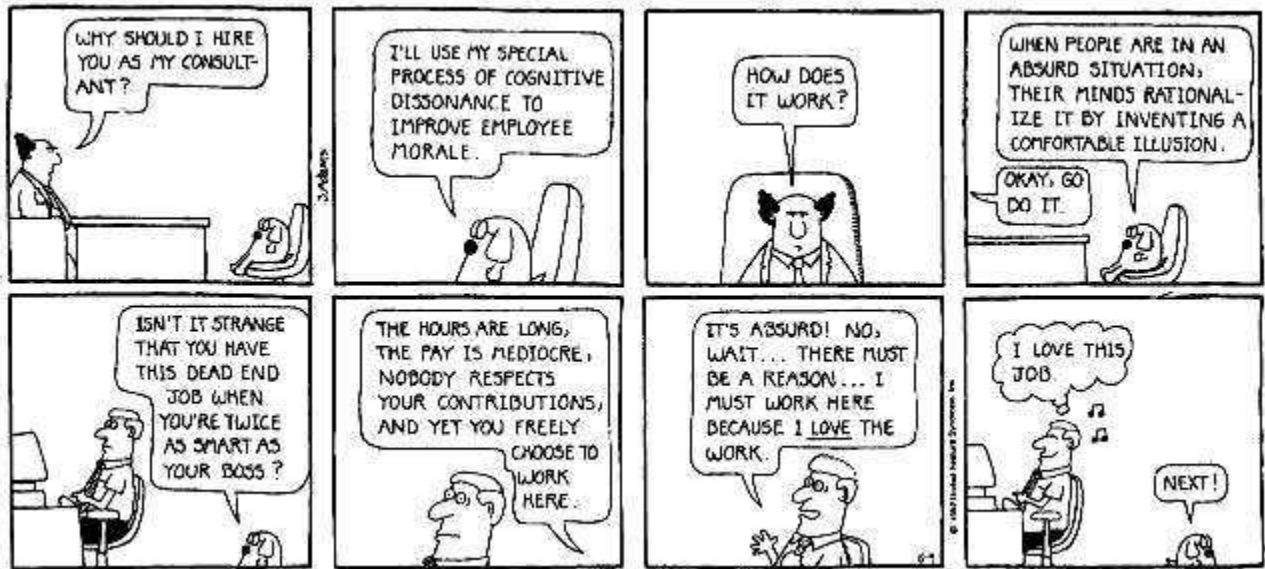
catfish is depicted as someone who needs to seek forgiveness for their actions. This scenario reduces both the catfishee and the catfish to stereotypes and never explores the complexities surrounding their story. It does not matter that Nev is an upper middle class urban New Yorker with social and cultural capital. As someone who has been catfished previously, the assumption exists that he cannot only relate to, but mentor a bullied, transgender person of a colour from a rural background.

- 4) As Nev is the self designated subject matter expert on Catfish TV, the dynamic between himself and the catfishee becomes polarised as Nev designates himself as spokesperson for the downtrodden. A superficial boundary is created, in which Nev is presented as being more culturally equipped than the catfishee to deal with his/her own life, which necessitates the need for the TV show. In essence, class and cultural differences are negated so that Nev's experience can become universalised and allow him to act as mentor to the catfishee. In this scenario, Nev has followed in the footsteps of Tyra Banks from *America's Next Top Model* who has used the *I'm one of you, but really I'm not* tactic to amass herself fame and fortune.

