Secrets, Lies and *The Real Housewives*

The Death of an (Un)Popular Genre

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‘I’m from this town, I know what’s real and what’s fake.’

—Kyle Richards, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, season 4 opening credits

Through the course of this compendium, my fellow contributors and I aim to work through what it is that makes up ‘unpopular culture’. This is no easy task, and if any conclusion is to be drawn it is that there is, quite simply, no single definition. Where does one draw the limit on ‘culture’? Are we speaking of productions, people, or practices? And what do we mean by ‘popular’? To identify these ambiguities hardly breaks new critical ground, yet to consider them in light of the *un*popular is to venture into relatively uncharted territory. Our rubric brings together two terms that are multivalent and broad in scope, and this essay does not intend to sketch out all its possible manifestations or provide a unifying answer to the questions raised above. What this collection instead aims to do is break down unpopular culture into its constituent parts. When viewed as a whole, maybe our examples will provide a more coherent image of the myriad directions these cultural forms can spread. Before moving forward, though, some refinements are needed, and by re-distributing ‘unpopular’ into a set of sub-categories the theoretical grounding for what is to follow may become clearer. These adjustments are made by way of punctuation, an academic technique that, according to an old professor of mine, ‘was fashionable about ten years ago’. Amusingly fitting, then, for use here.

Underground music, the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) and Justin Bieber could all be described as ‘unpopular’, but the disparities between them show that with each use of the term we mean subtly different things. For example, fans of bands with a strong presence on Pitchfork, but not the Billboard Hot 100, position themselves outside the general public. Audiences are small in size, but are united in a shared appreciation for a genre. They are, to use the Latin root, not of the ‘populus’. Denunciation of the WBC is shared by politicians and ordinary individuals across the globe, and although these two examples may seem radically different, they do, in fact, share a common trait. They incite homogenous audience behaviors, both
taking different interpretations of ‘popular’ (audience size and positive appreciation) and inverting them completely. An essay could be devoted to unpacking distinctions and relations between the two, but I merely claim that ‘unpopular’ is in these cases appropriate. Other cultural figures and productions, though, require a reconstruction of the term to reflect the complex behavior of those who interact with them.

The un/popular, here exemplified by Justin Bieber, splits its audiences into two opposing factions where ardent fans clash with critics and wider audiences. A slash literalizes this process through its double meaning, signifying not only a punctuation mark but also an act of violent division. Tensions between fans and critics are often played out across online social networks and blogs, and it is through such confrontations that the dialectic of un/popularity is maintained. In negotiating this virtual space fans also sometimes inhabit both sides of the binary division: self-fashioned tribal groups (Lady Gaga’s ‘Little Monsters’, Justin Bieber’s ‘Beliebers’, One Direction’s ‘Directioners’, etc.) engage in hostile exchanges, defending their chosen idols while viciously attacking others.

A second reconstruction of ‘unpopular’ further muddles the coherence of a viewing demographic. The (un)popular’s audience is not homogenous, but nor is it singularly defined by internal conflict. While the un/popular fosters a semantic antagonism between its composite parts, the (un)popular’s inverted popularity is subjugated through a bracketing. It is what audiences ‘hate to love’ instead of ‘love to hate’, and although the boundaries between these separate permutations of unpopularity are by no means rigid, objects of (un)popularity are often subject to a more light-hearted approach. Audiences that embrace these productions simultaneously reject them, or are aware that they should reject them, and this process establishes the (un)popular as a close cousin of camp (it is no coincidence that there is significant overlap between examples of the two). Such behavior is, of course, by no means unanimous across all individuals who engage with these cultural forms; for every media text declared ‘trashy’ or ‘tasteless’ there will be those who genuinely invest in it, lacking the cultural capital that tells them they should, apparently, know better. However, when a substantial proportion of an audience decry the music they repeatedly listen to or the television show they can’t bear to miss, an (un)popular category of forms—the guilty pleasure—is born.

