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The Real Housewives, Gendered Affluence, and the Rise of the Docsoap

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we position gendered affluence as a representational trend in dramatic comedies (e.g. Sex and the City, SATC) and docusoaps (e.g. The Real Housewives, TRH) that coalesces around themes like hyper-femininity, nouveau riche values, and conspicuous lifestyle. Through our analysis we suggest that institutional practices (identity politics, cybernetic commodification, and post-feminist technological interactivity) situated in a neoliberal context and a remediated environment enable the systematic reproduction of gendered affluence in the broader landscape of women's television. The process of remediation is used as a lens to examine how the docusoap differs from (the immediacy of mediated self-performance) and resembles (the hypermediacy of mediated irony and post-feminist interactivity) the fictional portrayals of gendered affluence found in dramatic comedies like SATC. Our case analysis of TRH demonstrates the specific way non-fictional portrayals of gendered affluence are transforming genre (via an ethos of affluence and a consumerist ethic) and artfully maintaining the status quo in terms of gendered, raced, and classed intersections. Ultimately we argue the docusoap is accomplishing this in a remediated environment that promotes a neoliberal agenda via affective engagement grounded in mediated self-performance and rational disengagement grounded in mediated irony.

KEY WORDS: Gendered Affluence; White Privilege; Women's Television; Bravo; and The Real Housewives

Introduction

Affluence has historically been situated as a term that references economic abundance, as opposed to consumer abundance. For example, when political economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1998) first published The Affluent Society in 1958, his primary intention was to acknowledge the simultaneous presence of private wealth and public poverty that characterized mid-twentieth century America. Despite Galbraith's ([1958] 1998) efforts, the division between the private economic abundance of the few and the public impoverishment of the many has only grown since then, and become an even greater problem in the post-2008 recession. In the current cultural/political economic climate, real economic inequities are further masked due to the way affluence has become equated with consumer abundance. This is evident in marketing scholarship that foregrounds how consumer affluence and consumer credit has produced the rise of upscale services and products, as well as shifts in consumer purchasing practices, which consequently have allowed middle-class families to live luxury lifestyles that were only accessible to people with a high level of economic wealth twenty years ago (Ronald Michman and Edward Mazze 2006). This shift towards credit-based consumer affluence -- a shift that resulted from massive corporate profits that did not lead to wage increases, but instead were used to provide secured/unsecured debt for America workers (Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff 2003) --- exists alongside an aspirational notion of upward mobility and individual success that sustains class position through the powerful discursive and material presence of capitalist reproduction (Lisa McLaughlin 1997). We are interested in how this "ethos of affluence" --- an ethos embodied in nouveau riche values (that privilege upward mobility and aspirational living) and a conspicuous lifestyle

(that promotes the acquisition/display of consumer affluence) --- is gendered in American popular culture. Through a close reading and feminist political economic analysis of Bravo's The Real Housewives (TRH) franchise, we examine how affluence is gendered in the docusoap genre.

In this essay, we position the gendering of affluence as a trend in women's television that coalesces around themes like hyper-femininity, nouveau riche values, and conspicuous lifestyle. Through our analysis we suggest that a neoliberal context and a remediated environment enable the systematic reproduction of gendered affluence in the broader landscape of women's television. Additionally, we examine the role institutional practices play in this process. Our theorization of gendered affluence has important implications for feminist media studies. In particular, the ways gendered affluence is being used --- for instance, the recurring nature of "madcap shopping sprees" and the clothes-consuming behavior of wealthy women in TRH (Susan Dominus 2008) --- suggests that capital is dictating the narrative structure of women's television via the dual role of the remediated environment and neoliberal context. After we situate our thinking regarding the reproduction of gendered affluence, we turn to the docusoap to engage the way this genre responds to, builds upon, and moves beyond dramatic comedies, and to theorize the role immediacy and hypermediacy play in fictional and non-fictional portrayals of gendered affluence. Finally, we use our case analysis of TRH franchise to examine the articulation of mediated self-performance and mediated irony in the docusoap genre. More importantly, through our case analysis of TRH we demonstrate the specific way non-fictional portrayals of gendered affluence are transforming genre (via an ethos of affluence and a consumerist ethic) and artfully maintaining the status quo in

terms of gendered, raced, and classed intersections. Ultimately we argue the docusoap is accomplishing this in a remediated environment that promotes a neoliberal agenda via affective engagement grounded in mediated self-performance and rational disengagement grounded in mediated irony.