#### **5.4 Cognitive Dissonance**

“Cognitive dissonance is only possible where someone perceives, constructs or interprets a dislocation between thought and behaviour. It is, in this sense, a matter of framing.” (39, Ruddock)

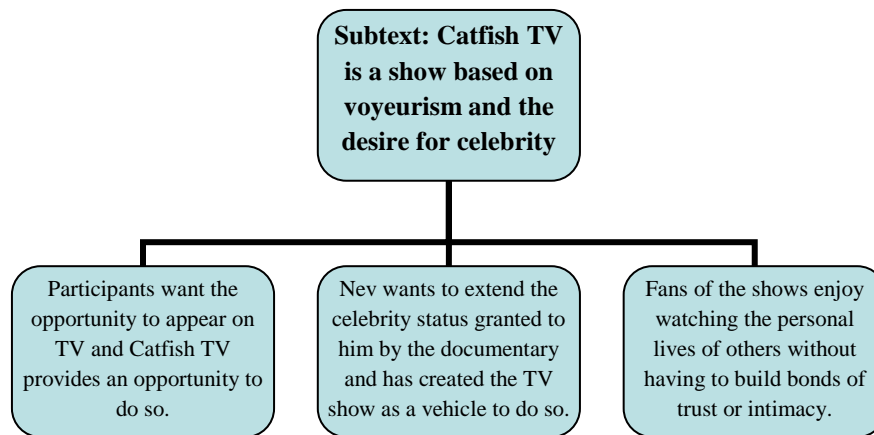
Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual's behavior conflicts with their values or belief structures. A tension occurs when there is a discrepancy between what a person believes that s/he should do under certain circumstances and what s/he actually does. In order to reconcile this tension, the individual in question, reframes the situation to minimise the tension and make sense of their choices. The concept is illustrated through the below Dilbert cartoon from August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1992.



The most obvious example of cognitive dissonance is found within the catfish/catfisher dynamic in which the catfisher provides all sorts of justifications as to why their online paramour is refusing to meet them in person, or engage in any online activity that will reveal their appearance.

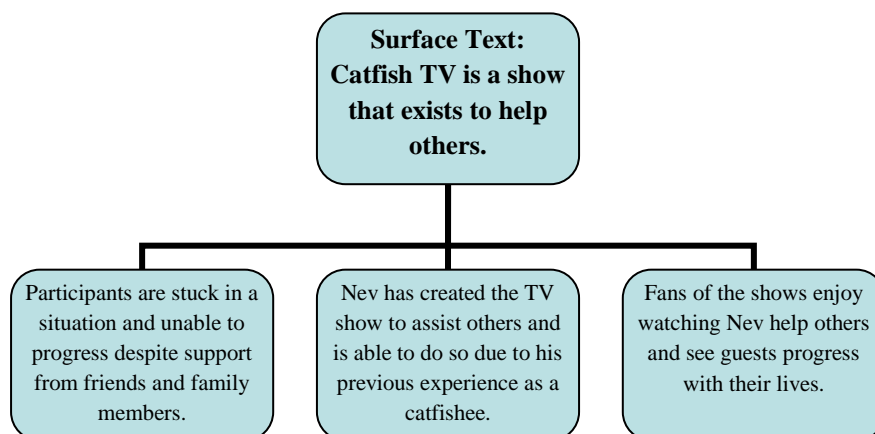
It is only fitting that a show about cognitive dissonance should feature a host engaged in the practice for the purpose of justifying the very existence of the show. After watching Nev Schulman in both the documentary and the TV show it is apparent that he does care about others and wants them to do well. However, there is also the fact that through both the documentary and the TV show, he is profiting in both the monetary sense and in terms of increased social and cultural capital, from the confusion and misfortune of others. As someone who attempts to be sensitive to others, there must be a tremendous amount of discomfort between his desire for fame and success and his unwillingness to appear an exploitive opportunist. As “media users evaluate media figures along criteria similar to that they apply to people they encounter in the flesh” (190, Giles), a way to reconcile these diverging realities is to package the show as a form of public service and present himself as a self identified subject matter expert whose sole purpose is to help others. Guests on the show collude in this practice as they state that they are on the show to receive help, rather than acknowledging desire for their Warholian five minutes of fame.