When preparing to deliver an early form of this essay, mention of its topic was often met with a laugh or smirk. There was an amusing incongruence to a conference paper on a lowbrow Reality TV show. Potentially subversive and definitely comic, discussing *The Real Housewives* would be
an unpopular gesture in most academic circles, and even when presented at a conference titled *Unpopular Culture* it did not fail to elicit the occasional giggle. To conduct scholarly work on a brazenly vapid television series was funny because, quite simply, it felt like breaking the rules. Despite the decades that have passed since cultural studies formed a discipline in its own right, the notion that scholarship must be ‘serious’ if one wants to get an academic job has somehow managed to persist. All of us in that room were—not for the first time that weekend—deviating from this apparent norm, and (un)popular, in this particular context, came to signify more than ‘guilty pleasure’: it is the not-serious, the playful, the improper and the out-of-place.

*The Real Housewives of Orange County* was developed by Scott Dunlop in 2004, and, after being bought by the American network Bravo, premiered on 21 March 2006. It was the third in a sequence of television programs focusing upon the affluent residents of Orange County, California, beginning with teen drama series *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003-2007) followed by *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* (MTV, 2004–2006), replacing the former’s fictional characters with real-life group of adolescents. The figure of the Orange County housewife—surgically enhanced, permanently medicated and devoted to a full-time schedule of social engagements—featured as a peripheral element to both, and was mythologized as a distinctly local phenomenon. Further influenced by the recent success of *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004–2012), the show capitalized upon the popularity of affluent female subjects by following a group of women living behind the gates of Coto de Caza, a private residential community. In the years since its premiere the franchise has reached unprecedented levels of success, with a rumored value in excess of half a billion dollars and a peak rating of 3.1 million viewers over *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* season five. At the time of writing, six more U.S. editions have aired (set in New York City, Atlanta, New Jersey, Washington D.C., Beverly Hills and Miami) alongside seven spin-offs, and it is the first docuseries to franchise overseas with international editions in Greece, France, Canada and Australia. Its (un)popularity is evidenced through an all-pervasive cultural reach: a 2012 *Hollywood Reporter* cover story declared the franchise to be ‘the guiltiest pleasure on television’ (Bruce), and it even earned a humorous acknowledgment in a speech by President Obama the same year. In a recent interview, Dunlop declared that ‘[y]ou can love the show, you can hate the show but you really can’t ignore it’ (qtd. in Day 16).

After undergoing refinements through its early seasons, each edition of *The Real Housewives* now follows a relatively standardized format. Cast
members are documented as they navigate the trials and tribulations of female friendship, formed in part by pre-existing bonds but also through the show’s artificial augmentation of social groups. Narratives unfold amongst patterns of relentless consumption: exotic holidays, plastic surgery, extravagant parties and luxury shopping trips form the rotating background against which the drama of each season takes place. Fly-on-the-wall documentary footage forms the bulk of each episode, interspersed with video confessions that, although filmed retrospectively, deny their temporality through a present-tense narration of each woman’s thoughts and feelings. Polished aesthetics characterize these segments: a green-screen is replaced with images of opulent domestic interiors, coupled with soft lighting, expensive dresses and heavy make-up. At the closing credits for each episode a cast member’s voice-over directs viewers to Bravo’s website, where official blogs by each of the housewives are posted to offer further thoughts on the footage and enable additional interaction with their fans. At the end of each season the cast are brought together by Bravo vice president Andy Cohen for a reunion episode (or episodes, sometimes split into multiple parts), in which protagonists are shown footage from the past season and asked for their thoughts on the events that transpired.

Similar to unpopular culture, the category of ‘docusoap’ is marked by ontological incoherence. Its trajectory is difficult to precisely chart, given the gradual process of hybridization through which it occurred and the historical analysis that grouped programs into new generic clusters. PBS’s *An American Family* (1973) is often identified as the genre’s earliest and most prominent example, in which a documentary used the narrative structure of soap opera to chronicle the lives of the Loud family from Santa Barbara, California. Cameras captured the unexpected dissolution of the domestic unit when Pat Loud asked her husband Bill for a divorce, and also followed their eldest son Lance move to New York City and immerse himself in the downtown queer arts scene. This identification as a docusoap, though, is a retrospective one, and the use of the term in relation to contemporary media did not occur until two decades later. Although the focus of this essay is restricted to American visual culture, the simultaneous emergence of the docusoap on both sides of the Atlantic can yield some useful context; Janet Jones’s survey of British journalism shows the term entering our lexicon most prominently in 1998 (cf. 76), so it would be accurate to assume the genre emerged a few years prior.

