This paper addresses the topic of Reality TV: why we love it, why we hate it, and how we have become it. Initially wanted to answer the question: How has reality television become simultaneously one of the most hated and most popular forms of entertainment in America? However, I ended up with another: Has the rise of Reality TV influenced our culture or is it a product of the culture we live in?

"One day you're in, and the next day you're out."

Heidi Klum says her famous line with a chilling stare and red lipstick, walking down the catwalk with 'PROJECT RUNWAY' in big block letters in the background. Eight year old me is reciting Klum's catchphrase word for word, inches from the tv screen. My mom and I stay up late on a school night critiquing the unconventional challenge garments alongside with the judges. I tell her I have to be a fashion designer when I grow up and apply to be on the show, so I can meet Heidi Klum and make it to Fashion Week. Eventually I fall asleep to the sound of Tim Gun saying *Make it work…*

Project Runway was the first reality tv series I ever watched. Everything about the show was exciting for me: the quirky contestants, their dramatic confessionals, Nina Garcia's ruthless comments. I didn't know it at the time but that show unlocked the door to my guilty obsession with all things overly produced, edited, and flashy. I started off simple: Game shows. *Jeopardy* would always be on tv because my dad's childhood best friend was on the show for an eight episode run in 2010. The thought that someone I actually knew in real life was on one of those ostentatious sets, speaking into a microphone, talking to Alex Trebeck, amazed me. Unlike the movies or sitcoms I'd seen at the time, I wasn't watching actors on the screen, I was watching 'real' people. I devoured episodes of *The Great British Bake Off*, *Chopped, Cutthroat Kitchen,* and all the other cooking shows not soon after my game show phase. Next there were competition shows: *America's Got Talent* and *American Idol*, which my cousin and I viewed at my grandma's house in Florida every spring break.

As I approached highschool, the shows I watched became more ridiculous but more consumable. My mother told me if she ever caught me watching *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* in our house she would disown me. So of course I watched it, every night, learning the names of all the sisters and their constantly changing spouses. I felt massively comforted whenever I came home from a long school day and curled up in my bed to watch Khloe and Kim argue over which car they should take to Malibu. The transition between *KUWTK* to franchises like the *Bachelor* and *Love Island* was so natural, I watched season after season of strangers fall in love and break up immediately.

Once I got past and accepted that 'these shows are absurd, disgusting, and problematic to their core' mindset, I could allow myself to dig deeper into the manufactured plot lines, to analyze every twist the host threw at the contestants, and to view the show in a completely different way. Instead of immediately dismissing these shows as a complete waste of time, I saw them as having some sort of value or substance to learn from: they are the mirror of every problem in our society, reflected through lip injections and confessionals. Or the window to a harsh reality, caked in dirt and grease, that is observed from afar. Sometimes the truth is hidden under a counterfeit representation that appears abstract at first, but often is more real than you might think.

I am on a journey to find out why I am infatuated by something that is so agreeably hated upon, something so easily critiqueable, something that has been called 'The Museum of Social Decay'. I hope to discover what it says about me that I contribute to the growth of such Museum, what it says about all my fellow consumers of televised garbage, and our society as a whole. Essentially, I want to answer the question: How has reality television become simultaneously one of the most hated and most popular forms of entertainment in America? Has the rise of Reality TV changed our culture or is it a product of the culture we live in? Why do people love it, or love to hate it? These are the questions that I hope to explore as I continue to research.

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To better analyze any subject, it is important to understand what it is exactly, how it began, and how it developed over time. Reality TV is a genre of television programming that showcases how ordinary people behave in their normal, everyday lives or in made-up situations. In this vague definition, *ordinary people* means unprofessional actors and *normal* means highly produced and edited. It is important to acknowledge at this point that although these shows are called 'Reality TV', they do not truly demonstrate reality, but an altered one that aims to entertain rather than inform the truth. Often times reality tv is produced to follow the arc of one person or group dynamic to form an artificial plot line, meanwhile documentaries focus on the bigger picture with an emphasis on facts rather than entertainment.