Gendered Affluence in a Remediated Environment and Neoliberal Context

When TRH-Orange County (TRH-OC) premiered in 2006 the cast consisted of five white heterosexual women who were situated as “real life” counterparts to the fictional characters on shows like Desperate Housewives (ABC, 2004 –2012) and The OC (CW, 2003 – 2007) due to their physical attributes, pampered lifestyles, and frivolous consumer practices (David Bianculli 2006; Charles McGrath 2006; and Tom Shales 2006). We argue these types of comparisons, which were a regular occurrence in journalist commentary for the installments that followed TRH-OC, signify a trend in women’s television. This trend, the gendering of affluence, coalesces around themes like hyper-femininity, nouveau riche values, and conspicuous lifestyle.

There is a wealth of feminist scholarship that problematizes the way the aforementioned themes circulate in television and film representations of women. Most recently, Maria Elena Cepeda (2010), Isabel Molina (2010), Susan Douglas (2010), Angela McRobbie (2009), and Elana Levine (2008) have drawn attention to the presence of representations of women grounded in hyper-femininity, hyper-sexuality, and gendered consumption. Similarly, Vicki Ball’s (2012) analysis of British television directly engages the “intensified address to women as consumers of feminine discourse” (259). Ball’s (2012) critique of feminized consumerist address in SATC and DH --- show’s which she argues have given rise to British dramas oriented toward “the affluent

and aspirational lifestyle” of middle class women (258) --- is of utmost significance given the way it aligns with the themes we argue characterize the representational realm of gendered affluence. Still, gendered affluence is not simply a representational trend. Instead, both the representational and institutional realms of gendered affluence are situated within a neoliberal context and a remediated environment. In the discussion that follows, as we examine the institutional practices that support the systematic reproduction of gendered affluence --- identity politics, cybernetic commodification, and post-feminist technological interactivity --- we show how capital is dictating the narrative structure of women’s programming and we engage the way this is enabled by a neoliberal context and the remediated environment.

The rise of identity politics has been instrumental to the articulation of gendered affluence. Following the work of Nancy Fraser (2009), our interest lies in the way identity politics disregards the complexity of human subjectivity. A 2008 New York Times article that positions NBC Universal Women’s and Lifestyle Network President Lauren Zalaznick as a female affluencer serves as a useful example:

She is wealthy, well-educated and attentive to fashion, food and pop culture. At 44, she’s inside Bravo’s demographic of viewers from 18 to 49, and her opinions have considerable influence on the people around her. She is, in short an ‘affluencer’ – a gimmicky word Ms. Zalaznick said she made up, combining affluence and influence – to describe Bravo’s core audience. (Carter 2008, 1)

In the excerpt above, the complexity of multiple intersecting identities is ignored as female viewers that identify as part of Bravo’s core audience are monolithically characterized through practices and interests typically associated with femininity (e.g. pop culture, fashion, and food) and recognized for a conspicuous lifestyle

grounded in nouveau riche values. Lauren Berlant's (2008) conceptualization of an intimate public illustrates the consequences of the type of identity politics under discussion. It engages the way "the market frames belonging to an intimate public as a condition of possibility mainly for those who can pass as conventional within its limited terms" (Berlant 2008, 13).

Moreover, Berlant's (2008) attention to how intimacy is commodified in the capitalist market is foundational to our understanding of how a neoliberal context and remediated environment enable the gendering of affluence for at least two reasons. First, a market-based notion of belonging is a fundamental tenet of neoliberalism (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2012). Second, the process of remediation relies on immediacy to erase the act of representation (Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin 2000, 5). As we will see later in the paper, fictional and non-fictional portrayals of gendered affluence capitalize on immediacy and commodify intimacy in slightly different ways.

Like identity politics, cybernetic commodification --- a term that speaks to the role measurement/monitoring processes play in the production of the audience commodity (Vincent Mosco 2010) --- supports the systematic reproduction of gendered affluence. In particular, cybernetic commodification has been instrumental to the rise of female cable networks. For example, shortly after NBC's acquisition of Oxygen in 2007, Lauren Zalaznick profiled "female affluencers" who consumed Bravo and Oxygen content. The executive constructed this critical audience commodity based on key behavioral/spending habits that would extend beyond television and into the digital sphere. As a result,

Oxygen's female affluencers were profiled and referred to as "spenders," "trenders," and "recommenders," and Bravo's female affluencers were defined as "big-spending, tech-savvy consumers" (Hampp 2008). This example highlights two important points.

First, the creation and management of "female affluencers" at both networks relies on a market-based empowerment that only varies slightly based upon nuanced psychographic data. This aligns with Amanda Lotz's (2006) commentary regarding how empowerment --- a common brand attribute of cable networks for women ---- is articulated in different ways based upon the lifestyle, attitude, and life-stage of the audience. Second, we see the way remediation and reuse of niche marketing practices (from the women's magazine industry to women's cable networks) is refashioning industry perceptions of women's television via a polarization that reverses the "hybridization of masculine and feminine genres" that took hold in prime-time network dramas in the late twentieth century (Jane Arthurs 2003, 84). The effort to target, measure, package, and commodify gendered viewers is not new, but a neoliberal context and the remediated environment certainly intensifies the property creation of the audience commodity (especially through identity politics) in ways never seen before (Mari Castañeda 2008). Moreover, the multiple converging technological platforms that stabilize and direct the relations amongst content, services, and audience members (Dan Schiller 2014) naturalizes a democratized notion of technological interactivity.