Experiments in format between the realms of factual and fictional programming produced a range of new generic types, in which dramas such as *E.R.* and *NYPD Blue* adopted the visual grammar of the documentary,
while MTV’s *The Real World* used documentary footage and confessional interviews to narrativize the lives of a group of strangers picked to live together. This particular mode of production quickly proved unpopular with critics, who bemoaned the undermining of documentary’s founding principles in favor of mass entertainment, and expressed frustration with the quick proliferation of cheaply-produced programming and its cast of interchangeable, everyday people. The visual format employed by *The Real World* has since developed into the most culturally prolific form of docusoap today, to the extent that it has become synonymous with Reality television—in fact, a sprawling array of diverse media—in the public imagination. Now continuing into its third decade on the air, the show’s structure has remained largely unchanged and is reflected in a huge number of popular programs across a global array of broadcasting networks. *The Real Housewives* displays many hallmarks of internationally successful docusoaps such as *Jersey Shore* and *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*: it combines fly-on-the-wall footage with direct-to-camera interviews, narrativizing its content through soap opera-esque edits and dramatic music.

A continuity of cast members between seasons charts their development from ‘normal’ women to public figures, and in doing so the show produces a self-reflexive documentation of the perks and pitfalls of Reality TV fame. As their public profile increases, the women adapt their behavior and appearance accordingly—original Orange County Housewife Lauri Peterson describes the cast of season one as ‘virgin housewives’ who quickly substituted ‘no make-up and sweatpants’ for more glamorous fare once they witnessed themselves on screen (‘100th Episode Special’). Alongside the manifest pressures of the film crew’s presence, the cameras of the paparazzi eventually come to exert their influence. After encountering their mediated representations the women react to their appearance on screen and in print, and as viewers we witness the trajectory of this peculiar phenomenon. By allowing the process of celebritification to feature within its tightly-edited narratives *The Real Housewives* maintains a precarious link between Reality and reality that carves its own space within a crowded genre whilst simultaneously undermining its numerous, and necessary, fictions.1

Within the franchise, degrees of authenticity are modelled according to the multiple footage types used, forming a Chinese box structure. Each segment purports itself to be the location of authentic thoughts and feelings, yet as these move outwards cast members reflexively analyze themselves and others to reveal to their audience their ‘real’ opinions. Confessionals reflect upon the core documentary footage, official blogs analyze episodes as a whole and final reunions examine the contents of all three, during
which editing techniques, on-screen personas and off-camera events are all discussed. As seasons progress and the housewives’ celebrity status develops, digital tabloid media emerge as a powerful force which reformulates this structure from both its epicenter and periphery. Interactions between storylines and the internet and tabloid press begin to occur, disrupting its episodic narrative by the immediacy of gossip blog and social media posts that reveal to Bravo’s audience the chasm between transmission dates and the actual time of production. Stories relating to the cast, particularly ‘behind-the-scenes’ gossip, are delivered with up-to-the-minute speed by outlets such as *TMZ* and *Radar Online*, providing information on ‘real-life’ drama beyond the confines of the show and the extent to which scenes are contrived by Bravo. When these become embroiled within the show’s storylines, a new hybrid R/reality is produced; as an active and temporal construct, it is maintained by and dependent upon the tensions between real life and its augmentation.

