Wild Bodies and True Lies: Carnival, Spectacle, and the Curious Case of *Trailer Park Boys*1

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Abstract: The Halifax-based TV series *Trailer Park Boys* shares some of the characteristics of reality television, yet at the same time contrives to present a vision of society that is significantly different from that of shows like *Survivor*. By theorizing reality television in terms of spectacle versus carnival, this chapter argues that neo-liberal-inflected, transnational “game-doc” shows and the Canadian mockumentary *Trailer Park Boys* invite us to construct the real in qualitatively different ways.

Keywords: Cultural analysis; Mass communication

Introduction
In the summer of 2000, to quote journalist and television critic Scott Feschuk, “North America could not avert its eyes from the doughy, digitally-blurred buttocks of Richard Hatch, the dastardly schemer who . . . waddled away with international fame [and] a million dollars” (Feschuk, 2003, p. 99). Hatch acquired wealth and achieved celebrity by virtue of being the long-awaited first winner of what, according to some, is the definitive reality television show, *Survivor*. The climactic episode of *Survivor* was watched by 50 million Americans (Feschuk, 2003) and, according to many contemporary critics (Andrejevic, 2004; Brenton & Cohen, 2003; Murray & Ouellette, 2004), the success of this series, and an increasing number of others like it, while not unanticipated, marked a significant shift in what John Fiske (1987) has categorized as “television culture.”

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In contrast to shows like *Survivor*, there are no celebrities in Sunnyvale Trailer Park, home of the fictional “mock reality” television series *Trailer Park Boys*, although Canadian rock band Rush and folk song diva Rita MacNeil do make cameo appearances. (MacNeil, along with her band, the Men of the Deep, is kidnapped and forced to help the Boys harvest their marijuana crop!). In the following passage, Reviewer Jonathan Durbin summarizes the show’s premise and introduces some of the central characters:

In the series, fictional filmmakers have come to Sunnyvale to produce a documentary about Julian’s life. As the camera follows him, the audience is introduced to his friends, like Ricky and Bubbles, and enemies, like Jim Lahey (John Dunsworth) the trailer park supervisor. . . . As Sunnyvale’s exasperated father figure, Julian is a black-clad straight man whose get-rich-quick schemes have involved bootlegging vodka, stealing barbecues and selling hash to prison guards. But Ricky, the show’s clown, inevitably fumbles the plans in a spectacular fashion. Meanwhile, Bubbles adopts stray cats and is the soul of the series, comfortable referencing Plato and *The Catcher in the Rye*. Other characters include Trinity (Jeanna Harrison), Ricky’s cigarette-smoking nine-year-old, and J-Roc (Jonathan Torrens), a hip-hop-loving white kid who thinks he’s black. (Durbin, 2005, p. 2)

When we hear the term “reality television” many of us would think of *Survivor*, or perhaps the even more popular European-born *Big Brother*, but in addition to these globally successful game-doc formats, there are also docusoaps, and a range of lifestyle programming, including makeovers and, more recently, life-experiment programs (Hill, 2005, pp. 36-37). The boundaries of reality television are remarkably fluid and arguably, as a “mockumentary,” *Trailer Park Boys* can be positioned somewhere along the ever-expanding continuum between reality television and other genres. As Annette Hill points out:

There are a variety of styles and techniques associated with reality television[,] such as non-professional actors, unscripted dialogue, surveillance footage, hand-held cameras, and seeing events unfold as they are happening in front of the camera. (Hill, 2005, p. 41)

Some shows, such as *Jon and Kate Plus Eight*, use documentary as part of their format, and other examples of tabloid-style mockumentary include the BBC’s *Operation Good Guys* as well as *People Like Us* and *The Office*. *Trailer Park Boys*, while not factual entertainment per se, does blend factual and fictive elements: the names and events are not real, but the set is. Furthermore, the authors and actors are often the same individuals, and they sometimes appear “in character” spontaneously acting out their television roles in real-life settings, such as downtown Halifax bars and malls. The dialogue is mostly scripted, but the frequent direct addresses to the fictional filmmakers create reality effects, as does the low-tech use of hand-held cameras (West, 2005) and the occasional intrusions of the film crew into the program’s action. Finally, *Trailer Park Boys* assumes that ordinary people are worthy of media attention. (After all, why else would anyone bother to document the life of a semi-employable, lumpen “loser” like Julian?!?)
Although many aspects of the show may fit (however loosely) within the reality genre, *Trailer Park Boys* is self-conscious and often ironic in ways that “straight” reality programming is not. As mockumentary, part of what the series is doing is parodying the reality television genre itself, and indirectly challenging the claims of any television product to unproblematically represent reality. Parody cannot exist without its object, and *Trailer Park Boys*’ “in-your-face” performativity is also linked to reality television by the extent to which it subverts the latter’s premises.

