

## Camcorders and PC's Shape Aesthetics of 'Reality' TV

By Lisa Napoli

If you think cultural critics are aghast over the social implications of the "reality" television craze, listen to what camera-wielding purists have to say about the technical quality of some of the video vérité programs now being spewed into the nation's living rooms.

"Incredibly shoddy production values," said Alan Raymond, a co-director of an early version of reality programming: the 12-part *American Family* series broadcast by PBS in 1973. Mr. Raymond, who with his wife, Susan, made that acclaimed and controversial PBS series about the real-life Loud family, was recently coaxed by his 14-year-old son into watching the contemporary reality series *Surreal Life* on WB network. *The Surreal Life*, which has now run its course, monitored a group of past-their-prime celebrities who shared a house for 10 days.

Watching the show, Mr. Raymond cared little about whether the group could help Brande Roderick, a desperate and dateless former Playmate of the Year, find a suitable man. Instead, Mr. Raymond found himself fascinated by what he considered the low-rent way the show was made.

"I swore that half of it was shot with camera sound, not a separate sound mike," Mr. Raymond said. "I said to myself, 'How cheap this is; how amazing that it's become acceptable that people will watch it.' It's almost like the content supersedes everything to do with the artistry of the making of the show."

But maybe his 14-year-old son, who edits his own short films on a laptop computer, saw something that Mr. Raymond, an Academy Award-winning film documentarian now in his 50's, did not.

Two decades into the home-video era, the idea of being on television and shooting television has become second nature to an entire generation of viewers. That may help explain not only the pool of people willing to be televised under any number of potentially humiliating circumstances, but also the standing army of videographers ready to capture it all on tape.

The technology of shooting and editing video has become so affordable and accessible that it almost seems as if anyone on the street can make a television show these days. That may be why, in the view of the auteurs, anyone on the street is making television shows these days.

"The distinction between home movies and broadcast television has all but disappeared," said Jeffrey Tuchman, a documentary filmmaker who directed a 1992 Clinton presidential campaign film, *The Man From Hope*, and helps teach a documentary workshop at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism.

"Now anyone can teach themselves to shoot," Mr. Tuchman said. "Anyone can teach themselves to edit. Before, people who did those things were trained over a period of many years. The deprofessionalization of this whole business is what has changed the aesthetics. The fact is that anybody can now afford to have all the tools necessary to make broadcast television in their living rooms."

That includes independent producers like Mr. Tuchman, who has a professional editing suite in a home office in his Upper West Side apartment. As recently as a few years ago, producers had to pay hundreds of dollars an hour to rent such equipment at a production house or spend \$500,000 or more putting together such a setup.

Some producers of reality shows acknowledge that today's technology lets them get by with looser production values. And yet they say that in the aesthetics of reality television, grittier is sometimes greater.

"There are times when you want things that are very aesthetically pleasing, and there are times when you want it raw, and that rawness translates to intimacy," said Jay Renfroe, an executive producer with Renegade 83 Entertainment, which produces reality shows like *The Surreal Life*, *Blind Date* and *The Fifth Wheel*.

The notion of putting real people in quirky situations for TV has been around at least since *Candid Camera* went on the air in 1949. But the true democratization of documentary-style video did not begin until the arrival of professional-grade one-person video camcorders in the early 1980's.

How different the tools, techniques and times were when the Raymonds made *An American Family* more than 30 years ago. In 12 hourlong installments shot in the home of Bill and Pat Loud in Santa Barbara, Calif., the documentary chronicled the disintegration of their marriage and included the disclosure by one son, Lance, that he was gay.

Using a 16-millimeter film camera that required loading a new reel every 11 minutes or whenever the action moved into different light, the Raymonds sometimes did not have a chance to view their processed film for weeks. Shooting took seven months, with an additional year's work by a film editor, who spliced the 12 episodes together from 300 hours of footage using a razor knife and Mylar tape. Each 11-minute roll of film and its processing cost roughly \$300 - in contrast to the \$30 a typical 64-minute professional-quality tape costs today.

And as the fragile, high-maintenance medium of film gave way to the more instantaneous and durable medium of videotape, the cameras also became less cumbersome. During the 1990's, moreover, videotape entered the digital stage. Editing software that is affordable for home use now allows images to be manipulated and enhanced on a computer screen as simply as text is moved around in a word-processing document.