Our understanding of the way post-feminist technological interactivity supports the reproduction of gendered affluence is grounded in Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2012) feminist scholarship. More specifically, our use of this term derives from Banet-Weiser's (2012) discussion of the way technological interactivity and post-feminism, two cultural formations which she notes are enabled by advanced digital capitalism, function as processes that "make self-branding seem not only logical but perhaps necessary" (26). SATC is a specific text that has made effective use of post-feminist technological interactivity. For example, a Wall Street Journal article discusses the way SATC's approach to branded entertainment generated viewer interest in specific designers, led to multiplatform buzz, and ultimately moved the "retail needle" (Lipton 2004). A claim made by SATC costume designer Patricia Field in the same article --- "once we saw the direction it was going in, we played the clicks for all they were worth" (Lipton 2004, 1) --- further engages the significance of post-feminist technological interactivity. The way digital capitalism enables post-feminist technological activity (Banet-Weiser 2012) --- via a multiplatform connectivity that stabilizes and directs relations amongst content, services, and audience members (Schiller 2014) --- is readily apparent in both examples, as is SATC's ability to sell female viewers an integrated lifestyle primed for emulation (Arthurs 2003). This happens in a neoliberal context and remediated environment that naturalizes self-branding.

Like SATC, the CW's Gossip Girl (2007 – 2012) profited immensely from a post-feminist technological interactivity that generated fashion trends in a

hypermediated climate characterized by gendered affluence. For example, the Gossip Girl (GG) website supported the identification of the accessories and clothing the characters wore in each episode of GG and offered click through buying for the commodities identified (Ruth La Ferla 2008). Derek Johnson's (2013) discussion of trade publication coverage of GG highlights the profound role economics played in the institutional legitimacy afforded to this female serial.

Turning to Johnson (2013):

In an industry where masculinized, patriarchal notions of taste, decorum, and quality had historically helped define perceptions of cultural legitimacy, the imagination of Gossip Girl as a franchise emphasized not its soapiness or trashiness, but its economic potential, thereby rationalizing its ongoing, multiplied production (p. 62)

Johnson makes a valuable point regarding the role GG's economic value played in the show's institutional legitimacy in the trade press. Still, GG's economic value derives from the way the identity politics, cybernetic commodification, and post-feminist technological interactivity are used to literally and figuratively sell gendered affluence.

In closing, our analysis sheds light on the specific ways capital is at work in women's television. We see it in multiple forms. The way Bravo's non-fictional programming caters to female influencers via an identity politics grounded in fashion, beauty, and design, and the way Bravo and Oxygen remediate the niche marketing practices found in women's magazines in a digital climate characterized by cybernetic commodification, identity politics, and platform convergence. It is also evident in the way fictional portrayals of gendered affluence in SATC and GG use a hyper-feminine conspicuous lifestyle grounded in nouveau riche values to promote identification (via the practice of identity politics) and to figuratively and literally sell a gendered ethos of

affluence (via a post-feminist technological interactivity that generates valuable cybernetic commodities). These examples illustrate how gendered affluence is systematically reproduced through the capitalist refashioning of representational and institutional practices in the remediated environment of women's television and how this systematic reproduction happens in a neoliberal context that privileges an individualistic market-based logic grounded in self-governance. In the next section, we theorize how the two logics that ground the processes remediation --- immediacy (a logic that strives to erase the act of representation) and hypermediacy (a logic that ruptures immediacy) (Bolter and Grusin 2000) --- function in the docusoap genre, and we demonstrate the unique way immediacy functions in non-fictional portrayals of gendered affluence.

The Rise of the Docusoap

There has been a substantial rise in reality shows that follow the day-to-day lives of rich women, this includes but is not limited to: TRH, Keeping up with the Kardashians (E!, 2007 – present) and Bad Girls Club (Oxygen, 2006 – present). The replication, multiplication, and franchising of docusoaps --- a term used to refer to observational documentaries that “follow people ‘being themselves’” in a natural setting (Stella Bruzzi 2000, 137) --- corresponds with a cultural shift toward gendered affluence. Here, as we theorize the two element remediated in the docusoap --- the immediacy of mediated-self performance on the one hand, and hypermediacy mediated irony on the other --- we situate this genre in the broader landscape of women's television.

