

Could Line Between What's Real and What's Fiction Get Any Blurrier?

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The phone rang in the middle of the night, an occupational hazard for psychologist Geoffrey White.

But this call wasn't from a patient. It came from the set of "Joe Schmo," a short-lived parody of TV reality shows that aired on the Spike Network from 2003-2004.

A crisis was brewing, White was informed. A full-fledged rebellion was in the works.

White was a consultant for "Joe Schmo," as well as "The Mole" on ABC. His job was screening contestants to make sure they weren't too emotionally fragile to deal with the contrived conflicts and simulated situations devised by the evil-genius producers.

He also monitored each episode, stepping in whenever he felt human frailties were reaching a limit.

"Joe Schmo" was a reality show with a twist. All the contestants except one were really actors following a script, with events choreographed.

The producers had come up with a particularly mean practical joke to play on the unsuspecting male contestant _ one of the show's actresses would pretend to fall in love with him. That's when the crew _ the folks who work behind the scenes _ said "enough." They thought the prank was cruel even by reality series standards.

"They were going to mutiny," White said.

He mediated the dispute. He reviewed the videotape.

And he decided in favor of the crew.

There would be no made-up love affair.

For one time, at least, reality wouldn't bite.

As the prime-time schedule rolls out this month, it seems that much of what viewers see on television mirrors the premise of "Joe Schmo" _ part reality, part fantasy, with the line between the two blurred almost beyond recognition.

1 Because reality shows are taped and heavily edited, they are becoming more scripted. Their wannabe contestants now have a blueprint to follow, and many audition with a previous player's role in mind.

2 At the same time, scripted TV is striving to portray reality in the raw, with explicit language and graphic content that reflect the dark side of human nature.

3 And TV news, the third element in the programming stew, is hyping real-life dramas such as car chases and highlighting newscasts with crime stories that, interestingly enough, often provide the "ripped from the headlines" plotlines for scripted shows.

4 The irony is that the fixation with the worst aspects of human behavior paints a picture as unrealistic as when TV moms like Donna Reed wore a dress and pearls around the house and law enforcement figures like Sgt. Joe Friday were one-dimensional caricatures.

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Whether it is "Survivor" (which begins its 13th season Thursday at 8 p.m. EDT), "Law & Order: SVU," or the 10 o'clock news, the world depicted through the TV lens is not a pretty picture. It is filled with violence, dishonesty, greed and betrayal, and it is obsessed with sex.

All that's missing from the Nielsen ratings is a weekly TV body count.

And it does not figure to abate anytime soon. Audiences adjust. What they find edgy and disturbing one season becomes routine the next.

Remember when "NYPD Blue" was banned by states in the Bible Belt in its first season?

Network programmers have to keep raising the ante to hold the audience's attention.

Thus, scripted and unscripted TV is being taken to the extreme.

Even a feel-good show like "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," which helps a family in need, has to find people in increasingly dire straits.

"It's because people are becoming desensitized," said Chicago-based psychologist Kate Wachs, who specializes in relationships. "You need more desperate people to keep the level of emotion high."

And scripted TV will leave less to the imagination. It's nothing new to peek over the shoulder of medical examiners and E.R. surgeons as they split open a body as if it were a chicken breast. Cameras now zoom in for close-ups of human remains in decay and crawling with insects, more often than not on a half-naked young woman.

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Psychologists worry that this sinister picture of the world appeals to our base instincts. Viewers are drawn to violence and human conflict on TV like gawkers to an accident scene.

"It's natural that people will pay more attention to what threatens their life and is plausible," said Stuart Fischhoff, professor emeritus at California State University, Los Angeles, and editor of the Journal of Media Psychology.

Shows like "Survivor," "The Apprentice," "The Bachelor," "The Amazing Race" and "Big Brother" thrive, in part, because they encourage viewers to root as much against contestants as for them, "scripting" negative portrayals in the editing bay.

Host Ryan Seacrest devilishly prolongs the misery before dismissing a dejected young pop singer on "American Idol" every week. Simon Cowell has become a caricature of himself as the mean judge, reveling in his biting, insensitive critique of contestants during the audition portion of the show.

"It appeals to the mean part of our human nature," said Robert Thompson, who teaches the study of popular TV at Syracuse University. "We have all been treated that way, by a boss, friend, peer ... Seeing it happen to someone else is really comforting."

It's no surprise, then, that the TV audience has embraced the "Sopranos" as they once did the "Waltons"

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"Most people live boring, empty, disconnected and lonely lives," Geoffrey White said. "They're fascinated by something happening to another human being."