A subtextual analysis of the motivations of the Catfish TV dynamic would appear as follows:



While this dynamic contains elements of truth, the picture it paints is one which does not offer a very flattering reflection of the various cultural players involved. As each component in the cultural dynamic is dependent upon the *raison d'être* of the show for its own means of self identification, a textual repositioning of the show's intent offers a solution that continues participation while minimising cognitive dissonance. Such an approach is suggestive of a coherence theory of reception which "follows the cognitivist enterprise by assuming the film spectator is an active participant in the reconstruction of meaning. The active spectator wields her prodigious abilities to make sense of the images unfolding before her." (4, Oakley)

A textual model based on coherence theory would read as follows:





Surface text and subtext do not have to act in opposition, and can coincide with one another. As a means of minimizing dissonance, people tend to seek out information they expect to agree with, so rather than acknowledge the less pleasant aspects of the reality TV genre, and by extension, human nature, the focus is placed on the surface reality presented by the show in order to minimise discordant feelings . In order for these two realities to coexist, an implicit understanding must exist between all components of the cultural dynamic, thus creating a social structure that supports the collective need to minimise dissonance.

“A disillusioned individual will inevitably indulge in escapism to placate fears and will create structures that confirm individual values. When an entire society behaves this way, it forms the foundation for a make-believe reality: if everyone agrees the emperor is wearing new clothes, then he is.” (104, Torikian)

## **5.5 Summary**

A subtextual analysis revealed dialogue being controlled by the cultural distributor (MTV) and the cultural creator (Nev Schulman), in which a focus on either the superficial or only positive aspects of participant experience resulted in a lack of meaningful discussion regarding issues surrounding the participant and viewer experience of the TV show. TV show participants were shown to be depicted as stereotypes through overrepresentation of nonnormative groups and by reducing individual experiences to a victim/ aggressor dynamic. While the documentary and TV show are framed as collective stories, in reality both texts are heavily influenced by the host and narrator, who is the focal point of each story. The intent of the paper is not to paint the host in a negative light as it is obvious that he cares about the majority of the people he comes in contact with on the show. However, his desire for fame combined with his tendency to polarise issues has created a situation in which participants are denied the ability for genuine self expression as they must conform to his limited view of reality. While this outcome does have a strong correlation with the more covert aspects of the reality TV genre, it does not enhance the entertainment value of the show and therefore does not coincide with definition provided earlier.

# CONCLUSION

*“I may be wrong, but I’m never in doubt.”* Marshall McLuhan

This research project began with an interest in how concepts of the real are represented in reality based genres. A direct comparison between documentary film and reality TV initially presented an issue as studies in documentary film tend to focus exclusively on theory and form, while academic research on reality TV favours audience personality traits and content. However, by defining and classifying each form, a cross genre analysis revealed that the primary difference between the two types is that information provision is valued as the primary function of the documentary, while the reality TV genre places more importance on entertainment. This difference manifested itself through staging, a conventional practice within the reality TV genre but one which is viewed unfavourably within the documentary community.

A comparison between *Catfish* and *Catfish TV* was undertaken to ascertain if these differences manifested themselves through codes and conventions found within each form. *Catfish TV* borrowed the visual signifiers found within the documentary genre to lend an element of authenticity to the show, while neglecting to adopt the symbolic codes associated with documentary. This focus on superficial elements is indicative of a cultural gravitation towards the hyperreal, which is further intensified by casting agents and producers within the reality TV genre.

A subtextual analysis was performed to identify if textual deviations between forms are genre specific or based on an underlying ideological premise. While both *Catfish* and *Catfish TV* perpetuate assumptions based on dominant ideological premises, differences between types cannot be solely attributed to ideological posturing. Deviations within each form can mainly be ascribed to the difference in viewing frequency between each genre and responsiveness to audience feedback generated in online forums. The subtextual analysis revealed the perpetuation of stereotypes and reductionistic tendencies within *Catfish TV*, which appear to stem from the creator’s need to legitimise the social value of this particular show.

