“Love”... in “Reality”

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Reality television has seen phenomenal success in recent decades, which reflects structural changes in society that have enabled the success of such a genre. The obvious influences stem from pure technological advances, which have accompanied and caused the shift into an increasingly individualised society structured around consumerism (Lyon, 1988; Giddens, 1991; Cartmel, 2007). These developments have created a space and an audience accepting of such programmes, especially in the narrower definition of romantic reality T.V. that have allowed such a style to flourish. This is essentially due to one of the most defining features of a late modern society that displays elements of a reflexive, liquid life we inhabit today. Not only have these complex changes facilitated these shows to run popularly, they would in fact not exist without key the key developments of society.

Life in the late-modern era has seen the deterioration of tradition, which has left a society filled with individuals who have lost a sense of collective identity in the individualised society (Beck, 2007). In order to fill this void technological advancements have provided new ways for individuals to find connections, which is arguably ironic as these technological advances have arguably both created this loss, yet worked to ease it. Giddens (cited by Cartmel, 2007: 143) has discussed these consequences brought with the mass development of information technologies that enable the individual to access experiences without leaving their house, as one is no longer “bounded by space”. Through this we see dating shows such as ‘First Dates’, ‘Take Me Out’, ‘Love Island’, ‘Are You The One?’ and ‘The Bachelor’ providing entertainment fulfilling the romantic urges we have as human beings, yet not engaging in actual romance (Giddens, 1991).

What exactly we can gain from reality television is a fundamental question, as the majority of the productions involve the simplicity of people watching other real and “ordinary people doing ordinary things”
(Holmes and Jermyn, 2004: 258). However, as we have sprung into a society obsessed with the possession of knowledge, television functions as a way of teaching individuals how to do things correctly. Stehr (cited by Webster, 2006) contends that “theoretical knowledge” is now applied to all compartments of an individuals’ life, as we use the advice and help of experts to ease the process of life. This has created the Information society, which essentially filters into televised programmes - the genre of romantic television is used to teach people how to correctly find a partner or behave in romantic relationships (Stehr cited by Webster, 2006). According to Webster (2006) the transformation of society stems from the sudden access to almost any information imaginable, which has created a reliance on knowledge that seeps into our personal lives, extending past just being a necessity for work or education. Here we can access knowledge appropriate for all aspects of our lives to go about everyday things such as dating or finding a partner that were once approached more naturally.

Programmes such as ‘Love Island’ (which gains over 1 million viewers) show the complexities of romance through individuals engaging in complicated mind games in order to gain a partner, combined with actions of sexual interaction and infidelity that although considered entertaining (Telegraph Reporters, 2016), illustrate this natural process as complex and intimidating. These messages delivered through diverse forms of media have in turn come to be a powerful apparatus, as they are not just modes we dip in and out of, they are constantly, often subconsciously imbedded into our beings (Webster, 2006).

Unpredictable relationships are central to romantic reality T.V; represented in headlines such as; “Ex on the beach shock as another girl Gaz cheated on Lillie with emerges” which illustrates immediately the insecure, uncommitted relationships that are portrayed on reality television (Rattenbury, 2016). These relationships mirror an extreme version of the ideas of reflexive modernisation that Giddens (1999: 91) contends to be the inhabited feelings of “never being satisfied within the relationship”, through the constant battle of finding a partner in a society that enables so much choice and visions of being able to find something better. This is reflected within society through the increased pattern of separation and divorce (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), leading to an escalation of individuals floating in and out of relationships, thus creating a greater need to connect to relationships televised.
The importance of the relationship to contemporary society still remains despite the deterioration of the traditional family structure (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). This is displayed within these dating reality programmes and also through the overall success of such a genre of T.V. A running theme that emerges in both real life and televised life is the belief that the next relationship will bring more to satisfy ones needs, which are feelings that arouse even during a relationship, as people are consistently on the search for something better (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). This is reflected in consumerist values that represent unlimited choice that follows the belief of replacing your items if you aren’t satisfied anymore, as you can find something else if it no longer meets your requirements (Featherstone, 2007). Overall this has proved a negative consequence of late modernity as there is a loss of structure surrounding love and relationships that brings confusion as one negotiates from relationship to relationship with no boundaries constricting them (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