Not surprisingly, given its rapid proliferation and recognized audience appeal, reality television has been both defended and criticized on a number of grounds and from a number of quarters. Proponents of reality television argue that it democratizes culture, since “not only are ordinary people featured in programs, but the interactive viewer is often critical to program development by voting off contestants” (Fanthome, 2004, p. 166). Many object to its trashiness, a reaction that supporters of reality television argue pathologizes mass taste. Equally disturbing is the privileging of what some see as a “dog eat dog” social ethos and, linked to this, the various ways in which the (admittedly consenting) participants are objectified and exploited (Feschuk, 2003). I am inclined to reject the dichotomized view that reality television must be (uniformly) either pleasurable or deplorable, because these approaches homogenize both the content of a range of programs and the multiple responses of audiences. But my specific contention here is that the Canadian mockumentary *Trailer Park Boys*, while also focusing on the mundane and foregrounding a “trash aesthetic,” speaks from the margins (also for the marginalized) and in true carnivalesque fashion subverts the “winner-take-all” values of game-doc shows like *Big Brother* and *Survivor*.

**Celebrity, spectacle and “everyday life”**

Reality television invites participants to inhabit what Chris Rojek has described as “a goldfish bowl watched by millions” (2007, p. 14). Why, then, do those involved expose themselves to potential ridicule in, for example, “game-docs”? The conclusion that can most readily be drawn is a simple one: “People will do anything for money.” But although cash prizes are doubtless an incentive, whether or not this is the most important motivator is, I think, questionable. An equally convincing explanation as to why contestants willingly submit to what some consider a form of public humiliation is our present-day obsession with celebrity. Scott Feschuk explains:

> In its infancy, reality television was portrayed as a threat to the future of humanity, but the truth is that in its earliest forms it was a far more viable threat to the future of celebrity. It was as though the fame franchise had been extended to all adult Americans. (2003, p. 27)

As Feschuk points out, however, what happened instead was the creation of “what might best be called a class of ‘celebrity temps’—average folk who are called on to be showcased . . . for a brief period and then abruptly sent back from whence they came” (p. 105). Decades earlier, pop artist Andy Warhol asserted that North American culture made it possible for everyone to be famous, but only “for fifteen minutes;” a prophesy that reality television appears to have made good on.
Television, as a visual medium, is well suited to the task of star marketing, since celebrity is about “seeing and being seen.” It is essential that one “stands out from the crowd” in some dramatically discernable or spectacular way. Drawing on the work of Guy Debord, Myra Mendible reminds us that the word “spectacle” “denotes a public exhibition or display,” and that such displays are most often “cultural performances sponsored by an empowered or authorized group” (1999, p. 74). Mendible notes that:

From medieval to present times, spectacle has always had an official function. Generally, spectacles played off the desires of the populace, thus appearing to dissolve conflicts and divisions, even as they sustained the gap between the empowered and the powerless. (p. 73)

According to Kellner (2005) celebrity is “manufactured and managed in the world of media spectacle” (p. 27), and he identifies mainstream reality television as being (paradoxically) about “the spectacle of everyday life” (p. 29). Kellner adds that:

In 2002-3 there was a proliferation of competitive reality shows in the U.S. involving sex, dating and marriage, including The Bachelor, The Bachelorette, Cupid and the short-lived Are You Hot. In these shows men and women humiliate themselves, facing scorn and rejection as they compete [for sexual favours] . . . and their few moments of media glory and reward. And entertainment and spectacle are apotheosized in American Idol, the break-away hit of summer 2002 that rewards young wannabe entertainers . . . while humiliating those judged to be losers. (Kellner, 2005, p. 29)

