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Reading Reality Television:  
Publicizing, Promoting, and Commodifying the Self

By

Tamar Salibian

Claremont Graduate University

2020

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### **Approval of the Dissertation Committee**

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Tamar Salibian as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies.

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## **Abstract**

Reading Reality Television:

Publicizing, Promoting, and Commodifying the Self

By

Tamar Salibian

Claremont Graduate University: 2020

This dissertation investigates the ways that ideology is dispensed through popular media to drive the commodification of the self. These ideologies are reinforced in the televisual texts examined in this research with the use of self-reflexivity and metacommentary. The use of these tactics creates an onscreen illusion of transparency to co-opt the viewer with the suggestion of authenticity, familiarity, and openness to inscribe the televisual and its visual codes with meaning to perpetuate messages that support consumerism, hegemony, and power.

In order to consider these processes of self-commodification and the reproduction of power in media and cultural production, this dissertation examines the MTV reality series *Teen Mom OG*, a revival of the *16 and Pregnant* program. Its production, editing, and narrative tools reflect a new direction in this television genre, complicate questions of commodification, enforce capitalist modes of exchange, emphasize hierarchies of labor and power, and uphold ideologies in support of surveillance by connecting compulsive personal expression and publicizing private labor in domestic spaces to success. Pairing a close reading methodological approach with analysis of audience responses on fan blog pages, this dissertation considers the themes of celebrity, labor, surveillance [and consent to it], and the emphasis on the commodification of the self in the landscape of this contemporary moment.

For my parents

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## Introduction

“What happens when a narrative takes the place of reality? It’s almost as if nothing really happened in history unless it has been recorded in a movie. Or in a television series.”  
– Erroll Morris, “A Wilderness of Error” Episode 1 “Girl in a Floppy Hat” (2020)

This dissertation investigates the promotion of ideologies of self-commodification through the televisual text by focusing on reality television [Hereafter “reality TV”]. The examination of this process as it operates in reality TV is rooted in the notion offered by Theodor Adorno that, “the world wants to be deceived...[and people] desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them” (106). This desired deception is reinforced in the programs examined in this dissertation with the use of self-reflexivity and metacommentary. The use of these tactics creates an onscreen illusion of transparency, which co-opts the viewer with the suggestion of familiarity and openness to inscribe media and its complex visual codes with meaning to perpetuate ideologies of consumerism, hegemony, and power.

The reality TV program examined here, MTV’s *Teen Mom OG*, highlights a type of life without providing specific life-changing tips that are emphasized in traditional “lifestyle” programs such as *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not To Wear*, or *Trading Spaces* which put emphasis on such elements as home improvement (DIY or otherwise), wardrobe choice, or adjustments to health and weight through diet, exercise, or plastic surgery. In its decades-long evolution, reality TV now inhabits multiple spaces with many subgenres. For the purposes of this project, a general understanding of what constitutes “reality TV” is best highlighted by Media Studies scholar Rachel Dubrofsky. In her research on the dating competition series *The Bachelor*, Dubrofsky explains the reality genre as “the filming of real people over time with the aim of developing a narrative about their activities segmented into serial episodes (...) What occurs on a

[Reality TV] show is a constructed fiction, like the action on scripted shows, with the twist that real people create the fiction of the series” (“Fallen women in reality TV: A pornography of emotion” 354). With this understanding, the emphasis in this analysis of *Teen Mom OG* and its ideological implications is less on factual details and instead on the structure, representation, and meaning offered to the viewer.

All televisual media promotes ideology, even if specific programs do not explicitly emphasize this act of promotion. While certain lifestyle choices *are* addressed and highlighted in *Teen Mom OG*, the emphasis is instead on intangible changes represented by the words and actions of the cast and crew through the pairing of conflict and habitual self-expression. This pairing is framed to appear to drive personal and professional success. By utilizing self-reflexivity and metacommentary in tandem with the ongoing narrative tether (found in most television) between conflict and resolution, *Teen Mom OG* delivers suggestions of ideological paths to improvement through the narrative structure, choice of participants, and tone infused into the series.

*Teen Mom OG* is a revival of the *16 and Pregnant* (2009-2014) and *Teen Mom* (2015-present) programs. The original program and its offshoot *Teen Mom* follow young mothers through their pregnancies, delivery, and life after having children as a teenager. In the *OG* version of the series, six years after four of the original teen moms first went through the pregnancies and had their children, what appears to be a fixed emphasis on the self appears to foreground the program’s characters, giving the illusion that these characters – and not the camera crew, producers, and editors crafting the narrative, or the networks making decisions based on advertising, ratings, and profit – are in control of their story. Self-reflexivity, as it is examined in this research, is the focus on an overwhelming emphasis on the self by the cast, their

family members, and the producers and crew who appear on screen alongside the cast.

Metacommentary, which claims to turn the production process inside out through the constant response to (and discussion of) the production woven into the narrative, engages the viewer with a complex, seemingly uncovered storyline. These components – paired with an emphasis on the crew onscreen alongside the cast as well as the production’s recording devices, cameras, gadgets, related technological tools – cooperate to engender the allure of transparency to promote what is argued in this research as self-commodification.

This form of promoting the self, while appearing to empower the individual, acts as a pacifying tool for both the cast and the viewer of the program. Masquerading as lifting the veil from the wily nature of cultural production, the components examined here are arranged in this program in ways that create an appearance of openness while upholding the deceptive elements of the culture industry. The “culture industry” refers to the systems in media examined by Frankfurt School theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the seminal text, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” In a 2016 *New Yorker* piece about the culture industry, Alex Ross relates recent political events in the US to the writings of Adorno, who believed that “the greatest danger to American democracy lay in the mass-culture apparatus of film, radio, and television. Indeed, in his view, this apparatus operates in dictatorial fashion even when no dictatorship is in place: it enforces conformity, quiets dissent, mutes thought” (par. 4). Bearing this supposition in mind, not only is it important to examine the visible and explicit ways that dissent is quieted and thought is muted through the apparatuses in televisual media, it is also necessary to uncover the often hidden or complicated tools used and the covert or veiled ways that a televisual text may promote such ideologies through the commodification of its onscreen characters. Important to this study also is the understanding of the way in which

Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) – as outlined by theorist Louis Althusser, who drew upon the works of Marx, Lacan, and others – function in contemporary popular media. According to Althusser, media is infused with meaning to influence ways of seeing and support “the reproduction of the conditions of production” (1). These apparatuses help uphold existing structures of power by utilizing the processes by which identity is acquired when individuals see themselves within ideology.

