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Television New Media 2009; 10; 251 originally published online Mar 26, 2009; DOI: 10.1177/1527476409334017

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“A Fan Crashing the Party”
Exploring Reality-celebrity in MTV’s
Real World Franchise

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Reality TV’s (re)emergence at the turn of the century necessitates a reconsideration of what it means to work in television as on-camera talent. Through a study of reality actor Susie Meister, the author examines a new kind of television-based celebrity created in the wake of the longest-running U.S. reality series, The Real World (1992–). This form of celebrity, which I call “reality-celebrity,” diverges from other modes of televisual fame by encoding its participants as off-camera texts cast to perform their “ordinariness” within the confines of a reality persona. Different from other types of television personalities (e.g., talk show hosts, news anchors), MTV’s reality-celebrities must continually act as if they are off camera. The “behind-the-scenes” quality of Meister’s fame is explored to trace some of the ways in which MTV’s construction of celebrity challenges past notions of televisual fame. Ultimately, this article considers the implications of reality TV’s blurring of the distinction between participant and performer.

Keywords: reality TV; celebrity; reality-celebrity; television; The Real World; Road Rules; MTV

In the summer of 2005, E! Television debuted Kill Reality (2005), another in a long line of reality programs showcasing former reality participants. The premise of the show was the making of The Scorned, a B horror film cast with reality actors. To do this, Kill Reality implemented a common production formula: during periods of shooting The Scorned, the cast was also filmed living in a large beach house, furnished in accordance with the communal party aesthetic often associated with reality TV’s sensationalized depiction of domesticity. In this space, Kill Reality focused almost entirely on mixing gossip, “catfights,” and drunken escapades among bunk bed-partitioned rooms. But what made Kill Reality exceptional was not the format’s recycling of reality participants within this domestic setting but its acknowledgement of the ambiguous, and often arduous, status held by these reality laborers. And although Kill Reality is the first reality program to explicitly use the topic of reality-celebrity as the engine for its plotline, it is merely one instance of a long-standing practice by which the television industry has for some time profited from the quasi stardom created by the reality phenomenon. For example, The Amazing Race (CBS 2001–), The Bachelor (ABC 2002–), Big Brother (CBS 2000–),
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and Survivor (CBS 2000–) have all spawned spin-offs that recycle their participants into franchise programming (e.g., The Amazing Race: All-Stars [2007], The Bachelorette [2003–], Big Brother: All-Stars [2003], and Survivor: All-Stars [2004]). As a result, a subgenre of reality TV has originated by reclaiming former participants and using them as both semiprofessional entertainers (or “talent”) and real individuals free of a manufactured celebrity facade.

The question of whether reality TV can be classified in terms of clear generic tropes has been insightfully debated in recent television scholarship (Kilborn 1994; Nichols 1994; Corner 2002; Andrejevic 2004; Murray 2004; Hill 2005). But what is too often underdeveloped (or omitted) in these accounts is an analysis of how the celebrity created in the wake of reality TV’s turn-of-the-century proliferation has changed the parameters defining televisual fame. This article, by contrast, focuses on an emerging type of reality-based celebrity created in what John Corner (2002) identifies as a “postdocumentary” moment of television. Television’s construction of fame is often associated with the way the medium blurs the boundaries between its talent’s on- and off-camera performances (Langer 1981; Ellis 1992; Lury 1996, 2001). And while the intimacy found in reality TV’s “first-person” narratives can be seen to further obscure the line separating participant from viewer (Dovey 2000), it is becoming apparent that we need to consider how being a reality-celebrity might potentially alter the dimensions of this boundary. This has led Su Holmes (2004) to call for a reconsideration of the framework used to understand televisual fame to better address the celebrity created by shows such as Big Brother. By reconceptualizing reality participants as a new form of on-camera talent, this essay adds to this ongoing discussion through a consideration of MTV’s cultivation and deployment of reality actors in spin-offs of the longest-running U.S. reality series, The Real World (1992–). I argue that MTV’s reality-celebrity exhibits a novel celebrity formation that is the result of commercial television’s shifting institutional structure. More specifically, this article explores the ways in which MTV’s reality actors are in pursuit of a television-based fame that is uniquely dependent on, as well as limited by, the way they play “themselves” as if always off camera.

