

The Nouveau Reach: Ideologies of Class and Consumerism in Reality-Based Television

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Abstract

*This essay presents a critical analysis of the class and consumptive ideologies on reality-based television programs *The Apprentice*, *The Bachelor*, *While You Were Out*, and *Pimp My Ride*. In the United States and the United Kingdom, consumption of material goods has risen markedly and the class gap has increased. This essay describes the prevalence of lavish commodities and commodity fetishism that normalise an upper class lifestyle and the prevalence of the myth of the American dream and meritocracy that obscure class barriers. I conclude that the sum of these capitalist ideologies encourages viewers to spend beyond their means, potentially resulting in wider class divisions.*

“[C]onsumer culture publicity suggests that we all have room for self-improvement and self-expression whatever our age or class origins.” (Featherstone 1991: 86)

Participants on the reality-based television program *Survivor* have the chance to win one million dollars, but only after living in some of the poorest conditions experienced by any television personality. After sleeping on dirt, catching their own food, and competing for the chance to shower, some participants may wish they applied to *The Real World*, *Big Brother*, *Trading Spaces*, or almost any other reality-based program. In contrast to the survivors' decline in living standards, most reality programs elevate their participants to a lifestyle they did not previously enjoy. Taylor (2002: 484) argues that contemporary British television programming addresses audiences “as consumers rather than citizens.” As is true with British prime-time, American television has also been infiltrated by consumer programming in the form of reality shows. In order to better understand the ideologies of capitalism, class, and consumption in reality television, this essay undertakes an analysis of the lifestyle ideologies on four programs: *The Apprentice*, *The Bachelor*, *While You Were Out*, and *Pimp My Ride*. The communication about consumption on the programs is analysed through a Marxist lens and considered in terms of the widening class gap.

Between the 1970s and the turn of the century, keeping up with the Joneses became much harder. Gini (1999) contends that the average American is consuming at least twice as much in material goods when compared with rates from four decades ago and that this trend is true throughout income levels. Ironically paralleling the rise in American consumption is a widening income gap. Although there have been claims of a new economy of the 1990s, the income disparity between the top, middle, and bottom classes has continued to grow (Bernstein, Mishel, & Brocht 2000). The upper class wealth concentration is greater now than any time since the Great Depression (Zweig 2000: 69). Increases in consumption and increases in the class divide may be related as people spend beyond their means, becoming part of a group that I call the “nouveau reach,” and are pulled into debt. It is estimated that an astronomical 63% of Americans earning \$50,000-100,000 a year are currently in debt (Schor 1998: 19). Similar trends may be seen in the UK: The average British household is spending £22 more than their income per week (Ward & Jones 2005) and the class gap continues to grow (Bennett 2005). Collectively, these figures do not bode well for future class mobility.

A study comparing consumer realities and television viewing by O’Guinn and Shrum (1997) found that television affects judgements of what is normal consumption, thereby influencing viewers’ consumer expectations, satisfaction, and desire. As media portrayals can have powerful effects on viewers’ consumptive realities, and consumption can be tied to debt and the widening class gap, it is important for viewers and scholars to be critical of the lifestyle ideologies represented in various media. While communication scholars have analysed lifestyle representations in sitcoms (Butsch 1992; Butsch & Glennon 1983) and soap operas (O’Guinn & Shrum 1997), Phillips (2004) claims that class is an under-explored element in newer television formats such as the reality genre. This essay takes a step toward filling that gap by conducting a critical analysis of the class and consumptive ideologies in two episodes each of *The Apprentice*, *The Bachelor*, *While You Were Out*, and *Pimp My Ride* that aired in fall 2004. Although the programs examined all aired in the United States, the reality television market is extremely globalised. *While You Were Out* was inspired by the British programs *Changing Rooms* and *Fantasy Rooms*. And as of 2005, *The Apprentice*, *The Bachelor*, and *Pimp My Ride* all had British counterparts of the same name.