It is important to uncover and examine the visual tools that deliver these apparatuses particularly when the desired passivity underwrites the hegemony of corporate capitalism by being presented as its opposite -- a form of empowerment and agency imperative to reaching personal enlightenment, self-actualization, success, and capital. It is also important to contextualize this supposition of passivity within a larger conversation – rooted in Media Studies – that may not necessarily find its end point at a concrete assertion of hegemony. Calling upon the positionality of Douglas Kellner in reference to that of Gramsci and Foucault, Andrew Harrington explains in his research how “television is a multi-faceted discourse that certainly is dominated by voices of the ruling class, but those voices are not monolithic nor are the receptions of the audiences” (28). Harrington points to the difference between the Chomsky and Herman (2002) “propaganda model” (which leaves little room for decoding meaning other than what those in power dictate) and the hegemony model outlined by Kellner (1990), which allows for a multiplicity of decodings of meaning within a more fluid, shifting framework. Harrington favors the latter approach. The hegemony model also illuminates discursive elements within an understanding of *Teen Mom OG* and the larger questions it reveals that an approach hinging solely on a Marxist or a Frankfurt School contextualization may not do.

Therefore, this examination of the way the culture industry perpetuates ideology through *Teen Mom OG* is situated within a discursive approach which welcomes and considers the ways that meaning can be decoded in multiple ways, especially in consideration of the fans who respond to the series by engaging with each other on blog sites devoted to the series. The guiding question here isn't whether or not *Teen Mom OG* and reality TV are tools for passivity within a broad sweeping neoliberal project. We already know this to be true because they are products of entertainment within the culture industry. The questions motivating this project are: *How do Teen Mom OG* and reality TV, by adopting new ways of assembling imagery to build a narrative, function within this ongoing neoliberal project to aid in the reproduction of power? And, what are the ways, if any, that viewers and fans can engage in ways that acknowledge this system and its tools while continuing to enjoy the process of consuming cultural products?

### **About *Teen Mom OG***

*Teen Mom OG* (2015-present) documents the lives of four of the original characters from the first season of *16 and Pregnant* (2009) as these young mothers maneuver their lives, personal relationships, and fame (or infamy) six years after their initial participation on the show. Farrah Abraham, Maci McKinney (née Bookout), Catelynn Baltierra (née Lowell), and Amber Portwood starred in *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom OG* and have contributed to developing the *Teen Mom* brand with successes in the form of book deals and clothing lines, and controversies such as a "leaked" sex tape. Despite their respective successes, the cast is invariably tethered to the *Teen Mom*/MTV brand. On the show, the relationship between the cast and the on-screen producers and crew members is incorporated into the dramatic narrative in ways that are not done in similar lifestyle programs that highlight domestic situations of semi-celebrities such as

*Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. On *Teen Mom OG*, the camera crew and producers are presented almost as if they are family or close friends of the cast members because of their involvement in the characters' lives since the cast's original participation in *16 and Pregnant*.

On *Teen Mom OG*, as with many other reality TV programs (on MTV and on other networks) the emphasis on what appears to be self-examination by the main characters – while talking with friends and family, in conversation with onscreen camera crew, or even in televised therapy sessions – attempts to convince the viewer that the primary and most important act taking place is the one highlighted in the self-reflexive action taking place. The presentation of this narrative suggests that the self-reflexive focus will enlighten and entertain the at-home audience, and it does. Yet the presentation of the narrative in this manner also aids the perpetuation of the ideological apparatuses of hegemony, exploitative labor practices, and mechanisms of surveillance that break down the barriers between public and private. Similar results are achieved in other shows.<sup>1</sup>

On other programs, the producers use similar tactics as the ones used in *Teen Mom OG*, with related ideological promises connected to the implementation of self-reflection, participation in recorded therapy sessions, use of metacommentary, publicizing the private and/or the domestic, and overall self-commodification through participation in the process of cultural production. One may argue that the genre itself hinges on these processes. Yet with *Teen Mom OG*, the inclusion of the producers as costars in the narrative complicates the landscape of the series and the ideological promises that it makes. The “enlightenment” that is offered in *Teen Mom OG* reveals apparatuses that promote surveillance and exploitative labor which aren't as overt in other reality programs. These struggles endured by the cast are made to mirror the viewer's own conflicts and challenges within everyday life, yet closer scrutiny of the televisual

text reveals a narrative that places the onscreen character(s) in a never-ending state of self-commodification. Publicizing private and domestic physical and emotional labor on the series as a means to achieving success results in alienation from others as well as from the self in what Marx considers the “species-being” or “species-essence” – an outcome that also reflects the current state of culture in which reality TV is produced and consumed and intrusive social media and surveillance practices are infused into our everyday lives.

While the emphasis in this research is on *Teen Mom OG*, other programs (reality TV and otherwise, whether on MTV or not) must be considered as well in order to contextualize this study within a broader understanding of the signs and symbols that are craftily configured to affect the viewer. Also important to note is that the tactics used in *Teen Mom OG* that are examined here are a reflection of growing trends and practices within cultural production and must be treated as such, much like the way most Cultural Studies and Media Studies examinations highlight the televisual as a representation of much larger issues at work. To use the study of reality TV programs – as has been done in certain recent Media Studies scholarship – to temper the importance of this televisual genre or even demonize its producers who are themselves important participants in this complicated process is to neglect crucial elements in the study of cultural production in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My personal reasons for this research stem from my connection to this genre and to the televisual text in general. After a Bachelor’s degree in photography and a Master’s degree in film, I worked in documentary and reality TV post-production, most notably on such programs as *I Love New York*, *Survivor*, and *The Apprentice*. While working in this field, I began to consider the intricate tapestry being woven in these shows, and I began to pair my practical experience in photo research and sales for news and entertainment sources, film production and

reality TV post-production with a theoretical consideration of the structures of power that are supported by the televisual text (and its consumption by fans and scholars). My approach to this subject is that of a fan of popular culture with a background in the arts who is simultaneously an active participant in the recognition and dissemination (through ongoing study) of the ways that power is reproduced, and ideology is supported in palatable cultural products designed to produce various forms of pleasure, emotion, excitement, and enjoyment through the process of consumption. An additional motivation for this project and area of concentration – which I have shared with friends, colleagues, strangers, high school students, and people from varying socioeconomic backgrounds and levels of education – is the hope that this research stretches beyond academic discourse to inspire non-academic readership, consideration, and a growing media literacy among television viewers and consumers of culture.