This symbiosis produces a genre in perpetual flux. Tied as it is to the immediacy and frenetic turnover of the tabloid media, docusoap programming presents difficulties for scholarly work. The categorical ‘presentness’ of the viewing experience makes retrospective viewing surreal and incomplete, and this takes an admittedly comic turn with the unrelenting pace of surgical upkeep (watching old seasons appears to make breasts deflate and noses grow). Translating such temporalities into the permanence of the written word, then, risks fast becoming irrelevant, if not incorrect. In the short period between this essay’s original presentation and the time of writing, new seasons of the franchise have come and gone, and more will inevitably follow. A strategy for the most accurate representation of such media texts is to engage with very recent and current programming, yet the original examples used are now, of course, already comparatively dated. For now, though, this essay’s main proposals continue to be demonstrated, and I will use my original examples alongside some more recent case studies. My focus will be restricted to two particular instalments of the franchise which have exemplified the tumultuous relationship between Reality and reality, and its mediation through tabloid gossip. The intermedial nature of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* (2009–present) and *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (2010–present) is demonstrated through cast members’ engagement with stories online and in print, where articles published by *TMZ, Radar Online, People* magazine and *US Weekly* become anchor points between which plot lines are drawn and from which dramatic confrontations are frequently provoked. This phenomenon is hardly limited to these two instalments, but for the sake of coherence within this survey it is necessary to refine my scope.
With its setting in the affluent Los Angeles suburb, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* is situated in the epicenter of the tabloid and entertainment industries, an area housing major TV and film studios as well as the headquarters of numerous print and digital media outlets. Its cast are embedded within a social circle that features many high-profile celebrities—current housewives Kim and Kyle Richards are aunts to Paris Hilton—and interactions between its cast and tabloid journalists or paparazzi occur with a higher frequency than other installments of the franchise. Street photographers are evident as a peripheral element of everyday life for the city’s wealthy residents, concentrated within particular areas where the Housewives live and socialize. The relative normalization of tabloid encounters amongst the residents of Beverly Hills eases their transition into public figures, initiating conflicts and developing narratives with which audiences are able to directly engage. One particular confrontation exemplifies the feedback loop between online gossip and events within the show, and is constructed through a web of dialogic exchange between cast members and journalists. Although it is by no means the only instance of such conflict, it succinctly demonstrates the complexities of this process.

In the reunion episode for season two, cast members Lisa Vanderpump and Adrienne Maloof trade accusations regarding the selling of stories. When Vanderpump alleges that Maloof’s chef leaked information to the tabloids, the latter responds by claiming that Vanderpump had sold articles to *Radar Online* for the amount of $25,000. For viewers wanting to decipher the truth to these contradictory claims, the website itself posted articles covering its inclusion in the episode:

*The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills all have one thing in common—they love RadarOnline.com! In the reunion episode that aired Monday night, Radar was the center of attention, because we apparently really get under their skin. [...]*

So was Adrienne right? Did RadarOnline.com pay Lisa $25,000? Find the answer on twitter at @IMPerel.

('Real Housewives Fight At Reunion—Over Radar!')

Through directing readers to the page of Twitter user IMPerel—a.k.a. David Perel, the company’s Executive Vice President—the normally mediated exchange between journalists and the cast is transformed into direct communication. Indeed, the use of Twitter by the Housewives serves a key role in
the expansion of the show’s narrative to a real-time space, equalizing three forms of subject (cast, journalists and viewers) within the same interactive virtual domain, and allowing the possibility for viewers to enter into conversation. In a follow-up story on the website, quotes are taken from Perel’s Twitter conversations with Vanderpump and Maloof and it transpires the argument was apparently a misunderstanding.

After talking to both ladies, Perel figured out who had communicated the false information to Adrienne and the air was cleared.

‘@IMPerel Thank you for your support, I know what @TheRealCamilleG and I were told. Moving fwd in a positive direction! xoA’ Adrienne tweeted on Tuesday to Perel.

‘Thank u!! following you @IMPerel glad we can move on to more important things! Have a great day!! XoxoA’

Lisa also tweeted in support: ‘@radar_online thank you for supporting me and not that bullsh*t...means a lot’.  
(Lisa Vanderpump & Adrienne Maloof Feud Over Radar: All A Big Misunderstanding!)

Negotiations of authenticity and attempts to establish ‘the truth’ feature heavily throughout The Real Housewives, and are often the primary catalyst for its narratives. Considering the relative stability of their affluent lifestyles, the show’s dramatic events must be constructed predominantly from the fabric of inter-personal relationships. As public figures with lucrative personal brands, the cast are aware that reputation is tightly linked to financial gain; Bravo’s viewers are, in essence, consumers, targets of subtle (and frequently unsubtle) product placement of the books, clothing and beauty products the Housewives endorse. Indeed, the inclusion of business ventures and products, alongside pay increases, has even been factored into contract deals for popular returning characters (‘Exposed!’). Rose and Wood explicitly address this model of viewship in their article ‘Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity through Reality Television’, and conclude that audiences ‘increasingly value authenticity in a world where the mass production of artifacts causes them to question the plausibility of the value’ (286). In a competitive effort to self-market along these lines, proclamations of ‘realness’ and authenticity abound as the women collectively try to determine who is, or is not, ‘fake’. In this case, the context of Beverly Hills
provides a backdrop of normalized ‘fakeness’ against which the Housewives position themselves: alongside surgical enhancement, superficial personas are touted as a well-known stereotype of wealthy Angelenos, leading Yolanda Foster to ask Lisa Vanderpump in season 4 episode 17, ‘Are you a Hollywood friend or a real friend?’ (‘Lines in the Sand’).

