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Athenaeum Paper
April 1, 2004

Isolated from the civilized world, beautiful women and handsome men live together in a place called Eden. Eden is paradise -- a lush tropical island, replete with modern amenities.

The goal of the "beautiful people" is to remain in Eden as long as possible. The longer they stay, the more gold coins they accumulate. All the while, they swim, sun, socialize and most importantly... frolic...with each other. Nary a move is made without musical accompaniment, usually of the mind-numbing variety.

Among the "beautiful people" of Eden: a country music singer, a radio DJ, a pro football cheerleader, a fitness model, a student and a writer. They cohabituate without material possessions, armed only with their smarts, and their God-given assets. One by one, they are eliminated, and replaced by other "beautiful people".

Not surprisingly, the men and women of Eden are tested and tempted. Apples materialize, symbolizing either good or evil. Serpents abound, sometimes slithering on pool tables. And the "beautiful people" are often banished to the temple of **banishment**. Probably just an average day in the garden for Adam and Eve.

PAUSE

Twenty-two (22) producers, twenty-one (21) editors, two (2) casting agents,

two (2) creators and one (1) host are responsible for such a modern-day Eden. *Forever Eden* they call it, and it's a reality television show. And it's just one (1) of some 200 reality "tv" shows currently dominating the tube.

Mr. President ... Mr. Secretary ... Members of Athenaeum ... The title of my paper is

Reality Television: Paradise Lost

The network executives at FOX tout their show, *Forever Eden*, as television paradise. Television as it was meant to be.

Somehow I doubt that Philo Farnsworth would agree. Philo transmitted the first all-electronic television image in 1927. Nor would Edgar Bergen and his puppets Charlie McCarthy or Mortimer Schnerd (Dad told me about Mortimer), who debuted in 1937. . . or Robert Kane who introduced us to the Batman cartoon in 1939.

Maybe Milton Berle, Edward R. Murrow, Lucille Ball or Jackie Gleason. They were masters of live tv, not "reality tv". There's a difference. They were the "golden age" of television. They were tv paradise. They didn't need serpents, or apples or temples of banishment.

So how did we arrive here? Here being a TV Guide full of these shows.

It didn't begin with Star Trek, but where then? Maybe it began with Faraway

Hill, a show that many television historians believe to be the first network soap opera.

1966 brought us the first Star Trek episode featuring a creature that sucked the salt from human bodies. Maybe that creature spawned others, other creatures that is, who must have stayed only to suck the brain cells from the American viewing public. That might be the only explanation for the parasitic proliferation of this mind-numbing entertainment we proudly refer to as reality television. Maybe this is the result of what journalists and others have deemed the “dumbing down of America”.

Or maybe it began in some small way with Charles Van Doren, the Columbia University Professor, who became a media sensation in 1959 by winning \$129,000.00 on the television quiz show *Twenty One*. Rumors of cheating on quiz shows later erupted into a national scandal. That was then. Now, it’s not so far-fetched to think that such a scandal . . . in and of itself . . . would blend seamlessly into the world of reality TV.

So when did it take off?

It might have taken off in 1963. That’s when we watched Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald on the first live television broadcast of a murder. Sadly enough, in 2004, the majority of the American viewing public may be ready for such a show. “Murder Island” they might call it . . . although it might be hard to find volunteers.

What is most troubling about this American phenomenon is that P.B.S. . . . yes . . . PBS may be as guilty as any of the networks. The Public Broadcasting Service aired the first true reality television series in 1973 – *An American Family*. The show chronicled the dysfunctional Loud family. During this unsettling, yet fascinating documentary series, members of the Loud family opened their home to TV and lived for seven (7) months with producer Craig Gilbert . . . who shot over three hundred (300) hours of footage. **Thank God for bathroom doors.** Only twelve of those hours ever made it to television. An astonishing 10,000,000 viewers watched the marital breakup of Bill and Pat Loud, and the “coming out” of their son, Lance. The family later complained that the hours chosen for broadcast misrepresented their lives.