Reality TV, like other kinds of television programming invested in depicting “liveness,” depends on personalities “playing” themselves (Langer 1981; Corner 2002). In the early 1980s, John Ellis (1992, 105–6) argued that this emphasis on personalities was the result of television’s structure making it both technologically and institutionally predisposed to depicting the everyday: “The institution of television (at least in Britain) seems at pains to reduce the star phenomenon by reducing the extraordinariness of its performers, and their status as figures of an equivocal attraction and identification by viewers both male and female.” Admittedly, Ellis’s positioning of television stardom as a lesser mode of fame is problematic. It evaluates television personalities in terms of other kinds of performers (most notably film stars) without accounting for the way television invests its on-camera talent with a value that is unique to the small screen.
Although my discussion might at times appear to support this claim, the goal of this essay is not to uncritically dismiss reality actors as inhabiting an inherently less valuable mode of fame. Instead, I examine MTV’s construction of celebrity using a framework that borrows from Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of fields of cultural production. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 97) note that specialized fields of cultural production (e.g., television) are “spaces of objective relations that are the site of a logic and a necessity that are specific and irreducible to those that regulate other fields.” With this in mind, I approach MTV’s reality-celebrity from the standpoint of how its participants occupy a position within television’s institutional structure that invests them with a value that is unique to their role within the media industry. To put it another way, I think it is important to treat reality TV’s penchant for the “ordinary” as an instance in which television purposefully does not structure itself to meet the same objectives as other kinds of media. As a consequence, the value associated with its participants’ fame must be understood in the broader context of commercial television’s changing landscape.

For example, since The Real World’s debut in 1992, MTV has come to exemplify cable television’s growing dependence on participants as a form of on-camera talent. Over the past seventeen years, the majority of MTV’s primetime programming has been redesigned in such a way as to recast previous participants to capitalize on the storylines connected to their reality personas. In this way, MTV’s use of reality talent appears to work against Ellis’s “personality” model in at least one important respect: in contrast to the assertion that television creates personalities “who are famous for being famous” (Langer 1981, 353; Ellis 1992, 107), MTV’s reality-celebrities encode themselves as off-camera texts by performing their “ordinariness” within the confines of their already established reality personas. Different from talk show hosts, news anchors, and game show masters of ceremonies, MTV’s reality-celebrities depend on the “behind-the-scenes” quality of their reality personas for the parts in which they are cast.

The aim of this article, thus, is not to assert that reality-celebrity exists entirely outside television’s broader manufacturing of fame. Instead, the goal of this discussion is to outline how MTV’s reality-celebrity functions to complicate previous assertions made about television’s production of celebrity and to explore how MTV’s emerging reality workforce might indicate a significant change in the way audiences interact with television stardom. In particular, I hope to supplement the growing theoretical discussion of reality TV’s relationship with celebrity through a consideration of MTV’s management of reality actors and the resulting talent’s handling of fame. To do this, I look at the experiences of one such reality actor to guide my discussion.

My participant, Susie Meister, was on five of MTV’s most popular Real World spin-offs: Road Rules: South Pacific (1998), The Real World/Road Rules Extreme Challenge (2001), The Real World/Road Rules Challenge: The Gauntlet 2 (2005), The Real World/Road Rules Challenge: The Inferno 3 (2007), and Road Rules:
Meister grew up in a large lower-middle-class family in Pittsburgh. When cast to participate on *Road Rules*, she was a nineteen-year-old college student who identified herself as a conservative evangelical Christian. According to Meister, her background played a significant role in the way she first approached her time on *Road Rules*. Because MTV’s reality actors depend on their life stories to provide the material for their performances, Meister’s background helped to structure the persona she would come to affect both on camera and off camera. Today, Meister continues to reference her religious and working-class roots as a way to contemplate what she perceives to be the anemic character of her celebrity. From this perspective, Meister’s time working in MTV’s franchise of *Real World* programming and her struggles with fame offer a compelling look at some of the tensions found in MTV’s assembling of reality-celebrity.

**Method**

In what follows, I discuss Meister’s relationship with celebrity to call attention to the effect reality TV has had in her life. One of the most compelling aspects of Meister’s story is found in her reflections on the way in which MTV fashions reality talent for its young viewers. MTV’s casting of its audiences (a necessity in creating relevant reality programming) has allowed it to establish a beachhead within turn-of-the-century reality TV via the construction of a stable of reality stars. My subsequent analysis is informed by the following empirical material: two in-depth interviews with Meister over the period of six weeks, brief correspondence via e-mail and telephone, secondary materials (pictures she has supplied me with, other interviews she has given in commercial publications), and member checks (a memo summarizing the content of our first interview and a case report e-mailed to her after our second interview). Of course, these interviews cannot be regarded as representative of the way in which participants on reality TV engage celebrity in general. Nor can we assume that Meister’s words correspond with how a specific social category (e.g., young women) participates in reality-celebrity. Rather, the primary issue addressed in this discussion is how Meister experienced celebrity in the context of MTV’s recuperation of former reality participants.