Filming ordinary people in odd, unscripted settings dates back to long before *Survivor* emerged at the turn of the century. In the late 1940s, a producer named Allen Funt created *Candid Camera,* a popular and long-running television series that featured random people being confronted with unusual situations, filmed with hidden cameras. The strangers' reactions would be shown and followed by a "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*!", similar to John Quiñones popping out at the end of a *What Would You Do?* episode. *Candid Camera* became so popular that it lasted decade after decade, rerun after rerun, spin off after spin off, until the last season in 2004. The show set a foundation for every other reality based show after it, by introducing the idea that video media does not have to include professional actors, a group of writers, and a strict script for it to be valid and entertaining.

After President Lyndon B. Johnson signed The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) established both the National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). This was a significant moment in television history because PBS did not have to depend on advertising revenue like other commercial networks, which meant that it had the flexibility to broadcast more experimental programs. Thus, the show *An American Family* aired from January to March in 1973, showcasing an intimate examination of the Loud family and their day to day lives in Santa Barbara. Producer Craig Gilbert did not have a plot, script, or general goal in which he wanted the series to build around; instead, he adopted an observational, low edit, film style, that allowed for the quotidian moments of the 'average' family to show through. The uncomfortable quietness and unfiltered quality of '*An American Family'* shocked sitcom audiences all over the country who were used to laugh tracks and harmless, packaged, surface level drama.

Gilbert's initial objective to capture the mentality and living patterns of a 'Classic American Nuclear Family' did not work out so well; he ended up recording the drama of a family in the process of falling apart. By the final episode of the 12 part series, Bill and Pat Loud's 21-year marriage was destroyed, Bill had a business crisis, and the oldest son was open about his homosexuality with his parents, at a time when none of these very real problems had ever been shown on television before. *An American Family* was massively popular, drawing in 10 million viewers by the end. The world had never seen anything like it, and with anything new comes debate and critique. Many of the questions spurred at this time are still echoed to this day: Were they being truly themselves in front of the cameras? Were the events edited in a way to make them more dramatic than they actually were? Of course they were.

The interest stirred by viewers after *An American Family* lead to various spin offs, fictional recreations, and of course, the birth of an entirely new television genre: Reality TV. Craig Gilbert was completely ahead of his time when he took a camera into the intimate life of one family and aired it on national television, because it wasn't until the early 90s that producers recognized the popularity of the concept. In 1992, *The Real World* was born, MTV's variation of *An American Family* that involved filming the day-to-day lives of a group of young strangers who live together. At the turn of the century, *Survivor* was born, packaged with confessional style interviews, a steady format, and a whopping $1 million cash prize. This marked the beginning of the modern Reality TV era- as views soared and multiplied, so did the number of shows. Producers continued to push the boundaries of the genre, discovering a new quirky outlet of life or an interesting competition concept to create a series out of.

It is impossible to name all of the different types of shows that exist under the umbrella term that is Reality TV because the genre is constantly expanding, but some examples are: Love and Relationship programs (*The Bachelor, Love Island, Married at First Sight),* Game and Competition programs (*Survivor, The Amazing Race, American Idol),* Celebrity programs (*Keeping Up with the Kardashians, The Simple Life,* Transformation programs (*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, Queer Eye, What Not to Wear),* Lifestyle programs (*The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills, Jersey Shore),* and many many more.

The man who produced *The Bachelor* franchise also produced *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* reboot series. I am both creeped out and amazed, but not at all surprised by this fact. I've always felt that there is an underlying darkness to reality tv shows, as if I was not watching actual people on my screen but robots or aliens acting as 'normal' human beings. There is a clear comparison between reality tv shows and gladiators fighting in Roman coliseums, in my mind. Both are cultural phenomenons of society that reflect the values of their respective time period, whether it's the obsession with physical strength or popularity. They also do not only consist of the main event, but rely heavily on the onlookers, the audience, the silent spectators. These groups derive pleasure from observing the terror, humiliation, humor, or passion faced by another person. Reality TV is a grand Roman coliseum that stars idiots who are willing to provide entertainment which is continuously fueled by our voyeuristic society.

