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Jilly B. Kay

June Deery, "Reality TV." Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2015, 192 pp.

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Book Review

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June Deery's *Reality TV* is a timely intervention into the rapidly developing area of inquiry around this television genre. The book is both concise and thorough; it ambitiously seeks to capture and understand both the evolution of this media phenomenon, and the on-going and multifarious academic debates which attend it. Any attempt to take stock of this televisual genre – one that has now been a significant part of the Anglophonic media landscape for twenty or so years – constitutes a dizzying and colossal task. This is especially so, given that reality television as a genre is unwieldy, endlessly transmogrifying and notoriously difficult to define; furthermore, the body of scholarship that Deery seeks to apprehend here is continuously proliferating, and its theoretical frameworks are increasingly complex and sophisticated. Nonetheless, with this book Deery has negotiated a clear path through this welter of information, history and ideas. It is explicitly aimed at a broad audience, and does not assume prior knowledge or familiarity with the academic literature that has grown around reality television (or RTV, as Deery abbreviates it). Its style is laudably clear, uncluttered and lucid; each of its seven chapters identifies a key theme in the RTV scholarship and presents a discussion that will be helpful for both undergraduate and postgraduate students seeking to better understand this fascinating and still-developing area. While it points to some key ideas in the academic literature and signposts helpfully to further reading, it is not densely loaded with academic references, preferring instead to synthesise some of the major scholarly themes and patterns into an condensed, general and accessible overview. The book focuses on both US and British television, as well as on the relationship between their "cross-pollinating markets" [p. 13].

In the introductory chapter, entitled "*Definitions, History, Critiques*," Deery presents a wide-ranging discussion of RTV. We are taken on a whistle-stop tour of the history of the genre since the year 2000, which Deery identifies as the moment marking "the start of the first wave of full-blown reality TV as most use the term today" [p. 15]. This chapter covers the historical precedents of the genre (and, indeed, addresses the question of whether it can be considered a "genre" at all); it explores its connections and overlaps with other genres, including fictional genres; it considers RTV's economic logics, and its especial affinities with the deregulated, multi-channel environment of cable and satellite; and it outlines some of the key ethical and academic areas of interest that have been piqued by the rise of the genre. The chapter is a valuable and robust defence of reality television as an object of critical analysis: for Deery, RTV comprises a legitimate, productive and serious area of critical inquiry, the study of which can yield important and unique insights into the contemporary workings of politics, culture, society and identity. It tackles head-on some of the widespread conceptualisations of RTV as straightforwardly harmful, trivial or culturally debasing, and instead points to its cultural significance and the need to understand why the genre is at once so widely watched and yet so fiercely denigrated.

Chapter 2, entitled "*Reality Status*," traces through some of the myriad questions of definition that have attached to RTV, most particularly in relation to its claim to the "real." Here Deery usefully assembles the existing definitions and debates, as well as offering some of her own new and pithy explications: for example, that RTV "is to real life as ice is to water: it is the same substance but it is transformed and available for further shaping" [p. 33]. Chapter 3, "*Social Television: Reality TV and New Media*," considers how RTV is particularly useful for thinking through issues of media convergence and the nature of the multiplatform environment; indeed, it is suggested that RTV can be thought of as being "TV's version of the internet" because of its dealings with "the superficial intimacy of mediated sociality" [p. 57]. The chapter engages in interesting discussions around the ways in which RTV plays with and re-contextualizes time and space; the challenge to the distinction between "text" and "audience" that RTV and its relationship with social media presents; as well as the possibilities of participation and interaction that multiplatform mediation affords. While new media undoubtedly recasts the relationship between text and audience, there is a tendency here for Deery to straightforwardly conflate "interactivity" with internet use, as though audience engagement with television never happens without recourse to social media. There is an implied equivalence between interactivity and online activity which means that other forms of mediated sociality – for example, the emotional resonances and affective entanglements between RTV and its viewers[1] – are missed here.

Chapter 4, "*Advertising and Commercialization*," addresses the ways in which RTV is deeply entwined with consumer culture as well as the precarity and insecurity of labour in late modernity. Deery presents compelling arguments about how RTV commodifies and monetizes experience and personal relationships, while "training" viewers in behaviours consistent with the consumer capitalism it promotes. At the same time, the employment models of RTV production are characterized by non-unionized labour, limited benefits and insecurity; as such, in RTV "the precarious and flexible nature of post-Fordist labour relations" [p. 77] is prevalent both on- and off-screen.

Chapters 5 and 6, respectively entitled "*Gender and Race*" and "*Class*," turn their attention to RTV's role in identity formation and representation. These chapters address the ways in which RTV makes visible those minority groups that have traditionally been under-represented in mainstream media – and the ambivalent political implications of that visibility. Deery suggests that while RTV offers the promise of "real" people as opposed to stereotyped fictional characters, in practice this does not often lead to the subversion or transformation of problematically gendered and racialized social "scripts." The decision here to separate out class from race and gender may be rooted in the editorial need for clarity, but the effect is to close off the possibility of considering the intersectional nature of inequality, prejudice and identity formation. Much recent work on reality television explores how race, gender and class are inextricably co-constructed and co-articulated.[2] Nonetheless, there are still valuable insights in these two chapters, including the often reductive ways in which RTV codes formats as either "masculine" or "feminine;" the relative visibility offered to gay male identities in contrast to the relative

[1] See, for example, Skeggs and Wood [2012].
[2] See McRobbie [2004], Grindstaff [2011], and Tyler [2011] as examples.

invisibility of lesbians; the burden of representation that is so often imposed on people of colour on RTV; and the deeply classed stereotypes of "chav" and "redneck" that circulate so widely in RTV.

Chapter 7, entitled "*Politics*" provides a useful and concise overview of some of the key theoretical frameworks through which RTV has been approached in academic work. Concepts such as neoliberalism, governmentality and surveillance are presented here, and their connections to RTV carefully and clearly outlined. Deery considers the political implications of RTV's basic superficiality; its unyielding focus on instantaneous transformation over long-term, structural solutions; and its construction of problems as individual rather than social in nature. She suggests that RTV tends to "de-contextualize and so disable any critical inquiry into economic inequality" [p. 151]. The questions that the genre provokes – around democracy, participation, surveillance, apathy, performance and self – mean that RTV can be understood as "emblematic of a new socio-political order" [p. 156].

Overall, this book is a welcome and necessary intervention; it takes stock of an immense, unruly media phenomenon and the social, political and theoretical debates it has incited. The breadth of knowledge and detail of information that Deery offers here are undeniably impressive, particularly in the meticulous recounting of significant RTV programmes in the US and UK. Indeed, while the book does not present itself as such, one of its chief values may be as a compendium of noteworthy RTV titles from the last 15-20 years. Its clear style and neatly synthesized themes mean that it is particularly suitable for students looking for an accessible and up-to-date introduction to reality television. However, I am also tempted to hope that the book may find its way to those journalists and other commentators who so readily and easily dismiss reality television as inconsequential, worthless, and lacking any political significance beyond its capacity to "dumb-down." As Deery clearly shows in this rigorously researched book, reality television is anything but insignificant.

Jilly B. Kay
University of Leicester

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