The desire to legitimise the social value of a cultural product is not a tendency often associated with reality TV, although it is a common practice within the documentary community. This idiosyncratic notion places Catfish TV in a unique position as it demonstrates the intentionality of the documentary without ascribing to the inherent objectivity of the form. This practice mirrors reality TV's adoption of documentary's visual conventions while disregarding the ethical codes found within the genre. Such hybridisation could be construed as a postmodern response to the documentary genre and has been cited by cultural alarmists as the downfall of the documentary form. Yet a response such as this fails to recognise culture as a constantly evolving form. The cultural sector is subject to cyclical behaviour and one only has to look at the current saturation point of the reality TV genre to realise that its current precedence is not eternal. An inclination towards a more substantial form of narrative in the mainstream cultural arena is already in evidence through Red Border Films, a newly formed Time Magazine company which intends to focus on the creation of ten minute documentaries, or communication giant AT&T's choice of Werner Herzog to film *From One Second to the Next*, its' PSA about the dangers of texting while driving.

While this paper was able to isolate characteristics that differentiated one genre from the other, the bigger surprise was the commonalities that the two forms share. Reality TV has had an influence on the documentary form, but the relationship is symbiotic in nature with documentary asserting its influence on the reality TV genre as well. And while I believe the paper was able to successfully answer the questions that it set out to explore, I do not claim that these same answers will still be valid in a decade or quite possibly even in a few years time. Like reality itself, these culturally defined characteristics are a work in progress.

# IMAGES

1 Marshall McLuhan

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/26/books/marshall-mcluhan-media-theorist-is-celebrated.html>

2 Ariel Schulman & Henry Joost

<http://americanfilmshowcase.usc.edu/henry-joost-ariel-schulman/>

3 Max Joseph & Nev Schulman

<http://www.mtv.com/shows/catfish/series.jhtml>

4 Megan

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Aimee-Gonzales/156707811022081>

5 Max 'filming' Nev

<http://www.mtv.com/shows/catfish/series.jhtml>

6 Nev filming Nev

<http://www.mtv.com/shows/catfish/series.jhtml>

7 Capoeira

<http://www.rio.com/practical-rio/capoeira-classes>

# PROGRAMS CITED

20/20 News	Land without Bread
America's Next Top Model	March of the Penguins
An American Family	Master Chef
An Inconvenient Truth	My Date with Drew
Big Brother	Nanook of the North
Candid Camera	Night Mail
Capturing the Friedmans	No Reservations
Catfish	Pimp My Ride
Catfish TV	Punk'd
COPS	So You Think You Can Dance
Crumb	Supernanny
Dr. Phil	Survivor
Drop Dead Diva	The Bachelor
Fear Factor	The Bachelorette
First Dates	The Cove
From One Second to the Next	The Jerry Springer Show
Gene Simmons Family Jewels	The Osbournes
Judge Judy	The Real World
Just for Laughs	Titicut Follies
Koyaanisqatsi	Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?
Kurt & Courtney	X Factor

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# APPENDIX ONE

## MTV's Catfish Season 2 Casting Application

Please only fill out the questions that apply to your story. Thanks!

- Name  First  Last
- City/State
- Email \*
- Phone Number \* ### - ### - ####
- Have you ever video chatted or webcammed? (Have you ever SEEN the other person through video?) \*  
 Yes  No
- Are you 18 or older? \*
- Is the other person in your online relationship 18 or older? \*
- Are you still in contact with your significant other? \*
- Phone number for significant other:
- Email address for significant other:

- Do you have a secret or something to confess to your online partner? Have you made any fake online profiles? Please explain in as much detail as possible.
- Do you have reason to believe that your current online crush is lying to you about who they are or what they look like? Please explain.
- Have you ever applied to another TV show? If so, what show was it and when? What was your role on the show?
- Which website led you to our Wufoo application?
- Where online did you first meet your significant other?
- Please tell us a bit about your story and your significant other. How long have you known each other? How serious is your relationship? (I.E. Do you use BF/GF titles? Have you said I love you? Do you talk about the future and marriage?)
- Why haven't you been able to meet in person yet? Does your significant other make excuses of why they can't get on a webcam or meet in person? If so, what are the excuses?
- How do you communicate? Via text, phone, IM, Skype and how often?
- If you were to finally meet, what are you most excited about? If you were to finally meet, what are you most nervous about? Please explain.
- Do you have anything special planned for when you first meet?
- Please include any social networking links (Facebook, MySpace, etc.) for you and your partner if you have them.
- Please attach any photos you may have of yourself or your significant other.