Immediacy is a logic present in fictional and non-fictional portrayals of gendered affluence. Indeed, all portrayals of gendered affluence rely on a

commodified form of intimacy that promotes a market-based understanding of femininity (Berlant 2008) and exploits identity politics. Still the immediacy that characterizes the docusoap is different. The act of representation is erased (Bolter and Grusin 2000) in the docusoap via the use of mediated self-performance. Mediated self performance --- a term used to note the presence of “ordinary” people performing as themselves --- offers a unique viewing experience due to the way this logic of immediacy functions as a space of identification and recognition in which the line between performing and viewing merge on a public stage (Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood 2012). The mediated self-performances found in reality television, are according Skeggs and Wood (2012), grounded in “‘flesh and blood’ social relations” that heighten emotional attachments in a melodramatic space (40).

Building off Skeggs and Wood’s (2012) we argue that fictional portrayals of gendered affluence in dramatic comedies like SATC evoke a logic of immediacy via a traditional melodrama. This space of excess and emotion externalizes the psychological conflicts (Peter Brooks 1976) of fictional characters immersed in traditional feminine interests. In contrast, the docusoap relies on a refashioned melodrama that capitalizes on the intimacy and connection associated with non-fictional portrayals of gendered affluence. Ultimately, the logic of immediacy found in the docusoap stands out due to the use of mediated self-performance.

To understand the docusoap genre it is also necessary to engage how immediacy is ruptured in a unified space via representational excess (Bolter and

Grusin 2000). Various feminist scholars have examined the representational excess in TRH franchise via terms like “mainstream camp” (Jane Feuer 2015), “the melodramatic money shot” (Pier Dominguez 2015), and “ratchetness” (Kristen Warner 2015). Moreover, there is scholarship that explicitly addresses the role irony plays in TRH (Michael Lee and Leigh Moscovitz 2012). While our research builds upon the aforementioned scholarship, we also move beyond textual analysis of TRH franchise to address the mainstreaming of ironic representations and ironic interpretation (Ien Ang 2007) in the broader landscape of women’s television.

Given our belief that ironic representations exploit the overlapping power relations amongst intertwined discursive communities (Linda Hutcheon 1994), we are interested in the way gender intersects with other identity markers to shape master narratives about women as consumers (Jennifer Sandlin and Julie Maudlin 2012). For example, racialized gendered stereotypes like the materialistic jezebel and the greedy gold digger --- forms of ironic representation, which Susan Douglas (2010) notes are prevalent in reality television --- stand out in TRH franchise due to the way they degrade, trivialize, and vilify racial minorities.

The ubiquitous deployment of ironic representations --- representations that tap into existing ideological and social norms of discursive communities, which through their prior existence, contextually situate the way irony is deployed and interpreted (Hutcheon 1994) --- exists alongside the rise of ironic interpretation. The shift toward an ironic perspective or attitude makes sense within a postmodern climate characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty.

Nonetheless, we agree with Lillie Chouliaraki's (2011) critique of the way an ironic perspective grounded in a neoliberal morality has privatized public concerns. Our use of the term mediated irony presumes ironic representations are filtered through an ironic viewing lens grounded in a neoliberal morality that privileges rational market-based logic.

Today, the docusoap is an emerging women's television genre that responds to, builds upon, and moves beyond fictional representations of gendered affluence. On the one hand, mediated irony is a hypermediated logic that illustrates the similarity between fictional and non-fictional portrayals of gendered affluence. On the other hand, mediated self-performance --- a logic of immediacy that has refashioned the melodrama found in soap operas and dramatic comedies --- illustrates how the docusoap genre has built upon and moved beyond fictional portrayals of gendered affluence. Having situated our theoretical grounding, in the next section we examine the specific articulation of mediated self-performance and mediated irony in TRH franchise.

The Authentic Edge of Mediated Self-Performance and Mediated Irony

Since its inception, TRH has built upon and refined the gendered affluence that characterizes dramatic comedies like SATC. The multiplication and replication of both franchises over time offers insight into how this representational trend is systematically reproduced. Still, as we have seen TRH is an iconic text that exists within a women's television landscape characterized by the rise of docusoaps. Here, we turn to executive commentary to examine the specific articulation of mediated irony and mediated-self performance in TRH franchise, and to discuss the role we believe an authentic edge plays in both elements. Our use of the term "authentic edge" speaks to the way the media

industry is capitalizing on the desire for authenticity in a societal context characterized by digital capitalism.

The reality television genre writ large is symptomatic of the desire for authenticity in the increasingly technologically mediated context of digital capitalism. Still, executive commentary surrounding TRH franchise suggests the docusoap genre is distinct due to an authentic edge that derives from the observational access of the day-to-day lives of “real” women. Here, as we illustrate how this authentic edge is used to situate TRH franchise, we also engage the way the docusoap genre is compared and contrasted with the soap opera genre and situated within the broader realm of reality television.