These conflicts are magnified within reunion shows, in which a legalistic mise-en-scène evokes the theatrical arrangement of the courtroom. Host and Bravo executive Andy Cohen is flanked by the cast on opposing sofas and mediates in sometimes violent altercations. Damaging rumors are traced back to their source, and cast members exchange accusations of lying in an attempt to maintain and accumulate authenticity as a valuable form of social capital. Objects of ‘proof’ are used as evidence in their pre-meditated confrontations, in which photos, text messages and print-outs of e-mails are brought by the Housewives to make their case for truthfulness before the jury of their fellow cast and viewers at home. The literal value of authenticity in this case, as a determining factor in viewer popularity, could be perhaps conceived as an economic drive behind such conflicts, in which social capital stands in for its financial equivalent. Postmodern philosophical scholarship, however, cannot be entirely ignored in favor of a purely Marxist approach: this search for authenticity can be, and often is, formulated as a response to the postmodern condition itself. Instead, the clear financial motives behind establishing ‘authenticity’ could be seen to merely exacerbate the epistemological uncertainties felt by subjects of postmodern culture. That the differentiation between fact and fiction occurs both within and beyond the bounds of the camera’s frame is testament to the prevalence of this cultural anxiety, and is demonstrated by efforts of fans to peel back façades of production. The timed, dated interactions between cast members and viewers through social media are used to re-chronologize the show, matching dates of tweets and sightings of the cast with events portrayed on screen. Through exposing the re-arrangement of events to form satisfying narratives, independent bloggers collude with tabloid media in their galvanization of cynical, suspicious viewers. If chronological adjustments can easily be de-coded, then what other elements of reality have been manipulated? Whilst edits can, with in-depth detective work, be unveiled, what about producer interventions, or performative elements that influence the raw footage?

The disorientating generic hybrid of the docusoap induces unsettling effects upon its audience, captured in Annette Hill’s observation that ‘viewers describe themselves as watching a bad dream, trying to work out what is real or not in the topsy-turvy world of reality entertainment’ (89). Reality
television—as manifested in the docusoap—is, then, characteristically postmodern in its in-betweenness, and the viewing experience is theorized as such. Rose and Wood point to a ‘postmodern paradox’ (286) at the heart of this search for authenticity, whilst Janet Jones describes the process in a 2000 article title as ‘The Postmodern Guessing Game’. Jones’s essay is telling in its particular phrasing: the docusoap is not a postmodern guessing game, it is the guessing game. This is not to say that uncertainty is only inherent in encounters with the docusoap—far from it, in fact, as one could argue a similar response through the spectrum of postmodern cultural productions—but rather that the multiple anxieties brought to bear upon the viewing experience typify the concerns of our contemporary epoch.

Here, I follow the view that postmodernity is ongoing, and while this perspective is certainly open to debate (countless variations of ‘post-postmodernism’ have been proposed, but few—if any—have gained traction), general consensus points to its beginnings in the late 1970s. From this moment onwards, postmodernism’s most transformative effects can be seen in the field of subject-image relations. Coupled with a broader suspicion of grand narratives and a burgeoning discourse on the politics of representation, the photographic image was deconstructed along lines of race, class, and gender by both visual artists and critics. Documentary photography’s claim to neutrality formed an easy target for this cultural interrogation, and the digital turn only heightened such suspicion when its claim to verisimilitude—indexicality—was removed. As a consequence, the drive to challenge documentary’s ‘truthfulness’ is exacerbated when its already contestable forms are merged with the inherent fictions of entertainment. Audiences are prompted to work through its mesh of realities to distinguish its constituent parts, and the unique quality of The Real Housewives is the bleeding of this process through the screen. When this crisis is addressed within episodes of the show it reveals a unique degree of self-reflexivity, but also slowly begins to expose and unravel its inner workings.

