

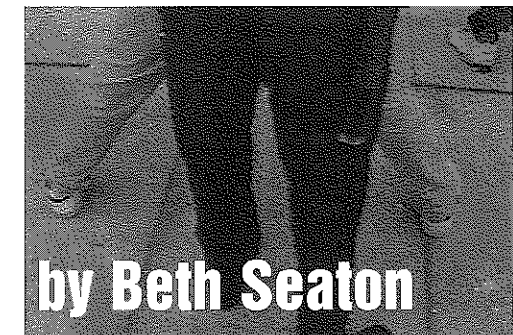
AFFECTED

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The Populist Resentments of

REALITY

TV



by Beth Seaton

Why "America's Most Wanted" and other shows like it make you lock your door at night.

There are moments in time when certain events appear inexplicable, whose severity and meanness seem just too sharp to grasp. "How did this happen?" we ask, and the answer we give, if we answer at all, tends to avoid difficult or uncomfortable explanations in favour of the easy response that such things are simply beyond our control.



In the city of Toronto, this response has become something of the chosen explanation for the election of Mike Harris and the outright meanness of his Conservative government's cuts within the social and cultural sectors. For those of us who live in this city whose choking air and ugliness are only made tolerable by its strong cultural environment, who consider ourselves enlightened and urbane, and who only last spring were laughing at the mediocrity of this man with the face of a corrupt choir boy, the consensus is that Harris was nominated by forces outside of our dominion. Simply put, it was those people out there—out in the expansive wasteland of exurban monster homes, or farther out in the more pastoral, but equally mysterious rural territories—who brought Harris and his Tory government to power. These are people who, it may be presumed, have little or no understanding of the life and experience of the city.

While there may be some truth to this rationale, the success of Harris's "common-sense revolution" extends beyond a simple tale of the country and the city. Nor may it be found within an economic explanation (the deficit), which is itself only a heuristic fib dressed up as a truth. Rather, the conditions of this "revolution" may be found within the far more nebulous and affective terrain of culture: that place where a hegemonic "common-sense" secures its nomination.

Harris's election is indicative of a fundamental shift in the cultural machinery of representation—where what is important (particularly for the task of building consensus) is not knowledge, but feeling, not critical distance, but an emotional closeness. Harris was able to push his politics into the sphere of consensus by speaking to people on a very subjective level. His attacks upon the deficit were not voiced in the dry language of economic rationale, but rather outrage. His attacks upon the poor—labeled as "welfare cheats" and "immigrants"—tapped into a mean and irrational paranoia of "the other." Nothing was explained, only felt.

What is disturbing about the success of this "common-sense revolution" is how neatly it appears to parallel a shift in audio-visual culture: particularly in terms of how television now defines and shapes social problems. Television, as all students of the medium know, acts as an important—if not the pre-eminent—public sphere. The social meanings which are circulated and constructed within this apparatus

matter very much to our lives. As a commercial medium geared towards the entertainments of promotion, television's persuasive powers and existence have long been dependent upon its ability to sell us things—commodity goods, social values, common sense—just as we are sold to advertisers. As a mass medium which is also a household object, television is doubly articulated between private lives and public worlds; it offers a felt connection between what is here and what is there, between what is actual and what can be imagined.

Much has changed in terms of the quality of television's mediations over the past ten years. Certainly, it remains an important part of the process by which consent to the existing structure of power in society is produced; however, the process by which this production takes place has changed. Television, which is equally an aural as well as visual medium, no longer expresses its hegemonic grammar in calm and measured tones, but increasingly in the stammering staccato of a talk-radio host, a carnival huckster or a populist politician. Its persuasive intonations tap into and bring forth not the new knowledges of insight, but the older abstractions of emotion: abstractions which pose the complexities of society in sensational and spectacular terms.

Television (and this is old news) has gone tabloid. It has moved away from public affairs into private matters, and, in the manner of any skilled gossip, it does so with a sophisticated interweaving of the truth and the lie. The staid work of television news has become entertainment: anchors engage in "happy talk," events are illustrated via computer generated re-enactments, and the "soft" melodrama of human-interest stories takes precedence over "hard" news. (Indeed, many news programmes are now produced under the networks' entertainment, rather than news, divisions). Conversely, entertainment programming, such as the police dramas, *Homicide: Life on the Street* or *NYPD Blue*, mimic the whirling hand-held style of documentary reportage, and often base episodes upon "real-life" crimes. The lines between an authoritative real and popular representation have blurred, and the chosen culprit for this mess of distinction is "reality programming."