A 2010 interview with Lauren Zalaznick is a useful starting point due to the effort the executive makes to note the way TRH franchise is similar to and different from Bravo’s reality competitions. The similarity lies in the way all of Bravo’s original programming is, according to Zalaznick (2010), driven by “people who are obsessed with what they believe is their life’s work.” Zalaznick’s use of the term “life’s work” has important significance due to the way it aligns with a broad notion of self-entrepreneurship that “is not defined in the traditional sense of being a business owner or investor” (Banet-Weiser 2012, 37), and the way the all-encompassing nature of the term resonates in neoliberal context characterized by self-branding and self-entrepreneurship more broadly.

This similarity exists alongside a notable difference. A difference that arises after Zalaznick (2010), having situated the life’s work associated with a variety of reality competitions aired on Bravo (e.g. Top Chef and the passion or drive toward cooking), relies on a sarcastic tone and third person voice to say, “well, what about The Real

Housewives, they don't have jobs." Then, returning to a first person voice and speaking in an intense, powerful, and emphatic tone, Zalaznick (2010) responds to the third person critique she voiced by saying "their jobs are to be them." This assertion, and the way it is conveyed, directs our attention to two important ways the mediated self-performances in TRH franchise are being situated as unique. First, Zalaznick's reliance on a third person voice, a voice that presumably represents a well-known viewer critique given the negative tone, suggests the judgmental gaze of the other (Skeggs and Wood 2012) has a unique presence in TRH franchise. Second her assertion, "their jobs are to be them," offers an ordinary day-to-day vision of "life's work" (Zalaznick 2010). A vision that distinguishes the docusoap genre from the performances of "ordinary" people in reality television writ large via the attention to the private sphere. Indeed, the claim "their jobs are to be them" (Zalaznick 2010) presumes a domestic orientation grounded in the day-to-day lives of housewives.

The domestic orientation under discussion is also significant due to the way it calls into being the daytime soap opera, even as it implies an authentic edge that is not associated with this women's television genre. A 2014 segment on CBS This Morning in which Andy Cohen (Executive Vice President of Development and Talent, 2011 – 2014) comments on TRH franchise is useful due to the explicit contrast between what he refers to as the modern soap opera and the scripted soap opera. Turning to Cohen (2014):

Well, I think the Housewives have replaced the modern soap opera, in a weird way, for a lot of people. You know, soap operas, scripted soap operas, there's only a couple on the air now and truth is stranger than fiction.

Cohen claim that TRH is an unscripted soap defies logic given the way this franchise exploits simplistic identity scripts grounded in the intersecting tensions amongst gender, race, and class. Nonetheless, his commentary resonates with a legacy of direct cinema that misleadingly assumes there is a way to represent and provide access to an unmediated truth (Bruzzi 2000).

The executive commentary under discussion highlights the presence of authentic edge that is used to distinguish the docusoap genre from fictional performances (found in dramatic comedies or soap operas) and non-fictional performance (found in other forms of reality television). The day-to-day domestic orientation of seemingly “real women” makes the docusoap genre stand out. This domestic orientation is well-suited to forms of self-branding and self-entrepreneurship that promote a hyper-feminine conspicuous lifestyle grounded in nouveau riche values. From this perspective, the remediation and reuse of a consumerist ethic and ethos of affluence in the docusoap is transforming genre via a neoliberal agenda grounded in non-fictional portrayals of gendered affluence.

The articulation of gendered affluence in fictional and non-fictional text relies on a conspicuous lifestyle that is closely linked to irony. The mainstreaming of ironic representations and ironic interpretation since the late twentieth century has, as noted by Ien Ang (2007), made irony cool and trendy. In the current women’s television climate, irony is an aesthetic element that is used to authenticate a consumerist ethic and ethos of affluence. Our use of the term mediated irony refers to the authentic edge that derives from way representational irony is framed and the way interpretive irony is privileged. At Bravo, the effort to frame representational irony happens at level of viewer content (e.g. calling attention to the conspicuous nature of product placement in TRH franchise) and in

executive commentary. In relation to the latter, Lauren Zalaznick's claim that the conspicuous branded entertainment found in Bravo programming is an acceptable industry practice that offers viewers insight into product integration is of extreme relevance (Dominus 2008). In both instances, representational irony derives an authentic edge based on the seemingly unmediated access to the process of production. Zalaznick's effort to frame the various types of excess found in Bravo's programming as a "layered approach" to reality television existed alongside her effort to negate the cultural impact of this content via neoliberal individualism (Dominus 2008). Here, the authentic edge derives from an ironic viewing lens grounded in elements like personal choice, personal responsibility, and viewer reflexivity.