In short, the same digitalization of television that has enabled cable and satellite operators to carry 100 or more channels is also helping computerized video producers turn out relatively inexpensive programming quickly. Whether the voyeuristic proclivities of today's television audiences are more a cause or an effect, the phenomenon's impact on production aesthetics has not been lost even on the major broadcast networks.

"Increasingly, we see reality shows that are quite rough," said Cecile Frot-Coutaz, an executive producer of Fox's televised talent search, *American Idol*. Fox is owned by the News Corporation.

The on-air audition phase of the show, shot with hand-held cameras, is intentionally rough-hewn, Ms. Frot-Coutaz said. Only as the contestants progress through the competition does the entire production become slicker, with conventional television-studio cameras on dollies handling the bulk of the stage action.

The contemporary video audience, she said, has a tolerance for shaky cameras and spotty lighting. "*The Blair Witch Project* movies, where the production values are terrible, that is part of the look and feel," Ms. Frot-Coutaz said. "Provided it is a good concept, I don't think viewers mind." Nor, presumably, do television executives mind avoiding the \$2 million-an-hour budgets of many traditional dramatic series.

Mr. Tuchman, the filmmaker and Columbia instructor, said the video aesthetics of the camcorder generation were naturally infiltrating broadcast television as many production companies that churn out reality programming employ people in their 20's.

Indeed, the Los Angeles offices of Renegade 83 Entertainment are filled with as many as several hundred young workers, depending on the number of shows in production. "So many kids today have grown up with computers - that's their tool," said Mr. Renfroe, who is 43. "They're into all that software, the plug-ins, the effects, the language. They know that whole world. They've had access to it their whole lives."

And that leads to a climate for creative uses of those tools, he said, like dropping people or objects from images as visual gags, or inserting thought bubbles as visual punctuation, techniques that were not possible on old editing systems.

Renegade's digital editing systems allow three editors to work on the same show simultaneously, retrieving video from a central computer server. (One show, *The Fifth Wheel*, is edited on a laptop computer.) Music is composed and recorded on site. Animations and graphics that used to be farmed out to outside production companies are now done internally. Adding special effects is as simple as manipulating a computer program.

And then there are the new types of cameras - like increasingly smaller versions of so-called lipstick cameras, which are tiny enough to be worn or unobtrusively installed in a room and remotely operated. Fifteen of those were placed in fixed locations throughout the house in *The Surreal Life*, and are used at both the beginning and later phases of the dates on *Blind Date*, Mr. Renfroe said.

Even when camera crews are used, they shoot with camcorders that require less lighting than earlier video formats.

"Reality was much more difficult before all this technology," Mr. Renfroe said. "We could not do these shows a few years ago."

Many of the people who work in reality TV acknowledge that the trend cannot sustain its current scorching popularity, but they predict that the production standards set by the shows will influence fictional television forms.

"The shooting techniques we use in reality television, some scripted producers are going to see that as a form of storytelling," Mr. Renfroe said.

At the request of the Fox Network, he said, he and his partner, David Garfinkle, are developing a scripted drama based on *Blind Date*, a reality series that eavesdrops on a couple on a date from the minute they meet to whatever unfolds over the next 8 to 10 hours. The drama series, with the working title *Dating Is Hell*, would follow six singles in Los Angeles on a Saturday night, using a hand-held video camera, to give it an authentic feel.

And WB has said it is working with the rapper-turned-preacher MC Hammer, who appeared in *The Surreal Life*, to develop a scripted situation comedy based on his family's life.

Such developments do not surprise Mr. Raymond. He and his wife have shot their last four documentaries on digital video, including their latest, *Lance Loud! A Death in an American Family*, which had its debut on PBS in January against the first episode of *Joe Millionaire*. Mr. Raymond is a fan of the new technology - if not all that it has spawned.

"Reality TV has pushed the envelope so far that *An American Family* seems almost quaint," Mr. Raymond said. "It's not hyperedited. It's a serious show trying to hold a mirror up to society."

Still, Mr. Raymond rues the end of the mystique. Camcorders and video editing have now become so much a part of daily life, he said, that there is nothing really special about recording reality.

"Yes, the so-called reality TV explosion has increased the amount of TV time devoted to programs dealing with real people," he said. "But for people who work in serious long-form, it has hurt us."

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