Reality programming refers to an expansive industry label which includes the syndicated and network programmes of tabloid television news-magazine shows, video-verité and re-created crime, rescue and "man-hunt" programmes, and family amateur video shows. While the programmes grouped under this generic rubric are admittedly varied, there are three consistent characteristics which underscore each. First is the reality show's

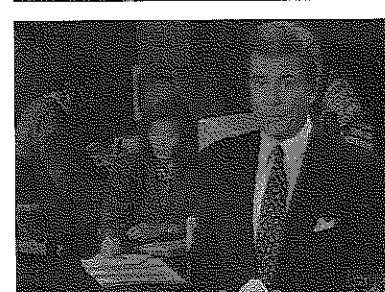
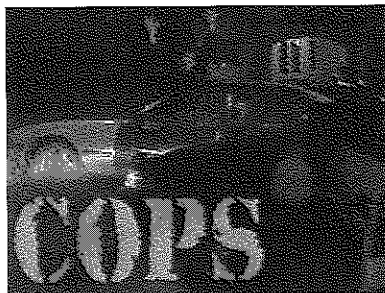
visible reference to, or dramatization of, "real" events, people or problems. This depiction of the "real" involves a flexibility which, while promising an unmediated relation to actuality, sometimes strains the bounds of the credible. Rather than solely relying upon actual documentary or "live" footage, reality programming often draws upon a mix of acting, news footage, interviews and re-creations in a highly simulated pretense of the "real." Moreover, this dramatization of actuality—involving the liberal use of flashy graphics, creative editing and evocative music—is largely geared towards self-promotional, rather than informational, ends. In essence, the effectivity of the "real" in these shows is drawn from popular memory and forms, specifically the popular forms of commodity culture. Second, these programmes are the stuff of moral disorder and deviance—crime, corruption, sexual infidelity, victimization—particularly as they take place within a private sphere. While the random violence of everyday life is tempered in the family video-shows towards the "happy" pratfalls of domesticity (with the hardest fall awarded a cash prize), the tabloid and cop/manhunt sub-genres pose criminality and deviance as a constant threat whose existence demands social and moral redress. Hence, the supercilious condemnations of the tabloid, or the cop/manhunt shows and their weekly variations on the theme of Nancy Reagan's staged crack-house bust, in which police, with camera crews in tow, make a "live" show of their powers, their "compassions" and their moral convictions.

Finally, reality programmes express their social or moral dilemmas in highly emotional terms, for this is crucial for their (self)promotional function. Importantly, it is feeling, rather than seeing, which is the basis for believing in these shows. Stress is laid upon individual and immediate ramifications, particularly in terms of how someone feels or responds to the reported event. In this respect, it is no longer a distanced or neutral gaze which acts to establish actuality, but rather an appeal to subjective identification, wherein what matters most is the proximity of the depicted event to the experience of the audience. In other words, the adulterous affair on *Inside Edition*, the brutal mugging on *Cops*, and the groom who throws up at his wedding on *America's Funniest Home Videos* are all events which could ostensibly happen to the viewer. This appeal to subjective involvement is further established through certain participatory strategies that, in the sacred tenet of "consumer choice," encourage audiences to interact with the programme. Thus, viewers of *Hard Copy* are offered 1-900 numbers in order to place phone-in votes at the end of the show ("Burt or Loni? Who do you believe?—Callers must be 18 years or older"). *America's Most Wanted* asks its viewers to assist in the capture of suspected fugitives profiled on the show by calling the toll-free hotline 1-800-CRIME-TV. And studio audience members of *America's Funniest Home Videos* vote for the "funniest"

video shown during the programme.

