A NARRATIVE CRITICISM OF LIFESTYLE REALITY PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to understand and explain the relationship between lifestyle reality television programs and consumers. Specifically, this article outlines this relationship from a critical narrative perspective by interrogating two common story structures within lifestyle reality programming. By analyzing these narratives, conclusions are drawn about the role of story in consumer behavior. Additionally, this article argues that through the combination of the rhetorical situation of the housing collapse and narrative storytelling, consumers are taught how to perceive and interact when considering the purchase of a house. Finally, this article synthesizes Social Cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) in conjunction with Narrative theory (Fisher, 1984) to explore how rhetorical criticism can use social science to better understand lived, mediated, experience.

Keywords: Lifestyle reality television, consumer, narrative, narrative theory, interdisciplinary, reality television, housing collapse

INTRODUCTION

Television provides an insight for viewers into various worlds both imagined and real. These worlds are explained through stories that connect to the viewer. According to Fisher (1984), these stories are the most fundamental form of communication, which he calls narratives. The narrative paradigm simply describes ways that stories are used to construct ideological ideals and promote certain worldviews. This paradigm can be applied to a variety of media. In this essay I will apply the narrative paradigm to reality television, focusing on two lifestyle reality television programs, House Hunters and Love It or List It.

The recent proliferation of reality television continues the narrative tradition of providing stories that humans use to make sense of the world around them. However, finding one definition of what constitutes reality television is a tedious task. Reality television as defined by Cavender and Fishman (1998) is distinguished by programs that “claim to present reality” (p. 3). This particular definition fits well into Fisher’s (1984) conception of narratives needing fidelity and probability. Potter et al. (1997)

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offers a broader definition of reality television to include local and national news, broadcast news, magazines, talk and interview shows, and nonfiction narrative programs. These definitions, although inclusive, provide little by way of refining the definition for reality television. More recently a more refined definition of reality based television programs is offered by Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003) by stating that reality based television programs are “Programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur” (p. 304). Further developing their definition, Nabi et al. (2003), also explain key elements of a reality based television program: (a) people portraying themselves (b) filmed at least in part in their living or working environment rather than on a set, (c) without a script, (d) with events placed in a narrative context, (e) for the primary purpose of viewer entertainment.

However, having a clear definition of what reality television is only provides a definition of the genre without defining the subject of this essay, lifestyle reality programs. Everett (2004) offers the definition of the sub-genre “transformation TV” to categorize television shows that depict real people partaking in do-it-yourself projects. This sub-genre will be the focus of this essay. Lifestyle reality television programs help shape the way we see the world around us by portraying the ideologies of consumption in a narrative form.

**ARTIFACTS**

This essay will attempt to understand how lifestyle reality television programs encourage audiences to perceive the experience of purchasing a house and the housing market, further reinforcing the ideals of consumption. Specifically, this essay will analyze the television programs Love It or List It and House Hunters. Additionally, this article will take the unique perspective to understand these cultural artifacts by utilizing both a rhetorical narrative analysis and the application of a theoretical framework derived from social cognitive theory. The use of these two distinct frameworks allows for critical analysis of reality television from multiple perspectives, from the individual (social cognitive) to the societal (narrative). In order to accomplish this task, I will first provide a description of each program and its context.

House Hunters is a 22-minute reality television show that first premiered in 1997. The program follows potential homebuyers in their struggle to find the perfect home. Each episode follows the homebuyers as they look at three different homes, one of which they will ultimately purchase. An omniscient narrator provides a detailed review and drums up speculation about each house. Each episode follows a strict formula by which a narrative is constructed. A standard episode will first introduce the potential homebuyers by providing detailed background information, helping the audience understand that these are “good and normal” people. The program will then introduce the realtor who will provide expert insight into the purchase of a home as well as giving the audience a short and to the point synopsis of the housing market in that particular area. The program then introduces a series of houses that will act as the antagonist in the narrative.