Television's inexorable march toward its dark realism didn't occur overnight. It sprang from seeds planted in the medium's infancy.

In 1956, one of the most popular daytime shows featured four women, each of whom told a heartbreaking tale of woe. Long before 800 numbers and text messaging, an applause meter was used as the studio audience voted for the best sob story and host Jack Bailey proclaimed the winner "Queen for a Day".

The woman would be ceremoniously draped in a velvet robe, and Bailey would place a crown upon her head. Her prize was usually a desperately needed refrigerator, washing machine or TV set.

Fifty years later, the spirit of "Queen for a Day" is alive and well in "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" on ABC. But now, the prizes are a king's ransom _ super-sized homes, awash in luxury, with new pools, plasma TVs and other high-tech toys.

"American Idol" and the flock of talent shows it has inspired is an updated version of Major Bowe's and Ted Mack's "Original Amateur Hour," with a little "Gong Show" thrown in for good measure.

TV news was just an innocent bystander when viewers watched Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald, two days after the assassination of President John Kennedy in 1963. Reality news programming gained more of a foothold with the space program, including live coverage of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon and the space shuttle Challenger exploding on its ascent into the Florida sky.

The age of innocence on scripted programming may have begun its decline when "All in the Family" premiered on CBS in 1971 and Archie Bunker became the contemporary version of Robert Young in "Father Knows Best."

"All in the Family' goes from programs that ignore the real world to programs that put the real world in your face in every episode," Robert Thompson said.

Over more than a decade, utopian escapism and gritty reality co-existed. For every "Maude," "M*A*S*H" and "Roseanne," there was "The Cosby Show," "Family Ties" and the "Mary Tyler Moore Show." There was room for "Miami Vice" and "Hill Street Blues," which killed off characters 20 years before it became commonplace.

But a society that was becoming more cynical of its institutions, and distrusting of people, rejected escapism over time because it never seemed relevant to their own lives.

"Escapist shows were not just sharing time with the new model, they were being annihilated," Thompson said.

Now, television is playing poker with viewers' emotions.

8 With so many choices available with a click of the remote, programmers are resorting to extremes in pushing the reality button.

Is the new plotline of "Survivor" dividing teams by race a stroke of genius, for example, or are producers desperately grasping at straws because they have run out of ideas and the audience knows what comes next?

9 Reality shows have passed the point where contestants reflected average people. Most now look like they were sent from central casting, with a high hunk and hottie quotient. The rest are like character actors fitting neatly into assigned stereotypes.

"The whole notion that these are people like me is not there anymore," said Stuart Fischhoff said. "They're looking for young, beautiful people, and then we watch them do themselves in."

To reflect what people are really like _ or what we suspect they must be like _ the stars of popular scripted shows all struggle with personal issues. It seems like doctors on medical dramas have more issues _ physical and emotional _ than their patients.

And perhaps in response to reality shows, which vote off contestants weekly, many scripted shows are now killing off characters with impunity. That's life, they want viewers to think.

One of the more clever approaches used to blur the line between reality and fantasy was introduced last season on ABC's hit series "Lost," which is essentially "Survivor" with a detailed script.

10 The show's creators inserted ads for the fictitious Hanso Foundation among the other commercials. Viewers who recognized the name from the show and went to the foundation's Web site, or dialed its phone numbers, were drawn into an alternative reality, interactive game, "The Lost Experience."

And the Web site also had subtle promotional tie-ins with the show's real sponsors.

11 Is television doing a disservice by muddying the waters of reality and fantasy, or are viewers not being given credit for being able to distinguish between the two?

Richard Allen, chairman of Radio/TV/Film at Texas Christian University, said it's dangerous for viewers to see TV as a portal to the world.

"They're in the Fun House and think everyone's house is like this," he said

But he notes that because there are so many choices, no one has to be a captive audience. "There's Nickelodeon, the Disney Channel, so many different places where people can tune out," he said.

Psychologist Wachs advises viewers to pick and choose, avoiding shows and themes that strike a nerve.

12 "We have to exert more choice," she said. "We don't have to be manipulated. How do you want to script it?"

If violence scares or depresses you, don't watch. "If a reality show is too much like your life, why sit through it?" she said.

Thompson said that TV will not recapture its lost innocence, but there is room for old-fashioned utopian escapism, if the networks would be more open to pursuing it.

But reality television _ scripted or unscripted _ appears to be here to stay.

13 "The genie is out of the bottle," Fischhoff said. "We are continually holding our breath waiting for something decent to happen, and it never does."

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