# APPENDIX TWO

By Camille Dodero Mon., Aug. 1 2011 at 7:45 PM Village Voice

Last Wednesday's Village Voice cover story profiled the DeBartoli sisters, two Staten Island sisters who starred in the never-aired Jersey Shore precursor Bridge & Tunnel and signed enormously binding contracts, legal documents that seemed to be written in another language but that they accepted anyway. This is standard practice for all its reality-show subjects, and though the following is a different document than the one the B&T girls inked, we've managed to get our hands on an unsigned Real World contract. The 30-page spectacular is worth careful scrutiny, but please enjoy the amusingly specific highlights we've summarized below. Happy birthday, MTV!

Under the stipulations of the following standard contract, participants in Real World--the granddaddy of "reality" shows, after Cops--agree to the following terms:

- You may **die**, lose limbs, and **suffer nervous breakdowns**. (Stipulation 1)
- If you undergo any medical procedures while involved in the show, they carry the risk of infection, disfigurement, death. (4)
- You may be **humiliated** and explicitly portrayed "**in a false light**." (12)
- Producers are under no obligation to conduct background checks on your fellow cast members. (7)
- If you contract **AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases** while filming ["gonorrhea, herpes, syphilis, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), Chlamydia, scabies (crabs), hepatitis, genital warts, and other communicable and sexually transmitted diseases or Pregnancy; etc"], MTV is not responsible. (7)
- Interacting with other cast members **carries the risk of "non-consensual physical contact"** and should you contract AIDS, etc. during such an interaction, MTV is not responsible. (7)
- You **don't have STDs**, but accept that other people on the show might. (18)
- You're not pregnant and you won't become pregnant before the show's done filming. If you do become pregnant, you'll tell the Producer immediately--and pregnancy is grounds for dismissal. (38)
- If you get **kicked off the show, it will be filmed**. (14)
- You can't change your physical appearance during filming, without the Producer's express permission. (26)

- You grant the Producer **blanket rights to your life story**. (49)
- The Producer can do pretty much anything they want with your life story, including misrepresent it. (49)
- Your **email may be monitored** during participation. (20b)
- You promise not to hide from MTV cameras in establishments where they can't film. (20a)
- You authorize the Producer to have total access to your school records, government forms, your credit history. (19)
- The production crew can show up at your personal house at any time to film and/or to take anything they want, as long as they return the objects once production has ended. (20a)
- Under ordinary circumstances, all of this would be considered a **"serious" invasion of privacy**. (11)
- For one year after the show's final episode airs, cast members are required to participate in all producer-determined press and forbidden from engaging in any media (radio, television, chat rooms, blogs) without the Producer's written permission. (9)
- The Producer holds the authorship and copyright to every photograph, email, website, sound or video recording, documented performance created in relation to the program, on every medium imaginable. (8)
- You're obligated to participate in a **Reunion Special for up to five years** after the show ends, you'll be paid **\$2500 for your involvement**, and the Producer only has to give you 14 days notice. (50c)
- You're required to participate in **book or home video projects** for two years after the show ends, and you'll be paid **\$750.00 for each one**. (50f)

Also, worth noting:

- While you're on the show, you're responsible for all long-distance phone charges. (16a)
- The explicit list of physical tasks you might be subjected to, enumerated in the contract, include traveling by "air (whether via helicopter, commercial airliner, glider, private aircraft or otherwise), train and/or automobile, as well as strenuous and/or dangerous and/or mental activity, including but not limited to, horseback riding, jogging, bicycling, motorcycling, exercise and/or weight equipment, skydiving, swimming, bungee jumping, parasailing snorkeling, jet skiing, amusement park activities, rock climbing, engaging in contact sports, hiking, kayaking and boating." (1)

The 30 page document that was used to compile this list has been removed from the blog, while the above summary remains online.