This essay begins with a brief discussion of the reality-based television genre and then familiarises readers with the specific programs that will be analysed. Next, this essay establishes its theoretical grounding with an examination of relevant features of Marxism and post-Marxism. The analysis then begins with a discussion of two themes coursing throughout these programs, which collectively emphasise and normalise an upper class

lifestyle: the prevalence of upper class markers and commodity fetishism. Lifestyle and consumptive patterns continue to function metonymically for class (see Douglas & Isherwood 1996: 141; Ewen 1988: 61) and the analysis moves on to reveal two mechanisms through which class/lifestyle boundaries are made to appear permeable: emphasis on the American dream and meritocracy through the process of gifting upper class commodities to “hardworking” and “selfless” reality show participants. I conclude that the sum of these rhetorical mechanisms encourages viewers to spend beyond their means, potentially resulting in cycles of debt and wider class divisions.

Although Andrejevic (2004) asserts that ideological critique results in complacency about existing symbolic structures, I argue that scrutinizing the mediated world of consumerist ideologies can help chip away at the Utopian facade. Criticism of the prevalence of upper class images and the myth of social mobility, while not likely to cause a direct change in material conditions, can help erode the normalisation of upper class consumptive patterns. Furthermore, exposing rhetorical mechanisms in the myth of social mobility can potentially encourage collective action in place of consumer activism.

Reality-Based Television

Andrejevic (2004: 2) notes that reality-based television was rapidly transformed into the “hot programming of the new millennium.” Once dismissed as a passing trend, the reality genre continues to be a staple in network and cable programming. This (still) hot programming packs a double whammy for networks because costs are kept low without the need to pay script writers and actors.¹ Carter (2006) reports that one hour of reality programming costs one third less to produce than its scripted counterpart. Viewers are clearly satisfied by the cheaper product as evidenced by the 72 million viewers (representing 25% of the American population) who tuned in to the 2000 finale of *Survivor* (Lowry 2000) and almost 43 million who watched Taylor Hicks be crowned the fifth American Idol (Malcom 2006).

From makeover shows such as *The Swan* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* to competition shows such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, this genre varies widely, yet all are similar in formula: Reality-based shows present a verisimilitude by taping the seemingly unscripted actions of participants and then presenting an edited, yet realistic, final product. The level of verisimilitude varies by program. Although some reality-based television programs clearly involve rehearsals (such as *American Idol* and *Dancing with the Stars*) or producer-planned activities (*The Bachelor*, *Survivor*, and *Real World/Road Rules Challenge*), the dialogue of participants appears unscripted at the very least. Viewers likely realise that production teams have played a role in the final product, but the verisimilitude

has important consequences for the ways in which viewers are encouraged to interpret the content of the show: Potter (1986: 168) claims, “Viewers who believe that televised content is real are more likely to be influenced by it than are viewers who believe the content to be fictional or stylized.”

The Programs

I have selected a sample of reality-based television that encompasses a broad variety of themes. The four shows I examine all aired in the fall of 2004 and are equally split between cable and network channels. *The Apprentice* and *The Bachelor* represent the network side. In *The Apprentice*, eight men and women are placed into two teams that compete in a variety of tasks including selling ice cream, running fundraisers, and creating advertising campaigns. At the end of each episode, one member of the losing team is eliminated, dashing their hopes of being hired by Trump Enterprises for a \$250,000 yearly salary. The 7 October 2004 premiere of *The Apprentice* attracted a healthy-sized audience of 14 million viewers. ABC’s *The Bachelor* is similar to *The Apprentice* in that both have a weekly elimination event. In spring 2007, *The Bachelor* began its tenth season of a similar scenario involving one bachelor or bachelorette who chooses from a pool of twenty-five potential relational partners. While ratings for the 2004 season were unavailable, earlier seasons of *The Bachelor* have often ranked in Nielsen’s top twenty-five (Farhi 2002).

The two cable shows, *While You Were Out* and *Pimp My Ride* both involve makeovers of personal property. *While You Were Out* showcases a surprise room re-decorating by a specialised team consisting of a designer and carpenter, among others. The person being surprised is sent on a short vacation and the *While You Were Out* team scrambles to complete the new room. The participants on *Pimp My Ride* knowingly sacrifice their run-down vehicles to rap star Xzibit’s crew of car technicians. The skilled team “pimps out” what could previously be considered a lemon, shocking the car owners at the end with many fancy additions such as dashboard DVD players, sound systems, rims, paint jobs, and other improvements.

