

VOTING DEMOCRACY OFF THE ISLAND

Reality TV and the Republican Ethos

By Francine Prose

Not even Melana can believe it's real. As the "former NFL cheerleader and beauty queen looking to fall in love with the perfect guy" swans a bit dazedly through the Palm Springs mansion in which she will soon undertake the task of selecting Mr. Right from among sixteen eligible bachelors, she coos about the thrill of living a "dream come true."

It's the premiere episode of NBC's *Average Joe*, one of the extremely popular and profitable "reality-based" television shows that, in recent years, have proliferated to claim a significant share of major-network prime time. Featuring ordinary people who have agreed to be filmed in dangerous, challenging, or embarrassing situations in return for the promise of money, romance, or fame, these offerings range from *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* to *Who Wants to Marry My Dad?*, from long-run hits such as *Survivor* and *The Real World* to the short-lived *Are You Hot?* and *Boy Meets Boy*.

The title *Average Joe* has evidently alerted Melana to the possibility that her bachelor pool may not be stocked with the same species of dazzling hunks, those walking miracles of body sculpting, cosmetic dentistry, and hair-

gel expertise who courted "The Bachelorette." Clearly, she's expecting to meet the more routinely, unself-consciously attractive sort of guy one might spot on the street or at the water cooler.

But, as frequently happens, the audience is privy to an essential truth—or, in the argot of reality programming, a "reveal"—concealed from the hapless participants. Now, as the cameras whisk us to the bachelors' quarters, we instantly get the visual joke that is, even by the standards of reality TV, sadistic.

The men about to compete for Melana's affections are not merely Joe Well Below Average but Joe Out of the Question. Several are obese; others have tics, dermatological or dental problems, or are short, bespectacled, balding, stooped. Racial and cultural diversity is provided by a diminutive "university professor" from Zimbabwe with a penchant for intellectual boasting and grave fashion miscalculations.

Although the sight of Melana's suitors is intended to amuse and titillate rather than to touch us, it would (to paraphrase Dickens amid this Dickensian crowd) take a heart of stone not to be moved by the moment when the men take a look at one another and realize that their inclusion in this confraternity of nerds is probably not a mistake.

Meanwhile, night has fallen on the desert, and the lovely Melana, all dressed up and as starry-eyed as a kid on Christmas morning, comes out to meet the guys. A white limousine pulls up. A male model emerges, and Melana's face brightens, only to darken seconds later when he announces that, sadly, he is not one of her bachelors.

The white limo carries the tease away. Presently a bus arrives.

The bus doors open. They send the fat guys out first. And by the time a half-dozen sorry specimens are lined up, grinning their hearts out, even Melana gets it. Her shock and dismay are genuine. The men cannot help but notice. "This is *bad*," she whispers, and we can read her lips. "Someone's messing with my head."

What lends the scene its special poignancy is that Melana knows, as do we, that what has befallen her is not some cruel accident of fate. Rather, she has brought misfortune on herself. In filling out the questionnaire that led to her being selected as the heroine of *Average Joe*, she indicated that "a good personality" mattered more to her than did appearance. And in doing so, she violated one of the cardinal rules, a basic article of faith, one of the values that this new version of reality pumps out, hour after hour, night after night, into the culture. Had Melana watched more reality-based TV, she would have learned that sur-

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face beauty (preferably in concert with a strong manipulative instinct, a cunning ability to play the game, and vast quantities of money) is all that counts. Melana has transgressed. And now, as we sit back and watch, she is about to be punished.

If this—a dash of casual brutality, a soupçon of voyeurism—is your recipe for entertainment, it's a taste you can satisfy, in the privacy of your living room, nearly every evening. In fact, unless you own one of those televisions that allow you to watch two programs at once, you may be forced to make some hard choices.