The house hunters are then given a tour of the houses. During the tour the hunters will openly discuss the features they like and dislike. After each of the homes has been
examined, the realtor and the house hunters will discuss the pros and cons of the home. In a final segment the potential homebuyers discuss which home they should purchase. After the selection has been made and the home is purchased, cameras are invited back to the location after a period of time to show how the house hunters have become acclimated to the property. Although simple, this effective method of storytelling allows audiences to experience the drama of purchasing a house while maintaining suspense in the mind of the audience by not revealing the outcome until the very end. Additionally, the program cultivates attitudes within the audience about what is desirable in a home and what is wrong/bad in a house.

The second program that this essay will attempt to analyze is Love It or List It. Love It or List It is a popular Canadian reality television program that has recently been syndicated on HGTV (Home and Garden television). The program follows two hosts and a family (a new family is selected for each episode) as the family tries to determine if they should love their current home or purchase a new house with the help of the hosts. One of the hosts of the show is named Hillary. Hillary is an interior designer who tries to convince the episode’s family to love the current house they live in by completing extensive renovations. The second host is David. David is a realtor who attempts to persuade the family to list their current house in favor of a different property, which David has selected for them. In order to assist Hillary and David, the family provides a list of must haves. These lists are the criteria that the family will use to decide whether they should love their current home or list it. In order to understand how these programs shape and cultivate attitudes, I will first analyze the rhetorical situation in which the narrative functions within.

RATIONALE
Lifestyle shows such as House Hunters and Love It or List It occupy a valuable position in the minds of many of its viewers. In particular, lifestyle and transformation television provide more than mere entertainment but rather they provide a coaching or education for their audiences. One reason coaching is utilized within lifestyle programming could be that television content is geared to aggregate audiences to sell to advertisers. Indeed a preview of any of the programming discussed within this essay will surely find advertisements for various household improvement projects. Coaching the audiences to recognize the needs or perceived needs of the characters within the narrative are essential to the consumption behaviors of potential viewers. Although advertising has an embedded incentive for the coaching of attitudes, an examination of the rhetorical situation may provide a deeper understanding of how the narrative functions within the ideology of consumption at large.

RHETORICAL SITUATION
The reason I argue that lifestyle programs are so prevalent is because they act as a reaction to the rhetorical situation in which the housing bubble burst in 2006 that avalanched into what would become a global recession. Lim (2008) explains that in the lead up to housing bubble, bankers and middle class families saw a direct benefits from “unsustainable” mortgage lending practices. Bankers made millions and low to middle class families benefitted from minimal down payments. In Lim’s (2008) analogy he declares that the “party” was harshly cut short, resulting in a loss of millions of
dollars. For decades, home ownership was seen as part of achieving the American dream. When crafty and sometimes questionable mortgage policies came about, this opportunity or “party” was expanded to even more people. Lim (2008) explains how just prior to the housing bubble the American dream of owning a new home was advanced at nearly an unprecedented level:

Many large housing developers aggressively pushed mortgages to borrowers in order to boost sales. For example, Pulte Home (the country’s largest developer by market capitalization) provided mortgages for 90% of the houses they built. These new players have neither the credit skills nor the interest to conduct proper due diligence of potential homebuyers. Their interest is in pushing out the houses as fast as they are built. (p. 3)

The American dream, which was house ownership, only lasted as long as the money existed. As soon as the aggressive mortgage loan rates began to keep pace with the market, these exotic loans began to show a much darker side, ultimately resulting in detrimental outcomes such as “In 2006, 1.2 million household loans were foreclosed, up 42% from the previous year” (Lim, 2008). It is within this rhetorical situation that lifestyle programs were/are building an attitude towards a new type of relationships with homes. For instance, larger home improvement chains have seen a very specific attitude become prevalent, “When you can’t sell, repair and maintain instead. That seems to be what’s happening in the troubled housing market... Executives at home-improvement retailers are finding consumers continuing to take on smaller, discretionary projects” (Zmuda, 2011). The reaction by viewers to the housing market crash has created a new way in which we talk about housing, but in particular it has changed how we engage in home improvement and lifestyle reality entertainment. From a theoretical perspective, the prominence of House Hunters and Love It or List It can be explained by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social cognitive theory posits that people learn from one another. Recent work with media has shown that viewers can also learn from on-screen figures. Nabi (2009) corroborates this point, “That is, by observing others’ behaviors, including media figures, one may develop rules to guide subsequent actions and/or be prompted to engage in previously learned behavior” (p. 11). However, observational learning within television reality has only been studied within the context of body image, violence, and sex (Nabi, 2009). In the same way that other media has been shown to model behaviors, House Hunters and Love It or List It seek to teach, instruct, and inoculate obedience by showing audiences how and what to look for when buying a home.