While these programs focus on very different goals, they may be united with the common theme of “improvement” – professionally, romantically, and possessionally. Burke’s (1969: 24) discussion of “moral growth” provides a useful framework:

Man’s [*sic*] moral growth is organized through properties, properties in goods, in services, in position or status, in citizenship, in reputation, in acquaintanceship and love.

While reality makeovers of possessions and occupation are clearly class-based, it is important to address the neglected area of courtship as this is also intertwined with lifestyle and status.

Class, Consumption, and Media

In a very simplified description of Marxism, this critical philosophy argues that the capitalist system is exploitative, denying the proletariat meaningful work, which results in their subjugation by the bourgeoisie capitalist class. Marx employed the term “ideology” to explain why the alienating conditions of capitalism do not necessary result in revolution (Aune 1994). Ideology in Marxism clarifies how the economic structure of society shapes the legal and political superstructure which, in turn, moulds one’s social consciousness: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx 1975a: 425). An important part of economically inspired ideologies is that they must work to subversively maintain consent for an exploitative capitalist system. Summarizing Marx, Eagleton (1991: 84) asserts that ideology may denote “illusory beliefs” which distract men and women from their “actual social conditions” and may also signify “ideas which directly express the material interests of the dominant social class.”

Ewen (1988: 61) traces Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption and the rise of consumer democracy beginning with industrialization to argue that class is defined “almost exclusively, by patterns of *consumption*” (emphasis in original). This conflation of lifestyle with class is an ideological mechanism that perpetuates the myth of class mobility, thereby obscuring actual conditions and discouraging collective action to improve existing social conditions. Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism is part and parcel of this hegemonic mechanism. Marx argued that as products of labour are disassociated from production and detached from their use-value (in other words, they become commodities), and as workers feel alienated from the products of their labour, secondary meaning systems step in to stabilise value hierarchies. Commodity fetishism results from these fragmented, anomic conditions. The value of a commodity thus comes to be defined by exchange value, what Marx (1978a: 322) described as a “social hieroglyphic,” and people come to be defined not by their work, but by the commodities their work enables them to purchase. In other words, the relationship between people comes to be defined by the relationship between things (Marx 1978a: 321)

Marx did not predict the incredible staying power of capitalism. In light of this, it is important to examine how capitalism has maintained its ideological grip on American society. Media

scholars Jhally and Lewis (1992: 74) elaborate on the inner-workings of the capitalist system asserting that, “To sustain consent for a market economy constructed upon enormous disparities in income and wealth, it is necessary to persuade people not to question but to consume.” Lears (1994: 10) traces the ethics of consumption back to advertising practices at the turn of the 20th century. He explains that advertisements evoked desire and sought to harness the power of that desire, “to stabilize the sorcery of the marketplace by containing dreams of personal transformation within a broader rhetoric of control.” Whereas advertisements are explicitly intended to sell products, subtler forms of consumptive ideologies perpetuate almost all forms of media, and may be considered extremely powerful in reality-based or lifestyle television programs.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of the culture industry (1979) and Jameson’s (1992) concept of the fantasy bribe are productive in explaining the inner-workings of these mediated hegemonic consumptive ideologies, which collectively create the *semblance* of class mobility and perpetuate the myth of the American dream. Much like Gerbner’s cultivation theory, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that media send uniform messages to the masses. These messages help retain class division by encouraging a false sense of hope in the working class:

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises... The promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu (Adorno & Horkheimer 1979: 363).

By providing a window into the upper class world, and by making the path to that world seem easily negotiated, media pacify lower classes. This mechanism is similar to Jameson’s fantasy bribe in which he argues that mass culture exploits the anxiety and hope of the collective consciousness and soothes that anxiety with a Utopian vision, or fantasy bribe. Both of these theories are consistent with Lears’ observation that mass media actively shapes and channels consumptive desire in order to maintain consent for the capitalist system.