On a typical night—Thanksgiving Eve, November 26, 2003—you could, at eight, watch a contestant on CBS's *Survivor Pearl Islands* secure himself some sympathy by misleading his fellow tribe members into thinking that his grandmother has just died. But

(chosen from more than 10,000 applicants) have their lives transformed by plastic surgery. On this night a man whose 200-pound weight loss has left him looking like a shar-pei, and a rather pretty grade-school teacher—who believes that she is only a rhinoplasty and a chin implant away from rivaling her beautiful sisters—will go under the knife.

In the event that three hours of watching your fellow humans suffer and squirm and endure surgical procedures has left you feeling uneasy about how you have spent your time, or what you have found amusing, you can be reassured—as are the network executives, it would seem—by the fact that you are not alone. In January 2003 the premiere of Fox Network's *Joe Millionaire*, in which a construction worker courted women tricked into believing that he possessed a vast personal fortune, attracted 18.6 million

tively cheap to produce, mostly because they avoid the expense of hiring actors whose salary demands can rise astronomically if the show becomes a hit. One consequence is that television actors have seen a radical reduction in the number and range of available roles.

Despite the fact that journalists periodically hail the death of reality TV, it has proved remarkably long-lived. MTV's *The Real World*, which sends seven attractive young strangers to spend six months turning their luxury housing into a Petri dish of sexual, racial, and interpersonal tension, has been running since 1992. Now in its eighth season, *Survivor* has airlifted a succession of warring “tribes” from the Amazon to the jungles of Thailand. During the week of November 17–23, 2003, the only shows more popular than *Survivor Pearl Islands* (which drew 19.9 million viewers) were *CSI*, *ER*, and *Friends*.

On aesthetic grounds alone, it's arguable that reality-based shows are no better or worse than *CSI*, *ER*, and *Friends*. But the most obvious difference is the most crucial one. Fans of *Friends* understand that they are watching a sitcom, cast with celebrity actors. Watching *Survivor* and *The Real World*, they believe that they are observing *real* men and women.

Viewers do, of course, realize that some of what they're seeing has been instigated or exacerbated by the show's producers. Yet the fact is that viewers *are* watching people who, regardless of their career ambitions or masochistic exhibitionism, are amateurs who may have been chosen for their fragility and instability. Many of the “Average Joes” could never get hired as character actors. And observing their response to stress and humiliation generates a gladiatorial, bread-and-circus atmosphere that simply does not exist when we see movie stars in scrubs sail a gurney down the halls of *ER*.

Reality-based TV, then, is not a scripted fiction but an improvisation, an apparently instructive improvisation that doles out consistent and frequently reinforced lessons about human nature and, yes, reality. These programs also generate a jittery, adrenalized buzz that produces a paradoxically tranquilized numbness in



witnessing the “biggest lie ever told on *Survivor*” would mean missing the episode of NBC's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* in which a quintet of homosexual fashion and lifestyle advisers convince a balding lawyer to lose his unflattering hairpiece. At nine, you could shop along with ABC's *Trista & Ryan's Wedding*, an account of the big-ticket ceremony that would solemnize the love affair spawned, as America watched, on *The Bachelorette*. And at ten, on *Extreme Makeover*, the most literally invasive series so far, two lucky souls

viewers; 40 million tuned in for its conclusion. *American Idol*, the talent show that asks fans to vote for their favorite contestants by telephone, received 110 million calls in its first season and 15.5 million calls during the final show alone. By contrast, the most popular national news program—NBC's *Nightly News*—averages around 11 million viewers per night.

Like Melana, network accountants were quick to see reality shows as a dream come true. For although production values and costs have risen, reality-based programs are still rela-

which our defenses relax and leave us more receptive to the "information" we are receiving. For this reason alone, even those who take pride in never looking at TV, except for the occasional peek at PBS, might want to tune in and see what reality their fellow citizens have been witnessing.

