

# Reality TV

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*Version 1.5 (posted on 3 May 2022)  
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Looking backward in time from where we are today, when did America cross the threshold from being a fairly typical culture — full of good stuff and bad stuff, real stuff and fake stuff, where all the categories were intertwined and ultimately inseparable — into becoming the lurid spectacle of a full-on, all-day-every-day Reality TV show, where even the appearance of reality is an illusion?

Reality TV is, of course, an oxymoron — paired words or phrases that contradict each other in stark contrast, like the sarcastic interpretation of terms such as “military intelligence” or “political science.” The particular oxymoron of Reality TV was coined to describe an entire thriving class of television shows that purport to be “real life,” but which are actually fictional, created out of whole cloth by the people who make the shows. In other words, Reality TV is fiction masquerading as reality, presented as entertainment, for the purpose of profit.

Reality TV shows have existed since television supplanted radio’s brief run as America’s primary entertainment medium. Think back to the first televised bouts of “professional wrestling” from the 1950s. Over recent decades, however, those kinds of shows have proliferated like rabbits. Hell, WWE and the phenomenon of MMA have spawned an entire sports industry of theatre, spectacle, and performance art. Along the way, various sub-genres emerged: dating programs, makeover programs, docu-soaps, skill competitions and talent contests, court programs, reality sitcoms, and celebrity variations. In a very real sense, Donald Trump’s path to the White House was paved by his celebrity status as a Reality TV star. He would never even have run, much less been elected, without that. The thing is, though, almost all politicians today are Reality TV stars.

So, how far back shall we go to mark the time when America succumbed and became Reality TV Nation? The last year? The past two decades? A century or two? Even though America has always been rife with contradiction and heavily prone to mistaking illusion for reality, I think the die was cast when video screens became ubiquitous. Although television entered American culture around the middle of the 20th century, it wasn’t until flat-screen TVs and smart phones that our addiction became full-blown. Sure, we could go back to 1960 and the first televised “debates” between Kennedy and Nixon. Each succeeding decade then saw a new spate of Reality TV shows.

Arguably, though, social media was the tipping point — Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and all the other social media platforms that support video content. What that has revealed and taught us, like a pie in the face, is that all the major television news networks — Fox, CNN, MSNBC, and PBS — are *also* Reality TV rather than authentic journalism. In addition, every other significant American institution has been unmasked as untrustworthy. Whatever former consensus we felt as a nation has come apart at the seams.

America's fracturing into echo chambers, silos, and tribal camps has paralleled our descent into Reality TV Nation, so that the paradoxical but co-existing contradictions of gullible belief on the one hand and utter skepticism on the other are now more didactic and extreme than may have been the case in the past, although even that can be argued either way. A sad truism is that humans typically prefer illusion to reality, and America has expanded that proclivity to all-encompassing depths.

What's painfully obvious is that we are now like the audience at a classic three-ring circus, except that there are many more than three rings. Almost everyone in attendance can find some ring in the spectacle of the show that looks and feels compelling, although seductive is probably a more accurate word than compelling. Seduction always leads eventually to betrayal, and anyone who is seduced by some facet of the current, ongoing circus is inviting betrayal and later disappointment and disillusionment.

Each ring within the circus presents a particular facet of Faux Reality that usually has at least some roots in passionate discontents based on something true and actual, but the overall effect of the entire show is and remains an illusion, little more than a distraction from what actually ails us. And the end result is almost guaranteed to substantively change very little, if anything. We may imagine the circus as authentic drama, but it's not. No sane person sets out to create a show that highlights such over-the-top melodramas but actually prevents anything from changing for the better. Well, maybe Mitch McConnell and the Republicans in Congress... But most of us wouldn't. That is, however, what America has become — a show full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. We are swirling down the drain in a gigantic toilet flush.

Is this a conspiracy? Sort of. It's probably a thousand different conspiracies all unfolding at the same time — some in plain sight, some partially obscured, and others completely hidden. Is the game rigged? Well, DUH! Of course it is, although probably not as effectively as we believe. The producers of the shows (whether in entertainment or politics) know the outcomes they want, but actual reality is chock full of monkey wrenches, wild cards, and other unexpected surprises. The impresarios behind the curtain are, however, quick on their feet and good at adapting. In the movies, gangs of thieves pull off amazing heists. The gangs in politics don't have to, though. They own the casino, and the odds of the house winning in the long run are virtually guaranteed.

This is not to suggest that everyone is taken in by the illusion or seduced by the show. Sanity still exists in pockets. Are all the Trump supporters who stormed the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, crazy morons? No. Some are, but many are not. They're not insane; they simply succumbed to seduction. Have all the elected representatives in Congress lost their freaking minds? No. Many have, but some haven't. Are all the talking heads in the mass media — all the hosts, reporters, and "experts" — delusional hacks? Probably not, but too many of them willingly serve a corporate master who is mainly interested in making hay while the storm rages.

Sure, we can find narcissistic sociopaths across the entire spectrum of belief and motivation. The vast majority of people are not sociopaths, however. I don't want to call them "victims," but they've been seduced — co-opted over a long period of time — by one fantasy or another. I have to admit, however, that I'm concerned much less with crazy sociopaths than I am with apparently sane but nearly-as-crazy sociophiles. Yes, monsters abound, but it's the great mass of "regular" people in the bulging middle of the bell curve who worry me almost as much as the monsters. Why? Because they embrace far too willingly the many narratives of cultural propaganda. In so doing, they enable the monsters to enact (and get away with) their dirty work.

At its heart, advertising is the essence of Reality TV, and its most insidious form. Americans who travel outside America, live in a different country for awhile, and then return to America are very often struck by the same disturbing insight: What makes America so different from other cultures is the sheer amount of advertising to which its people are subjected all day, every day. Advertising is inescapable in America. We are marinated in advertising, drowning in it, assaulted by a perpetual onslaught of promotional pitches. And, like anything that fills the zeitgeist, we eventually stop noticing its effects on us. That occurred long ago in America and is now a *fait accompli*. Advertising has become as invisible to us as the proverbial water around the fish.

But then, that's to be expected in this country. As President Calvin Coolidge so famously quipped nearly a century ago, "*The business of America is business.*" Commerce has always reigned supreme, and the endless, headlong drive for profit and financial wealth is invariably the bottom line. Humanity be damned. Quality of life be damned. Everything has been commoditized. The only thing sacred is profit. That's what America wants, even though the money is no longer based on anything real.

Prospects are not good for our awakening from the toxic hypnosis of Reality TV — advertising, fictional narratives, false propaganda, and all the other illusions that comprise American life. Until we do awaken, however, disenthraling ourselves from Death Culture will remain very unlikely. About the only alarm we have left is collapse, and even that may be ineffective as a wake-up call.

So, break a leg, America. The show must go on.