Furthermore, “people are subconsciously continuously comparing themselves to others, and in particular to those whom they like and admire” (Festinger, 1954; Jansson-Boyd, 2010; Wheeler, 1991). The dyads shown on House Hunters and Love It or List It provide instruction and comparison for the audience through the criticism and praise bestowed to each house shown in every episode. The way we communicate and tell stories provides the basis for this analysis and lends itself to narrative criticism. This essay will attempt to understand the basic narrative features of the two lifestyle
reality television programs, House Hunters and Love It or List It, specifically; setting, character, events and narrative typology.

**SETTING**

The setting of House Hunters and Love it or List it is a central component of the narrative structure in both stories. In order to understand how each of these narratives complete the objective of teaching, instructing, and inoculating obedience, I will fully analyze the setting as a central feature. I will first look at House Hunters. House Hunters is an episodic reality television show, following a similar formula for each episode. The setting changes with each new episode, however, the micro setting of each episode, which is the individual house, plays a unique and important role in the structure of the narrative. Each house can functionally be used as an antagonist in the story of each episode. As such, the importance of each of the three houses looked at in an episode is paramount to the telling of the story.

When the house hunters enter a new house for their ultimate consideration, the viewer is given a tour of the house narrated by the realtor and the perspective homebuyers. Within each new setting the house hunters comment and critique the various features of the home. For example, when entering a new kitchen it is quite common for a prospective buyer to comment on the materials used to build the countertop. Such distinctions by the house hunters allow for the viewer to be “educated” or “coached” on how and what to look for when purchasing a home or what is wrong about their current home. Although each new setting provides conflict within the story, it is the prospective buyer’s judgment and comments that favor or diminish each individual setting. The settings are thus highly developed, detailed, and reviewed for the viewer to complete the narratives objective of teaching, instructing, and inoculating obedience. House Hunters shares many of the same traits with Love It or List It specifically within the feature of setting.

Love It or List It is also in episodic program that follows a formula. However, the participant’s current home is a prominent setting within the program. Thus, within any given episode a large amount of time is spent on describing the positive and negative features of the participants’ current home. For example, a participant on Love It or List It may explain that she absolutely needs a home office and if this were not possible she would need to move or in the verbiage of the program, List It. In the same hypothetical episode her significant other might explain to the viewer the reasons they should stay in their current home, or Love It. As the story progresses the participants are also shown other homes that meet their requirements. These other settings provide the basis for conflict, both among the participants and among the hosts or personalities. Although these houses provide some of the setting within the story, a far more noteworthy setting exists.

The most prominent setting of Love It or List It, usually takes place within the current participants home. A common occurrence within the program occurs when major unexpected renovations are needed. Thus, the home shifts from merely a setting to an antagonist, which ignites conflict amongst the family. For example, when renovating a basement to accommodate a home office, the hosts of the show may find
trouble with the home’s foundation. In every episode of Love It or List It this technique is used to show the prominence of the setting by creating a source of contention. With the help of setting, Love It or List It is able to teach, instruct, and inoculate obedience within the audience.

Setting plays a role in almost every narrative. However, with these two programs under analysis, the role of setting is elevated and central to the narrative. House Hunters continually changes settings to inoculate viewers to ideas about how and what to look for when buying a home. The strategies are utilized by having the participants commentate on the good and bad qualities of each setting without a baseline comparison. In contrast, Love It or List It focuses much more on the current home. That is not to say that Love It or List It does not cultivate attitudes within the viewer, but rather it increases the fidelity of the story while at the same time providing a roadmap for changing, renovating, or purchasing a home. The rhetorical situation in which these programs are shown make almost no mention of the current housing market with the exception of the occasional statement of how good house prices are in that particular area. Furthermore, these programs only show the benefit and positives of renovating or buying a home without caution or a full evaluation of the consequences. It is through the evaluation of the setting that a full picture of the programs characters begins to emerge.