Indeed, various contemporary scholars have found a link between media and commodity consumption. Schor (1998: 80) claims, “The more TV a person watches, the more he or she spends.” The likely explanation for the link between television and spending is that what we see on TV distorts our sense of what is normal. As Lewis (2004: 295) asserts, television programs encourage viewers to make ideologically based judgements about social class and further reinforces these judgements with “fictional constructions of class behaviour [*sic*].” In

his survey of domestic comedies from 1950-1990, Butsch (1992) found that only 11 domestic comedy series (out of 262) depicted blue collar employees as the head of the household. Furthermore, the author observes that many of the middle-class families appeared unusually affluent and successful. The difference in portrayals of the working class compared with the upper class appears to be greatly polarised. Synthesising various studies on the portrayals of class in television, it is possible to conclude that middle and upper class lifestyles are depicted as normal, proper, and ideal (Butsch 1992; Jhally & Lewis 1992; Lipsitz 2003; Schor 1998).

In opposition to the class segregated world depicted in standard television programming, Andrejevic (2004) argues that reality television touts itself as a more democratic and socialist genre as the “masses” now allegedly have free access to media (in the form of participating in a reality television program). As the analysis will soon explain, however, this more democratic genre may be little more than a fantasy bribe.

Method

For the analysis I have transcribed dialogue and noted relevant visual and aural semiotics that rhetorically construct messages about class and consumerism. While Marx considered class to be defined by one’s relationship to the means of production, this essay melds together class and consumption, working from a symbolic taxonomy of the goods and services consumed in order to position the participants as representative of a certain lifestyle. As O’Guinn and Shrum (1997: 279) explain, “television commonly uses consumption symbols as a means of visual shorthand; what television characters have and the activities in which they participate mark their social status.” In his analysis of class in situation comedy, Butsch (1992) looked at things such as home and furnishings to evaluate the characters’ classes. This essay will consider upper class markers to be those goods and services that cost a great deal and go far beyond meeting basic needs.

I begin by describing the upper class markers and commodity fetishism that permeate the programs, thus normalizing an upper class lifestyle. I then move on to the myths of the American dream and meritocracy that at once under-gird and disguise the fantasy bribe inherent in the programs.

Analysis

Upper Class Markers

The major networks have more money to spend on programming and the extravagance of *The Apprentice* and *The Bachelorette* dwarfs that of the sampled cable programs. In both

The Apprentice and *The Bachelor*, viewers are exposed week after week to lifestyles of the rich. By viewing the lush surroundings, the appearance of the participants, and their leisure activities, the audience receives a voyeuristic upper class education.

Contestants on *The Apprentice* work hard during the competitions, but most also live at Trump Towers and receive luxurious prizes for winning each week's capitalist contest. In the episode from 23 September 2004, the team that creates the most product exposure for a new brand of toothpaste is rewarded with dinner aboard the Queen Mary, the "biggest, grandest ocean liner in the world." The experience would not be complete without other signifiers of the upper class lifestyle: The participants dine on filet mignon and lobster, smoking cigars as an after-dinner treat.

Participants on *The Apprentice* are in competition to secure their place in the upper class. In order to do this, they must demonstrate their belongingness through their manner of dress and appearance. The participants wear business suits and professional attire throughout many of their tasks and when meeting with Trump. These polished appearances are a necessity when attempting to gain admittance into an elite group. Once the participants hear Trump's trademarked "you're fired," however, we see a great discrepancy between the world inside Trump Towers and the world outside. Fired apprentices in the 2004 season exit the glass doors of the monstrous towers, step out onto the hard sidewalk, and settle into a tacky yellow taxicab, which serves as a clear symbol that their lavish dreams have not been realised.

Like *The Apprentice*, the scenery of *The Bachelor* depicts an upper class lifestyle: During the course of the show, the bachelor lives in a sprawling mansion complete with a large landscaped swimming pool and tree-lined driveway. In the elimination ceremonies, the women appear dressed in evening gowns, perfectly coifed, with flawless make-up. Just as *The Apprentice* serves as a model for how to make it in business, *The Bachelor* serves as a model for courtship. In this model are established very expensive courtship patterns that involve extravagant dinners, boating trips, helicopter rides, jet travel, and, of course, the ubiquitous diamond ring. As a huge fountain splashes in the background of the opening of the second episode, host Chris Harrison presents bachelor Byron with a Marquis jet card so that he may travel to the remaining three women's hometowns. After stepping out of a limousine we watch Byron board his own jet with the Marquis logo emblazoned on the side. The product placement of this episode is especially apropos as "marquis" denotes a type of diamond cut. This word rhetorically encourages viewers to anticipate the engagement that will take place in the following episode.