Pairing a semiotic textual analysis of the signs and symbols in this program (through a close reading of scenes from the first season of the *Teen Mom OG* reality TV series) with research that considers both the audience and the entertainment industry (through an analysis of responses to the series on two *Teen Mom OG* fan blogs and an historical look at the evolution of metacommentary and self-reflexivity on television and in reality TV), this study will uncover the ways that *Teen Mom OG* and other media subtly dispense what Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek refers to as effective and “nice” totalitarianism through signs, symbols, and meaning-making (December 17, 2017). In order to understand cultural hegemony and the way hierarchies of culture are rooted in capital and dispensed through cultural products, this research uncovers the tools of self-commodification within the televisual by confronting, prioritizing, and potentially reimagining the uses of self-reflexivity and metacommentary.

## Research Methodologies

Within this examination of self-reflexivity, metacommentary, and self-commodification, the aim is to overcome what Kellner considers “the divide between a text-based approach to culture and an empiricist social science-based communication theory” (34). Breaking down this divide requires the marriage of theoretical considerations and close reading of the televisual text (and responses to it by audience members) in the research. The theoretical analysis employed in this study confronts several connected concepts<sup>2</sup> – the system of capital and hegemony upheld by the culture industry which results in alienation from the self and which is made possible by mythmaking, infusing meaning into visual media in ways that are simultaneously pleasurable and oppressive – to uncover the tools used to support ideological positions that privilege and uphold existing power structures.

My primary source material is the first season of *Teen Mom OG*, first released in 2015. Scholars such as Ien Ang, David Morley, and Roger Silverstone use an audience studies framework to examine the role of the viewer within the encoding/decoding circuit of meaning as outlined by Stuart Hall.<sup>3</sup> Motivated by the audience studies approach of Ang, Morley and others, audience response is included in this study, but in support of the visual and theoretical study of the reality series. The primary emphasis in this project is on a semiotic analysis of the construction of *Teen Mom OG* and similar reality TV programs. Included in this approach is the examination of the role that producers, cast, and crew – makers of culture who are at the same time also influenced by cultural production through its circuits of meaning – embody to distribute messages through the televisual text. In support of this study is a look at how fans engage with this series.

The analysis of audience response and engagement with *Teen Mom OG* is presented through consideration of message board posts and online discussions of the series taking place on two *Teen Mom OG* sites – *Teen Mom Junkies* (teenmomjunkies.com) and the *Teen Mom Central* Tumblr page. Both pages were created before *Teen Mom OG* premiered its first episode, and their posts and responses are included in this research to challenge the theoretical assertions that the series (as an extension of reality TV itself) encourages passivity and the adoption of the ideological positionings and practices that the cast perform on the screen in the viewer. The goal with this research is to examine the way the material is received in order to interrogate the assertions of authenticity while simultaneously examining the engagement of the viewer in the process of consumption of the product. A number of chapters will include close reading in the form of descriptive explanations of various scenes from the first season *Teen Mom OG* in order to point the reader to the construction of the televisual text and the ideological apparatuses at play.

This project highlights the first season of *Teen Mom OG* because the inclusion of the onscreen crew is newly introduced in this series. As with other programs, this newness does embody some forms of authenticity that may dissipate as the cast and crew become more aware of the mechanisms of production from season to season. While events that take place in later seasons of *Teen Mom OG* and other series are mentioned, the emphasis is on the space in which the newness of the metacommentary and self-reflexivity are most potent. The emphasis on the construction of these televisual texts through the use of close reading follows Barry Brummett's understanding that the researcher must try to understand "who is empowered or disempowered by a text. An ideological close reading assumes that power is always at work to some extent in a text, and understanding how the text connects to structures and struggles over power helps to

reveal its ideological import” (104). In examining the power structures both in the production and in the signs and televisual symbols in *Teen Mom OG*, this dissertation confronts and challenges June Deery’s understanding that, in reality TV, “audience engagement – whether participatory or interactive – is often radically sanctioned and even vital, but thus far it has not established any radical shift of power or agency” (35). The lack of a shift in power or agency may be confronted through the use of close reading with an emphasis on form and patterns of form as well as through an understanding of the way the televisual is received by the audience. According to Brummett, our minds follow patterns, seeking them out “to help us think about how to live in the world. For that reason, form has more to do with rhetorical effect than content does because it is usually form that gets and holds people’s interest, attention, and participation in a text” (51). This approach – which highlights the importance of form and pattern over content – also illuminates a general shift in culture that moves away from facts within narrative content and factual importance to favor delivery and reception of the televisual which often becomes ritualized and repeated for emphasis, whether it is wholly real and true or not.

### **Fan Responses and Blogs**

Alongside the semiotic analysis in this study is a look at audience reception of the series. The qualitative research in this project centers viewers’ online responses to *Teen Mom OG* in posts and comments on two *Teen Mom OG* fan blogs – *Teen Mom Junkies* (teenmomjunkies.com) and the *Teen Mom Central* Tumblr page. The fan comments were organized by keyword: Money, Motherhood, Beauty, Fame, The Parasocial Relationship, Production (signifying both the MTV crew/producers and the production process), Remorse, Redemption, Class, Comedy (referring to fan creativity and humorous comments),

Pornography/Sexuality, and each of the main female cast member's names. The consideration of these blog posts and comments is to gauge fan engagement with the series, viewers' skepticism of the veracity of the cast and/or crew, intellectual and emotional response to the series, creativity in responses (as an indicator of agency as well as community and camaraderie among fans), willingness to engage in critical intervention of the televisual text, responses to specific cast members, and considerations of the themes of motherhood, authenticity, and trust.