This approach poses a methodological dilemma. Because the work of being a star includes participating in auxiliary forms of self-promotion (e.g., interviews and public appearances), my conversations with Meister can be seen as instances in which she continued to produce herself as a commodity. This is compounded by the fact that one of reality TV’s regularly used techniques for character development and plot fabrication is engaging its participants in a reflexive dialogue about their time on the show through to-camera monologues and interviews. Meister’s discussion of her celebrity can, in this way, be thought of as a performance. Thus, unlike previous research that incorporates interviews with industry professionals (Gamson 1994;
Andrejevic 2004; Roscoe 2001), fans (Couldry 2000), and viewers (Hill 2005) as a way to offer insights into reality TV’s institutions and effects, my analysis of Meister’s experience approaches our conversations as part of her larger textual process of self-construction. In doing so, I treat our interviews as discursive sites from which to trace and analyze recurring themes concerning her fame.

Results

“I Didn’t Think I Would Be a Real Cast Member, I Only Thought of Myself as a Fan”

It is not clear what goes into being a reality-celebrity. Is it based on merit or something else? Holmes (2004, 120) notes that a “gamedoc” such as Big Brother highlights the value of perseverance but does not indicate that hard work is an important component of being a reality actor. This point touches on one of the primary tensions surrounding reality-celebrity: more so than with other forms of television stardom, the fame garnered from being on reality TV is rooted in an observational aesthetic that seeks to highlight the fact that its participants are not professional actors. Nick Couldry (2004, 60–61) sees the end result of this depiction exemplified in the transition undergone by participants on the first Big Brother. On being dismissed from the house and reentering the general population, fans greet the transformed participant as a type of newly christened celebrity. In both Holmes’s and Couldry’s accounts, reality participants’ fame is tied to an ability to play oneself on camera. And like other television personalities, the skill that is required to “be oneself” on reality TV is obscured by the medium’s affection for intimacy rather than inaccessibility.

In the current environment of niche cable programming, where viewers are accustomed to watching reality programs that they know cast people who fit already-established roles, the extent to which reality participants can be seen as inhabiting the traditional mode of a television personality becomes less clear. There is no better example of this than MTV. In the wake of 1990s television designed to “narrowcast” to specific demographics (Banks 2005), MTV attempted to mobilize its viewers by inviting them to participate as talent. Over time, this formula has resulted in a growing reflexivity on the part of audience members turned reality participants. Similar to John Fiske’s (1997, 115) discussion of the intertextual codes necessary to read television, long-running reality formats have created certain expectations about what it means to participate on a specific kind of reality show. Today, participants are likely to be familiar with the particular roles and storylines of the programs on which they seek to be cast. This is one of the recurring themes in my interviews with Meister. In fact, Meister applied to be on Road Rules using a form included in a promotional guide published by MTV that incorporated detailed biographies of former participants with advice on how viewers could become cast members：“
So, I got all these books and I studied them. And on the back it, like, if you want to apply. But you have to be 18 to 24. So, when I turned 18, two months after that, I sent in a 10-minute tape just talking about myself, where I was at in my life. Just like sitting on my bed in my room. And within five days they called and said, “We’re going to send you this application.” It’s ten pages, and I filled it out. I still have it. But it’s like all the questions, they want to get into your mind, I guess. So that was the first step. Filled it out, sent it in, and then it was like, “Ok, now you’ve made the semifinals, now we’re having it in [Washington] D.C.” And then, I did an interview. And then they said we want to follow you in your real life for a few days. So then they came to Pittsburgh with a crew and I was going to community college and working two jobs and they went with me everywhere. And I guess to see if you were willing to be yourself in front of a camera. And while I was being filmed at my work, they called and told me I made the finals. And then I went to the finals in L.A. and then they called and said I had made the show. So it was, like, a two-month-long process.