CHARACTER

The character within the programs are seemingly complex, however, with a deeper level of analysis across multiple episodes, it becomes clear that the characters are uniform and shallow. The characters within House Hunters are nearly all recycled each episode. For example, a typical episode will include: a two-person house hunting party, a realtor, a narrator, and most importantly the three houses that the dyad can choose from. The dyad is defined not by their character or good judgments but rather by each persons wants or must have for a new home. The realtor (a secondary character) often provides a dose of reality to that episodes couple with an explanation about what they can expect in that particular housing market. The narrator provides a review and exposition about the house hunt for the viewer in order to keep the characters judgment salient within the viewers mind. In this way the narrator ensures that the viewer is continuously reminded of why a house is “good” or “bad.” Each house that the participants view is framed in such a way to create a unique character for the house that is mediated through the exposition by the house hunters. In framing each house as a “good” or “bad” character, this gives the protagonist (the house hunters) an enemy or antagonist (the bad houses). These flat characters within House Hunters serve to teach, instruct, and inoculate audiences to the attitudes and beliefs about the housing market and homes in general from the perspective of the creators and producers of the program. Love It or List It has a very similar cast of characters, but with a few additions.

A typical cast of characters within an episode of Love It or List It will include: a couple (usually representing a family), interior designer Hillary (who urges the family to love the home they currently reside in), expert realtor David (who urges the family to list their current home in favor of a new and different property), and finally the current home the family resides in. The dyad usually has one member who is
vehemently against moving (Love It) and one who is strongly in favor of moving (List It). Hillary and David then personify these positions. David will search out properties for the couple to agree upon. In Love It or List It, the position of the realtor is a more central character than in House Hunters. Hillary, will renovate the house within the participants budget. An interior designer by trade, Hillary, must balance aesthetics versus the functionality of the home. This inner tension provides working space for arguably the most important character within the program, the current home. The current home is shown to be a broken place just short of satisfactory. When Hillary interacts with the current home the inevitable plot device of an “unplanned” renovation spurs the current home to become an antagonist within the narrative. The house is then actively exerting itself against another character. Although the dyad looks at other properties, the current home is only property to be personified within Love It or List It. Personifying the current home allows for audiences to understand in a narrative form how their current home may be less than the perceived ideal.

Characters within a story are often portrayed in a way that suggests an audience should model their attitudes, beliefs, and actions based on the character shown. Indeed the characters of both House Hunters and Love It or List It provide a narrative rationale for how people should view and purchase homes. The setting and characters of the both of these programs provide sufficient elements for a narrative to exists, however, the necessary condition of the narrative’s events needs to be fully understood.

EVENTS

Typically narratives will utilize two types of events in a story construction. These two types of events, kernels and satellites, are different in their significance to the story but also in how they function within a narrative. The major events that occur within a narrative are called kernels. Kernels cannot be omitted from a story without destroying narrative coherence. In comparison to kernels, minor plots events are called satellites. Satellites are not central to a story like kernels are, but they help develop and elaborate on major events. Foss (2009) explains the importance of satellites “satellites are not crucial to the narrative and can be deleted without disturbing the basic story line of the narrative, although their omission would affect the form of the narrative and the form’s rhetorical effects,”(p. 337). Within lifestyle reality television how do events transpire and create meaning for the audience? In order answer this question I will focus on a typical episode of House Hunters and Love It or List it

The typical House Hunters episode follows an undistinguished and mechanical story line. That is, every episode of House Hunters will follow a standard progression of events. In order to elaborate on an episode a chronological analysis will be completed.

The first event that a viewer is shown is the introduction to the house hunters. This event is a satellite event because the reasons for the couples unhappiness and backstory are inconsequential for the first kernel event. The first kernel event occurs in the first few minutes of an episode where the dyad explains that they need to change their current living space. Within this kernel the audience is given numerous reasons for this event but also given an insight into the house hunter’s needs and wants. The
audience is then introduced to a series of three houses, each of which is surveyed and critiqued for the audience by the house hunters. The introduction and the houses themselves represent satellite events. The reason why the houses are considered satellites is they are functionally deleted and replaced with each new episode. The kernel event that is shown in every episode is the house hunter’s judgments within a given house. For example, within an episode of House Hunters the couple will enter a house and comment and critique the various features of the house. These comments direct movement within the narrative. After surveying the complete house, which is supplemented by the satellite events of differences within features of the home i.e. cabinets, master bedroom size, and flooring, the couple will recap with the realtor and discuss for the audiences the various positives and negatives of the house. This recap and discussion represents a kernel as the narrative is based around reasons to prefer one material good and home over another.