Zalaznick's perspective is important because it highlights the formative role industry executives play in the process of theoretical, critical, and aesthetic deliberation (John Thornton Caldwell 2006). Indeed, Zalaznick --- an executive with a semiotics degree from Brown (Dominus 2008) --- appears to be capitalizing on the type of neoliberal and postmodern theory that is both critiqued and heralded in cultural studies (Feuer 2015). Still, we do not believe this is just about TRH franchise, or for that matter Bravo's reality programming. To the contrary, this is about the ubiquitous presence of mediated irony in the broader landscape of women's television. From this perspective, Jane Feuer's (2015) claim that "the entire discourse of Bravo lies outside the realm of critique of mass media in the usual sense" (188) needs to be expanded. Today, mediated irony is a ubiquitous element in women's television that: frames representational irony as a space of empowerment that provides viewer's access to production practices and privileges a neoliberal morality that privatizes public concerns (Chouliaraki 2011) surrounding

representational irony via an ironic viewing lens. Today, fictional and non-fictional portrayals of gendered affluence remain outside “the realm of critique of mass media in the usual sense” (Feuer 2015, 188) due to the way they capitalize on the authentic edge of mediated irony.

Thus far, we have used TRH as a lens to examine the articulation of mediated self-performance and mediated irony in the docusoap genre. The theoretical framework we are using to situate this genre presumes the presence of a capitalist drive that works through the immediacy of mediated self-performance (Skeggs and Wood 2012). Indeed, we agree with Skeggs and Wood (2012) claim that this “new way of extracting value in the political economy of television” (Skeggs and Wood 2012, 144) enables an affective intensity that is distinct from an aesthetic drive like postmodernism. Still, we suggest the capitalist drive of mediated self-performance (Skeggs and Wood 2012) exists along the postmodern aesthetic drive of mediated irony in the docusoap genre. Our primary interest lies in the way the docusoap genre remediates between the affective engagement enabled by the immediacy of mediated self-performance and the rational disengagement facilitated via the hypermediacy of mediated irony, and this is where we turn next.

The Behavior of Rich Women and The Perfect Distraction of Train-Wreck TV

TRH franchise offers unique insight into the gendering of affluence in women’s television. It engages how the behavior of rich women and the perfect distraction of train-wreck television are both at work in the docusoap genre. An excerpt from The Hollywood Reporter is worth quoting at length due to the way it evokes the elements we believe drive this cultural artifact:

Yes, these women are rich (or at least lost more money than most people make in a lifetime). Yet the franchise has become a perfect distraction for

viewers in the age of Occupy Anything. It's kind of a train-wreck television that Americans, with all their woes, probably shouldn't be watching; but on any given night, 2 million of them – mostly women ages 18-49 are glued to one version or another of the multipronged soap opera ready to blast, blame or bewail the kind of behavior that's left even Oprah aghast. (Leslie Bruce 2012, n.p.)

From our perspective, Bruce's (2012) characterization of TRH franchise implicitly engages the remediation between mediated self-performance and mediated irony.

On the one hand, we recognize the presence of mediated self-performance in at least three ways. First, immediacy is evoked via the reference to women being “glued” to the various installments of TRH franchise. Second, the attention to blasting, bewailing, and blaming taps in to the role affective engagement plays in TRH franchise. Finally, the use of the term “behavior” suggest the presence of “real” women who are not performing. On the other hand, the classification of TRH franchise as “train-wreck” television resonates with our discussion of the way ironic representations rupture immediacy, whereas the recognition of the way this text serves as a “perfect distraction for viewers in the age of Occupy Anything” (Bruce 2012, n.p.) aligns with our understanding of interpretive irony as a space that privileges neoliberal morality and privatizes public concerns (Chouliaraki 2011) via rational disengagement. Our analysis draws out the remediation between the behavior of rich women and the perfect distraction of train-wreck television that distinguishes TRH specifically, and docusoap genre more broadly. To further examine the unique remediation between immediacy (mediated self-performance) and hypermediacy (mediated irony and post-feminist technological interactivity) in docusoap, we turn to a branded entertainment initiative that linked Sprint with the fifth season of TRH-OC.

Sprint's multiplatform sponsorship capitalized on the mediated self-performances of gendered affluence that characterize TRH-OC in various ways. For example, custom Sprint tune-in spots were used to promote weekly "A Day in the Life" webisodes sponsored by the mobile phone company. The promotional spots touting the webisodes exploited the domesticity of the docusoap genre by offering viewers the ability "to follow each of the ladies during a typical day" ("Bravo announces" 2009, n.p.). This type of domestic orientation is a form of identity politics well suited to promoting and selling a consumerist ethic. Indeed, through the gendered lifestyles practices of the cast, viewers are immersed in a market-based intimate public that promotes a conventional (Berlant 2008) hyper-feminine conspicuous lifestyle grounded in nouveau riche values. In this specific instance, tune-in spots that used affective engagement --- or the lure of being able to experience "the life of an Orange County housewife first hand" ("Bravo announces" 2009, n.p.) --- to push viewers online generated post-feminist technological interactivity via the consumption of TRH-OC webisodes.

