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“The Woman All of America Loves to Hate”: The Game of Recapping The Bachelor

During the May 12th, 2012 finale of Season 16 of *The Bachelor*, winemaker Ben Flajnik proposed to bikini model Courtney Robertson on the top of a Swiss mountain, presenting her with a Neil Lane bauble as strings swelled and helicopters captured aerial shots of the happy couple in love. As soon as the credits rolled, ABC swiftly transitioned into the *After the Final Rose* special, hosted by *The Bachelor*'s Chris Harrison, who introduced winner Courtney as “the woman all of America *loves* to hate.” ABC then spent the hour as a referendum on Courtney’s “mean” behavior over the course of the season. This was a redux of the referendum that occurred during *The Women Tell All* special just two weeks prior, wherein a jury of jilted Bachelorettes confronted her before a live studio audience and millions of TV viewers.

The Bachelor franchise—which includes *The Bachelorette* (25 men vie for the heart of one woman) and *Bachelor Pad* (rejected male and female contestants from previous seasons compete for a cash prize)—creates its text out of our culture’s contradictory understanding of gender roles, making and remaking them within the context of a competition format reality show. While on its surface, *The Bachelor* presents a narrative of a fairy tale romance, it attracts many viewers who come just for the spilled blood in the form of tears, and this conundrum of multiple receptions is embodied in the words of Chris Harrison: “the woman all of America loves to hate.” This is acknowledgement of the multiple readings of *The Bachelor*'s audience, which finds pleasure in watching bad girl

antics and even more pleasure in watching the bad girls receive punishment. The producers can discern these readings from the instant feedback they receive via social networking sites such as Twitter and via comments on both fan-written recaps and recaps published on the websites of major media outlets such as *Entertainment Weekly* and *New York Magazine*, published and archived immediately online.

The intensely formulaic nature of reality shows like *The Bachelor* requires that spectators find the creativity in the format—how the text interacts with the format itself, finding pleasure in the abnormal/anomalous moments. Content creation has also become a way in which fans receive a show and interact with it; labor has become a required aspect of reception and a point of entry into interaction with the format. As the cynical, subversive reading of these programs become the mainstream reception of *The Bachelor*, it becomes necessary to interrogate how *The Bachelor* adapts its text to appeal to these kinds of viewers. And in accommodating this negotiated reading, expressed and archived through recapping, does the show demand more blood, sex and tears from the contestants on *The Bachelor*? Interpreting recapping this way suggests that perhaps the real product of fan labor is more producer exploitation of these failures in gender performance.

Governance and Gender Performance

The competitive nature of reality television fosters a strict environment of personal responsibility and

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reliance on self-control punishable by elimination. As Anna McCarthy states, "the [reality TV] genre is preoccupied with the government of the self, and how, in that capacity, it demarcates a zone for the production of everyday discourses of citizenship."¹ The self-governing and "responsibilization" of *The Bachelor* franchise comes in the form of a strict governance of the performance of gender roles. In order to succeed in the competition, women must perform femininity in the right way, embodying both qualities of "good" femininity—demure, modest, kind, polite, helpless—and "bad" femininity—sexual, assertive, competitive. These women are vilified and cast out by the other women in the house for their failure to properly perform, i.e. to be nice, "good," to conform to the group and subjugate self. To not be friends with the other female contestants is the worst offense a bachelorette can commit in the world of the show. McCarthy describes the kind of regulation on these competitive shows as "disciplinary reliance not on the inculcation of virtue but rather on shame and scolding."² Courtney had to do her penance in order to claim her reward (a diamond engagement ring) after the cycle of the competition ended, enduring the public trial of her behavior on the *After the Final Rose* special.

The Bachelor highlights women's humiliation and emotional pain, exemplifying McCarthy's assessment of how reality TV succeeds in "governing populations through rehabilitative examples of individual minds and bodies in pain."³ A large portion of the running time of *The Bachelor* takes place during the rose ceremony, which is interminably drawn out, especially before the final rose, showcasing every lip bite and shaky smile. After the rejected bachelorettes are asked to say their goodbyes, they cannot escape the camera's gaze, often turning away and covering their crying faces. But they can't evade the glare of the light and the camera's steadfast, unwavering lens in the backseat of the limo, which does not cut away from their weeping and wailing as they blame themselves for their failures.