To think that PBS gave birth to reality television is like crediting Beethoven with the onslaught of heavy metal music. Thankfully for PBS, reality tv didn't catch on after the airing of *An American Family*.

Equally grateful had to be the 80's, as the craze did not catch fire by then either; It can only be assumed that Star Trek's brain-cell sucking monster must not have been in need of human brain cells until a few years later.

At least not until MTV aired *The Real World*. It was then that we began to

spiral downward into this **entertainment abyss**. MTV and abyss go together like hand in glove. It's appropriate that the network was a pioneer in this field. PBS can breathe a sigh of relief.

To win a spot on the show, and in the house, 50,000 "twenty-somethings" audition to have their lives exposed for better or for worse. Worse usually means loftier ratings for MTV. After all, who would continue to watch if the residents didn't criticize and connive on a weekly basis.

Real World house mates enjoy fleeting fame. There is no monetary reward, although they do live in cushy surroundings while the show is being taped. *Real World* is beginning its 14th season. Its cousin, *Road Rules*, continues the art of wild and crazy "road-tripping".

To give you an idea of the quality of this kind of television, take the 2 aforementioned shows. Currently, MTV is airing a challenge between all stars from the 2 shows. Most recently, the big contest was who could do the most eating, then spinning . . . w/o puking. And yes, had you tuned in, you could have seen the losing all star . . . blow chunks or hurl, as the kids say these days.

Speaking of VOMIT . . . FOX NETWORK may be the leader of the genre. Fox has become synonymous with reality television. Indeed, ratings matter more to Fox Network executives than do quality or substance. The network's bell cow, *COPS*,

debuted in 1989 and remains a regular. The show chronicled cops on the beat, staking out suspects and making busts, all the while the cameras rolling.

America's Most Wanted, another Fox creation, dates back to 1988 and was number one in its time slot in 1989. The host, John Walsh, whose son Adam was kidnapped and murdered, presents information about fugitives and reenactments of their crimes, with the intention of tracking down suspects. To the show's credit, it has helped apprehend close to 800 criminals.

But neither PBS nor Fox can lay claim to truly starting it all. That distinction belongs to CBS for its show *Wanted*, which lasted less than a year. Maybe the lifespan of the show said something about viewers of that era. Possibly that they had good taste, among other things. Nonetheless, during the short run, host Walter McGrew outlined the crimes of fugitives and interviewed their relatives and law enforcement officers working on the cases.

But the father of reality television is undoubtedly *Candid Camera* . . . which has been on and off television since 1948. Interesting enough, the show actually has its roots in radio. Allen Funt originally taped and broadcast the complaints of fellow serviceman on the Armed Forces Radio Network and took his idea to network radio in 1947 as *Candid Microphone*. His television version followed a year later.

If *Candid Camera* “caught people in the act of being themselves”, then *America’s Funniest Home Videos* caught parents shamelessly staging and exploiting “tumbling toddlers and costumed cocker spaniels” all for the sake of money. Several shows were spun from the original, all equally contrived.

But reality television did not explode until Americans caught “Survivor Mania”. The show triggered the tidal wave and became a cultural phenomenon. *Survivor* first aired in 2000, and its season finale was viewed by millions, and remains one of the highest-rated shows ever.

Survivor has become so popular in fact that it is now on its eighth season, each season airing for sixteen weeks. The current version is called *Survivor 8 All Stars*. Yes . . . much like MTV’s shows, it is so popular it has an All Star team. All your favorite survivors from previous *Survivor* episodes compete in this All Star reunion. Yes . . . a reunion.

So instead of the heartwarming reunions bringing together the lovable cast members from shows like *Andy Griffith*, *Cheers* or *M.A.S.H.*, we now have homecomings for all our favorite reality television stars.

So instead of . . . Ange, Barn, Ope, Aunt Bee, Gom, Floyd, Goob, Mayor, the Darlins, and yes, Erenest T., we have . . . Eithan Zon, Lex, Cathy, Sheann, Tina Wesson, Gina Morasca, Rudy Basch (from Kentucky), Rob Sinternino, and Gretchen

. . .who by the way is from Clarksville and stars as Q108's morning DJ on the "Jack and Gretchen Show". Fame has it privileges.