What might future anthropologists (or, for that matter, contemporary TV-addicted children and adults) conclude about our world if these programs constituted their primary source of information? The most obvious lesson to be drawn from reality TV, the single philosophical pole around which everything else revolves, is that the laws of natural selection are even more brutal, inflexible, and *sensible* than one might suppose from reading *Origin of Species*. Reality is a Darwinian battlefield on which only the fittest survive, and it's not merely logical but admirable to marshal all our skills and resources to succeed in a struggle that only one person can win.

Compelling its testy, frequently neurotic castaways to operate as if they were several rungs down the evolutionary ladder, grubbing roots and berries and forced to earn such basic necessities as blankets by performing acrobatic stunts, *Survivor* is the prototype. The show urges its participants to labor for their tribe but always, ultimately, for themselves. Because at the end of the day—in this case, the final episode—only one person will walk away with a million dollars. And in case we lose sight of first principles, the show's motto, which appears in its logo, is "Outwit. Outplay. Outlast."

Survivor is the younger American cousin of the 1997 Swedish *Expedition Robinson*, a title judged too literary for the U.S. market. It's probably just as well that the series wasn't called *Expedition Robinson*. *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson* extol the virtues and advantages of fellowship and cooperation, whereas on *Survivor* such considerations are useful only to a point. *Survivor* could be Defoe's masterpiece rewritten by Ayn Rand. And for all its Darwinian trappings, the series offers a skewed view of the *purpose* of the struggle for dom-

inance. Propagating the species is the last thing on these people's minds.

And so the steps that lead toward that goal aren't determined by physical combat or brilliant displays of plumage. Rather, contestants are eliminated by a democratic process; every few days, tribe members vote on which of their fellows will be forced to leave the island. As we watch, the loser trudges across a rope bridge or rock ledge and off to a dismal future without a million dollars.

Observant readers may already have noted that the guiding principles to which I've alluded—flinty individualism, the vision of a zero-sum society in which no one can win unless someone else loses, the conviction that altruism and compassion are signs of folly and weakness, the exaltation of solitary striving above the illusory benefits of cooperative mutual aid, the belief that certain circumstances justify secrecy and deception, the invocation of a reviled common enemy to solidify group loyalty—are the exact same themes that underlie the rhetoric we have been hearing and continue to hear from the Republican Congress and our current administration.

Of course, no sensible person would imagine that Donald Rumsfeld is sitting down with the producers of reality-based TV to discuss the possibility that watching the contestants sweat and strain to bring civilization to the jungle will help us accept the sacrifices we have been and are still being asked to make in Iraq. On the other hand, there is the unsettling precedent set by *Profiles from the Front Line*, a series that aired around the time of the war in Iraq and was produced for ABC Entertainment by Jerry Bruckheimer, whose credits include *Black Hawk Down*.

According to an advance release from the network,

the Pentagon and the Department of Defense lent their full support and cooperation to this unique production.... As America prepares for a possible war with Iraq, the country continues to wage a perilous war on terrorism. ABC will transport viewers to actual battlefields in Central Asia with a six-episode series that will feature actual footage of

the elite U.S. Special Operations forces apprehending possible terrorists, as well as compelling, personal stories of the U.S. military men and women who bear the burden and risks of this fighting.

Indeed, ABC News complained that—in order to film the soldiers arresting a "big-time" Taliban leader, disarming rockets, providing medical care to Afghan civilians, capturing fuel-truck hijackers, and accepting the love and gratitude of the Afghan people—the show's producers were being granted a level of access to the troops that Pentagon officials denied the network's actual reporters.

But even when the collaboration between the military, the government, and the entertainment industry is not nearly so overt, these shows continue to transmit a perpetual, low-frequency hum of agitprop. The ethics (if one can call them that) and the ideals that permeate these programs at once reflect and reinforce the basest, most mindless and ruthless aspects of the current political zeitgeist. If the interests of the corporate culture that controls our television stations are at heart the same as those that fund and support lobbyists and politicians, it stands to reason that—when network executives do meet to determine what is appropriate, entertaining, profitable, what people want and need to see—they are unlikely to flinch at portraying stylized versions of the same behavior we read about in the press, or can observe on the Senate floor.