Reality TV is so popular for this reason: people like to watch other people. Whether it is to escape their own realities or to live vicariously through fabricated ones, people are entertained when they observe a life that isn't their own. This is the appeal of Reality TV that no other form of video media can provide, because completely scripted fictional shows will not make you think, "Was that real?". However, on *Bachelor and Paradise,* you can't help but ask that question when a dramatic, violent fight breaks out on the beach. It is the possibility of realness that keeps us watching; the idea that ordinary people are becoming heavily produced characters that could somehow slip up and show their humanity is a fascinating idea.

Americans are largely obsessed with comfort and ease, which plays a big role in the popularity of Reality TV. The reason shows like *Survivor* have been running for nearly 40 seasons is because of the stability and reliability of both the audience and the program. For many people it is part of their daily routine to come home, eat dinner, and watch the latest episode of the show they are currently binging. It is easy to watch people make a fool of themselves, and it is easier to critique people making a fool of themselves. The criticism of these programs fuels them even more, because whether you hate it or love to hate it, the views are increasing the demand, therefore increasing the supply.

Every other reason for watching Reality TV is essentially rooted in voyeurism and the attraction of surveillance. Author Gerald Mast wrote, "*Voyeurism* allows us to experience all the excitement of disaster, catastrophe, and pain, to witness the most horrible human events, without any danger of feeling real pain." Some audiences use these shows as an escape from their own realities, as they prefer to live on an island in Spain with a bunch of twenty-somethings, or in the kitchen competing with other Top Chefs, than their own boring lives. Some viewers are intrigued by love, and are even more intrigued by heartbreak. They become invested in relationships on shows like *Love Island,* as they glide from episode to episode, watching the show only to see their favorite couple have a cute montage or go on a date. The beauty of Reality TV is that the genre is so broad that there is a show out there for everyone. Interested in business? *Shark Tank.* In fashion? *Project Runway.* In family? *17 Kids and Counting.* Almost every corner of America has been poked and prodded at to see how many views a camera crew and a loose plot line can get you.

Reality Television has proliferated in the 21st century, therefore becoming a representation of the time period and our current culture, regardless if its widely hated or not. The filmmaker Guy Dubord called an inverted image of society, where authentic social life has been replaced with its representation, The Spectacle. Media and all forms of Television, especially Reality TV, act as Spectacles of us; they are both a reflection of society and reflected within society. The Spectacle and society work hand in hand, pushing and pulling each other to produce new social trends and movements. Our culture has been converted to celebrity worship and instant fame as a result of these Reality TV shows praising such, and these shows are being created to satisfy our fascination with celebrity culture at the same time. The themes and ideas brought up in the media are manifested within pop culture, and the trends within culture are amplified through the media. For example, many of the shows in the 1950s reflected the values of the time: the perfect nuclear family, conformity, and gender roles.. As our values change over time, so do the themes represented in the Spectacle.

The rise of capitalism, consumerism, and technology have all played a big role in influencing modern culture and entertainment; overtime society has focused less and less on the group, and more on the individual. With the rise of personal computers, smartphones, and cameras, each person is given access to the internet and power over how they present themselves as online. To me, the impact of Reality TV culture is clear and present. We may not all be recorded with cameras everywhere we go, but we willingly do it ourselves when it comes to posting on social media. Reality TV is just ordinary people exaggerating themselves to become their more consumable, entertaining, and popular alter egos. Are we not doing the same on Instagram by projecting our most lovable and interesting selves? Has Reality TV encouraged the recording of everyday situations and moments on Snapchat? Have the confessional booth interviews on competition shows inspired us to tweet out our every thought to the world?

I will not stop watching *Love Island* every summer, or keeping up with who is the next bachelorette, no matter how many people tell me I am destroying all my brain cells. I've learned a lot more from watching an episode of *Big Brother* than I ever did in my sophomore year history class. Maybe I'm exaggerating a little bit, and maybe that is a product of consuming too many hours of Reality TV.