This process is repeated two more times within two different homes in every episode. The final kernel that occurs is the deliberation and selection of a home. The final kernel is supported by the previous kernel and satellite events, but is not actually the last event. The last event the audience is shown is actually a satellite event that shows the house hunters moving into their new home. The satellite epilogue provides a reason and elaborates on the final deliberation by the house hunters. These events and their sequence provide a greater understanding of the narrative structure, but in order to provide a broader criticism of lifestyle reality programming I will also analyze the events of Love It or List It.

Love It or List It unsurprisingly utilizes a stock story line in each of its episodes that is similar to the format of House Hunters. The episode opens up with a satellite event of the introduction of a family who is currently having problems with their house. The family makes the decision to list their current house or renovate their existing home, which is the first kernel event. This kernel event is made up of two conflicting opinions by the couple. One person in the dyad wants to sell the house, while the other person wants to list the current house in favor of a new domicile. The couple then elicits the help of a realtor and interior designer to assist with their various positions. The duo provides a list of wants and must have for the hosts to accommodate into their next living space. These wants and must have scenes are a satellite events which supports the elaboration of a kernel event of selecting a house. However, the next event shows a completely different house then the dyad currently resides in. This event functions as a satellite to show that there are other options that can work for the couple. After seeing a house that has some of the features that the meets some of the needs and wants, the couple returns home to find a major kernel event. This kernel event, which happens nearly every episode, is that the interior designer finds a major problem with the current home. The problems range from the deterioration of the foundation or the presence of asbestos throughout the house. The dyad will then visit two more houses, both of which represent satellite events supplementing the kernel event of the eventual deliberation and debate over if these homes can compare to their current, renovated, home. Following the survey of three houses and overcoming the vast problems with the residence current homes, the final kernel event occurs. The final event is the showing of the current remodeled home and the couple’s decision to love their current home or list it in favor of one of the other homes. As in House Hunters
this selection is not the final event but rather the penultimate event as the episode shows how happy the family is with their decision, in the concluding satellite event. The similarities of events within the episodes of both House Hunters and Love it or List it can help explain the objectives of the narrative.

The research question that this essay attempts to understand is how lifestyle reality television programs teach, instruct, and inoculate audience obedience to the ideology of consumption. The first similarity that can easily be seen by dissecting the events within the narratives of the programs is the introduction satellite events. These events are predicated on another event that is presumed and only covertly shown. This presumed kernel is an event that had caused the residents to not like their current situation. In this way the characters enter the narrative already in a state of chaos, which is to be corrected by selecting the “right” house. House Hunters and Love It or List It then represent a divergence from the traditional narrative paradigm where characters enter a story to face a major kernel event which needs to be overcome. This may be one explanation, however, another explanation could be that the viewer and participants share the same rhetorical situation in that the kernel event that initiates action is the housing crisis or a material dissatisfaction that is inherent in a consumer material society. Regardless of which interpretation is selected the result is the same; House Hunters and Love It or List It instruct, teach, and inoculate obedience within a perceived audience. The rhetorical situations that occupies the presumed prologue within these programs are not the only evidence and criteria of measuring the narratives objective within events.

Perhaps the most important kernel that exists within both programs is the deliberation over which house should be selected. The reason that the deliberation scene is the most important event is two-fold. The first reason is that that every episode of both programs has a variety of satellite events that surround the features of a house. For instance, a house might not have a granite countertop. This feature represents a conflict within the couples wants and must haves as a reason to prefer the house. However, because these features are interchangeable they represent minor details that only serve to compliment the kernel feature of deliberation. This creates a major event where audiences can get a close and detailed review of what features “should” be important or unimportant and why.