Among the notions of reality that the designers of these shows appear to hold in common with the participants in the corporate strategy session—or, one presumes, the Pentagon or Cabinet meeting—is the vision of the world as a vast human-behavior laboratory. Its population of lab rats can be coolly observed by the research scientists (the market analyst, the politician, the TV viewer), who can then draw profitable lessons from their subjects' responses. Let's see how the castaways behave when they are ordered to abandon their humble camp and exiled to a new locale. Let's watch how the homely bachelors compete for the hand of the beauty, how quickly the public embraces the next revolution in junk food, and how the cit-

izens of the Middle East deal with their altered circumstances when we change their regimes and encourage them to adopt Western values. Meanwhile, this objective, experimental mode dispels any qualms we might feel about the fact that the research subjects are humans who may have their own ideas and opinions about how they want to live.

Presumably, many of these shows' creators would be unnerved to hear that the harmless amusements they are concocting actually reflect, reinforce, and codify a specific political agenda. But it might come as less of a surprise to, say, Mark Burnett, the executive producer of *Survivor*.

At seventeen, the London-born Burnett joined the British army and became a paratrooper, a decorated member of the elite Parachute Regiment, with which he saw combat in the Falkland Islands and in Northern Ireland. In 1982 he set out for Central America, then in the throes of widespread guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency terrorism. En route to work there as a military adviser with the British Special Air Service, he decided instead to get off the plane in Los Angeles and seek his fortune in Hollywood.

After brief stints as a nanny and a T-shirt salesman, his military background and media ambitions inspired him to enter the Raid Gauloises, an annual French race that sent teams on rugged courses through the Oman desert and the jungles of Borneo. In 1995, Burnett started his own version of the French competition, the Eco-Challenge, which (over the objections of environmentalists) took place in Utah and was filmed for the Discovery Channel. When the 1998 Eco-Challenge, staged in Morocco, received an Emmy Award, Burnett was in an ideal position to market the American rights to *Survivor*, which he had presciently acquired.

Reading Mark Burnett's résumé cannot help but make *Survivor* seem even more like a weekly dispatch from the Central American terrorist training camp to which he may have been headed when he was lured off course by the siren song of Hollywood. And our unease about

the cozy relationship between the broadcasting industry and its advertisers is hardly soothed when we learn that Burnett has given "motivational, leadership and team-building speeches" for such clients as IBM, Citibank, Sony, USA Networks, Discovery Channel, and AdWeek Asia. Knowing all this can only make us doubly aware, and wary, of the nuggets of motivational and guerrilla training we are receiving along with the seemingly innocent pleasure of picking sides and favorites, deciding which bachelor or bachelorette we'd choose.

The merciless individualism and bloodthirsty competition turn out to represent the noblest, most heroic aspect of this new reality. The darker, more cynical message—the lesson beneath the lesson, so to speak—is that every human being can and will do *anything* for money. Like those consciousness-altering substances that hurtled the Hashishins and certain indigenous tribes into battle, the smell of \$50,000 intoxicates the contestants on *Fear Factor* enough to achieve a protracted out-of-body experience. How else to explain their ability to so suppress both instinct and free will that they don't gag over goblets of liquefied night-crawler guts, don't recoil from a helmet of rats, don't rebel when they are instructed to crawl into a pitch-black cave tunnel and retrieve as many ripe skunk carcasses as possible in a limited time?