In the world of Trailer Park Boys, as mentioned earlier, the pursuit of celebrity is not an issue. Spectacle—defined as larger-than-life hypervisibility—definitely is, however, and one of the ways this is achieved is through what Gail Sweeney (1997) terms the aesthetics of excess. This is exemplified by Ricky’s style of dress (garish houndstooth shirt, festooned with gold chains and paired with rumpled sweat pants) and mile-high pompadour, resembling both Sean Penn’s “do” in Dead Man Walking (Tim Robbins, 1995) and the Elvis original, described by Time magazine as “five inches of hot-buttered yak wool” (Sweeney, 1997, p. 254). There is an over-the-top tartiness to the makeup and accessories of the main female characters, Lucy and Sarah (heavy eyeliner, chipped nail polish, tattoos, and microskirts), while Bubbles’ inch-thick, Coke-bottle glasses are surely the ultimate in hyperbole. In addition, all the characters frequently “make spectacles of themselves” as a direct result of their outrageous behaviour. In one episode, trailer park manager Jim Lahey drunkenly interrupts the Christmas Eve church service (“A Trailer Park Christmas”), while in another, Ricky inadvertently glues a contact cement–soaked rag to his face and “gets high” on the fumes (“Conky”).

Mark Paterson explains that “spectacle, in its usual definition, has a performative element and must somehow be staged or enframed, taken out of the context of everyday life” (2006, p. 122, emphasis added). There is a sense in which reality television reverses this process by (ostensibly) embedding “everyday life” in the context of spectacle. Nonetheless, as Chris Rojek points out:
Because [participants’] behaviour is always conditioned by the knowledge that it is enacted before a TV audience, its register and quality is different from everyday life. It is performance in a different key. (2007, p. 15, emphasis in text)

Ironically, the tacit message of much reality television, far from reassuring us that it is okay to be “ordinary,” is, again and again, that celebrity is the only desirable state of being, and that anonymity is synonymous with non-existence (Brenton & Cohen, 2003).

**The boys ’n their ’hood**

In *Trailer Park Boys* the characters also foreground their ordinariness, but when compared to conventional norms and standards, what passes for “everyday life” in Sunnyvale Trailer Park seems more surreal than hyperreal. Although there are occasional forays into downtown Halifax (usually to steal something), most of the series action takes place in the park, the exception being intervals at the beginning and/or end of each yearly instalment when the principals, Ricky and Julian, are shunted off for—yet another—stint in jail (sometimes joined by their friend Bubbles and other members of the cast). The choice of Sunnyvale for the show’s setting is a deliberate one that makes use of the fact that, in popular mythology, the image of the trailer park is fraught with negative associations. Mobile home courts have been stereotyped as:

trashy slums for white transients . . . mothers on welfare, children with no adult supervision. Their inhabitants supposedly engaged in prostitution and extramarital sex, drank a lot, used drugs, and were the perpetrators or victims of domestic violence. With this image in mind, cities and suburbs passed zoning laws restricting trailer parks to the “other side of town” or banned them altogether. (Bérubé, 1997, p. 19)

Hartigan (1997) theorizes that the “trailer trash” label reflects the insecurities of the working and lower-middle classes who attempt to preserve their own status by denigrating the tastes and habits of those they consider below them in the social hierarchy yet still too close for comfort. For Hartigan, White trash is “a classed form of Otherness [which] ruptures conventions that maintain whiteness as an unmarked normative identity” (p. 46). He concludes that White trash, “whether taken as a cultural figure, a rhetorical identity, or an apropos way of designating ‘them’ ” (Hartigan, 1997, p. 52) implies both boundaries and their transgression. Fittingly, it is this “White trash” image that *Trailer Park Boys* at once exploits and subverts.