Meister also explained that at this time she saw the prospect of being on *Road Rules* as a rewarding way to engage a program that she enjoyed and watched as a fan:

**HC:** What made you want to go on a reality TV show?

**Meister:** I’ve always been a huge fan of reality TV shows, especially *The Real World* and *Road Rules*. And I have always been sort of obsessed with watching it and I met a guy named Tim who was on *Road Rules* and he was from Pittsburgh also. And I met him after he did it and I was, like, star-struck. And I wrote him his first fan letter and I thought if I could just get on, then I could be a part of all the fun and meet all these people. I thought I would be a fan crashing the party. Ah, I didn’t think I would be a real cast member, I only thought of myself as fan so that’s why I did it. I wanted to see how it all worked, and experience the adventure. Because, it always looked like they were having so much fun and even though there was a lot of fighting, especially on *Road Rules*. It just seemed like this giant adventure. It had just seemed bigger than life. I wanted to be a part of it.

In this instance, the process by which Meister was cast and her overall desire to participate as a fan point to one of the most dynamic attributes of MTV’s *Real World* programming: viewers are allowed to become part of the spectacle; they are, quite literally, able to include themselves in the “giant adventure.” Significant in these excerpts is Meister’s desire to participate in *Road Rules* as herself, a fan “crashing the party.” Couldry’s (2000, 4) larger argument that the media function symbolically to create social realities is relevant here. In describing the media’s symbolic power, Couldry makes the claim that it is far from automatic. Instead, symbolic media power is created through what he calls “various practices and dispositions at every level of social life.” The media rituals inherent in reality TV’s gamedocs, for example, work to accentuate the idea that mediated reality is preferable to nonmediated reality (Couldry 2004).
Meister’s fascination with *The Real World* and *Road Rules* presupposes this point of view. She appears very much aware of her position as a “fan,” or nonmedia person. Following Slavoj Zizek’s (1997, 9) observation that “at its most fundamental, fantasy tells me what I am to my others,” Meister’s early involvement with *Road Rules* as both a fan and first-time participant was influenced by the symbolic value attached to inhabiting the on-camera space of a cast member. As Meister herself notes, she perceived the prospect of taking part in this experience—being cast as a person worthy of being on television—as comparable to “crashing the party.” Not only did Meister anticipate contact with her favorite programming to be analogous to the excitement of a party, she also seemed appreciative of the aforementioned media–nonmedia divide and the exclusivity implied therein. At the same time, because Meister had been a fan of both *The Real World* and *Road Rules*, she expressed an adroit knowledge of what role she might best fit:

HC: Were you aware of what the show wanted of you because you had watched six seasons?
Meister: Yeah . . . I was aware that they would like it if we fought and they would find it fun and juicy. But I had made a vow that I was not going to fight because I was trying to be, like, a role model.
HC: So, what were some of the vows you made?
Meister: That was a big one.
HC: So no fighting . . .
Meister: Yeah, I didn’t want to, because I felt, I knew I was going to be a type. I knew I was going to be portrayed as the religious person and I felt I had to live up to that because that was part of the belief system I had at the time.

Meister’s words not only indicate an awareness of *Road Rules*’s predictable storylines but also reveal an almost instinctual comprehension of the likely role she would be cast in: something along the lines of the “naive religious girl from middle America.”

Meister’s reflexive understanding of her place within the program’s use of character types indicates one way in which MTV’s reality-celebrities attend to prescribed roles when playing themselves on camera. Because Meister was aware of the type for which she would be cast and envisioned a media value connected to this participation, her time working as a reality participant began with a set of clear expectations. The performative component necessary in meeting these expectations is one way in which MTV’s participants are similar to other television personalities. However, in the case of MTV’s reality actors, participants such as Meister are asked not only to play themselves on camera but also to do so in such a way as to highlight the private quality of their images in order to substantiate *The Real World* franchise’s behind-the-scenes aesthetic.
“They Partied with the Real World-ers, or Whatever”

One of the central themes driving reality TV’s depiction of “ordinary” people is the opportunity given to its participants to inhabit a privileged media space. Couldry’s (2004) analysis of Big Brother is useful for thinking about reality TV’s unique depiction of its participants’ movement between mediated and nonmediated environments. In the case of MTV’s reality-celebrity, former participants often retain the services of agents to book public appearances as a way to further capitalize on their celebrity. These engagements are an attempt to profit from the symbolic media value MTV’s reality participants have acquired as a result of being part of The Real World phenomenon. Similar to media-infused props, these reality-celebrities carry in their persons a form of stardom representative of the time spent playing themselves on MTV’s party-driven reality formats. Meister’s extramural experience with promotional vacation packages illustrates this:

HC: So, tell me about Jamaica, no, you went to the Bahamas first, right?
Meister: Yeah, well I wish you had seen it because I was there with a group. I was hired by a spring break company that hires people that have been on these shows to come down and basically mingle with the people who come through their company so they can say, “they partied with the Real World-ers, or whatever.”
HC: Okay. . .
Meister: So, we were basically paid just to be nice to people and just lay on the beach and say hello and take pictures, or whatever. So, it’s a great gig and that’s the reason I did it because I usually say no to all this crap. But, I mean, you get paid to lie on the beach so I did it.