Pragmatism is the main concern, whereas morality is a luxury or, worse, an impediment, an albatross. And given the limitlessness of what our fellow humans will do for cash, considering the folly of acting according to ethical scruples, it's only logical that everyone lies all the time. In some shows—*Joe Millionaire* had twenty-five women convinced that its protagonist was rich, and the gay hero of *Boy Meets Boy* had not been informed that several of his suitors were actually straight—the lying is institutionalized; elsewhere deception is a more spontaneous, situational response. When that *Survivor* contestant cons the privilege of going off alone with a friend from home because the friend allegedly brings news of the contestant's supposedly dead

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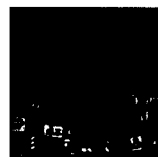
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The notion that everyone is, at heart, mendacious is reinforced in the parallel meta-reality outside the programs themselves—in the media coverage of the scandals that regularly erupt when contestants are exposed for not being what they appear. But why should that surprise us? We've seen the lies told on the show. One assumes that the audience was less astonished than Darva Conger, the lucky winner of *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?*, to learn that the finances of her rich new husband were shakier than he'd let on. Nor are we amazed to hear that an eligible bachelor is a former underwear model, or that the "university professor" on *Average Joe* has his own website advertising his skill as an actor. And why was that talented contestant kicked off *American Idol* just because of her involvement in Internet porn? The problem, apparently, is not the act of lying but rather the need to maintain strict control over who is permitted to lie, and under what circumstances.

The segment of TV broadcasting that is not merely "reality-based" but claims to report "reality"—the evening news and so-called news magazines such as *20/20* and *Dateline NBC*—are learning, along with the rest of us, the lessons of *Fear Factor* and *Survivor*. Having observed the public's comfort with the notion of people's willingness to do anything for money, these quasi-journalistic shows no longer hesitate to air programs such as the one, last fall, in which kidnap victim Elizabeth Smart and her family relived her horrific ordeal and, incidentally, plugged her parents' new book. Having noted how unquestioningly all the world loves a winner, the producers of the nightly news can cease worrying about their instinct to shape their coverage in support of whichever party or idea is currently leading in the polls.

If the truth is a millstone around one's neck, civility is likewise a hobble guaranteed to slow us down. And why should we be polite when rudeness is so amusing, and when we all secretly know that the spectacle of exclusion and humiliation is the highest

form of entertainment? Pity the unfortunate parent trying to instruct a school-age child in the importance of kindness and empathy when that child has been watching *American Idol* and has observed that producer Simon Cowell's star rises each time he destroys—in a hiss of clipped, Brit venom—one of the poor souls guilty of singing badly while auditioning for the show's judges.

It is almost a relief to retreat to the candlelit, soft-focus world of the mating reality shows. That is, until we realize that these too are death matches of a sort, that the competing bachelors and bachelorettes will blithely mislead and betray one another in pursuit of the man or woman of their dreams. Still, part of what sets these shows apart from the rest is that, unlike the castaways and delusional music hopefuls, the suitors and love objects are meant to be not only "real" but "nice" people. One way we know this is that they continually espouse a set of fantasies, hopes, and ideals that (although the finalists are often shown making out in the Jacuzzi and shutting the bedroom door on the film crew at the culmination of decisive "private dates") would gladden the hearts of right-wing Christian proponents of old-fashioned Family Values.

You might think we lived in a society in which divorce were not an option as the bachelors and bachelorettes burble on—in show after show, series after series—about finding "the soul mate I want to spend the rest of my life with" and about the "tremendous feelings" they are developing for whichever contestant they feel capable of loving "with all my heart and soul." Contestants remind themselves and one another to "follow your heart," to "listen to your heart," as if (and despite the observable evidence to the contrary) neither the eyes, the brain, nor the genitals deserve to be consulted. Just as the purpose of *Survivor* is to outwit, outplay, and outlast, the aim of the mating shows is to get the guy or girl and *get married*. It's sexual competition as spectator sport, true, but with an earnest, conservative face. There are deeply hurt feelings (the men scowl and shake their heads, the women weep) when suitors are rejected.