In the season finale of *The Bachelor* that aired on 24 November 2004, there are no less than six camera shots focusing on a diamond ring before Byron even selects the one with which he will propose. The ring stands as a symbol of the future relationship but also of wealth due in part to the large size of the diamond. The collective imagery of *The Bachelor* encourages viewers to see a reverse dowry effect: The message sent is that a man who wants to engage in “proper” heterosexual courtship must be able to afford elaborate dates to woo and a large diamond to seal the deal.

Throughout *Pimp My Ride* and *While You Were Out*, the cost of various products is greatly emphasised, yet the vehicles and houses that are subjected to makeovers are not as extravagant as the images seen on ABC and NBC. In the case of *Pimp My Ride*, the vehicles are falling apart and almost undriveable: Antwon’s back window is kicked out and his tail light broken, while Erin’s bumper is held together with rope and a screwdriver serves as the key to her back door.

In both episodes, however, safety takes a back seat to aesthetics. I have yet to see an episode in which airbags, anti-lock brakes, or other safety devices are added. Practical needs are overshadowed by DVD players, rims, neon highlights, and video game systems, not to mention a fish tank for Antwon and fireplace for Erin. Although the cost of each item is not always detailed, Q, the manager of West Coast Custom, remarks about the ridiculousness of putting \$20,000 into Antwon’s \$900 car. For the price of these many embellishments, Antwon could have had an entirely new vehicle.

In contrast to the vehicles on *Pimp My Ride*, the rooms made over on *While You Were Out* are not in poor shape. Both from the sample episodes are fairly plain, yet all the furnishings coordinate and are functional. The consumerist ideologies of *While You Were Out* are even more insidious than the other programs. Each room is supposed to be made over for \$1,500, a fact that is articulated several times throughout each episode. This total is extremely misleading as it does not include various “prizes” that the participants may win for their rooms, including a \$500 ceiling fan, \$1000 rug, and \$1000 chair in one of the episodes. Adding in the prizes, the cost of the room materials is likely closer to \$4000 and this total does not even include the expense of hiring a designer and paying for the labour of five skilled craftspeople for two days. In her analysis of British garden shows, Taylor (2002: 480) observes that reality programs present a discourse of “achievability and accessibility” for viewers. Presenting misleading totals of the cost of remodelling is one such method to normalise and rhetorically democratise the perceived accessibility of remodelling efforts.

Commodity Fetishism

As Marx (1975b: 169) explains in one of his many critiques of Hegel, “private property . . . becomes *inalienable*, and thus a *substantive characteristic* which constitutes the ‘private personality and the universal essence of the self-consciousness’” (emphasis in original). Marx is describing the subjugation of identity to property that occurs in industrialised capitalist societies, the root idea of commodity fetishism. Throughout the *Apprentice* and *Pimp My Ride* are examples in which identity, commodities, and occupation (as a marker of one’s means through which to attain commodities) are fused into one entity.

Commodity fetishism is most prominent in *The Apprentice*. As the participants are introduced at the beginning of each episode, their pictures appear superimposed on a Times Square billboard while their names flash below on a ticker tape. The O’Jay’s hit song, “For the Love of Money,” which repeats the word “money” several times, ties in with the visual rhetoric of the opening. Money is the ultimate capitalist desire as Marx (1978b: 102) explains: “by possessing the property of appropriating all objects, *money* is thus the *object* of eminent possession” (emphasis in original). This combination of advertising, stock trading, and musical celebration of money that introduces the competitors directly likens them to a product, thereby suggesting a mental shortcut between identity, labour, and consumption.