Both blog sites have been running for many years and began before *Teen Mom OG* premiered its first episode in 2015. The posts considered were shared within the time period from when the first episode of *Teen Mom OG* first began airing to the end of airing of that specific season. The reason for this choice of timeframe was to gauge initial responses to the series revamp and to understand what affected viewers the most. The analysis of these responses to the series was made in consideration of over 500 posts and comments on both pages, some of them original posts by page administrators (also fans), but most of the comments being responses to series and cast news and updates. The most popular themes as revealed by the number of responses according to keyword were posts about the production and onscreen camera crew and producers (68), posts and comments that revealed a parasocial connection between viewer and cast member (60), posts and comments about controversial cast member Farrah Abraham (56), and posts and comments in which fans and viewers discussed or referred to motherhood (52). The analysis of fan responses to the series is included as a way of questioning whether or not the theoretical and textual considerations and question are received by the viewer in ways that support, reject, or reimagine the encoded messages inscribed in the televisual text.

Key to this component of the research is the understanding of the circuit of culture Stuart Hall outlined in his 1980 essay, "Encoding/decoding." Hall sees the audience as both the source

and the receiver of the messaging within a larger process of communication, consumption, and meaning-making. The tension between the encoder who is the producer of these messages, and the decoder who is the audience member does not simply move in one direction. The encoder frames meaning within the televisual text in a distinct way, which is then consumed and potentially reinterpreted differently (according to background or habits) by the decoding audience. The decoding viewer has multiple ways they can decode this messaging and its embedded ideology. They may choose to decode meaning in the way the producer intended, which is considered the *dominant-hegemonic position*. There is also the *negotiated code*, where the viewer accepts the meaning of the text inscribed with meaning in the way the producer intended, but with room for exceptions and alternative interpretations. And there is the *oppositional code* where, according to Hall, the viewer “detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework or reference” (137). Within the oppositional code is the potential for agency through collective communication and action. What is to be determined with the examination of the *Teen Mom OG* fan blogs is the way fans of the series receive and share messaging embedded in the televisual text within the framework of the *dominant-hegemonic position*, *negotiated code*, or *oppositional code* to consider the ways that fans of this series encounter and embody agency as consumers of culture.

## **Chapters**

Moving from theory to qualitative analysis, this dissertation utilizes multiple modes of interpretation suitable for the complexity of the televisual experience, especially as reality TV attempts to seamlessly portray “the real world” while hiding so much of its artifice. Thus, these chapters describe theoretical precepts and offer interpretation, textual analysis of the show, and analysis of the audience reception.

Important to understanding the themes and systems that this series reveals is placing *Teen Mom OG* within the history of reality TV and visual culture. This historical context begins with the Photography, Documentary Cinema, and Daytime Television sections in Chapter 1. This chapter goes further by looking at two key programs: *Candid Camera*, which tapped into post-war Cold War paranoia in the 1950s and *An American Family*, which revealed the breakdown of the ideology of the American Dream in the 1970s. Chapter 1 also examines MTV's *The Real World*, in which the cohabitation of seven strangers in a stylized, surveilled environment in the early 1990s changed television forever through the endeavor of publicizing the domestic space in an intricately produced narrative that offered new ways of seeing and being seen and connected it to fame, infamy, and obscurity. This series catapulted what is known as reality TV, placing it squarely in the midst of the neoliberal project of defining value and meaning through the framework of capital. Consideration of *The Real World* also offers an historical look at the evolution of MTV and how it influenced reality TV as a genre, particularly after it brought reality TV to the forefront of its programming, moving away from being a network that made its profits solely from music and music-based merchandising and affiliations. The research for this chapter also takes into consideration such MTV programs as *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*. The examination of the programs in this chapter reveals the different manifestations of surveillance culture, performative self-reflexivity, and celebrity culture in television.

Chapter 2 examines *Teen Mom OG* in depth. It includes an outline of the series, a look at its precursor *16 and Pregnant*, an examination of the themes and ideologies at play in both programs, close reading of the beginning of the series reboot where the crew now inhabit the screen alongside the cast almost as costars, and an introduction of the tactics that support exploitative capitalist modes of exchange as they are revealed in the program.

Chapter 3 outlines the theories examined in this research. In order to better understand the ways that reality shows such as *Teen Mom OG* supports and upholds existing power structures, this chapter also examines a number of interrelated questions including the parasocial relationship between onscreen character and at-home viewer, the ways that *Teen Mom OG* enforces ideologies related to the promotion of the self as a commodity without consideration of the importance of the private self away from cameras, and the way the inclusion of social media and other mechanisms that the onscreen characters navigate drives the normalization of ongoing consent to increased surveillance and self-commodification.

Chapter 4 examines self-reflexivity and self-commodification by looking at the ways the tactics used in *Teen Mom OG* are ritualized while being presented as messages of authentic, introspective self-examination. The actual narrative details are less important than the way(s) in which the producers and crew are introduced, incorporated, and infused into these characters' visual representation, especially when the producers and crew are used as a vehicle for the character(s) to recount their narrative not as a way to consider their particular dilemmas, but to court viewership. Form trumps content. This chapter also examines ritual as a tool for discipline, and the way the cast uses social media and digital technology in the episodes of the series. In the construction of the visual and narrative landscape of *Teen Mom OG*, the use of social media is not only allowed, but is welcomed. Its use propels the brand reach through the labor of its characters. Included also in this chapter is analysis of the fan response to the themes in the series.

Chapter 5 examines how the use of metacommentary perpetuates ideologies of power and authority, particularly as the ideological apparatus of surveillance acts as a form of discipline, shaping the function of the cast, the onscreen crew, and the viewer within a digital panopticon. Taking cues from Linda Hutcheon's understanding of the simultaneous legitimation and

subversion of what is parodied within a parody, this chapter addresses the paradoxical construction of this reality TV program to drive the narrative forward, court viewership, and simultaneously problematize and normalize the ideological apparatuses highlighted.<sup>4</sup> The apparatuses important to this chapter are also in utilized social media, news, sports, and even in politics. This chapter uncovers the ways that the production-within-the-production informs our understanding of a culture that relies on the continuous commodification of the self in order for it to succeed. Included also are possible sites of agency through critical engagement with the televisual text.