Just as reality television has been condemned for its trashiness, *Trailer Park Boys*’ transgressions against good taste—especially the excessive use of obscenities and profanity—have offended some members of the viewing public. The excerpts below are from the Letters column of *Maclean’s* magazine:

I am surprised at the garbage that is appearing on TV in recent years: *The Sopranos*, *The Osbournes*, *Trailer Park Boys*, just to name a few. We have really stooped pretty low in life if we find humour in a bunch of jerks spewing out foul words. . . . In a very short time we will have hard-core porn coming into our living rooms.
Trailer Park Boys is the most disrupting show ever unleashed on society. This is what starts corruption in our world (gangs, drugs, violence, etc.). Many people complain how society is unsafe and wonder how we can improve it, but with this TV show, come on! What are they thinking? (MacLean’s, 2003, p. 6)

Other Maclean’s readers expressed amazement that there were “300,000 viewers per episode,” and furthermore that “some parents [would] actually allow their children to watch this crap” (Maclean’s, 2003, p. 6). Foul-mouthed to a fault, Ricky, Julian, Bubbles, and cohorts are not loved universally, but loved they are, by critics and audiences alike, as attested to both by their growing numbers of fans and by the fact that, in 2004, the show won a Gemini Award for best comedy series.

Why such contradictory responses? David Morley (1992) points out that media texts are always intertextual and interdiscursive and, according to Kevin Glynn (2000), such hybridization lends itself well to plural and even conflicting readings. In the case of Trailer Park Boys we see aspects of reality television, cult television (defined as programs that provide their fans with a “completely furnished world” [Gwenllian-Jones & Pearson, 2004]), soap opera–style serial melodrama, and adult cartoons (think South Park using actors rather than animation)—all combined in the cause of comedy. As with most humour, if you “get it” the joke is funny; if you don’t then it is meaningless. Or, in the case of comedy whose intent is to disturb, it may be seen as offensive or even disgusting (Davies, 1996).

A darkness at the edge of town . . .

[Carnival] . . . was the defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 91)

There are any number of reasons—including, some would argue, common decency—for disliking Trailer Park Boys, but it remains the case that many viewers do find the series funny, which suggests that the specific ways in which it is funny are worth looking into. Aspects of Trailer Park Boys’ excursions into comedic style hark back to a tradition that is very old indeed: the upside-down world of the carnivalesque. Drawing on Bakhtinian theory and the work of John Fiske (1989), Kevin Glynn emphasizes that carnivalesque elements are present in most, if not all, popular culture:

According to Bakhtin, popular culture is distinguished by its carnivalesque embrace of bad taste, offensiveness to officialdom, comic verbal compositions, vulgar language, ritualistic degradation and parody, emphasis on laughter, and excessiveness of all forms, but especially of the body. (Glynn, 2000, p. 115)

Bakhtin also contrasts carnival with spectacle:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 7)
At its wild heart, the carnivalesque also problematizes “the relation between marginal and central; between what is ‘high’ and what is ‘low’; what is named and what is nameless; what is displayed and what is hidden” (Lindley, 1996, p. 10).

As we saw above, there is no shortage of questionable taste and vulgar language in *Trailer Park Boys*. Described by director Mike Clattenburg as “more athletic than artistic,” the series definitely involves humour of the unruly body, as displayed in the “naked truth” of Randy’s burgeoning burger-belly. He never wears a shirt, is “addicted” to cheeseburgers, and when he works the streets (as a male prostitute) he does so near a fast-food restaurant. As well, much of the parody involved in *Trailer Park Boys* relies on the “stock” nature of characters that resonate with carnivalesque archetypes. There is a wise fool lurking behind the facade of Bubbles’ goofy naiveté, while Ricky, whose moral compass appears to have lost its bearings decades ago (he has difficulty telling right from left, much less right from wrong), is clearly an anarchic incarnation of the “Wildman” (Eisenbichler & Husken, 1999, pp. 8-12).