This imagery is fitting considering to whom they are apprenticed: Donald Trump, a man who has his face on a variety of products including board games, books, bottled water, and his own doll. Trump’s commodification has become so omnipresent that he is now referred to in popular press as “The Donald.” The Donald’s ability to profit from the free market’s invisible hand has even elevated him to divine status (at least on the show). As he descends an escalator in his eponymous towers, “royal” trumpets sound in the background (23 September 2004). The top of the escalator may have originated in heaven judging by the imagery shown before the final scene of the 4 November 2004 episode: Fast-moving clouds are shown jetting across the New York City skyline and a crescendoing chorus is heard before a tuxedoed Trump steps into the board room for the firing. As a divine figure, Trump possesses the ability to define the lives of his apprentices: In this episode, he privileges industry over workers explaining, “It’s not personal, it’s just business.”

Identity and commodities are also integrated in *Pimp My Ride*. In both episodes, the owners complain that their vehicles do not really represent their true selves, implying that one’s mode of transportation is integral to identity. As host Xzibit comments, “Cars always say a lot about the people that drive them” (24 September 2004). Whereas Xzibit’s car says “super duper get out the way,” both Erin and Antwon have vehicles that they believe do not speak

as highly for them. Erin states her case for a car makeover pleading, “This car, it just does not show who I am . . . and I need something that shows my true colours” (27 November 2004). Once the cars are made over, they become fully integrated with the identity of their owners. Erin refers to her car as “my baby” indicating that the vehicle is an extension of herself. Pointing to the electronics in his new vehicle, Antwon more profoundly illustrates the blending of selfhood and private property, saying, “This is me” (24 September 2004).

The American Dream

With the merging of consumptive practices and identity comes an expectation of all classes to emulate those at the top. As Veblen (1899: 84) explains, the leisure class’ standards “afford the norm of reputability for the community. The observance of these standards, in some degree of approximation, becomes incumbent upon all classes lower in the scale.” Consumption is thus “imbued with ethical, moral and aesthetic significance” (Taylor 2002: 482) and this connection is part and parcel of the myth of the American dream.

In their critique of the American dream, Jhally and Lewis (1992: 73) note that a “dream speaks to us not only about what is possible but what is desirable.” The authors further explain that small cracks in class barriers are not enough to let many rise up but that the few who do achieve the American dream serve to reinforce the hope of others. The mass media’s perpetuation of the American dream is an integral part of the fantasy bribe according to Jameson (1992: 29) who asserts that the Utopian ideologies of mass culture must offer a “genuine shred of content” in order to successfully persuade the public. Reality-based television, as it further blurs the real and television worlds with supposedly unscripted entertainment, may provide that “genuine shred.” In Kompare’s (2004: 103) discussion of links between documentary and reality television, he notes that both genres make the argument that “reality should look and sound like *this*” (emphasis in original).

Many implicit references to the American dream are woven throughout *The Apprentice*. Viewers are likely aware that the end goal of the competition is to win a \$250,000 salary as an employee of Trump Enterprises. The biography of Bill Rancic, winner of season one of *The Apprentice*, becomes what Cloud (1996: 125) describes as “part of the larger story of liberal individualism in capitalist society.” As Rancic told reporters following his victory, “The American Dream is still alive out there, and hard work will get you there” (“Bill Rancic is ‘The Apprentice,’” *Associated Press*, 28 April 2004).

The sampled episodes for this paper do not include the season finale of *The Apprentice*, but the American dream imagery is evoked throughout the season. Rancic returns to the show several times and offers advice to the remaining contestants (29 September 2004; 18

November 2004; 2 December 2004). These guest appearances serve as a reminder of his inspirational story. The evocation of his success story encourages the participants to glimpse victory as do their rewards for winning the various challenges. When the winning team from the 23 September 2004 episode celebrates their success on the Queen Mary, they cruise past the Statue of Liberty and viewers are left with the visual and aural memory of them singing “America the Beautiful.” The American dream is thus rhetorically equated with freedom and liberty, signalling that it is achievable even by the poor masses.