Not only are anxiety-driven responses to The Real Housewives characteristic of docusoap programming, but the specific discourse of differentiation also forms the genre itself. Building upon the discourse model of cultural genre theory in which genres are maintained through locating a text in identifiable clusters, the interactive commentary on tabloid websites and social media can be seen to create, and perpetuate, the docusoap genre through the very nature of its investigations. In ‘A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory’, Jason Mittell proposes that ‘a more satisfying macro-account of a genre’s history’ can be built ‘from the bottom up, by collecting micro-instances of generic discourses in historically specific
moments and examining the resulting large-scale patterns and trajectories’ (10). Specific events within the Beverly Hills and New Jersey instalments document confrontations between fact and fiction that hallmark *The Real Housewives*’ contributions to the docusoap genre. They pinpoint new R/realities created by the show, yet also indicate a compulsive drive to self-revelation threatening to wreak havoc upon the genre it inhabits. In such instances, legal threats have prompted Bravo to remove large proportions of footage, transforming the symbolic presence of the law (the reunion as trial; the use of evidence or proof) into a literal one, and shifting its agency from an internal negotiation to an external force. This shift occurs via a complex middle ground in which cast members themselves invoke its authoritative presence.

Efforts to maintain a distinction between Reality and reality are frequently demonstrated by the Housewives, such as in Kyle Richards’s book *Life Is Not a Reality Show: Keeping it Real with the Housewife Who Does It All*. When this occurs alongside a simultaneous drive towards authenticity, though, the two come into a destructive collision, and this is most acutely shown in a plot line starting from season 3 episode 6 of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. When in a group conversation with other cast members, Brandi Glanville expressed frustration with the ‘lies’ of fellow Housewife Adrienne Maloof, and in her efforts to expose ‘the truth’ revealed an apparently shocking piece of information. That this gesture was controversial was only deducible from reaction shots, after lawyers acting at Maloof’s behest forced producers to cut the content from the show. The ongoing conflict initiated by this revelation, however, provided the central storyline for the season, and the audio of Glanville’s allegation was simply removed, leaving collateral information behind. The gaps in audio prompted an online discourse of docu-/soap differentiation, which attempted to re-insert Glanville’s words into the *Housewives* narrative. Her continual utterance of this void in the media commentary accompanying the furor (when asked, she replied that she was banned from discussing it) urged viewers to complete her forbidden declaration by searching, through the usual online channels, for what exactly was removed. Tabloid gossip outlets quickly revealed that the information Maloof had been so intent on silencing was that she had used a surrogate for her youngest two children, despite claiming that she had given birth naturally. After forcing Bravo into extensive and costly re-edits she confirmed the rumor in an *US Weekly* cover story, and subsequently refused to appear for the reunion show taping. Maloof’s handling of the allegation eventually resulted in her firing from the show, with host Andy Cohen explaining in his opening monologue that
This season was hard on Adrienne, as you all know. A secret about her family was revealed by Brandi. And from that moment on, Adrienne refused to speak directly about it. We know that frustrated you in the audience, and that frustrated all of us too. If you read the tabloids you might have theories on what the secret is, but Adrienne won't be here to tell her side of the story. Not only is she absent tonight, but she won't be on the show next season. (‘Reunion: Part One’)

Her decision to abstain from the reunion was not followed by Paul Nassif, Maloof’s then-ex-husband from whom she announced her separation in the season finale. Choosing to appear through a pre-recorded interview, he dismissed the accusation propagated by his ex-wife that Glanville was responsible for the breakdown of their marriage, instead blaming the moment when ‘Reality became reality’ as a catalyst for his divorce (‘Reunion: Part Two’).