These backseat tantrums would be an example of what McCarthy calls "failure of self-government, specifically, the ineffable, self-annihilating experience of *trauma*."⁴ The exposure of private suffering and failure to responsibly self-govern

their behavior is what drives the narrative of the show as *The Bachelor* teaches self-governance through scrutiny of "those selves that are made and unmade in the scenes of crisis management that dominate the reality program's social text."⁵ Some fan practices particularly revolve around this exposure of trauma, as seen in the blog "Forever Alone: Rejected Faces of Bachelorettes," the content of which consists solely of screen captures of the women's crying faces. A *Bachelor* fan can scroll through hundreds of images of these women—frozen and captured forever in emotional agony. It is part deconstructionist modern pop art, part obsessive fan archiving, and part Schadenfreude.

Format/Formula as Creative Generator/Play Aesthetic

One way in which activated fans receive *The Bachelor* is through pleasure in its format. The thesis put forth by Tasha Oren in "Reiterational Texts and Global Imagination" suggests that the "procedural format is hyper-televisual," and that "with every iteration, the format gains in complexity, cultural richness, and industrial value."⁶ For producers of cheap reality television, utilizing format is a way to develop "innovation within conventions."⁷ The pleasure of format television for fans is described by Oren as "the appreciation for variation within constraint... the pleasures of familiarity and repetition for an engaged audience."⁸ Fans of *The Bachelor* might find pleasure in watching how women follow (or don't follow) the prescribed formula of behavior on the show, anticipating a catfight, meltdown, or sexual transgression based on knowledge of previous seasons and "character" archetype. Oren describes reality TV formats as "a creative concept. It is precisely from the rules (and limitations) of format law that various permutations emerge."⁹ In order for the format to gain these qualities, it requires interactive labor performed by fans. This kind of reception goes hand in hand with how "game culture and the rise of a play aesthetic have not only emerged as an organizing experience in media culture but are central to an industry-wide reconfiguration towards interactivity and intertextual associations across media products."¹⁰ Fans approach televisual texts as a game to be played,



Conference presenters during the “Critical Literacies” panel

going beyond simple active viewing, inserting themselves into the text via their interactions on-line and with other fans.

More than anything else, *The Bachelor* is a game of gender performance that the women on the show must win, despite or because of what Oren refers to as character algorithms. Recaps, comments, and tweets are a point of entry for fans to insert themselves into the game. The intense knowledge required of both detail and anomaly within format makes tangible the perceived cultural superiority of the recapper/participant over the kinds of formulaic texts most common in reality TV, yet they are still subject to it. As Oren describes, a necessary component to participation in format reality TV is “the audience’s absolute complicity in, and understanding of, the highly artificial order that other television tools (such as editing or casting) bestow and impose on the already determined raw materials in this procedural, modular text.”¹¹ By participating in this way, fans offer a tacit approval of the questionable representations that make up the text of the show.

The Pleasure and Product of Fan Labor

The relationship between the recapper and the

producer of the recapped text is even more complicated, especially in the self-perception the recapper has of their own labor with these texts. As Mark Andrejevic states in “Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans,” the kind of activity and labor performed by fans and recappers “doubles as a form of value-enhancing labor for television producers in two ways: by allowing fans to take on part of the work of making a show interesting for themselves and by providing instant (if not necessarily statistically representative) feedback to producers.”¹² There is a constant “development of strategies for promoting, harnessing, and exploiting the productivity of this activity”¹³ on the part of producers, and it is telling that mainstream media websites that are offshoots of conglomerate owned publications have adopted the kind of obsessive fan-style recapping developed by sites like TelevisionWithoutPity.com and TVGasm.com, co-opting the productivity of this activity into more page views (and thus more advertiser dollars) for their sites.

Because of this fan interaction/labor, producers are able to tailor the text of their shows to appeal to these particular readings, a clear example of the process that Andrejevic describes as “creative

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activity and exploitation coexist and interpenetrate one another."¹⁴ This process creates neoliberal viewer-workers who take on labor practices of reception that privatize the active viewing experience in a public demonstration of cultural capital within their deconstruction of the text. And in reaction to this labor, the text stretches to meet the demands of the recappers, who demonstrate their pleasure in something like the masochistic limo ride tantrums, essentially demanding more exploitation from the text.

Andrejevic finds that the act of recapping is not as revolutionary as some participants and scholars view it. Deconstructing the sexist images that make up *The Bachelor* does not constitute a kind of labor that changes anything in the system itself. Andrejevic states that "the simple equation of participation with empowerment serves to reinforce the marketing strategies of corporate culture... a form of active participation in the constitution of those relations rather than a challenge to them"¹⁵ This deconstruction and playful interaction with these texts does not break them down, but, in fact, aids in their genesis. In attempting to discern the product of fan labor, Andrejevic concludes that "the result, however, is not a transformed media but participatory submission."¹⁶ While the producers of the *The Bachelor* force its female participants into a submissive position, subject to harsh judgment and humiliation for failing to perform gender properly, the practice of recapping renders the recapper submissive to the producers of media texts, because they are subject to the text of exploitation itself.