Still, webisodes are just one small part of this sponsorship arrangement. Of particular interest is how the partnership between Sprint and TRH-OC calls to mind our discussion of representational and interpretive irony. For example, the Sprint and TRH-OC partnership --- an initiative touted as a 360-degree sponsorship due to the way it spanned an on-air, online, and mobile presence ("Bravo Announces" 2009) --- is steeped in representational irony. Indeed, the extensive nature of this branded entertainment initiative can be seen as part of what Zalaznick refers to as a layered approach to reality television that provides

viewer's access to the industry process of product integration (Dominus 2008). Moreover, the 138% increase in likeability (as well as the 71% increase in message and brand recall) TRH-OC "Day in the Life" webisodes purportedly generated for the Sprint brand (Bravo Affluencer 2010/2011) suggests the presence of interpretive irony. Indeed, this data --- data collected by IAG primetime research in 2009 --- suggests a conspicuous sponsorship initiative that spanned the entire fifth season of TRH-OC effectively functioned as an aesthetic element that authenticated consumer lifestyle via an ironic viewing lens. Here we see way mediated irony facilitates rational disengagement (via the framing of representational irony and the privileging of an ironic viewing lens), depoliticizes non-fictional portrayals of gendered affluence grounded in a consumerist ethic, and uses post-feminist technological activity to generate valuable cybernetic commodities.

Our analysis of Sprint's branded entertainment initiative with TRH-OC is representative of the way affective engagement and rational disengagement function in TRH franchise specifically, and the docusoap genre more broadly. The docusoap has important significance at this cultural moment due to the way an ethos of affluence and consumerist ethic are transforming the generic conventions of women's television. When thinking about the implications of this shift it is important to mention Bravo status as a women's cable network situated as "a premium purveyor of luxury goods with a viewership that's affluent but not exactly rolling in the money" (Dominus 2008, n.p.), and to reflect on the rise of credit-based consumer affluence noted in the introduction. With this in mind, we

argue the remediation between mediated self-performance and mediated irony in docusoaps like TRH franchise disguises the structural realities of class position (McLaughlin 1997) in a post-class women's television landscape characterized by an ethos of affluence and a consumerist ethic. Another disturbing theoretical implication of the remediation between mediated self-performance and mediated irony --- the artful maintenance of portrayals of gendered affluence grounded in white privilege --- is addressed in the final section of the paper.

Gendered Affluence, White Privilege, and the Artful Maintenance of the Status Quo

In a 2011 interview with Andy Cohen, New York Times journalist Horacio Silva recognized the shocking and scandalous antics of TRH franchise by referring to Cohen as “the executive in charge of dysfunction.” When the discussion turned to the behavior of a specific female character, Silva asked “Where does one find NeNe Leakes?” (Cohen 2011). Then, the journalist referred to Leakes as “a piece of work” (Cohen 2011). It is unfortunate, but not unexpected, that an African American woman from TRH-Atlanta (TRH-AT) was singled out for her outrageous antics given the bias against women of color on mainstream television. In fact, unlike TRH-OC and TRH-New York (two installments that preceded Atlanta in which the race of the all-white casts went unmarked), African American women were marked via racist caricatures of gendered affluence in TRH-AT. TRH-New Jersey (TRH-NJ) --- the fourth installment in the franchise --- evidenced a similar pattern. In this instance, portrayals of gendered affluence grounded in white Italian ethnicity were “othered.” From this perspective, white privilege is a dominant feature of TRH franchise that can be seen in the way portrayals of gendered

affluence are left unmarked (TRH-OC and TRH-NY) and the way they are marked (TRH-AT and TRH-NJ).

Here we focus our attention on how gendered affluence is racialized by the dominance of white privilege. Our analysis assumes that how American's conceive of and perceive race is not static, and that capitalism and government are two forces that have "fashioned and refashioned whiteness in the United states" (Matthew Frye Jacobson 2001, 88). Building off the work of Jacobson (2001), we argue an ethos of affluence has refashioned racial whiteness in a neoliberal capitalist context with a ravenous appetite for ceaseless consumption. To illustrate the way a white hyper-feminine conspicuous lifestyle grounded in nouveau riche values is privileged, we turn to an example that highlights the type of distinctions made between TRH-NY and TRH-AT.

