Reality TV Stereotypes Minority Groups

Brian Lowry is a columnist and a critic for Variety, an online entertainment news source.

Reality TV shows like The Jersey Shore and Flavor of Love rely on stereotypes of minority groups for entertainment. Careful editing exaggerate these stereotypes and help producers create the story they want to tell. A major concern with such stereotyping of people is that an undereducated audience will end up forming opinions of races and nationalities based on the reality TV they watch.

The outrage expressed by some Italian-Americans over MTV's "Jersey Shore" marks a late-in-coming epiphany about reality TV programs—namely, how many traffic in stereotypes that, in a scripted context, would result in the writers being crucified.

Reality has largely gotten a pass because it ostensibly reflects "reality"—overlooking how participants are depicted as "characters" in much the way fictional personalities are. Tellingly, a recent Newsweek column titled "Kings of Queens" that focused on dramedies like "Glee" and "Ugly Betty" in examining resurgent gay stereotyping gave short shrift to all the royalty conspicuously displayed at Bravo.

Ignoring reality's excesses, however, misses the artifice built into such fare. Not only can producers employ editing techniques to carefully craft the stories they want to tell, but they're provided plenty of choices by the wannabe famous, who surely understand by now that outlandish and exaggerated behavior usually pays off in maximum exposure.

The latest offense against a minority group arrives courtesy of VH1. "Let's Talk About Pep" and "Fantasia for Real" follow musical acts Sandra "Pepa" Denton and "American Idol" contestant Fantasia. They're not-so-subtly presented as an American-American sitcom block, approximating UPN's "Girlfriends" and a single-mom comedy, respectively.

In "Fantasia," the characters include the singer's 28-year-old brother, Teeny, a committed moocher who test-drives expensive cars and responds with horror at the suggestion he get a job. Certainly, few sitcom writers would dare construct a similar portrait of a shiftless black man circa 2010, yet he's seemingly designed to become the show's breakout player.

Less-educated audiences are also tuning in, and perhaps drawing unflattering conclusions based on narrow stereotypes.

Not all reality-TV stereotypes are equally negative, but they do squeeze into the sort of little boxes that have been rightfully ridiculed in the past.

Gays, for example, almost invariably possess an enviable knowledge of fashion, cooking and decorating—presuming the "Queer Eye" is inherently superior to its straight counterpart. Yet watch enough reality in this genre and you'll notice less-laudatory traits as well, among them a tendency to become hysterical under pressure (see Oxygen's "Addicted to Beauty") and relentless cattiness that regularly lurches into the snide.
Nevertheless, subsets of minority communities—in some instances no doubt amused by rough-hewn images of themselves—embrace such programs, which in today’s fragmented marketplace can be enough to render them commercially viable.

A less-settling prospect is that less-educated audiences are also tuning in, and perhaps drawing unflattering conclusions based on narrow stereotypes.

Admittedly, unscripted TV has wallowed in such imagery for years, but the shift has evolved in subtle ways.

Programs like "Jerry Springer" and other daytime talk- and courtshows portray an underclass full of knuckle-dragging cretins, obligingly indulging in affairs and disputes that lead to heated arguments and fisticuffs—the better to be lectured by the hosts.

Even more than drama, reality TV relies on this kind of lazy shorthand, leading to a flat-screen world where blondes are airheads and minorities are too-often shown fleeing from the cops (the latest offender in the latter camp being "Steven Seagal Lawman," an A&E series set in a depressed part of Louisiana).

The difference is that daytime TV churned out an ever-changing array of characters, whereas series like "Flavor of Love" and "Jersey Shore" are more insidious. Key participants represent an ongoing franchise, as opposed to mere bystanders granted 15 minutes of exposure. As such, their excesses are serialized and in success, magnified.

Moreover, in instances where celebrities (fallen or pseudo) are involved, they can be directly invested in the shows as producers—adding to the incentive to hit their mark, as it were, and play a predetermined part.

As the Newsweek piece concluded, there's room for broadly drawn characters provided that's not all the audience sees: "It's not that gay men and women should pretend to be straight, or file down all their fabulously spiky edges.... The key is balance."

But if fleshed-out minority roles are sometimes scarce in the scripted realm, thanks to reality TV's hyperbolic habits, such roles remain virtually nonexistent in "reality." And whatever alibis they might offer, unscripted producers know precisely what messages they're sending—from the haughty salons of Beverly Hills and mean streets of Jefferson Parish to the beer-soaked beaches of the Jersey shore.

Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals and Internet Sources**
- Kate Coyne "Kate Plus Eight: 'My Family Can't Be Canceled,'" *People*, September 19, 2011.

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