While *The Apprentice* makes many implicit references to the American dream, there are numerous explicit references in *The Bachelor* and *Pimp My Ride* that more profoundly emphasise the prevalence of fantasy bribes within these texts. These programs effectively capitalise on the “anxiety of the collective consciousness” that Jameson describes as an integral part of the fantasy bribe. For example, *The Bachelor* is premised on the anxieties felt by unmarried adult men and women. Bachelor Byron’s father articulates the socially constructed importance of having a mate when he asks of Tanya, “Why do you think it is that at 31—and you’re a beautiful young lady—that you’ve never been married?” With this question, he is implying that there is something wrong with being an unmarried thirty-something woman. Byron’s father also suggests that the only explanation for such a situation would be that the woman is not attractive.

The anxiety constructed in *Pimp My Ride* is even more overt as the beginning minutes of the show are dedicated to criticisms imposed by the vehicle owners’ social circles. Antwon allegedly cannot get dates because of his shabby ride and viewers are privy to a re-enactment of a scenario in which an attractive woman points and laughs at his car. Erin’s friend Kim adds in her criticisms, noting, “It’s a complete embarrassment for Erin to be driving down the street in that car” (27 November 2004).

The constructed anxieties are clearly solved in the finale of *The Bachelor* and in the end of each *Pimp My Ride* episode: One lucky woman ends up with a fiancée and the lucky car owners drive away in one-of-a-kind vehicles. Before the very last rose ceremony, *The Bachelor* finalist Mary discusses her plans to fit Byron into the Utopian vision she has constructed: “If it’s Byron and me at the end of all of this I will be ecstatic. . . I think that all of my dreams will be fulfilled” (24 November 2004). Thankfully, Byron has the same feelings for Mary. He confesses after the proposal, “I can’t imagine losing you. . . I feel everything I’ve been looking for is embodied in you.” Runner-up Tanya also hoped that all her dreams would be fulfilled in the final rose ceremony, but her anxieties were unfortunately maintained as she went back to just being a single, attractive, thirty-something woman.

Byron describes the final rose ceremony as “the most important night of my life” and similar sentiments are echoed by the car owners in *Pimp My Ride*. Their remodelled cars are like a poultice to their festering social anxieties. As she drives off to show her friends her new ride, Erin dramatically states, “This is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. This is literally a dream come true” (27 November 2004). Antwon also elevates this experience to the highest ranking out of all his life events. He claims, “It was just like the biggest, most exciting thing that’s happened to me in my life” and further notes, “It’s like a dream come true” (24 September 2004).

Meritocracy

Not everyone can experience the American dream so it is important to question what separates those who live the dream from the mere dreamers. *While You Were Out* and *Pimp My Ride* greatly emphasise the deserving nature of their chosen participants. These collective ideologies send the message that self-sacrifice corresponds with material rewards and lifestyle changes, which give the appearance of a change in one’s class. The implications of such ideologies are very serious: Cloud (1996: 133), in her discussion of tokenism in Oprah’s biography, asserts that the ideals of meritocracy support a class-based, discriminatory social order. As value and merit are integrated into the narratives of those who have risen up and made it, structural barriers to the achievement of the American dream are correspondingly deemphasised. The faux meritocracy constructed as part of the American dream “sustains a conservative political ideology blind to the inequalities hindering persons born on mean streets and privileging persons born on easy street” (Jhally & Lewis 1992: 8).

When viewers are first introduced to the people chosen for room makeovers on *While You Were Out* and vehicle makeovers on *Pimp My Ride*, they are given a sense that these are very kind and hard-working people. Judging by the dialogue, each person who will be surprised with a new room from *While You Were Out* has allegedly tirelessly supported their partner. The makeover is therefore constructed as a reward for their selfless behaviour. At the end of the first sample episode, we learn that swimmer Nate has contacted *While You Were Out* in order to “thank her [his girlfriend Michelle] for being with him through this time of training for the Olympics” (15 November 2004). The introduction to the second episode also frames the reasons for the makeover in a similar fashion. Jerry explains that he wants to surprise his wife because, “Kim works so hard for everybody else—and does for me, the kids, her friends. She always thinks of everybody else first” (17 November 2004).

Pimp My Ride follows an analogous form: The car owners are constructed as very hard-working individuals and also as financially needy. Friends, family, and the chosen ones themselves reiterate their deserving nature. Antwon is depicted as a starving art student who, like the apprentice Bill Rancic, is putting himself through school. According to the sympathetic narrative, he used half of his life savings to purchase the car, and spent the second half to fix the car when it broke down the very first week he owned it. His friends also shower praise on Antwon, describing him with the adjectives “loyal,” “not superficial,” and “nice” (24 September 2004).