The Conclusion reexamines keywords and key themes outlined in the introduction, reiterates the findings of this project, and offers future areas of interest and inquiry. At its core, this research is an examination of the ways that power is reproduced by crafting enjoyable, palatable, and often frustrating cultural products to deliver its messages. The masterful blend of highly produced scenes from everyday life creates a product and a set of ideologies that are consumed through the everyday act of watching television and often replicated in the viewer's own daily life.

### **Keywords and Themes**

The research here follows a handful of main keywords and themes that are linked critically: “Reality TV,” “Metacommentary,” “Self-Reflexivity,” “Self-Commodification,” and “Alienation.” Reality TV is the televisual form examined here, a constructed and produced episodic visual fiction that uses real individuals and parts of their actual lives in its narrative tapestry. As it is examined in this research, metacommentary is the tactic whereby the production process is included within the product itself. Self-reflexivity is the use of self-reference,

performed introspection, and a constant and intentional turn of the narrative back to the individual character within the narrative. Self-commodification is the process by which the individual identifies their identity through their relationship to capital and its practices and/or organizes and structures their personal life and relationships on the model of market relations. Alienation is the concept examined by Karl Marx which confronts the exploitation of the worker, interrogating the space(s) within and away from the workplace that nourishes and/or detaches the worker from their true essence or self.<sup>5</sup>

Additional themes addressed include: The “Parasocial Relationship,” whereby onscreen characters are part of a constructed relationship with viewers of cultural products within the framework of real-life friendships or partnerships, but without the actual reciprocity between participants; “Domesticity,” which is used here as a description of events and tasks within the familial home and as an entry into the discussion of the publicizing of private spaces in reality TV; “Motherhood,” which is confronted in this research as a as performing parental responsibilities in ways that propel consumerism and assert value through visibility, homogeneity, and materialism; “Hybridization,” which refers to the ways that reality TV fuses multiple genres (and span different consuming platforms) to engage viewers; “Pleasure” with regard to the emotions experienced while watching and interacting with the televisual product; and “Engagement,” which refers to consuming content and to the connection between consuming and to participation in the process of cultural production in ways that commodify and alienate the individual. These and other themes inform this study of how power is upheld and reproduced through popular visual media that often disguises itself as mere entertainment.

As the Errol Morris quote at the beginning of this introduction expresses, the environment in this contemporary moment functions in such a way that consumers of cultural

products may not believe something unless it has been documented. What must follow is the confrontation of who, what, and how that which is documented creates a narrative that serves a particular purpose that may not act in the best interest of the individuals on the screen or those watching what's on the screen.

## Chapter 1: Origins and Approaches

“This is the true story....”

– Opening narration, MTV’s *The Real World* (1992)

In order to understand the ways that metacommentary, self-reflexivity, and self-commodification function as pacifying tools of self-commodification within the mechanism of publicizing the private in *Teen Mom OG*, it is not only necessary to review the history of reality TV and the network which airs *Teen Mom OG*, but to also consider also the landscape of television and documentary cinema that informs the series examined here. Just as the visual tactics in one series are informed by an entire history of televisual content, so does the process of promotion and branding. As Jennifer Gillan explains, “branded entertainment of the present is not a millennial development. Rather, it is a return to the dramatized advertisements and sponsor entwinements pioneered by Ozzie Nelson and other 1950s television producers working in the single and alternating sponsorship financing modes” (34). To track the evolution of production and promotion within reality TV requires an understanding of how reality TV is informed by and constructed differently from other television genres and visual media, and how this has evolved and continues to evolve over time.

While fiction programs typically begin from the writing process in the form of a script that is translated onto the TV screen via the actors, producers and crew, the process of creating reality TV programs begins from the opposite end of the process. The producers build a skeleton of what the program will be by arranging various shoot days and settings, choosing specific personality types to perpetuate conflict and/or camaraderie, and selecting certain locations for filming. At any given moment, spontaneous events are captured without prior planning by production. Most reality TV follows a “shoot first, ask questions later” mode of production. As

the shoot progresses, the producers and story editors begin to construct the narrative skeleton of the series to then build each episode with the video editors. Working together, the production and post-production staff begin to piece together the tapestry of the cast members' story lines and narrative arcs within the series, often without knowing the outcome of the series.

During the post-production process, producers and editors typically piece together sounds bytes and visual imagery that has been cataloged by transcribers, video loggers, and other production crew in order to construct the story. The unpredictability of these plot-shaping events not only affects the way the episodes are constructed, but it also challenges the editors' and producers' approach to the material. The crafting of reality TV programming is a creative process that requires an understanding of how to construct a compelling story when its components are often changing throughout the filming period. Because of these intricacies in the genre, it is necessary to examine the televisual text through close reading in tandem with an understanding of the way televisual texts are formed and how they function. To have this happen effectively, a history of the televisual explains the roots.

### **Photography and Early Documentary Cinema**

The producers of *Teen Mom OG* shape a set of signs and symbols that appears to privilege the cast member as a visual representative of the possible desires and/or concerns of the at-home viewer. Here, relatability attracts viewership (through the use of self-reflexivity, relatability, and the parasocial connection). The series highlights the ordinariness of its cast. But in doing so, the show simultaneously cements the characters within an established hierarchy of authority which privileges the producers of culture, and capital over the collective. Nicole Aschoff examines the phenomenon of the celebrity super-elite, reminding her reader that "The

most powerful storytellers aren't poor or working people, they are the super-elite" (9). This emphasis on the celebrity storyteller supports and replicates an ideology of social, economic, and cultural capital that is connected to visibility, self-commodification, and complicity with the exploitative mechanisms of the culture industry. The mechanisms used in *Teen Mom OG* reveal a sophisticated and cunning approach to crafting the televisual that is both reflective of, and that affects culture today. The mechanisms in the construction of reality TV have their roots in other visual forms.

Before the discovery of ways to create moving images, still photography was an innovative way to study and catalog actions, places and events in a unique and essential way. By the 1890s, photographer Edward Muybridge began work on his human and animal motion experiments with his cameras. Deciding to push his work in a new direction, Muybridge created a system whereby he placed many cameras next to each other on a track and opened the shutters of the camera in succession. With this method of shooting multiple still images, Muybridge created a moving image sequence that was later projected onto a screen. One of Muybridge's most famous sequences was one where a horse galloped across the screen, each detail of the gallop distinctly recorded onto each frame of the film. Erik Barnouw describes the success of these early moving picture experiments: "[Muybridge's experiments] often evoked the poetry of ordinary, familiar actions... [He] had foreshadowed a crucial aspect of the documentary film: its ability to open our eyes to worlds available to us but, for one reason or another, not perceived" (3).