Here, the show’s construction of the Real forms a pattern of simultaneous in-/exteriority. This transformation emerges again within case studies—Mittel’s ‘historically specific moments’—that chart a broader unravelling of the genre, where lawsuits from external individuals have been brought against cast members, production companies and Bravo itself, causing fissures within the precariously maintained docu-soap structure. These points of rupture take the form of narrative voids which similarly led viewers to tabloid websites in order to uncover the secrets of absent footage. Two examples from seasons 4 and 5 of The Real Housewives of New Jersey differ in post-production editing technique, ranging from a complete and seamless removal of footage to explicit omissions that frame invisible content through remaining shots. They both, however, share a degree of significance with regards to the docusoap’s disintegration: they expose the means through which drama is orchestrated, and the contractual agreements used to maintain control over the cast, their mediated representations and, by extension, reality itself.

Whilst filming during a holiday in the Dominican Republic for season 4, internet rumors began to spread of a large-scale brawl at the bar of the Hard Rock Resort in Punta Cana, which culminated in the detainment of cast members by local police (‘EXCLUSIVE’). In a 42-page complaint filed after their return to the U.S., a vacationing family alleged that upon confronting the cast when one of their party was sprayed with champagne

members of the cast and crew […], without provocation, brutally and savagely beat, kicked, punched, scratched, jumped on and smashed glass on the heads of [the claimants] causing them to sustain severe pain and suffering and bodily injuries. (‘EXCLUSIVE’)
The filing against Bravo and production company Sirens Media also alleged that they encourage, promote and demand that the cast [...] engage in verbal and physical conflict with one another and members of the public, creating a culture, climate and/or atmosphere of confrontation, hostility and violence in order to attract viewers. (‘EXCLUSIVE’)

Claimants’ passports were apparently withheld until they signed a release of claims drafted by lawyers especially flown in by Sirens Media and Bravo to the Dominican Republic. They allege that they were under ‘great duress, coercion and physical and emotional stress’ and signed the release in order that they might return home quickly and receive appropriate medical care (‘Manzo’s take Punta Cana by Storm’). The case was subsequently settled out of court for an undisclosed amount, and footage of the Punta Cana altercation was removed in its entirety from the show before broadcast. Tabloid gossip here not only attempts to fill narrative voids and piece together reality, broken by the docu-soap into pieces of an incomplete puzzle; it exposes the presence of such voids altogether. Season 5’s finale, by contrast, depicted a confrontation through momentary snippets of footage, in which a fight at the opening of a hair salon is represented through reaction shots of bystanders interspersed with fades to black (‘Salon, Farewell’). The lawsuit that occurred as a result of the violence consisted of criminal charges filed by a peripheral cast member, John Karagiorgis, against cast members Jacqueline Laurita, Chris Laurita and Joe Gorga for assault, harassment and/or terroristic threats. In exchange for the dismissal of the criminal case in September 2013, Karagiorgis was granted a waiver of the show’s contract clause, which hitherto prevented him from filing against the network itself.

At the time of writing, it is understood that he plans to press civil charges against all three cast members, Sirens Media, Bravo, NBC and security teams for planning the altercation, manipulating individuals with a known propensity for violence and not intervening after the fight had occurred. A copy of the contract signed by the claimants in both lawsuits was leaked to Radar Online in the same month, exposing through dense legal prose the degree to which docu-soap narratives may be fictionalized. In signing, subjects agree that:

I understand that [...] my actions and the actions of others participating in the Program may be embarrassing or of an otherwise unfavorable nature that may be factual or fictional. [...] I further understand that
my appearance, depiction, and portrayal in and in connection with the Program [...] may portray me in a false light. (‘We Can Fictionalize The Footage!’)

Digital copies can, of course, be immaterially and endlessly circulated, reproduced and quoted as above. The ontology of the contract, however, is material in its essence: it is a paper document validated through signature(s), and digital copies are merely inadequate signifiers, unable to translate the physicality of their real-life referent. This signified, then, is a symbolic object, an icon for the Real of the Housewives that balances, or attempts to balance, the conflicting realities of ‘docu’ and ‘soap’. As well as outlining the control producers have over cast and their representations, it details the manner in which individuals may become the subject of tabloid gossip (‘defamatory’ or ‘embarrassing’ information may emerge ‘in connection with the Program’). The waiving of its terms in a court of law demonstrates the undoing of the docu-soap within a system predicated upon discerning absolute truth, and whilst the Karagiorgis case presents implications specifically for The Real Housewives, its resonation can be found in legal troubles concerning other high-profile programs.