Since the airing of this particular season of *The Bachelor*, ABC has trotted out several more iterations of the wildly popular series, in the form of *The Bachelorette*, *Bachelor Pad*, and more *The Bachelor*. In the lead-up to the summer 2013 season of *The Bachelorette*, producers and marketers were still focused on gender-performance based humiliation as a genesis of entertainment for fans, but this time, they were focused on the other gender. Block letters advertised "MAN TEARS" over a quick montage of teary-eyed men, gleefully advertising their failure of masculinity as primetime entertainment content. And the show seemed to answer the questions of how fan labor affects text by inserting fan labor directly into the text itself, onto the

screen, with a series of live tweets from both fans and snarky ironic spectators displayed prominently on the screen. While we may have been looking at how various readings of this show influence the text in terms of the scenarios, production, and editing, it's clear that the show needn't be too subtle about it and is only happy to openly incorporate this "free" content into their text by inserting it, unedited, onto the screen.

Recapping is now par for the course on mainstream media websites and has dragged this particular kind of fan interaction from its niche markets and normalized it as a standard issue part of media reception. But to what end do we find the result of this reception practice? Legendary recapper Rich Juzwiak, known for his animated GIF heavy recaps of *America's Next Top Model*, *Rock of Love*, and *RuPaul's Drag Race*, recently wrote a post on Gawker decrying the recapping effort, titled, "Tune In, Recap, Drop Out: Why I'll Never Recap a Show Again." Juzwiak laments the futility of this kind of intense labor practiced on a fleeting, ephemeral text. He also says, "I'll never get over my love of minutiae and I'll never stop attempting to capture and describe the bigger picture. Recapping found me reveling in the former and unable to focus on the latter."¹⁷

But aside from how we read the show, it may be more important to widen the scope of analysis away from the minutiae and to focus on the economic and power structures of the fan interaction itself. The latest development of onscreen tweets shows how fan labor constructs an important part of the text for producers, which is an enhancement for fans, and thereby a more lucrative product to sell to advertisers, who then sell to the activated attention spans of the live-tweeters. Live-tweeting insures activation and investment in the show, and is also a fan practice that has evolved to stop the time-shift of television watching today. Live-tweeting is only relevant while the show is on, and not days later, so it insures that fans are watching live television and subject to commercials and advertising. The producers of the show activate the attention/labor of the fans, who freely contribute portions of the text via their uncompensated labor, which is then used within the text to further activate their attention again, in an increasingly common multiple-screen spectatorship. The show's fans are contributing free

content that is used to further activate their attention, which is ultimately the most lucrative commodity for a cable network to sell to advertisers. So what are fans getting out of this uncompensated labor—a more interesting text? An opportunity to see themselves inserted into the screen via their tweets? While this is unclear, it is quite obvious that networks and show producers are more than happy

to exploit fan labor to the fans themselves, via the process of exploitation and gender humiliation onscreen. And while the cycles of labor, exploitation, exposure and humiliation continue on reality TV, it seems that only the networks and producers are profiting, leaving the participants and fans to try and derive/discern the intangible value for themselves.

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Notes

1 Anna McCarthy, "Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering," *Social Text* 93, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2007): 17.

2 McCarthy, "Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering," 18.

3 McCarthy, "Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering," 19.

4 McCarthy, "Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering," 21.

5 Ibid.

6 Tasha Oren, "Reiterational Texts and Global Imagination: Television Strikes Back," in *Global Television Formats*, ed. Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf (Routledge, 2011), 368.

7 Oren, "Reiterational Texts," 369.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Oren, "Reiterational Texts," 371.

12 Mark Andrejevic, "Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans," *Television & New Media* (2008): 24.

13 Andrejevic, "Watching Television Without Pity," 25.

14 Ibid.

15 Andrejevic, "Watching Television Without Pity," 43.

16 Andrejevic, "Watching Television Without Pity," 43.

17 Rich Juzwiak, "Tune In, Recap, Drop Out, Why I'll Never Recap A Show Again," March 22, 2012. <<http://gawker.com/5895232/tune-in-recap-drop-out-why-ill-never-recap-a-tv-show-again>> Accessed March 22nd, 2012.