While many of his motion experiments involved animal movement, Muybridge also studied human action in his work. He often photographed models in ordinary situations. Muybridge's scenes often presented women paired with children. An example of such pairing is

*Woman Picking Up Child*, where the simple action of a mother and her infant is beautifully and simply captured in a short moving segment. Dai Vaughan examines the shock and surprise over this new form of capturing imagery. It was not, as Vaughan notes, the moving images that perplexed viewers, but in the way this new format was able to “portray spontaneities of which the theater was not capable. The movements of photographed people... were perceived as performance, as simply a new mode of self-projection; but that the inanimate should participate in self-projection was astonishing” (5). Roberta Pearson explains the effect of these early moving pictures: “The first film audiences did not demand to be told stories, but found infinite fascination in the mere recording and reproduction of the movement of animate and inanimate objects” (17). The feeling of spontaneity embedded in these simple performances was important to the success of early moving pictures. This feeling soon to be manipulated by documentary filmmakers to produce complicated and enticing results.

After the success of Muybridge’s moving image experiments, two French brothers, Auguste and Louis Lumiere began to film various subjects and situations. Owners of a photographic equipment factory, the Lumiere brothers constructed a moving image camera which they called the *cinématographe*; it shot, developed and projected the images that the brothers recorded. With this camera, Auguste and Louis were able to film a variety of characters whose ages ranged from newborn to middle-aged. Barnouw explains, “While a few of these early [Lumiere] films involved deliberate performances for the camera... most were ‘actuality’ items. None used actors; Louis Lumiere rejected the theater as a model for motion pictures. He presented instead a panorama of French life that grows more fascinating as the years recede” (8). The root of early documentary filmmaking, according to Vaughan, “comes down to what is not predictable by – and not under the control of – the filmmaker” (7). And yet, as it is understood

now, the choice of subject or tone is absolutely under the control of the filmmaker. In later works, many filmmakers such as Robert J. Flaherty and Louis Buñuel explored this power of the choice of subject and tone to explore social and political themes in their work.

The masterful manipulation of real situations through the use of a system of production tactics begins with documentary cinema. Documentary classics such as Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), lauded as masterpieces of ethnography and the moving image, rely on the manipulation of filmed environments and the use of different tactics to achieve an intended purpose. In this silent documentary filmed on a portable, yet bulky Akeley camera, Flaherty documented the daily life of an Inuk man and his family in the Canadian Arctic. After the initial attempt to document the lives of multiple Inuk families resulted in Flaherty's film being destroyed by a fire, the filmmaker returned to the Arctic with the financial support of a French fur company and a crew of local Eskimo cameramen to focus on only one family instead of many. The finished film shows Nanook and his family searching for food and traveling across a brutal landscape.

Many elements of this film were staged, altered, or produced, with title cards such as the one at the beginning of this chapter employed as framing devices to shape and propel the narrative and prioritize form over actual content. As Flaherty recounts, the production materials included "75,000 feet of film, a Haulberg electric light plant and projector and two Akeley cameras and a printing machine so that I could make prints of film as it was exposed and project the pictures on the screen so that thereby the Eskimo would be able to see and understand wherever mistakes were made" (par.6). Many of the scenes were planned in advance, and after the filming of one scene in particular, the effects of the production began to reveal themselves. Raw footage of the "Walrus Scene" was printed and shown to the Eskimos who "completely

forgot the picture—to them the walrus was real and living. The women and children in their high shrill voices joined with the men in shouting admonitions, warnings and advice to Nanook and his crew as the picture unfolded on the screen. The fame of that picture spread through all the country” (par. 16). This fame affected everyone including the main character, Nanook.

According to Flaherty, “The walrus hunt having proved so successful, Nanook aspired to bigger things. The first of the bigger things was to be a bear hunt at Cape Sir Thomas Smith which lay some two hundred miles northward of us” (par. 19). It becomes evident that the correlation between participation, visibility, fame, and the thirst for additional, potentially dangerous labor was present since the early days of moving images. In these details recounted by Flaherty is the understanding that what is considered “document” is itself a construction, which is carried from one scene to the next and from one genre to its successors.

Arthur Calder-Marshall elaborates on Flaherty’s romanticized realism by commenting on the imposition of the white man on territory previously unseen by white men, noting that the white man “alters it by the mere fact of seeing it. The white man who wants to show what Eskimo life is like normally has to manipulate it on film; a degree of organization comes in from outside... the film unit is undermining the very patterns of life it is trying to film” (85). *Nanook of the North* brings complex ideas about realism to the screen. Charles Musser explains how, “in many respects, Nanook appropriated the techniques of Hollywood fiction film-making operating on the borderline between fiction and documentary and turning ethnographic observations into a narrativized romance” (90). The visual imagery in the documentary is carefully crafted. In one scene showing Nanook and his Inuit family inside their igloo home, for example, film historians explain how the scene was staged, with Flaherty completely altering his subject’s environment to create the resulting narrative (See Barnouw, 1993). As documentary film progressed, filmmakers

began to use more meticulous and calculated methods of presenting their subjects to evoke certain emotions from the viewers. Some filmmakers such as Robert J. Flaherty chose to present the characters in a seemingly natural way in order to make the viewer sympathize with the subject. The resulting imagery is a reality that is shaped to present a skillful, self-reliant hero to the audience without revealing the authority of the filmmaker shaping the narrative. Yet that authority, much like in the *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* franchise (and most other reality series), is ever-present.