Here we see how Meister carries with her a value associated with being branded with MTV’s mark of celebrity. She embodies in her presence a kind of mediatized aura. This differs from what Couldry (2000, 95) perceives as necessary in the ritual attention paid to media artifacts. For example, in Couldry’s analysis of fans’ reactions when meeting stars on the set of a soap opera such as Coronation Street, the preferred encounter with a celebrity involved a shared experience of ordinariness: “The star should be behaving in an ordinary, relaxed way but, crucially, in the same space that the visitors themselves occupy.” By comparison, the experience of being in the presence of MTV’s reality-celebrities is not solely underpinned by a desire to get a glimpse at what these reality actors are “really like.” The idea of vacationing with a cast member from Road Rules while on spring break in the Bahamas also appears to have to do with visiting the set of MTV’s Real World programming as a kind of pseudo-participant. That is, The Real World franchise shoots its programs on location, using the places the cast visits as the sets (e.g., clubs, bars, shops, parks, beaches, and streets). As a consequence, these backdrops play an important role in the seamless integration of recurring reality talent within storylines dominated by partying and other leisure activities. Thus, when Meister explains that these young
vacationers want to be able to say that “they partied with the Real World-ers,” the question arises, to what extent is “partying” with these reality-celebrities comparable to being on the set of the show itself?

One way of understanding these promotional vacation appearances by former cast members is to consider the possibility that their presence works to create an imagined mise-en-scène similar to the set of a traditionally scripted television program. From this perspective, the presence of these young reality actors does not accentuate the gulf between nonmediated space and mediated space but instead works to bridge it. In contrast to Baudrillard’s (1983, 25) famous estimation of the enjoyment found in hyperreal spaces such as Disneyland—environments that are presented as imaginary to make acceptable the reality that they are as real as it gets—the potential pleasure in vacationing among these reality-celebrities is found in the promise of playing “yourself” in an environment infused with a kind of mediated textuality. That is, instead of paying to see how celebrities “really” act on vacation or to see how they differ from you in some exceptional way, these encounters with reality actors are also about interacting with them in character—“being real.” Reality actors are, in Meister’s own words, “paid just to be nice to people and just lay on the beach.” In this way, former cast members of The Real World and Road Rules are working in the same roles they inhabit on television. Here we can also see a realization of how television’s affinity for intimacy works to exchange “the exceptional” with “the ordinary” (Langer 1981, 364). In the case of these reality-celebrities, television’s depiction of intimacy has progressed to a point off screen. It has evolved to a stage in which the “ordinariness” inhabited by MTV’s reality actors may be experienced firsthand by their fans. To draw a connection between Couldry’s and Baudrillard’s analyses, the spring break partiers who pay to vacation with MTV’s reality talent appear to be engaged in the temporary enjoyment of dissimulating themselves among the realness embodied in reality-celebrity’s “unexceptional” personas.

“They Are into It. It Is a Different Beast Now.”

To better understand the complexity of Meister’s celebrity, the evolution of MTV’s Real World programming has to be considered in the context of its viewers becoming cast members. To do this, I want to think about how being cast for either The Real World or Road Rules today is different from when these programs first aired in the early 1990s. For Meister, the main difference has to do with the way these shows are approached today by prospective participants:

Meister: And it’s a totally different world for these people now because it’s more intense and because they live off it. They don’t go back to school or anything when they are done. The show for them is like the prelude. It’s not the event. But for me the show is the event and everything after was sort of incidental.

HC: That’s really interesting.
Meister: But for them it’s the beginning of . . . of craziness. And, um, they couldn’t believe I didn’t love the aftermath. I think I am kind of an exception, because they love it. They love the fame, they love the perks, they love not having to go back to school. It’s bizarre. They are into it. It is a different beast now.

It is now common for first-time reality participants cast on *The Real World* and *Road Rules* to be very aware of the continued employment opportunities afforded them as a result of their newly acquired fame. Between follow-up shows and promotional appearances for vacation packages, MTV’s reality talent engages in a wide variety of public appearances on college campuses and at bars. It is not a coincidence that these same campuses are also the primary recruiting sites for new *Real World* talent. Shows such as *The Real World* and *Road Rules* are presented to potential first-time reality participants as sites of personal incubation, places in which to cultivate one’s identity as a celebrity. *The Real World* and *Road Rules* act as a bridge over which first-time reality participants may cross the nonmedia–media split. They do this by offering the notoriety necessary to garner future celebrity-driven employment. *The Real World* and *Road Rules* act as points of entry into MTV’s cadre of reality talent; both programs function as feeder shows for MTV’s *Real World* spin-offs.