Another key feature of late modernity explored by Cartmel (2007) is the ‘risk society’. Giddens’ work (1991: 3) notes that, “modernity is a risk culture” that has built social life around imagined risks and plays a key role in the driving of our own life course. This society lacks solidity and is built on insecurity, due to a loss of traditional values and deterioration of social structures, such as class boundaries (Cartmel, 2007). This risk society has been facilitated by the development of the mass media, which has enabled the connection to be made between individuals and experiences that are distant realities to the individual (Giddens, 1991). This is visible in the reality T.V programme ‘First Dates’, where we see two individuals on a first date. During their discussion the man begins to praise his date, yet comments on her unattractiveness, leaving her understandably wounded (Corner, 2016). This negative experience works to create a connection between the audience and a distant happening that sparks individuals to relate to the experience. This in turn effects our actions as we avoid scenarios to avoid that particular experience, despite this not directly happening to us. This demonstrates the idea of having ‘too much knowledge’ as we are overexposed to things that could happen which is internalised as risk awareness to guide us through our social life. Consistent themes within reality dating programmes are elements of rejection, betrayal and embarrassment, which play a part in transferring into an individual’s perception of what could happen in their own lives.
A further concept that has been developed to describe and understand late-modern information societies is surveillance. Modern understandings of surveillance have been based around Foucault’s applied concept of the ‘Panopticon’, which enabled control through the idea that the few watch the many (Kivisto, 2000). However, in late-modern times surveillance transitioned to form around a society where the many can see the few, in the form of television, recognised as the ‘synopticon’ (Mathiesen, 1997). Changes in surveillance not only represents a transition in society that illustrates that wider society now physically watches the few, but it also represents the shift that has brought the “desire to be watched” (Lyon, 2007: 152) that is visible in the overwhelming number of individuals desperate to gain time in the spotlight.

Lyon (2010) has discussed the ways in which surveillance works. One method of control in a media-based society is the consumerist messages infiltrating one’s mind, often subliminally, as one engages with these programmes. Surveillance is also a method of regulation - televising particular people and their behaviours elevates their status, establishes new norms around what is deemed appropriate and acceptable behaviour, and encourages viewers to identify with and mirror these behaviours (Mathiesen, 1997). The consistent pattern of the, typically beautiful, finding love or success on television programmes reinforces a sense of inadequacy in the individual. These subliminal messages create feelings of discontent in one’s own self that potentially lead to the correlation of not finding love with a lack of beauty. Wolf (1991) has applied surveillance to the beauty standards society has created, as the media is used as a platform to regulate beauty standards - consistently telling women how to look in ways that result in the internalisation of feelings of ‘being watched’ that works to control them. These messages function as a form of “self-surveillance” (Lyon, 2010) that revolves around the idea of ‘self-control’ that has developed out of the fear of being watched. It serves to regulate behaviour through messages from the media that enforce our appropriately acted behaviour (Mathiesen, 1997).

Consumption has developed due to ‘high modernity’ replacing the traditionalist forms that once held that an individual’s identity was based on the family and other admired structures (Cartmel, 2007). As these forms have deteriorated the need for one to define their identity has relied on improving ones consumption through products and bought experiences that build on our appearance and general being artificially (Giddens, 1991). As society has become a place of insecure identities and relationships (Wolf, 1991), consumer culture has grown to present itself as the answer to these insecure problems despite the fact this consumerist lifestyle has contributed to the cause of insecurity in the first place.
Reality T.V reflects a number of social trends that have been significant in this time of late modernity. The information society reveals that despite advances in the amount of knowledge available, it can be perceived negatively, as we are too aware of the risks presented to us, which we can often gain access to through televised programmes that seem real due to the “reality” genre. Surveillance is a further key concept that has developed increasingly, but it can be seen as a consequence of consumerist values transmitted by media outlets with ulterior motives that complexly seek control through subliminal messages. The phenomenon of reality T.V. has been enabled to develop due to a disconnected society that not only craves ‘normalisation’, but also craves watching individuals who embellish these consumerist values.

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