Even the families get involved. *Meet My Folks* invites competitors to live in the same house with the love object's parents. The show is partly based on a popular film, starring Robert De Niro as a paranoid, snooping, ex-CIA future father-in-law from hell. But by the time the plot reached TV, it had deftly made the leap from Hollywood high comedy to Main Street reality, to the homes of suspicious couples who subject their grown children's suitors to humiliating polygraph tests and spy on them, via hidden cameras, at play with their sons or daughters in the hot tub. In fact, the producers of these shows have gotten precisely the sort of go-ahead for which John Ashcroft has long campaigned. Plenty of eavesdropping and surveillance transpires; one *Average Joe* was eliminated after being secretly videotaped insulting the 400-pound "Cousin" Danielle, who was actually Melana in a fat suit. The mechanisms of surveillance—the cameras, listening devices, and polygraph tests—have been seamlessly integrated into everyday life.

Indeed, on several of these series, the last remaining suitors are taken home to meet Mom and Dad, the siblings, and best friends. And the loved ones get to weigh in on which prospective mate will fit into the family. Because what's at stake here is *marriage*. Only rarely does anyone—usually a concerned parent or friend—inquire if this is really love or something manufactured by the producers.

In case we, too, have doubts about where all this is heading, the miniseries *Trista & Ryan's Wedding* celebrates the union between a good-looking fireman and the former Miami Heat cheerleader who was a runner-up on *The Bachelor* and who was brought back as *The Bachelorette* so that this time, just to make things more equal, *she* could choose. Carrying us across the commercial breaks with hints of prenuptial jitters ("Will the wedding go on as planned?"), it's a consumer blowout, a catalogue of lavish table settings, flower arrangements, wedding gowns, and the platinum- and diamond-encrusted "most expensive bridal shoe in the history

of the world." It's fitting that consumerism should be the theme of this theme wedding, not only because television is, obviously, a vehicle for advertising, or because the show's concept facilitates the product placement that's so much a part of reality programming, but also because the entire courtship has been a shopping event. A purchasing decision has been made among twenty-five suitable, competing products who labored long and hard to commodify and sell themselves.

In a nod to today's "reality," the array of suitors often includes a few non-white candidates, but although the contestants-of-color are rarely eliminated in the first round, no program so far has meant true love for an interracial couple. In fact, the gene pool is a shallow one. Ryan is a fireman, but he, like most male contestants, looks like a model. The women either resemble cheerleaders or *are* cheerleaders, perky blondes with cute bodies, pert noses, and slightly strangulated Tweetie Bird voices. Reality TV is not where you go to have your stereotypes undermined and subverted. The gay guys on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* tend toward the nellie hysteric with the ability to out-shop Trista and a gift for initiating the nominally heterosexual male into the taboo joys of consumer culture.

Always gently testing the limit of what the culture will put up with, careful to give the bachelorette, as well as the bachelor, a chance to choose a mate, the networks are unlikely to take a chance on an *Average Jane* in which the genders are reversed, the male model obliged to pick from twenty-six ugly bachelorettes. Perhaps it's assumed that few viewers could accept the basic premise of the male beauty falling in love with the beast, regardless of her many good qualities. And perhaps it would be rightly feared that opinion might turn against a series that evoked the old-fashioned fraternity dogfight, those contests held to see which brother could bring the ugliest date to the party. It's worth noting that in the final episode of *Average Joe*, Melana rejected the ordinary-looking guy (who turned out to be a millionaire) in favor of one of the handsome contestants who, in a typ-

ical reality-TV plot twist, had been introduced into the game near the end of the series. Opting out of the game if one fails to find a suitable soul mate is simply not a possibility, for in the Republican corporatocracy there are always enough goods in the display case so that no sane shopper could refuse to make a purchase.

If these shows observe a sort of mass-market correctness, even as they reinforce gender stereotype and cliché, they also toe a fairly traditional line when it comes to class. The producers cast these scenarios from a solidly middle-class population. The well-off families in *Meet My Folks* have the sort of houses Americans are supposed to have: houses large enough to host the team of applicants competing to take their offspring on a romantic vacation. And the very wealthiest segment of the population is shown to have a heart of gold, just as we've always been led to believe. *The Simple Life* dispatches Lionel Richie's daughter (and Michael Jackson's goddaughter) Nicole and socialite Paris Hilton to slouch around an Arkansas farm, get grossed out in the cow barn, pretend not to know what Wal-Mart is, and reveal an underlying, insouciant sweetness.