Meister explained this dynamic by contrasting herself to the evolving reality workforce in which she participated while shooting *The Real World/Road Rules Extreme Challenge*:

The whole fact that I am married and have a settled life and I am trying to get a career and just go to the movies and see all the other stuff that everyone does, it was foreign to them and in some ways they seemed to be jealous of it. They’d be like, “Wow, that’s really neat.” And stuff like that. Mostly they couldn’t even wrap their head around it. They’re so enrapt in this life now: of being single and globetrotting and having everyone know you and getting to be on commercials and endorse products and stuff. They all work for, um, companies where you speak at different colleges. Like they want you to speak on anti-tobacco or diversity. Companies will hire them to speak and they get a lot of money. Like, for this recent cast member, his name is Ace, and he got thirty speaking engagements since January. And they get like a minimum of $2,000 per speaking engagement.

Meister’s description of the reality-celebrity lifestyle reveals the extent to which MTV’s surrogate production house, Bunim/Murray Productions (BMP), blends management practices reminiscent of the early Hollywood star system with reality TV’s more contemporary, postglamour desire for an illusion of intimacy. Not only did Meister have to sign a five-year contract stipulating that BMP/MTV would be entitled to any income (in excess of $750) that resulted from the celebrity she acquired while on *Road Rules*, her fame continued to be predicated on the private nature of her public persona as it existed outside of a scripted role.
As a consequence, MTV’s stable of reality stars straddles two historically divergent characteristics of fame: they work within the exploitive confines of a contract structure that suits the growing number of niche cable channels reliant on low production costs to make a profit while also existing as texts reflecting a contemporary desire to engage celebrity firsthand at the level of its construction (Gamson 1994, 50–54; Andrejevic 2004, 66–67). Meister notes that from the working viewpoint of these often college-age participants, the promise of “being single and globetrotting and having everyone know you” is an enticing incentive exactly because it is predicated on an assurance of “effortless labor.” From Meister’s perspective, her age and working-class background never afforded her the opportunity to leave the United States. *Road Rules* guaranteed the thrill of international travel and the opportunity to attain the trappings associated with stardom. Thus, MTV’s spring break ethos can be seen not only to shape its reality narratives but also to help seduce its young participants into signing inequitable contracts. Here, Meister’s observations underscore the contradictory nature of her celebrity as well as reality TV’s practice of manufacturing contrived environments to showcase participants “really” being themselves. Annette Hill (2005, 58) identifies this as a central paradox in the reception of popular factual programming:

> Viewers of reality programming are attracted to various formats because they feature real people’s stories in an entertaining manner. However, they are also distrustful of the authenticity of various reality formats precisely because these real people’s stories are presented in an entertaining manner.

This paradox can also be seen as the underlying manner in which reality TV situates its claim to realism vis-à-vis the divulgence of its own artificiality within the broader media landscape (Andrejevic 2004, 17). From this standpoint, MTV’s reality actors are asked to function in two capacities: as talent whose job it is to publicly comport themselves as if always off camera, while simultaneously attending to the prescribed parts of which they are reflexively aware and that afford savvy viewers the pleasure of second-guessing a particular format’s construction of the real.

“You’re Just Yourself, but You’re Still Famous”

Although Meister’s account favors the assertion that MTV’s reality actors inhabit a modified kind of celebrity, the influence of standard forms of talent management cannot be totally dismissed. MTV’s reality actors share a common endeavor with the larger spectrum of celebrity-driven talent. Whether in relation to film or television, at some level stars must produce themselves as commodities. Meister notes this in her description of a typical workday as a reality-celebrity booked to appear at a spring break resort in 2004:
HC: Did they work out and go to the gym and stay in shape?
Meister: Oh yes, saunas, weights, running. And they are all very thin.
HC: Do they do this even when they are partying? Do they always have time when they’re not taping and doing workout time? Take me through a day on one of these things on spring break.
Meister: Ok. Well, I always get up at 7:15 every day of my life . . . then I bathed for three hours before anybody else got up. And then we’d have to meet at 11:00. And that was our meeting of the day and they’d just say, here’s what we have to do. After 11:00, that’s when everyone would sort of break and that’s when a lot of the weight lifting and/or tanning would occur.