And instead of lovable lines like:

- It's me . . . It's me
- Nip It
- "Neete – Big Barn,
- JUDY
- Sarah get me

We have . . . well . . . **nothing**.

And if these reality all stars aren't familiar to you, then you are one of the *lucky few*. Nonetheless, in case you missed them the first time, they are back every Thursday at 7:00 p.m. battling for the \$1,000,000 in prize money that goes to the sole survivor "who outwits and outlasts all the others." With no fire, no food and only a machete, a pot and a bucket to hold water, these survivors are on their own. Filmed during the rainy season in Panama, the survivors form their own "cooperative society", building shelter, gathering and catching food, and participating in contests for rewards, all the while competing in tribes, until there are 2. Don't let the teamwork concept fool you. Those that backstab survive . . . and win challenges, where they are rewarded with things to make life bearable on their tropical island.

As previously noted, *Survivor* has spawned more than 200 reality shows since its airing in 2000. Most of these shows can still be seen somewhere, sometime; if not live, then in reruns or syndication. Aside from *Survivor*, the hottest shows include:

- American Idol 3 (if 1 and 2 weren't enough for you)
- The Apprentice
- Average Joe
- Playing It Straight (or really anything but)
- Forever Eden (You know the show where the contestants live in the Garden of Eden and are tempted by evil)
- The Bachelorette II; and
- Big Brother 4: Ex Factor

If you have been fortunate enough to reside on the underside of a rock since the violent take-over of reality tv, then you may not know the first thing about these shows. If that is the case, this is for you.

American Idol, again, in its third glorious season, begins with 50,000 hopefuls signed up to take part in a nerve-racking evaluation by music critics Simon Cowell, Paula Abdul and Randy Jackson. Whittled down to 117, the contestants then audition in Hollywood before they are finally narrowed down to 12. Each week the hopefuls face sharp-tongued judges for a "no holds barred" critique on their pop star

potential. Viewers at home pick the winners with their votes.

American Idol is breeding stars, the likes of Clay Aiken, Kelly Clarkson and “Ruben”. Yes, like Madonna or Prince, he is known only as Ruben. One critic said of these three, “they are simply not producing bold and original music . . . they are NOT artists.” Imagine that. At least in this respect, *American Idol* has truly mirrored reality.

And then there is *The Apprentice*, the newest phenomenon. The star of the show is Donald Trump, the arrogant “gazillionaire” who owns the world’s worst head of hair. Or more specifically, the world’s worst “comb-over”. Just look at it (referring to picture). That thing perched on his head like a aging Minx. Sorry but I am fascinated by bad hair. Good hair is boring.

The Apprentice pits 20 people against one another, each vying for a one-year internship with Donald Trump . . . **oooooh** what fun. The show is averaging 20 million viewers per week and NBC entertainment calls it a “total game changer.” Not only does it draw 20 million viewers each week but it also pulls in more high income viewers than any other series.

One phrase uttered by Trump strikes fear into the hearts of the wanna-bes: “You’re fired”. The phrase has become so popular that the Hair King is attempting to copyright it. Just a suggestion to Donald - but maybe he ought to be more

concerned with a patent rather than a copyright, a patent on some revolutionary hair replacement procedure. Another memo to Trump: the phrase “You’re Fired” is not original. You neither coined it nor do you own it . . . like everything else. “You’re Fired” proudly belongs to every assistant manager at every McDonald’s from London, Kentucky to London, England.

Average Joe has also been popular. Why wouldn’t it be? Sixteen (16) nerds compete for a former cheerleader for the Kansas City Chiefs, Marissa. She must have thought the producers were pulling her leg when sixteen nerds got off the bus and greeted her. Confused, Marissa thought she was on the next *Bachelorette*, waiting for the next hunk with Hollywood looks to fall in her lap. But alas, there is a twist. It seems the producers of the show will entice Marissa with one or more **non-nerds**, the “superior guys” as the website refers to them.