There are other examples of carnivalesque anarchy in *Trailer Park Boys*. School-age children (and just why aren’t they in school . . . ?!) known as the “Bottle Kids” roam the park in packs, their presence announced by the shattering sound of broken glass, as they conduct random “throw-and-run” skirmishes, forcing the hapless adults to duck for cover. No one—least of all the “authorities”—seems able to deal with them. Even the (relatively) stable Bubbles has a repressed dark side that surfaces occasionally. Sometimes this occurs via the medium of a demonic puppet named Conky. Bubbles attempts to use Conky as a kind of ventriloquist’s dummy, but the audience quickly discovers that Conky, far from being the inanimate stage prop, has actually taken control of Bubbles’ faculties (such as they are), and someone (usually Ricky) is compelled to conduct an “exorcism” (often with a baseball bat or other blunt instrument). In other instances, Bubbles displays his carnivalesque unruly body in the guise of an amateur wrestler. He dons a costume, not unlike that worn by the Jolly Green Giant brand icon, and grapples with opponents under the stage name of “The Green Bastard.” There are echoes here of Roland Barthes’ claim that, in wrestling, the “bastard” is defined as “essentially someone unstable, who accepts the rules only when they are useful to him and transgresses the formal continuity of attitudes. He is unpredictable, and therefore, asocial” (Barthes, 1970, p. 24).

The tension between anarchy and authority is central to carnival and, in his roles as trailer park supervisor and failed police officer, Jim Lahey represents the authority figure who is mocked, challenged, and usurped on a regular basis. As John Fiske (1989) reminds us, the carnivalesque “typically inverts normal patterns of social life and involves . . . travesties, humiliations, profanations and comic crowning and uncrowning” (p. 69). In Sunnyvale Trailer Park, such inversions are indeed “typical”—in fact they happen every week! Moreover, Fiske sees the overall effect of the carnivalesque as liberating.

[Es]caping social control, even momentarily, produces a sense of freedom. That this freedom is often expressed in excessive, “irresponsible” (i.e., disruptive or disorderly—the adjectives are significant) behaviour
is evidence of both the vitality of these disruptive popular forces and the extent of their repression in everyday life. (p. 8)

Whether or not viewers of carnivalesque television experience a comparable sense of liberation is a question well worth asking but, in the absence of audience research, it cannot be answered here. Many critics have argued, however, that the carnivalesque is also present in mainstream reality television, and further that, in this context, carnival and spectacle sometimes converge. Mark Paterson (2006) summarizes:

Arthurs and Grimshaw (1999) . . . explore this problematic notion of the carnivalesque, and the plethora of reality television shows that show female bodies as spectacle, as transgressing from the gendered norm of self-control and discipline as discussed by Arthurs (2004). We might ask whether carnivalesque displays of bodies on beaches and on reality television shows such as Temptation Island devalue women, making them grotesque, instead of providing a space for their liberation from normal conventions of deportment and behaviour. (p. 108)

Terry Eagleton (1981) has also questioned the liberating effects of the carnivalesque, suggesting that it might function instead as a kind of “safety-valve” for the prevailing social order. Paterson counters Eagleton’s argument with the following comment:

Whatever the actual political effects are, these spaces and times of bodily pleasure and excess do expose, if only momentarily, the fragility and arbitrariness of the social order. They are also testament to the vitality and energy of popular forces, the excessive energies that bleed beyond the normal body and the normal social order. (2006, p. 109)

Paterson adds: “[T]he potential to be progressive and disruptive is there, even if this is not always actualized” (p. 109). If, as in the film The Truman Show (Peter Weir, 1998), participants in reality programming were to somehow break out of the confined spaces and controlled scenarios predetermined by the producers, the camera’s eye might capture something very different. Instead, what we seem to have is a kind of alienated version of the carnivalesque, in which “[participants] are invited to sell access to their personal lives in a way not dissimilar to that in which they sell their labour power” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 6) and—in the case of game-docs—competitors’ energies are focused on defeating each other, rather than subverting the established televisual order. But perhaps it is the tension between what actually happens, i.e., containment, and this insurgent potential that keeps the audience on edge, and therefore engaged.