There was a time when the tabloid shows were laughingly dismissed as the vulgar and insipid freaks of the programme schedule. Just as some of us, in a not-too-distant past, found Mike Harris and his supporters to represent only the more regressive or "backwards" extremities of an oxymoronic Progressive Conservative Party, so too were these shows held to address only a small constituency of the television audience: the depths of a lowest common denominator. Consumers of these programmes were imagined as the televisual version of those big-haired women who supposedly frequent the supermarket's check-out lines - checking out the tabloid's sensational stories of lust, adultery and the occasional Elvis sighting - while waiting to buy the week's supplies of cheese-whiz, wonder bread and diet coke. In effect, both the tabloid shows and their audiences were derided within an evaluative framework of gustatorial, aesthetic and moral distinctions: signifying not only the processed junk food of a "feminine" mass culture which holds no productive or aesthetic value, but the bad taste of the "feminized" masses, who are consumed by the urge to buy into the small fibs and excessive fabrications of the tabloid's screaming headlines.

As reality programming was to mutate and expand beyond the "tasteless" confines of the tabloid show, its presence came to be perceived as less of a joke, than a threat. Emerging during a period of intensified competition for viewers and advertising revenues, reality shows quickly proved attractive to networks and syndicators in that they were not only cheap to produce (and buy), but were solid ratings performers. Before the 1988/89 season, the little vulgarities that Fox built - the tabloid show *A Current Affair* (which debuted in 1986), the video-verité reality series *Cops* (1988), and the re-created "man-hunt" series *America's Most Wanted* (1988) - stood alone. Soon after, however, similar candidates were offered by the Big Three networks which had the foresight to recognize a good thing when it hit them in the ratings. It was then that the dismissive laugh became a panicked cry. The menace of mass culture was at the gates, and we were asked to be vigilant to the ways in which, in the words of the *Globe and Mail's* John Haslett-Cuff, "the sometimes tawdry techniques of tabloid journalism were seeping into the mainstream." What was perceived as a greater threat than its tawdry tastes or generic expansions, though, was the reality show's confusions of the "real": that necessary component of television's supposed capacity to depict actuality accurately and neutrally. Reality programming's willful



contempt for the journalistic conventions of naturalism raised questions about our ever-more impaired relation to reality.

Undoubtedly, much of the excessive expansion of reality programming may be attributed to the economic demands of a competitive television market. The crisis and confusion represented by the mutations of reality programming also find correlation among other changes in social sensibility. There is great attention paid these days to what are perceived to be radical shifts in the thresholds of social and moral value—not only in terms of a perceived “epidemic” of crime, single motherhood, youth violence, homosexuality and uppity women—but more generally in terms of an overall denigration and demise of once-stable societal “truths.” In any number of articles debating the existence of “chilly climates,” the “fairness” of affirmative action, or the ground lost by white men, the explicit or implicit complaint is that social categories (of race, of gender, of sexuality, of class) will no longer stay in their places. Anyone may be a victim these days, anyone an aggressor. In this respect, condemnations of reality programming’s “feminine” violations—its emphasis upon moral disorder, its appeal to the subjective, and its perversions of “the real”—may be read as symptomatic of a culture in which the lines drawn between reality and representation, between the private and the public, and around categories of social identities, have become muddled. More particularly, in its hyper-dramatization of “the real,” reality programming may be seen to comment upon itself, foregrounding its own constructedness and cultural status as television, and “bad” television at that. Hence, the faked factuality of reality TV can be found to reveal the codes and processes of an ideological realism, rather than to disguise such codes as common sense.

Despite such self-conscious expositions, reality TV acts in the service of repairing, rather than tearing, the more insidious weave of a conservative ideology. Its violations of “the real” cannot be extended onto a celebratory logic which reads reality TV as, in the words of media scholar Kevin Glynn, a “primary site of rupture in the ideological fabric of bourgeois culture.” (Such readings in fact

believe a peculiar, and largely bygone habit of some analysts of culture whose myopia won’t allow them to see the hegemony for its “resistances.”) The obligations of reality programming are guided more towards the re-assertion of once-stable social truths; its onus is to provide a simulated relief from the assault upon once-sanctified cultural and moral values. Ironically, this restoration is conducted through the exhibition and policing of a private, “feminine” domain.

This private domain does not strictly refer to the home, nor does it necessarily encompass a “feminine” place. Rather, it pertains to those places which have historically served as repositories for, or domains of, social difference. Such a place could be the home, it could be a park which at night becomes a “queer space,” it could be the street (and increasingly, for poor people, it is). It is that place which, for whatever historical contingency, remains excluded from the universalist rights of a public sphere.