So far Marissa has provided few surprises. She has most recently picked one of the pretty boys, Gil, a 26-year-old builder from Ft. Lauderdale, Florida and they have spent four days together at a distant resort location. But toward the end of their dreamy vacation together, things turned ugly. Gil, the Florida builder, discovered that his beauty had dated Fabio, the romance novel icon. Gil immediately took offense. Apparently he could not endure the fact that she had dated someone with seemingly so little substance. So Gill packed his bags and went home. How dare

she date Fabio – the star of trashy romance novels. Gil has standards. Apparently, Gil had no problem with immediately becoming intimate on national television with a woman whom he had never met. But he had to draw the line at Fabio.

And what would reality television be without alternative lifestyles. *Playing it Straight* airs on Fox each Friday at 7:00 p.m. One beautiful single woman, fourteen sexy bachelors and a 1 million dollar prize. At stake is a relationship with the beautiful woman, Jackie, plus \$500,000 in prize money. The twist is, you guessed it. Some of the men are gay. But Jackie must make sure her final selection is a *straight* guy. If she picks a straight guy, then Jackie *and* the man that she picks both split 1 million dollars. However, if she picks a gay guy, the gay guy gets **all** of the money. Get out your “gaydar” for this show, as the previews proudly pronounce. For those of you who aren’t familiar with the term, it’s simple: “Gaydar” is gay radar.

There’s really no end to the fun on *Playing It Straight* . . . or PISS as I like to call it. Most recently, the boys went camping, pitched their tents and had a wienie roast. The beautiful Jackie had a more luxurious tent than the fellers and invited Bill, Brad *and* Chris to have supper with her. She questioned the boys about who they thought was gay and why they were still single. Brad said he had been dumped by

someone a year before and was looking for a new relationship. He wasn't there for the million dollars. Jackie interpreted that to mean that he would win a million dollars if she chose him, so he must be gay. She thought if he was straight, then he would have said "half a million". Other discussions of the episode revolved around which guys shaved their legs and other places as well. Jackie had many suitors that evening, and even let one lucky fellow sleep on the floor. Of course, she didn't know him well enough to let him sleep in her bed, yet.

Bachelorette II -- in this ABC-series airing every Wednesday at 8:00 p.m., former contestant Meredith Phillips searches for the man of her dreams. The show chronicles the narrowing of the male field. With 4 bachelors remaining, she meets their families and they meet hers. The final 3 will get to go on a fantasy date with Meredith. Then Meredith selects the man of her dreams from the final 2. (sarcasm) Surprise. Surprise.

Most recently Meredith suffered through a tearful evening of indecision as she was forced to decide to whom to give the final rose to. She ultimately chose Ian because she had fallen in love with him. When Meredith picked Ian, he gave her a ring. She promised him that the relationship would last. Now, Meredith and Ian are engaged. (sarcasm) Nothin' like original programming.

CBS calls *its* reality series *Big Brother 4*, *Ex Factor*, the ultimate reality show.

Wonder if CBS founder, William S. Paley, envisioned a show called *Big Brother 4*, *Ex Factor* . . . in 1929?

Reality on this show is 13 people locked in a house, caged like rats, for almost 3 months. Filmed 24/7, there are 4 video feeds streamed over the world-wide web. 38 cameras and 62 microphones that record their every move. Of the 12 housemates, 5 are ex-boyfriends and ex-girlfriends. The tenants compete for \$500,000 in cash. The game is much too complicated (and mentally exhausting) to explain, but in the end, the fate of the last 2 housemates rests with a final vote by the last 7 evicted houseguests. The winner takes home the \$500,000.

There are many other fine reality shows.

NBC airs the popular *Fear Factor* where buxom beauties confront their worst nightmares. The show features scantily clad ladies eating exotic bugs, cow spleens or worms . . . or swimming in tanks of snakes or other creepy creatures. Bikinis or tight t-shirts are the norm. Maybe *Fear Factor* should be known as Boob Factor.