While acknowledging the need for empirical research, Chris Rojek (2007) also speculates on the carnivalesque functions of reality television. Unlike Eagleton, Rojek places positive value on the “safety-valve” function, suggesting that “watching the strutting postures, aggressive exchanges, sexual games, and competitive rivalries of the contestants” (p. 17) might enable audiences to vicariously vent their own frustrations and feelings of aggression. Rojek ascribes these frustrations to the fact that we live in a social system where “groups and individuals are unequally situated in relation to scarce resources” (p. 17).
Since, as Stuart Hall (1988) has argued, subordination and marginalization are part of the daily experiences of those living in late patriarchal capitalist societies, it seems likely that many audience members can relate to the struggles of the inhabitants of Sunnyvale Trailer Park, whose operational imperative is “getting by,” and not—as in most reality television—“getting ahead.” Given that attempts to get ahead usually take the form of wild schemes concocted by Ricky and Julian (whose plans are invariably foiled), this is hardly surprising. Viewers may also take pleasure from the many occasions in which attempts to impose “law and order” upon the community are thwarted, and it is not difficult to sympathize with heroes who are perpetual underdogs. Remember too: the genre of comedy has always been about validating “low” themes and characters, celebrating democracy over hierarchy, and restoring harmony to the social group, albeit sometimes via highly improbably methods.

**Upsetting the shopping cart**

Among other things, humour provides hope, and a series like *Trailer Park Boys* raises the possibility that, as the cultural mainstream becomes increasingly toxic, only on the margins (as subculture) will community be possible. In explaining his decision to make a movie based on the series, producer Ivan Reitman observes that “the Boys” are “funny in a very specific universe, in a society that I like. They have great hearts, great aspirations, even though they get dashed a great deal of the time. It’s what life is like in this particular micro-cosm” (Knox, 2005, p. B1). Similarly, Jonathan Durbin describes Sunnyvale’s fictional world as “bombed but peculiarly compassionate” (Durbin, 2005, p. 3), while Elizabeth Duncan finds the series’ mix of “dope growing, petty crime and swearing [to be] oddly engaging,” adding that “beneath the surface of those dodgy schemes gone bad, the series is a warm show about community and family” (2005, p. 5).

Nor is all the evidence extra-textual. The characters may quarrel, scheme, and lurch from one improbable crisis to the next, but they also take care of each other. When J-Roc self-fashions his hip-hop persona based on the mistaken belief that he is Black (giving a distinctly postmodern twist to the assertion that “biology is not destiny”), no one in the park contradicts him. When, after being caught in flagrante delicto, Randy admits publicly that he and “Mr. Lahey” have a gay relationship, none of their neighbours censure them. The latter is a striking example of how, in a context where a homophobic response from “red-necked trailer trash” could be anticipated, not just gay sex, but outrageous and fetishistic gay sex (Randy is wearing a bumblebee costume and Lahey is dressed as—to quote Bubbles—“Indianapolis Jones”) is accepted within the heteronormative community. However, the most explicit statement of the series’ values is provided during an episode entitled “Jim Lahey is a Drunken Bastard” by supervisor Lahey himself, in a boozy monologue complete with mock-Shakespearean rhetorical flourishes:

> Who in this park, or even in the whole world, doesn’t have problems? Who doesn’t have a drink too many times once in a while and maybe even winds up passed out in their own driveway . . . Who doesn’t drink too much . . . or who doesn’t have a puff from time to time? And who
doesn’t have problems with the people they love? This is our home. This is our community!

This is a distinct contrast to the competitive, ultra-perfectionist social groupings represented by game-docs programming. In his analysis of *Big Brother*, Jonathan Bignell (2005) observes the following:

The contestants . . . do not have families, except as something distant that they may desire but that the viewers never see. The sociability of reality television is a form of “parasociability,” comprising contingent horizontally stratified generational groupings that are temporary, often goal-oriented, not communal, not familial. (p. 176)

As we saw earlier, in *Trailer Park Boys* the characters can and do “make spectacles of themselves” but, while often short on self-control, they are rarely controlled by others. Perhaps this is why members of the audience are permitted—in fact invited—to laugh “with them” rather than “at them.”

Much mainstream reality television subscribes to the notion that large cash prizes are the ordinary person’s vision of the ultimate reward—the one sure way to finally transcend the limits of the commonplace. Ricky and Julian, however, have escapist fantasies of a much more modest sort. They dream of financing early retirements through their marijuana grow op (and they aim to do so in the short term—“Freedom 35” is their stated goal), but the audience knows that all they really want is enough money to keep Ricky in smokes, top up Julian’s rum and Coke, buy food for Bubbles’ adopted “kitties,” and generally “do some good around the Park.” Who “wants to be a millionaire?” Not the inhabitants of Sunnyvale Trailer Park, though if offered the money they certainly would not turn it down. A million dollars buys a lot of pepperoni and chicken fingers, something Ricky would consider “awesome.” But someone, probably Bubbles, would be there to remind him: “Money can’t buy [you] love.”