We can see here how MTV’s reality talent fits Dyer’s (2004, 5) classic description of the star as “congealed labor”: “They are both labour and the thing that labour produces.” According to Dyer, the work of fashioning stardom comes in two stages: an attention to the “inherent qualities of the material” at hand—hair, makeup, diet, body building, plastic surgery, personality—and the film, or vehicle, in which the star performs. Marx’s theory of how one product of labor begets another is evident in the way MTV’s pool of reality talent depends on managers and other representatives to book subsidiary “reality gigs.” The daily routines of these reality actors exemplify the extent to which MTV’s returning participants must pay attention to the inherent qualities of their fame to maintain their value as talent.

Buttressing much of these individuals’ relationships with celebrity is the fact that, like many television personalities, aside from an attention to the inherent qualities of the material, they are perceived as possessing fewer skills than other on-camera talent. From this perspective, Meister’s ability to work as a television personality is even more restricted than that of other television stars. Aside from being rebooked on MTV’s upcoming shows and continuing to participate on the public appearance circuit, the employment opportunities for MTV’s reality talent are extremely limited. In my second interview with Meister, she painted a grim picture of the situation in which some of these young reality actors found themselves:

Meister: Oh yeah, they hadn’t been home in . . . months. With Mallory, she was starting to feel real sad about how she was in all of this. And I was like, “When are you going home?” And she was like, “I don’t know.” She’s booked up through April and May.
HC: And . . . do they want to go into acting and things like that? Or are they just happy to just do what they are doing?
Meister: Well, they were all involved in college, most of them. You know, they were all getting a degree in education, or something like that. And then now, most of them are sort of waiting for some opportunities to get involved in modeling, or acting or hosting. They’re really into hosting because you don’t need any skills.
HC: Hosting . . .
Meister: Yeah, any of that. You’re just yourself but you’re still famous. So, you don’t have to have any acting skills.
Meister’s observation that “you’re just yourself but you’re still famous” not only points to the singular nature of these reality actors’ fame but also indicates other working limitations experienced in her own celebrity. Meister’s reference to hosting as a career that her reality cohorts aspired to not only echoes the stigma often placed on television personalities as being one dimensional but also reiterates Ellis’s (1992, 106) assertion that “the television performer exists very much more in the same space as the television audience, as a known and familiar person rather than a paradoxical figure, both ordinary and extraordinary.” From Meister’s point of view, then, this formula is more pronounced with regard to MTV’s stable of reality actors. Ultimately, the premise of participating on *Real World* follow-up shows and public appearance tours is based on an acute experience with familiarity and shared space. And because MTV’s reality-celebrities are often limited to capitalizing on the circumscribed parameters of their reality personas, performers such as Meister (with the representational aid of agents and managers) must always construct personas with an eye to their commodification as uniquely “ordinary” stars.

### “You’re Just a Freak”

I want to conclude this article with a brief discussion of some of the ways Meister’s experience as a reality-celebrity may be placed within the larger discourse surrounding reality TV’s prominence. As the reality genre has been argued to set up contrivances to be perceptively dismantled by savvy viewers (Andrejevic 2004; Hill 2005), MTV’s reality actors appear to cater to a similarly reflexive relationship with fame. They offer a private form of celebrity that, via their televised off-screen personas, highlights how reality TV is produced as a textual system that combines aesthetic feints with the realness of its participants’ private selves. Thus, MTV’s reality-celebrity shows an unwavering fondness for the ordinariness of its participants. In so doing, MTV’s cultivation of reality talent curtails traditional oppositions associated with stardom: private–public, sincere–insincere, physical–mental, subconscious–conscious, imaginary–symbolic, and so on (Dyer 2004, 10–11).

The negotiation of these overlapping binaries affords conventional stars the opportunity to portray a type of “coherent continuousness” within their persons from which they can manipulate and profit. Dyer’s (2004, 9–10) explanation for either a love of or annoyance with stars who appear “one dimensional” in the roles they choose is helpful:

People often say they do not rate such and such a star because he or she is always the same. In this view, the trouble with, say, Gary Cooper or Doris Day, is that they are always Gary Cooper or Doris Day. But if you like Cooper or Day, then precisely what you value about them is that they are always “themselves”—no matter how different their roles, they bear the continuousness of their own selves.
MTV’s reality talent labors under a similar system of representation. Participants are asked to be “themselves” in a variety of reality situations to fulfill the expectations garnered through the documentation of their “private lives.” Although Meister continues to work as a reality-celebrity—she recently participated on the latest Road Rules and Real World/Road Rules Challenge—on more than one occasion she identified the private quality of her fame as highly unappealing. Meister couched this antagonism as the difference between being paid to publicly be “herself” and the experience of being observed publicly conducting her private life. She explained this in the context of working MTV’s public appearance circuit:

Meister: If somebody is paying me to do something then I don’t feel exploited as much as if I’m just on my own time, with my own family, in my own boring life and people want to talk about it. That bothers me more. But this, I really, really went down [to the Bahamas] knowing people would want to talk about it and be interested and curious. And I am okay with it. But, like, only in small doses. I wouldn’t make a living doing this like other people. But, like, once a year, if the opportunity comes, plus it’s such easy money, then, you know, it’s different.

HC: Okay. So, just, it feels different?
Meister: It does.
HC: It feels more like a job then?
Meister: Yeah, yeah, I feel like it is almost like a service.

Bound up in Meister’s “service” is the fact that her presence at these public appearances as “Susie from Road Rules” is relatively indistinguishable from her status as a private individual. Accordingly, the primary skill that Meister has from which to profit depends on the private quality of the access she affords her public. As much as this scenario can be seen as indicative of the wider field of television-generated fame, it also illustrates the value of approaching reality-celebrity as a specific subcategory within the medium’s larger construction of stardom. In the case of Meister, her fame is always rooted in her ability to play the “real” Meister, and thus her existence as a reality actor restricts her from cultivating a public persona separate from what is already portrayed on camera. We can see, here, how MTV’s reality-celebrities’ dependence on the personal quality of their fame connects them to the larger field of television stardom as much as it distinguishes them from it. Meister explained this aspect of her celebrity as her worst experience with reality TV:

HC: What is the worst experience you had? Where you are just, like, “I wish I had not gone on that show.”
Meister: Well, really every day.
HC: Every day?
Meister: Yeah. Or um . . . if I try, if I put a resume in, and I go for a job interview and they realize who I am, it’s just weird. And you don’t gain any skills so it’s not like you’re special. You’re just a freak. I hate it.
If Meister first approached her time on Road Rules as “a fan crashing the party,” today her frustration can be seen as disavowal, the result of Meister’s fame creating a deficiency in her sense of her own symbolic media value. Returning to Zizek’s (1997, 9–10) assertion that fantasy is the process by which I understand “what the Other (fascinated by me) sees in me,” one could argue that MTV’s reality actors, after traversing the nonmedia–media divide, lack the star identity necessary to secure a stardom independent from, and thus desired outside of, reality TV. Because Meister’s public persona is entirely dependent on the intimate quality of her private mode of fame, she is never able to substantiate a celebrity persona beyond what she portrays on MTV.

**Conclusion**

In a moment when “celebrity is seen as a marketing phenomenon, [and] the most interesting celebrities are the ones who make manipulation explicit” (Gamson 1994, 156), Meister’s experience exemplifies how reality TV’s inclusion of “real people” has the potential to address a broader compulsion to participate with the media at the level of its manufacture. As reality TV continues to develop its casting practices, the function of its participants as both viewers and on-camera talent necessitates a continued reconsideration of the conceptual parameters informing television stardom. And although it is difficult to judge the extent to which the fame produced by these “unscripted” performances maintains a sui generis status, the celebrity created in the wake of reality TV does represent a new class of on-camera talent specific to television. This, of course, varies between formats as well as between the different types of participants who are cast to meet the plot requirements of particular narratives. In the case of Meister and her cohorts, the uniquely one-dimensional quality of their celebrity has become the narrative engine for MTV’s highly successful Real World franchise. Although Meister’s celebrity represents a specific brand of reality-celebrity, it does suggest one way in which reality-based fame both typifies and contradicts previous assertions made about the medium’s propensity to produce “personalities” instead of stars. MTV’s reality-celebrity extends the medium’s partiality for the “familiar” and “ordinary” by reconfiguring participants into talent who are confined to work within the off-camera narratives embodied in their reality personas.

**Notes**

1. For an example of these kinds of promotional publications, see The Real Real World (Johnson and Rommelmann 1995).

2. The Real World and Road Rules frequently cast at least one participant who can be identified as a rural conservative (Kraszewki 2004). This scenario also points to an even less equitable casting experience for non-white participants who are not afforded the same diversity of roles as their white counterparts and
are often restricted to working within an unfavorable character type after being cast. Black men, for example, have traditionally been portrayed on *The Real World* as violent womanizers.

**References**


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