Erin and Antwon have many qualities in common and she, too, has worked hard to purchase and fix her vehicle. She lives austere according to her mom who explains, “Erin really has no luxuries in her life” (27 November 2004). Although she previously had not been rewarded for being a “good person,” Erin seems to buy into the ideals of the American meritocracy as she describes the perceived image of her car: “You would think it belonged to somebody who was unhappy, somebody who didn’t care, somebody who didn’t try.” Here again, we see effort and hard work equated with financial success.

Just as Donald Trump’s life is constructed as the ideal that apprentices strive to emulate, *Pimp My Ride* host Xzibit’s life is constructed as the success model for those on his show. Like Antwon, he began as a starving artist. Further strengthening the identification between host and reality show participant, Xzibit presents Antwon with a portable art set to keep in his car. He emphasises the achievability of the American dream by advising Antwon, “The one thing that’s most important is the art.” The moral of these stories seems to be that as long as one makes sacrifices for their art, their families, and their partners, they will receive material rewards and happiness.

Summary and Implications

Upper class consumptive patterns and commodity fetishism are widespread in the four sampled reality-based programs, *The Apprentice*, *The Bachelor*, *While You Were Out*, and *Pimp My Ride*, thereby glorifying and normalising upper class lifestyles. The stories of the few lucky reality participants who “win” a prestigious occupation, fiancée, or expensive additions to their private property, provide narrative support for the myth that hard work will necessarily result in the attainment of the American dream. Structural economic barriers are firmly entrenched in American society, yet these success narratives obscure the relative impermeability of class walls. Furthermore, the conflation of property and identity stigmatises members of the working class if they fail to obtain socially desirable lifestyle markers.

Compared to purely fictitious television programming, the glimpse into “real life” provided by these programs is potentially more persuasive.

While the ideologies represented on all programs are fairly similar, a pattern emerges when comparing the network and cable programs. The network programs more fully integrate participants into the upper class lifestyle, providing viewers with a greater sense of what it is like to live in that world. This exemplifies the process by which “those in control can take someone up into their heaven and throw him out again” (Adorno & Horkheimer 1979: 368). The power of those heavenly beings (like the divine Donald Trump) is clearly illustrated by *The Apprentice* on NBC and *The Bachelor* on ABC. The less-powerful cable networks represent class ideologies in another way, a way that is more easily emulated by lower class viewers. Instead of entertaining dreams of total upper class immersion, the reality makeover programs on MTV and TLC apply what may be considered an “upper class band-aid” to their participants. While their lifestyles may not change completely, at least one class marker will be elevated. The cost of these makeovers is often extremely high, yet more attainable, perhaps more persuasively encouraging viewers to spend beyond their means.

As the class divide in America continues to grow, these programs do not bode well for a future of economic equality. The ideologies embedded in *The Apprentice*, *The Bachelor*, *While You Were Out*, and *Pimp My Ride* normalise an upper class lifestyle and make it seem achievable, collectively encouraging viewers to reach for a higher class. This is a troubling trend as we see individuals increasingly identified by the products they consume and the work through which they earn the means to consume. Marx (1978b: 71) opines, “With the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men [*sic*]” (emphasis in original). The myth of the American dream connects class with morality and can lead to exploitation of the working class, according to Fisher (1973). The proliferation of American dream rhetoric may contribute not only to rising debt levels and the growing class divide, but also to unethical business practices such as the recent scandals involving Enron and Tyco.

Reality-based television provides entertainment for many, but it may also distort perceptions of lifestyles and consumption. The rhetorical depiction of a seemingly accessible upper class world may therefore drive a deeper ideological and material wedge between the upper and lower classes. I hope that these examples serve as vivid reminders that one can be empowered by refusing to be hailed by the consumptive rhetoric, by refusing to be a part of the nouveau reach.

Notes

1. I am not arguing that reality television is “unscripted” and that it does not involve acting, but only that it does not employ writers and actors of the traditional, fictional television sense.

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