Then there is *Extreme Makeover*. People volunteer to be carved up by charismatic plastic surgeons seeking their 15 minutes of fame. Tummy tucks, nose jobs, breast enhancements and raised cheekbones transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

The Osbornes on MTV. . . stars Ozzy Osborne, the rock and roller, prince of

darkness, now an old lovable, washed-up, mumbling, drug-induced husband and father of two. What a concept. The show gets its appeal from his stumbling and mumbling . . . a result of his years of drug abuse. His wife Sharon and kids have become big stars, as they play off of the old rocker. Keep in mind, this is a man who once snorted ants up his nose and ate the head off of a live bat, on stage, in concert.

NOTE: Tell the real story (Holland's)

Then there are those shows that defy description or simply don't need one. *Amish in the City*, . . . *Ms. Dog Beauty Pageant*, . . . *The Mole*, . . . *Real Beverly Hillbillies*, . . . *Fraternity Life*, . . . *I Want a Divorce*, . . . *Boot Camp*, . . . *Boy Meets Boy*, . . . *Cat House*, . . . *Are You Hot?*, . . . *Murder In Small Town X*, . . . *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancée*, . . . *Nashville Star*, . . . *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, . . . *Cupid*, . . . *Dog Eat Dog*, . . . *High School Reunion*, . . . *The Littlest Groom*, . . . *Rich Girls*, . . . *Search for a Playboy Centerfold*, . . . *Sorority Life*, . . . *Till Death Do Us Part - Carmen and Dave*, and . . . *You Don't Know Jack* Well, maybe we don't but what we do know is that 200 plus shows like these is too damn many. By comparison, Canada only has 1, *Canadian Idol*, and the U.K. has roughly a dozen.

Remember . . . it's pretty cold in Canada, and you're never far enough away

from Montreal and the French . . . and as for Great Britain . . . well it simply rains too much. So we're stuck with it.

Why do we watch? **We** probably don't. But what about the American viewing public. . . who we know have had their brain cells sucked out by the *Star Trek* creature. Why do **they** watch? Is it voyeurism? Is it the same reason people stop to watch a train wreck, car accident? Is it the idea that misery loves company? Or is it the need to live vicariously?

What-ever (as my 5-year old daughter says) . . . Enough reality. Enough true life. What every happened to escapism? Wait a minute. Maybe escapism is what makes reality television so popular. Maybe there is nothing real about any of these shows. Maybe the true irony of it all is that most of these shows are indeed nothing more than fantasy. Or maybe they're nothing more than thinly disguised game shows. Whatever the case, I simply cannot bring myself to say anything good about any of these shows, with only a few exceptions. Well . . . really only one, which I'll reveal in a moment.

So who do we call on to rid us of this scourge? The Gov't? Absent controls already in place, regulating content and the First Amendment don't mix. Whatever the case, we are out of space at the landfill. The garbage at the dump is piling up. It has become toxic - the sensationalism, the pornography and the violence. Just

a thought: If violence on tv fosters aggression in children, as the experts first told us in 1972, then what are reality shows doing to their parents?

While we ponder . . . millions and millions of viewers will continue to tune in . . . to watch the next episode of . . . *Prostitution Island*, or *Look at my chest* . . .

For all the negatives though, I guess in one sense reality television has done some good, at least the way I see it. Reality tv has temporarily dethroned the WWF and WCW – the terribly contrived pro wrestling leagues. Thank God for small miracles.

Like so many disjointed and dysfunctional over-the-hill pro wrestlers suffering from the after effects of steroids, reality television shows spit out failed actors, singers, models and everyday people suffering from the after effects of their 15 minutes of fame. These bad-luck contestants sometimes spend the rest of their lives searching for that **something**. Instead they end up on **celebrity boxing** matched against former *Partridge Family* star Danny Bonaducci (the kid with red hair and the scratchy adult voice) . . . or figure skating's bad girl Tonya Harding . . . she of the Springeresque life that could be a hit reality series standing along.