As with reality TV, documentary cinema continues this staging process in the editing suite where the configuration of film edits develops the message of the film. It is in the careful selection of the images that completes the process of the director and producer's intended message. As theorist Bill Nichols explains, with documentary film, "if there was a trick, it was the trick of appearing to duplicate reality. What could have been more overwhelmingly convincing of the powers of the *cinématographe* than to see something already recognizable and familiar re-presented in a totally unfamiliar but remarkably recognizable manner?" (par. 5). The visual, much like the ideological apparatuses it reveals, is hinged on a rearrangement of our concerns into shapes that are welcoming, familiar, pleasurable, and easy to digest. These powers of the *cinématographe* are visible throughout the history of documentary cinema, and confirm what filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer explains as a collaboration between director, film crew, and subjects "to simulate a reality in which they pretend the camera is not present...it helps us to suspend our disbelief and perceive that simulation as reality" (qtd. in Adams, "Joshua Oppenheimer's Documentary Manifesto," *Indiewire*). Reality TV production applies these very tactics to fuel a new set of questions about the relationship between producers who craft a new reality in which they encode meaning into the televisual text, the onscreen participants who

propels this process, and the at-home viewers who receive and decode the televisual text in different ways. The application of this process of rearrangement, when altered through the inclusion of the crew within the narrative, reimagines the role of subject to dispense the consideration and invitation to engage in a process where anyone can make themselves the subject. It is now this consideration and invitation to embrace the commodification of the self that helps suspend disbelief so that the participant does not consider the mechanisms, labor, exploitative practices, and potential damage that treating an individual as a commodity that actually exist.

### **Duplicating and Rearranging Reality on Television**

On *Teen Mom OG*, the participants do *not* pretend that the camera is *not* present. The acknowledgment of the camera is front-and-center, challenging both the accepted norms that govern meaning-making and visual culture and the traditional understanding of public and private, particularly as it relates to the consumer. The series, like its precursor, documentary cinema, is duplicating reality. That this reality now includes a constant, ongoing acknowledgment of the surveilling gaze of the camera reflects not only a shift in approach to constructing the televisual text, but also an evolution of culture itself. With *Teen Mom OG*, the acknowledgment of this visibility reveals and supports power and authority and simultaneously aims to appear to undermine them in order to appeal to the viewer. In the process, the ideologies surrounding visibility are presented through the onscreen participant, a “regular citizen” who in turn appeals to the sensibilities of the at-home viewer. The cast members perpetuate the ideology of visibility even if they may not entirely embrace this process. The resulting televisual product asks the viewer – acting under the guidance of the relatable, welcoming cast member – to embrace the ideologies of consent to the authority of the producer(s), of publicizing the private

through self-commodification, and of perpetuating the ideology of the individual as a commodity.

The branding of the self in *Teen Mom OG* relies on the authority inscribed in increased visibility, consent to surveillance, and the normalization of voyeurism, such that, as Dubrofsky examines in her research, a character's legitimacy rests on the amount of information about them that the audience has access to. Legitimacy, in this framework, is tied to the performance of the self so deeply that, as Media and Cultural Studies scholars Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn explain, on a series such as *Big Brother*, "To be evicted signifies a rejection by the public and by their companions who select those to be expelled" (97). Series such as *Big Brother*, *The Real World*, *Love Island*, and *Survivor* capitalize on this assumption of authenticity, which is dependent on continuous access through what appears to be 24-hour surveillance of the cast members. On *Big Brother*, the viewer has access to what appears to be unedited surveillance footage of the houseguests inside the production house (through what makes each week's episodes as well as an online site that airs the 24-hour feed). And yet, the producers still maintain a strict hold on the imagery being aired by selecting and promoting the moments in the narrative that are most titillating, bookending each episodic act with images of the surveillance cameras capturing the houseguests' every move. In this case, what is "real" from the surveillance feeds is offered to the viewer alongside a craftily edited set of episodes that serve not only to entertain, but to also highlight the abilities and authority of the producers.

Similarly, on such series as Bravo TV's *Real Housewives*, the question of veracity is ever-present. In recent seasons of the shows, various cast members are involved in narratives where their honesty is questioned by other cast members. On one season of *The Real Housewives*

of *Orange County*, for example, a cast member's boyfriend is accused of faking a cancer diagnosis in order to curry favor with his partner and their social circle. Another housewife's husband is accused of cheating and homosexuality. And yet another housewife accuses a castmate of [unsubstantiated] drug abuse and lascivious sex acts throughout the season until they address the matter and attempt a performed reconciliation during the reunion show hosted by Executive Producer Andy Cohen. In these situations, Bravo TV propels the narrative through repetitive points of conflict between characters before carrying the narrative toward some form of half-hearted resolution by uncovering "the truth." Andy Cohen revisits what was questioned during the season in reunion shows as well as in his late-night *Watch What Happen* series. And, while a quest for the truth appears to foreground the televisual content, it is the ongoing drama, conflict, and tension that carries the series and much of reality TV as well.

Ultimately, it doesn't really matter what the truth is when the narrative is crafted to be entertaining and fun to watch. Unlike in such documentary classics as *Nanook of the North*, which attempt to valorize the main character through the rearrangement of a produced set of moving images, the approach in reality TV often doesn't reflect an interest in remaining positive or uplifting. *The Real Housewives* is both supported by and offers support to a vast web of televisual content on television and online. This content enriches the Bravo network and expands its reach daily. The series itself is one piece of a system that functions on multiple levels and requires a constant stream of new content. A never-ending stream of conflict helps this process continue, regardless of what in the narrative is actually true. With *Teen Mom OG*, there is a tension between highlighting drama and emphasizing the redemptive by championing the young mothers. What is obscured in the production which foregrounds its choice to break the fourth

wall is the way the selection and configuration of imagery and content shape what is being offered to the viewer.

Most reality TV employs multiple camera crews for filming, such that the ratio of filmed footage and aired imagery is astoundingly imbalanced. And yet, the assertion – through the choice of what makes it to air – is that it is “real” when it is in fact a heavily produced reconstruction of reality into a piece of narrative fiction. In her examination of TV game shows, Annette Hill explains how producers capitalize “on this tension between appearance and reality by ensuring that viewers have to judge for themselves which of the [participants] are being genuine” (70). This process of capitalizing on tension relies on the illusion of authenticity offered to the viewer that invites or even requires ongoing commitment to watching and interacting with the series and brand. With *Teen Mom OG*, the negotiation between the producer and viewer that Hill examines becomes complicated because of the multiple “story within the story” elements that are employed. The viewer is asked to simultaneously accept both cast member and onscreen producer as genuine and on equal footing. Other television genres have grappled with the rocky terrain of the construction of reality. In daytime talk shows, for example, the relationship between host, guest, expert, and viewer have changed with the choices made by the production and the motivations of those who support, fund, and profit from it.