In theory, *The Real World* should get credit for at least addressing the issue of race. But it's demoralizing to watch the new housemates move into their luxury digs and to be able to predict, from the start, that the one who's not going to get along with the others (especially not the racist provocateur who often shows up in the group) is the angry or militant black guy. One of these, the loose cannon David, was ultimately thrown out of the house and off the show in *The Real World: Los Angeles*. When the black guy in the Seattle series, Stephen, hit a female cast member in the face, he was permitted to remain only after agreeing to take an anger-management course. And so the cautionary, conservative message is clear: If these happen to be the only African Americans you've observed at close range, you might think twice before seeking one out as a roommate or a neighbor.

The ways in which *The Real World* has evolved over its eleven-

year history provides a window onto the pressures that its producers must face to keep the show's young demographic tuning in. The most recent round, *The Real World: Paris*, focused on a group of American kids, installed in a suburban château, who spent more time in strip clubs than at the Louvre. Assigned to write an article on Versailles, two housemates downloaded the information from the Internet rather than bothering to go there. Rarely has the American public's notorious lack of interest in the world beyond our borders been made to seem cuter or more inconsequential: xenophobia as a harmless symptom of youthful ennui.

But it's the penultimate series, *The Real World: Las Vegas*, that became one of the most talked-about so far and may be a more reliable index of where reality TV is going. In their sybaritic penthouse at the Palms Casino Hotel, the Las Vegas suitemates far outdistanced their predecessors in their lack of inhibition about on-camera nudity, sex, bisexual threesomes in the hot tub, and round-the-clock debauchery. This fall, a cast member on *The Real World: San Diego* filed charges alleging that she was given a date-rape drug and assaulted by the friend of a housemate. Reportedly, the producers have been less than cooperative with the police investigation, and one wonders what role this incident will play in the show, whether it will be mined to inject the aging series with a revivifying shot of drama.

If television in general and reality TV in particular are indeed drugs, the principles of pharmacology would suggest that viewers will need an increasingly powerful fix just to maintain the same high. The producers of *The Real World* are currently launching *Starting Over*, a daytime series in which six women, lodged in a group home and aided by "life coaches," are put through the equivalent of rehab and forced to confront their problems with overeating, substance abuse, and social isolation. Unlike *The Real World*, which usually includes at least a few mentally healthy housemates, the women in *Starting Over* will presumably be selected to create a veritable zoo of conflicting personality disorders. On cable pay-per-view

channels, contestants on *Can You Be a Porn Star?* will compete for \$100,000 and a contract with an "adult video distributor." And O. J. Simpson has reportedly been approached to star in his own reality series.

Most recently, *Survivor* producer Mark Burnett has turned his attentions from the actual jungle to the corporate jungle ("where staying alive means using both street smarts and book smarts") to create *The Apprentice*, which sends contestants to work in Donald Trump's office and be entertainingly bullied by the Manhattan real-estate tycoon. Divided into teams, the participants (the mix of "Ivy League MBA graduates and street entrepreneurs with no college education" promises to add a frisson of class war) are assigned tasks that involve "sales, marketing, promotions, charities, real estate deals, finance, advertising pitches and facilities management." Instead of being voted off the island, losers will be fired by Trump, and the winner will be given a \$250,000 job with The Trump Organization.

By the time the competitors have run this high-stakes gauntlet, skinning and cooking rodents on a tropical island will presumably seem like a day at the beach. But even if reality TV continues to explore the far frontiers of cruelty and competition, it's unnecessary for these programs to get much more sadistic or grotesque. They merely need to stay the same, and to last long enough to produce an entire generation that has grown up watching them and may consequently have some trouble distinguishing between reality TV and reality. Because what matters is not what's on television but the ghostly afterimage that lingers in our minds and clouds our vision after we turn off the television.