However tongue-in-cheek, what *Trailer Park Boys* represents, in microcosm, is the kind of “caring community” that has been associated, in popular national mythology, with “Canadianness,” and, of course, the danger with such mythologies is always that they mask a less-than-inclusive and far-from-benign reality. Taking as his case in point Canada’s much-vaunted claim to multiculturalism, Sanjay Talreja offers these thoughts:

The problem is, in my opinion, that many Canadians . . . are too smug about their multiculturalism, and so content that they are not ugly Americans, so pleased that they are soft nationalists, and so sure that they speak with the rational objective voice of the sensible Western world, that they refuse to believe that tolerance, diversity, multiculturalism are notions that they—we all—have to work at. (2004, p. xii)

Nevertheless, kinder and gentler (to some, “wimpier”) is how Canadians purport to collectively see themselves, especially in contrast to Americans (Bodroghkozy, 2002; Manning, 1993). Also, as Bodroghkozy has argued, despite multiple diversities (of language, region, ethnicity, class, gender, etc.), the hegemony of American popular culture is one of the few things that, over the course of our recent history, all Canadians have experienced more-or-less together. What
we need to keep in mind here is not so much the gap between Canadian realities and our national mythologies (although that is a subject well worth reflecting on) but that representations of community provided by Trailer Park Boys are defined against the individualistic and upwardly mobile values portrayed by much reality television, including made-in-Canada programming such as Dragons’ Den or Canadian Idol.

Game-doc TV shows are a transnational phenomenon, but they invariably feature a small group of contestants who are made to “stand in,” synecdochically, for society as a whole. Yet at the same time, these participants are removed from the rest of us since, as in the case of Big Brother, the setting is a hermetically sealed house, while Survivor is located in Borneo, a space that is both remote and exoticized. In contrast, Trailer Park Boys is set in a real place (Sunnyvale Trailer Park near Halifax), but while most of the personnel are from the local community, there are few stereotypical markers of either regional or national identity (although Ricky does say “oot” and “aboot” and there’s even the occasional “eh”).

On the contrary, when compared to ostensibly “Maritime” programming such as Road to Avonlea, Trailer Park Boys represents a kind of anti-pastoral. There are differences in genre, obviously, but more than that, the fictional worlds depicted are very different. Immersed in urban sleaze, Trailer Park Boys seems distinctly out of step with other media representations of the region, and I suspect this is deliberate. As we have seen, Ricky, Julian, and the rest are “trailer trash”: poor, White, usually unemployed, and constantly implicated in petty crime. Trailer Park Boys situates itself in relation to class more than to either nation or region, and class is an aspect of social reality that game-docs, while (paradoxically) valorizing wealth and celebrity, seem largely oblivious to.

In their discussion of the American underclass, Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (1997) make the persuasive claim that the term “White trash” is both a racist and a classist slur, since so-called White trash (impoverished, rural, and usually from either Appalachia or the “deep” South) were seen as genetically defective and thus much closer to non-Whites, i.e., the so-called inferior races. Possibly there are parallels here with the rest of Canada’s common-sense (mis)understandings of the Atlantic region, as comprised of “have-not” (implying economically backward) provinces and as more insular—not to mention quaint and folkloric—than the rest of “Us.” It may be the case that, for regional audiences at least, Trailer Park Boys can be read as an ironic response to such demeaning stereotypes. On a more serious level, the transience and displacement symbolized by a home on wheels surely resonates with the East Coast experience of “going down the road,” whether riding the harvest trains of the past century or flying to a job in the Fort McMurray oil sands today.