The second reason that the deliberation event is important is because it highlights the focus of the narrative. The narrative accentuates the houses in each program as characters in their own right as mentioned earlier, however, it is through the analysis of the events that it can be clearly seen that the characters, both the couple and the houses, are secondary to the real objective of the narrative. The objective of House Hunters and Love It or List It is about training audiences to understand what is deemed as good and what should be sought after in a home. The events of House Hunters and Love It or List It clearly show a behavior that is intended to create a modeled behavior within the audience. The events all steer the narrative towards showing how to make changes based on a mass consumption paradigm. However, it is within this context that the question turns towards asking what kind of narrative is House Hunters and Love It or List It?
NARRATIVE TYPOLOGY

The type of narrative a story falls under can provide many interesting details about a program. Frey (2006) explains that a narrative can take four conventional forms. These forms are comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony. Each of these forms follows an archetypical pattern by which media consumers can expect a story to progress. Foss (2008) explains an example of this in a comedy's basic plot will show a “protagonist [who] challenges an established authority and wins happiness and stability in the end (p. 314). To fully understand what type of narratives House Hunters and Love It or List It are, a definition of romantic narrative, provided by Foss (2009), seem to be the best fit, “A romance (which does not always involve love), the protagonist completes a quest against an enemy and emerges victorious and enlightened (p. 315). This definition of romance provides a great starting point to understanding how these programs operate under their given archetype.

House Hunters follows the couple, or the protagonists, in their quest or hunt for a house. The enemy in this narrative is represented by the characterization of the houses, as well as the decision to select from these houses. In this way, the dyad must struggle to find its way through the house hunt overcoming their own insecurities and houses that do not satisfy their definition of good. Once a decision is made to move in, the program always includes a segment where the couple is shown to have moved into the selected house. This highlights the victorious and enlightened house hunters. The same type of archetypical storyline is also present in Love It or List it.

In Love It or List it the family is the protagonist in this romantic narrative. However, in this program, compared to House Hunters, the protagonist is completing a quest against an intangible enemy as well as their current home. The intangible enemy is the decision to move or not. The enemy within their current home is the serious flaw that is discovered during the renovation process. After a tumultuous decision making process the family inevitably selects the “correct” house, and like House Hunters, the protagonist family is shown to be enlightened and victorious in their conquest.

These narratives that depict the homeowners moving from a state of chaos and a state of dissatisfaction towards complete happiness and enlightenment, represent the very essence of what it means to be a romantic narrative. Comparing these television series to epics from times past can illuminate this point even more clearly. For instance, when looking at stories involving Arthur and the quest for Camelot it becomes clear that only through the quest do the protagonist become better through the trials and tribulations. For House Hunters and Love It or List It, it is clearly the quest that makes the protagonist better in the end.

However, I argue that in these quests that the on-screen personalities are not the only people that go through such a transformation. Specifically, the audience, is shown through instruction and inoculation of obedience how they to can find their enlightenment and happiness through the quest for a perfect house. In this way, the narrative type of romanticism provides an ideal framework for completing both programs objectives of teaching, instructing, and inoculating obedience for the audience.
CONCLUSION

Television is a powerful medium that people continually turn to for entertainment. Contained within the entertainment television landscape are countless narratives that help individuals make sense of the world in which they occupy. It is with this knowledge in hand we can start to understand how programs can educate and influence our perceptions of the world around us. Within the rhetorical situation of the aftermath of a housing crash, the quest to overcome the odds, and seek to win out over the market is a perfect story. The setting of each house and the decisions that are made about the homes provide a great background for the character to flourish. The houses as characters in each program provide great narrative space as the antagonist, constantly trying to relegate the participants to their current, unsatisfactory, home without any growth. These interactions are acted out in a series of events. A full analysis of the series of events suggested that the decision event was the most important kernel in both series. The programs formulaic approach to reality television does not seem to inhibit the fidelity of the story. On the contrary, the scripted nature provides a perfect way to highlight how the protagonist moves from lowly unhappy people to happy and enlightened people. As this progression occurs, the audience also encounters the same transformation. It is in this way that lifestyle reality television programs help the audience experience the romantic quest of purchasing a house by creating a frame of reference for their own lives. The programs that this essay discussed show how these types of programs teach, instruct, and inoculate obedience towards the housing industry.
REFERENCE