It's all too easy to envision a time when the White House will no longer feel compelled to sell a projected war to the American people but can merely pitch it to Jerry Bruckheimer, whose new series will show us why we need to spread our influence—preferably by force, since diplomacy is less apt to translate into compelling TV—throughout the Middle East. And it's nearly as frightening to conjure up the specter of the singles bar haunted by baffled bachelors and bachelorettes

who have spent years watching cheerleaders mate with male models and are struggling to comparison-shop cool-headedly for the best available match while simultaneously following the daunting imperative to "follow your heart" and find "the soul mate" with whom you are destined to spend the rest of your life.

As a way of reaching the American public, and inculcating audiences with a highly particular and politicized system of values, reality TV has already proved far more effective than more literal-minded representations of the governmental agenda. On the night of December 18, the stylishly dressed Paris Hilton, working in the kissing booth in a rural fair, drew 800,000 more viewers than did President George W. Bush, who was being interviewed by Diane Sawyer after the capture of Saddam Hussein. Were the President and his advisers frustrated, or surprised, or were their tender feelings hurt, by their inability to compete with the skinny socialite whose sex tape had made the rounds of the Internet? More likely they were reassured. With the public's attention so firmly focused on Paris baking pies, the administration can rest assured that it may pretty much do what it wants.

If reality TV does turn out to be not only the present but also the future of prime-time television, it seems more than likely that a steady, high-intake, long-term diet of *Survivor* and *The Bachelorette* will subtly, or not so subtly, affect the views and values of the audiences that tune in week after week. Watching a nightly Darwinian free-for-all cannot help but have a desensitizing effect. Once you've absorbed and assimilated the idea that civility is, at best, a frill, you may find yourself less inclined to suppress an eruption of road rage or the urge to ridicule the homely Average Joe who dares to approach a pretty girl. If the lesson of reality TV is that anyone will do anything for money, that every human interaction necessarily involves the swift, calculated formation and dissolution of dishonest, amoral alliances, it seems naive to be appalled by the fact that our government has been robbing us to pay off its supporters in

the pharmaceutical industry and among the corporations profiting from the rebuilding of Iraq. After you've seen a "real person" lie about his grandmother's death, you may be slightly less shocked to learn that our leaders failed to come clean about the weapons of mass destruction.

After all, it's the way the world works; it's how people behave. We can't have witnessed all that reality without having figured that out by now. How foolish it would be to object to the billing practices of companies such as Halliburton, or to the evidence that our government has been working behind the scenes to dismantle the social security system and to increase (in the guise of reducing) what the elderly will have to pay for health care. *Everybody* acts like that, given half the chance. And we all admire a winner, regardless of how the game was won.

Which is the message we get, and are meant to be getting, every time a bachelor outsmarts his rivals, every time the castaways vote a contender off the island and inch one rung up the ladder. Indeed, those weekly tribal councils at which the voting occurs, held in a cavern or cave decorated to evoke the palm-fringed exotica of the tiki lounge or the Bugs Bunny cartoon, are arguably the most disturbing and pernicious moments in the reality-TV lineup. They're a travesty of democracy so painfully familiar, so much like what our political reality is actually becoming, that it's far more unnerving than watching Donald Trump brutally fire each week's losers, or ugly single guys made to feel even more unattractive than they are.

The castaways vote, as we do, but it's a democracy that might have been conceived if the spirit of Machiavelli had briefly possessed the mind of Thomas Jefferson; indeed, the reasons behind the survivors' ballots might puzzle our Founding Fathers. Because this fun-house version of the electoral process seeks to dismantle civilization rather than to improve it; the goal is neither a common good nor the furthering of life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness. It's a parody of democracy, robbed of its heart and soul, a democracy in which everyone always votes, for himself. ■