Concurrent lawsuits have led to similar self-exposures whilst under oath, most notably in the case of Keeping Up With The Kardashians. In the March 2013 divorce trial between Kris Humphries and Kim Kardashian, the former sought an annulment on the alleged grounds that he was duped into a marriage conducted purely for television ratings, and after being subpoenaed to appear in court, a producer on the show testified that specific scenes had been ‘scripted, re-shot or edited’ to alter the appearance of their marital breakdown (‘Producer Testifies Under Oath’). Court documents leaked in March 2014 detail a subsequent lawsuit brought by Kardashian and her then fiancé Kanye West against Chad Hurley, an uninvited guest at West’s lavish proposal who released amateur footage of the event online before its airing on the show. In her written statement, Kardashian’s mother and manager Kris Jenner declared that she ‘played a major role in organizing and running the event’, despite its portrayal on the show as solely arranged by West (‘Monster-In-Law!’).

The case studies used in this essay form, I hope, a trajectory of the docu-soap as shown through The Real Housewives, from the genre-defining negotiation of truth to the ultimate conclusion of this process through the legal system. One current case marks the most significant unraveling of the franchise yet, not only implying a resolution of truth by virtue of its legal nature, but involving charges that are themselves concerned
with the fraudulence of cast members’ affluent lifestyles. When *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* stars Teresa and Joe Guidice were charged in July 2013 on a 39-count indictment of financial fraud, their legitimacy as cast members—predicated upon displays of wealth and extravagance—was quickly undermined. The pair were charged with conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud, bank fraud, lying on loan applications, bankruptcy fraud and failure to file tax returns. After initially pleading not guilty, the couple brokered a plea bargain in March 2014 admitting to a handful of charges in exchange for reduced jail time, and at the time of writing are currently awaiting sentencing. In an early stage of the proceedings, Bravo were subpoenaed to submit hundreds of hours of unedited footage, and it is through using the show itself as evidence in determining authenticity—or a lack thereof—that the metaphysical negotiation embarked upon by cast and audience is now transferred into the courts. The catastrophic impact of the Guidice case upon *The Real Housewives* is manifest in subtle but significant changes, and that such transformations work along and through the limitations of genre is evidence of the docu-soap’s gradual disintegration. In the final episode of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* season 5, the cut to a montage of news coverage of the Giudice trial—covering events between the end of shooting and the upcoming reunion—indicates a process of breakdown, in which generic integrity is broken though appropriation of alien media forms. Subsequently, a disruption of layered temporalities occurred in *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* season 4, itself a season revolving primarily around the drama caused by tabloid ‘lies’. At the end of the final episode, a brief preview of the reunion show revealed the artifice of this most ‘authentic’ element of the franchise, where backstage and behind-the-scenes footage documented the women arriving at a studio lot, sitting in hair and make-up and preparing for the upcoming conflicts during taping (‘Reunion: Part One’). This breaking open of the *Housewives* structure moves another degree closer to the documentary real, but in doing so continues to lay bare its meticulous construction. It reveals the uneasy co-existence of documentary and soap, in which the fashioning of entertainment from the ‘authentic’ proves to be an endless cycle of self-sabotage. Where, then, does the trajectory of this phenomenon point? Such outcomes can only be hypothesized, and we must look towards our TV screens to watch the answers unfold. What is apparent, though, is that we may just be witnessing the death of an (un)popular genre.
Notes

1. Some clarification might be necessary to avoid confusion: when referencing ‘Reality’ or the ‘Real’, I do not intend to invoke any Lacanian terms. I use a capitalization to distinguish between mediated reality and actual lived experience.

2. With the exception of occasional developments such as alcoholism, death and divorce, which are evidently not influenced by producers.

3. As of 2 October 2014 Teresa and Joe Giudice received prison sentences of 15 months and 41 months respectively.

4. This process of breakdown later accelerated through the course of season 6, in which the Giudice's legal troubles formed a substantial element of the core documentary footage. Cast members are shown watching television coverage of the couple's court appearances, and interspersed sections of news footage were accompanied with dates.

Works Cited