Equally salient is the argument (again presented by Wray & Newitz) that “White trash” as an epithet derives much of its power from the fact that “so many Americans find it useful” (1997, p. 1). They add:

In a country so steeped in the myth of classlessness, in a culture where we are often at a loss to explain or understand poverty, the white trash stereotype serves as a . . . way of blaming the poor for being poor. (p. 1)
Here again Wray and Newitz are referring to the United States but, sadly, the social reality for many Canadians—in most, if not all, regions of our country—is not so different. We too continue to experience the effects of the hegemony of neo-liberal political and economic policies brought in during the 1980s and 1990s, along with associated cultural deformations, including “vindictive … and opportunistic attacks on the poor and marginal” (Wright, 2004, p. 180), and in fact such vindictiveness is often dramatized on reality television. It seems clear that these transnational tendencies are a sign of the (globalized) times. This may be why Alan Bérubé’s (1997) musings, on the occasion of his return to the New Jersey trailer park of his childhood, seem more apocalyptic than nostalgic.

The whole country looks more like a trailer park every day. As our lived economy gets worse, more jobs are becoming temporary, homes less permanent or more crowded, neighbourhoods unstable. We’re transients just passing through this place, wherever and whatever it is, on our way to somewhere else, mostly down. (p. 38)

Conclusion

Jon Dovey (2000) quite rightly points out that a balance is needed between those who dismiss reality television as trash, and in doing so take the notion of audience-centred productive consumption too lightly, and those who claim that reality television democratizes media culture by empowering audiences. As I hope I have made clear, I do not object to the trash aesthetic of mainstream reality television, but I am concerned with the construction of social reality that shows like Survivor invite the audience to “buy in to.” According to some critics, “We live in a society which insists that we should be famous if we possibly can, because this is the best, perhaps the only, way to be” (Braudy, 1986, quoted in Holmes, 2006, p. 22), but as Su Holmes points out, this is “quite different from the possibility of everyone being famous” (p. 22). At a time when the gap between rich and poor is widening, much reality television traffics in our hopes of joining the elite: symbolically, if not actually; temporarily, if not permanently; individually, if not collectively. In my view, it is an odd sort of democracy that divides us into winners and losers, yet (ironically) this is exactly the kind of society we live in today. Perhaps this near-perfect congruence with the values of the neo-liberal status quo is what is most real about so-called reality television.

Admittedly, the grotesquely hilarious, upside-down world of Sunnyvale Trailer Park is scarcely a model for future utopias. Nonetheless, the carnivalesque representations of community presented in Trailer Park Boys are a distinct contrast to the every-man-for-himself, celebrity “wannabe” values portrayed in mainstream reality television. Furthermore, the comic inversions and recurring slippages, from cliché to archetype and back again, produce a text that is, in the Bakhtinian sense, truly “double-voiced.” This makes Trailer Park Boys highly resistant to all forms of unitarist readings, not to mention just plain hard to take seriously. I must acknowledge that I have written this paper from the split perspective of someone who is a staunch fan of the series as well as a reluctant critic of popular culture. As such I cannot deny that, like Trailer Park Boys, mainstream reality television has its defenders. Some do see it as genuinely populistic while
others (Andrejevic, 2004) focus on the “guilty” pleasures afforded, on the one hand, by audience voyeurism (the surveillance camera becomes a kind of peephole for viewers), and, on the other, by participant exhibitionism and narcissism (display for others/display for self). These are valid, if complex, questions, but I have chosen not to address them here, opting instead to present my own reading of the different ways some of these programs construct the televisual real.

There are other possible readings, including those of reality television fans who might agree with elements of my analysis yet draw completely opposite conclusions due to differing values and politics. For my part, I see the world of game-doc shows such as Big Brother or Survivor as a Hobbesian war of each against all. There are no collective solutions, and the possibility of a more humane social order seems entirely out of the question. But if much mainstream reality television is about humiliation (of “losers” and “little guys”), Trailer Park Boys is about celebration. In true carnivalesque fashion, the zonked-out denizens of Sunnyvale affirm the validity of life on the margins, and assert the spirit of community embodied in those who, while ill-equipped to handle the legal niceties and social proprieties of the cultural mainstream, still manage to survive, together.

**Editor’s Note**
1. The final episode of the series, Say Goodnight to the Bad Guys—A Trailer Park Boys Special, aired on Showcase Sunday, Dec. 7, 2008.

**References**


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