In Canada, as in the United States, the state expresses its norms and regulations in neutral and general terms, wherein political rights are said to be available to all, irrespective of social differences. While not entirely banished, but certainly transcended within the discourse of public rights and responsibilities, difference is argued to be important only within an experiential or personal venue. It is thus the domain of the private which harbours difference, as all that which remains other than a universalist or normative standard.

Not surprisingly, Harris’ cuts are aimed at those public institutions responsible for alleviating the difficulties of difference, particularly as this difference is

articulated in a private sphere: welfare, childcare, legal aid, health care, work equity, public transportation. In a like manner, it is the domain of the private which is the televised site of ideological conflict and difference and thus the scene of social policing. While reality programming’s voyeuristic scrutiny of the scandals of the private plays up the demise of once-sanctified social and “family” values, such scrutiny, conversely, is also the means by which an embattled dominant order now simulates reprisal upon the homes and bodies of those outside of its normative purview. This social and moral redress is evidenced in tabloid TV’s hyperventilating personalization (and thus domestication) of often murderous social/sexual/racial conflicts, wherein the challenge which difference may pose is erased of any material or ideological conditions. We see such reprisals most punitively in the video-verité cop shows, whose simulated actuality is anchored to a faith in the spontaneous and uncontrolled “truths” of the camera. Rather than exposing reality for the purposes of social critique, such programmes are geared towards the production of social consent, wherein the spectacle of violence condones the authority of a violent policing power. The reality “discovered” by this process is in fact constructed by it. The faces of perpetrators—overwhelmingly black, chicano or women, overwhelmingly poor—are rarely obscured in these programmes, but shown, close-up, as the gruesome physiognomic evidence of criminality. The cops give a running narrative to the authorless and mutely adoring camera, talking of the prevalence of crime in their city and their frustrations in dealing with it. The camera runs on as police, dogs and camera crews literally crash into the privacy of people’s lives, bursting into their homes in the middle of the night, turning over tables, turning up drugs, turning over their children to state authorities, all in the best interests of a universal constituency, “the people.”

Producers of the cop and man-hunt shows, perhaps in an effort to distance their product from the “trash” stigma of tabloid TV, like to describe their programmes as “pro-social,” as offering a form of public service. Supposedly, these shows are designed to foster a solid consensual ground of social and moral certitude. In their appeals to viewer identification, the helpful “crime tips” offered, and the participatory strategies of 1-800 numbers used to report a suspicious stranger, neighbour or friend, they presumably offer a rhetoric of citizenship and engagement, whereby collective watching translates into the collective practice of caring.

This moral and social consensus is directed less towards collectivist ends than to an individualist and conservative populism. It is addressed not towards the “public” citizen, but the citizen-consumer, whose primary motivations involve the pursuit of self-preservation and self-protection from the cruel (and largely economic) exigencies of the world. The social dimensions which these shows express encompass a crude rendering. Crime is rampant out there—committed by all those crazies and coloureds and deviants—and it’s inexplicable. There is not much to be done except sit back, watch, and hope it doesn’t come your way. The feelings mobilized on these shows are not those of caring (except about one’s self), but those of fear and insecurity; feelings which are simultaneously raised and then allayed with the ebb and flow of emotional closeness and self-conscious artifice. By making a spectacle of “the real,” reality TV acts to exaggerate the “nearness” of this condition, while insulating the viewer from its touch, keeping misery at a proper and categorical distance. As a genre which promises an unmediated or direct engagement with “the real,” it nonetheless offers a sensational flight from the social crimes of the real world. It professes a love of truth and compassion in all of its dramatized forms, but never in its complex substances.

During a period in which “gated” communities are rapidly becoming the standard for suburban housing, the attempt to keep difference at bay—away from the guarded dwellings of the “normal”—has become not only a developer’s dream, but also the obsession of a new privileged class. In so far as it supports such an obsession, reality programming may be the placating panacea of a new feudalism: a divisive society where the exurban elite remain safe behind their gates, while in the decaying city, the images of the deviant poor (Mike Harris’s “special interest groups”) are captured and broadcast back to them, reassuring them in their limited understanding, their meanness, and their populist conceits.

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