

PERSPECTIVES

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The Degradation of Reality

Do you remember the heady excitement of the first season of MTV's "The Real World"? The Emerald editorial board does. We were going to get to see real people, doing real stuff in the privacy of their home. Ooh. It was voyeurism at its best, mixed with the refreshing thought of unscripted young people, saying and doing whatever they felt like. At the time, "The Real World" seemed like a fantastic antidote to the stilted dialogue and overly contrived settings of the garbage sitcoms that were being aired.

Unfortunately, none of those qualities were what tempted us to take a peek at "Temptation Island," Fox's latest entry in the reality-TV craze. The reality genre has been degraded to the point where the only real allure to watch is to see how stupid the people will act and to ogle the hotties. Don't get us wrong; reality shows were never a pinnacle of highbrow programming. But they used to be innovative.

The initial surge of reality TV was refreshing. The people on "The Real World" acted like real people and said things that were recognizable as actual conversations. Who can forget Puck dipping his finger into the peanut butter? These early episodes were not contrived. When MTV brought out "Road Rules," some staging was added to the mix, but it was still interesting to see how real people would act in stressful situations, packed into a tiny RV.

The genre has now been turned into a stage for wanna-be actors, models and dysfunctional weirdos seeking their 15 minutes in the blue light of television fame. On CBS' "Big Brother," the interesting people were voted off so quickly that the fascination died. Fox's "Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire" was so staged and offensive that the network backed away from it almost as soon as it aired.

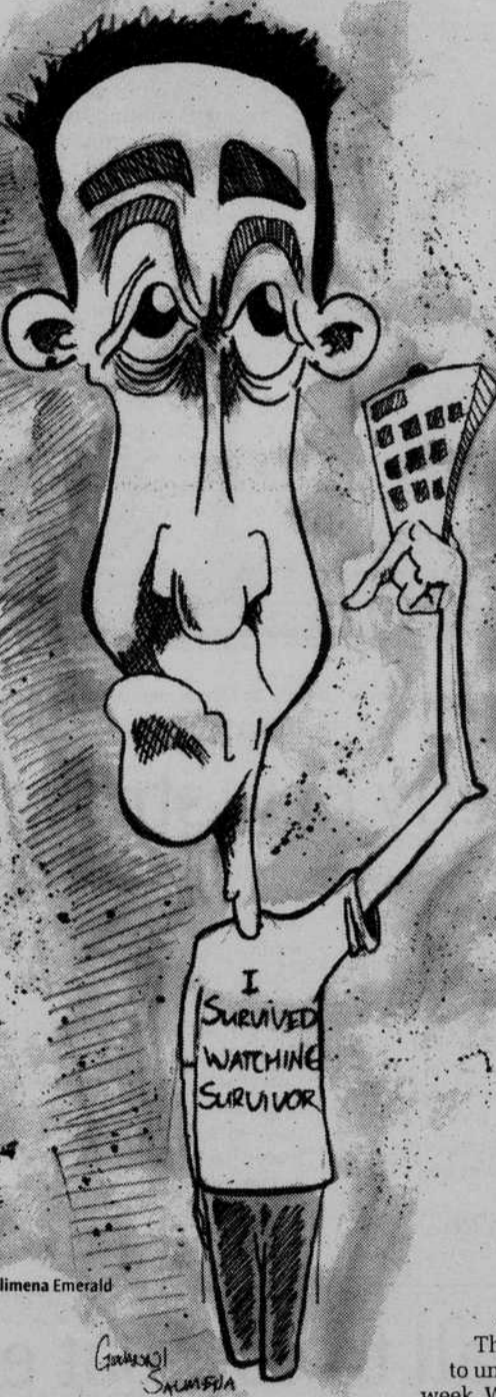
Then came CBS' "Survivor" and ABC's "The Mole."

What was once fun and unique has become so old and tired that network executives are concocting ever-more-unusual situations to put people in. Not only are the settings horribly contrived, but the people know darn well that they need to perform for the camera.

On "Temptation Island," the non-actors seem to think they have to ham it up, acting as melodramatic as possible about perhaps the silliest set-up yet imagined.

The new "Survivor" is sure to disappoint, because the new survivors are now painfully aware that scheming and strategizing is the only way to win. The whole thing has gone so over the top that Richard Hatch, the winner from the first version of "Survivor," is going to write a weekly column about the strategic moves made by the non-actors.

Besides viewers, the real losers



Giovanni Salimena Emerald

in this mania are professional actors and writers. TV executives have learned that they don't need to pay for professionally produced entertainment, as long as ordinary (or not so ordinary) people are willing to whore themselves for the camera and prizes. Top sitcom actors can cost \$100,000 or more per episode; the only talent expense for the entire season of "Survivor" was \$1 million. This seems like a good business decision for networks, especially with the Actors Guild and the Writers Guild threatening strikes.

We've heard that a new reality show, "Chains of Love," is going to take the genre to new lows of ab-

surdity. Apparently, five men will be chained to a woman, and the six-some will have to do everything together. The woman will choose to unchain one man each week. We can't even imagine what will be the prize, or the point, of this insanity.

As long as people keep being titillated by the ideas and tune in to the shows, there's no end in sight for reality TV. What is it about us, as humans, that drives us to watch? Sure, it can be fun to look at barely-clothed cuties, but there's better stuff available on the Internet. Is it just the old adage that people like to slow down at a car wreck, or is there something more at work? Perhaps Americans are so awash in dysfunction that they need ever-increasing levels of oddity to pique their interest. Maybe it's just the thrill of watching people degrade themselves for the chance to be seen doing so in front of millions of people.

A new movie, "Series 7," is soon

slated for release. This movie examines a fictional reality TV show, "The Contenders," where the contestants are armed and have to shoot each other to stay alive until next week. Supposedly, the movie is a wickedly dark satire of the reality genre, but the idea makes us wonder: With all the costs of making a movie, why didn't the producers just find people willing to play the game for real, and save themselves the expense of doing it fictionally?

We pray that reality TV will never degrade us all in such a fashion. It would be nice if the networks would stop trying to outdo cable by offering overdone tawdry voyeurism, and instead return to writing and producing quality stories that people want to watch.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses can be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.

Poll Of The Week

For those of you unfamiliar with our Web site, the Emerald has started a weekly online poll on topics of interest to the campus community. The poll can be accessed from the main page of our Web site, <http://dailyemerald.com>. We will post a new question every Sunday afternoon. Every week in this space, we will print the results of the last week's poll and the poll question for the next week. We encourage you to send us feedback about the poll questions and results.

This week's poll question:
 What does "PFC" stand for?

The choices:
 Personal Fun Center
 Progressives For Change
 Programs Finance Committee
 Personal Finance Club