In a February 2009 article promoting the second season of TRH-NY, Daily News journalist Patrick Huguenin positioned TRH-AT as an installment with a "the new standard of bitchy buffoonery" (n.p.) which had seemingly shocked some of the New York cast. For example, New York cast member Ramona Singer thought the crass materialism in TRH-AT was horrendous (Huguenin 2009). These brief examples both point to the ideological power of white gendered affluence. In particular, the ability for racial whiteness "to pass as a feature of the natural landscape" (Jacobson 2001, 92) is readily apparent in the way both Huguenin (2009) and Singer degrade the Atlanta cast, even as the New York cast embodies the exact same type of conspicuous lifestyle and nouveau riche values. New York cast member Jill Zarin's critique evidences the same type of white privilege. Still, her commentary relies on a comparison between TRH-

AT and Bad Girls Club (a show on the Oxygen cable network) that offers useful insights.

More specifically, Zarin referred to the Atlanta cast as a combination of female socialites and the Bad Girls Club, and she argued that this combination created a “twisted-bad-girls with cash” version of TRH (Huguenin 2009). Zarin’s effort to distinguish between TRH-AT and Bad Girls Club on the one hand, and the rest of TRH franchise on the other, has important significance given that the casts from the texts she is denigrating are primarily comprised of women of color. Here, following Jacobson (2001), we see the way Americans are visually (Zarin’s linking of shows that represent women of color) and conceptually (the presumption that women of color do not know how to spend money “appropriately”) reared to see race. From our perspective, the visual and conceptual rearing noted by Jacobson (2001) is present in the effort to distinguish between “appropriate” (presumably TRH-NY) and “inappropriate” (presumably TRH-AT) wealth in all of the commentary under discussion. Moreover, these racist claims are part of an ethos that privileges white gendered affluence; an ethos which finds ample presence in the docusoap genre specifically, and the women’s television landscape writ large.

From an industry perspective it is clear that the most provocative portrayals of gender affluence are of significant importance to the success of TRH franchise. This is evident in the way Andy Cohen, when discussing the cancellation of TRH-DC in the 2010 Washington Post (Lisa De Moraes 2010), positioned the “level of discourse” in this installment as different, due to the absence of: the Knots Landing’s vibe --- blonde hair,

large breasts, and attention to alcohol --- found in TRH-OC, the table-flipping found in TRH-NJ, and weave-pulling found in TRH-AT. We believe Cohen's commentary speaks to the salient role representational irony plays in the viability of TRH franchise. The representational irony in TRH franchise relies on easily identifiable group caricatures of gendered affluence. It is so obvious and ostentatious it is easily framed as a practice that provides viewer's access into the production process. Indeed, reaction shots are used to further this type of framing, and to privilege an ironic viewing lens grounded in viewer reflexivity. From this perspective, TRH franchise offers portrayals of gendered affluence well suited to rational disengagement due to the way mediated irony privatizes public concerns via the representational and interpretive realms of irony.

In closing, the installments of TRH franchise that have gone on to air for multiple seasons use affective relations to evoke interest in the behavior of a specific group of rich women and rational relations to illicit the perfect distraction of train-wreck television. These installments rely on portrayals of gendered affluence grounded in white privilege that maintain the status quo amongst the intersecting identity realms of gender, race, ethnicity, and class via the remediation between mediated self-performance and mediated irony. From this perspective, TRH-DC was canceled due to the absence of a representational irony grounded in a simplistic group caricature of gendered affluence well-suited toward an ironic viewing lens.

Conclusion

The gendering of affluence is a disturbing trend that illustrates the way a hyper-feminine conspicuous lifestyle grounded in nouveau riche values is promoted and sold in twenty-first century women's television. Our conceptualization of the way gendered

affluence is systematically reproduced (through the capitalist refashioning of representational and institutional practices in remediated environment of women's television) and how this systematic reproduction happens (in a neoliberal context that privileges an individualistic market-based logic grounded in self-governance) offers unique insight into the way capital is dictating the narrative structure of women's programming. This theoretical contribution strongly suggests that feminist scholars who study women's television would benefit from an approach that incorporates textual, institutional, and political economic analysis.

While gendered affluence is systematically reproduced in the broader landscape of women's television, we believe the docusoap genre stands out due to combination of affective engagement grounded in the public display of the private sphere and rational disengagement grounded in the privatization of the public sphere. The way the docusoap is transforming genre via an ethos of affluence and consumerist ethic is not insignificant and the stakes are high, especially in a moment when inequalities still persist across the gender, racial and class divides. What's at stake for women, and television viewers more broadly, is a complacency that disregards the way seemingly authentic portrayals of rich women and the perfect distraction of train wreck television work together to reproduce, cover for, and artfully maintain long-standing inequalities in a post-feminist, post-class, and post-race climate.

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