### **Daytime Television and Ideologies of Self-Improvement**

The use of self-reflexivity, metacommentary, and self-commodification in reality TV has its roots in earlier (fiction and non-fiction) television series. Most significantly, it was utilized in daytime talk shows such as *The Jerry Springer Show*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *Montel Williams*, which relied on these tactics to address social issues such as infidelity, incest, domestic

violence, sexuality and identity, obesity, addiction, depression, and AIDS. In many ways, these programs signaled a starting point for the development of the tactics examined in this dissertation. American daytime talk shows of the 1980s and early 1990s paired the subject's story with input from a guest expert, sometimes utilizing the background and authority of the show's host as a way to relate to the guest and to the at-home viewer.

For example, Oprah Winfrey revealed personal details about her own life, which, as Mary McNamara explains, “shattered the fourth wall between interviewer and subject, between medium and message, between marketing and personal revelation, and the world was never quite the same again” (par. 3). Through the disclosure of such events as Winfrey's childhood sexual abuse, the TV host appeared human, relatable, and authentic while at the same time finding her foothold within the hierarchy of power organized through the televisual codes employed by the network. Through this process, and by employing tactics to help solidify the parasocial relationship with viewers, Winfrey becomes humanized through her personal experiences and the revelation of these experiences. She is also made to seem to be an authority by presenting her admission from a position of success, vulnerability, and visibility within a neoliberal, American Dream ideology that Aschoff explains as reliant on “sweat equity.” It is the notion that hard work will get anyone somewhere, despite their background that Winfrey offers in her early performance of persona. Winfred capitalizes on the correlation between disclosure or confession and increased success, because the disclosure supports the “think yourself into success” approach. By the mid-1990s, in the second generation of these daytime talk shows, a shift in the use of on-screen participants took place.

In the early days of the daytime talk show, the “guest expert” was not featured as prominently while, as scholar Glen Creeber explains, “the number of guests proliferated, each

programme staging a whirl succession of five-minute sound bites of conflict, crisis and resolution...Fights between the guests, guests and audience members and audience members became a staple” (86). Soon after, Winfrey and others shifted focus to underwrite a different approach to advancement and success. In the process, this shift acted as confirmation and support for the ways of being that benefitted such figures as Oprah Winfrey. Aschoff uncovers the mechanisms that drive this way of being. She explains the equation that Winfrey and others prescribe for those striving to achieve their dreams as “always to adapt ourselves to the changing world, not to change the world we live in. We demand little or nothing from the system, from the collective apparatus of powerful people and institutions We only make demands of ourselves. We are perfect, depoliticized, complacent neoliberal subjects” (105-106). The compliance to authority is inscribed in every breath of Winfrey’s approach. And it is supported by the corporate model that her brand adheres to.

By the early 2000s, the focus in these programs changed. Earlier seasons of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* highlighted issues affecting communities and included input from experts brought in for their understanding or research. After the pivot away from this approach, the new and improved *The Oprah Winfrey Show* vacillated between spectacle revealed through guests’ actions and emphasis on individualism and exceptionalism rather than discussions about issues that related to community or larger social issues. Inviting such self-help gurus as Deepak Chopra, superstars Tom Cruise and Madonna, and future presidential candidate/spiritual leader/bestselling author Marianne Williamson to her show, Winfrey guided the viewer toward visualizing a way out of “victim mentality” by focusing on self-care with a promise of increased economic, social, and cultural capital. In problematizing this shift, what is revealed is the fallacy in the assertion that these forms of capital are accessible with enough gumption and grit.

As Aschoff explains, “The mind-cure stories that people like Oprah tell us say...[that] social and cultural capital are there for the taking if we want them and try for them. The real barriers are inside us (...) But in a system stacked against everyone but the wealthiest, the inside stuff is often all we are left with” (104) The resulting set of televisual codes – which use drama, conflict, and resolution through an emphasis on bettering the self through offerings rooted in capital and materialism – serve not only as a way to garner more viewership, but to situate the viewer within a hierarchy that frames value and profit in ways that are not actually accessible for most. Nevertheless, the tactic was successful, due largely to the appeal that figures such as Oprah Winfrey embodied. The parasocial frames Winfrey and other popular daytime television figures such as Ellen DeGeneres as friendly figures who traversed the same terrain as the at-home viewer and achieved overwhelmingly positive results. The sense is that if they can achieve it, so can anybody. The viewer seeks to emulate what is presented on the screen with hopes of achieving similar forms of capital, with all failures blamed on that very same individual rather than on the structures of authority, culture, capitalism, and power that favor only a select few.

The parasocial interaction between the onscreen character and at-home viewer appears to privilege the audience, for the supposition is that the content in which the cast is situated is created for the audience. But there is duplicity in this supposed prioritization. The viewer, privately admiring what is presented onscreen, is placed in a position where they seek to emulate how the television character acts by mimicking the onscreen personality in what they consume, emphasize, and promote. The ability of the onscreen character to appear relatable to the viewer – through the performed, “everyday” nature of their actions - helps the process even more, courting capital generated by the viewing consumer. With *Teen Mom OG*, consent to surveillance and cooperation with authority figures becomes embedded into the televised everyday actions. As

scholar Mark Andrejevic argues, the promise with reality TV is one that collapses “the distance that separates those on either side of the screen by cultivating the fantasy that ‘it really could be you up there on that screen – just send in your headshots and a homemade video and call this number now’” through the blurring of public and private spheres (9). Yet what is presented as bridging the gap between viewer and performer actually widens it, resulting in a clamoring embrace of ideologies of self-commodification as a necessary precursor to success.

The promise of “it really could be you” is contingent upon the participant’s willingness to live for the camera and not for the self or a community that thrives away from the gaze of the camera lens. This is evident in the success that pivoting away from community and toward individualism that took place on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The labor involved in being an onscreen participant – highlighted in daytime talk shows as based on merit and expertise with the guest “expert” – is distorted. Merit based on expertise is now overshadowed by merit achieved through the assertion of the self, often without further explanation beyond this simple, repeated and ritualized act. This tactic has various iterations rooted in the utterances and assertions made by onscreen participants. An example is the sharing of items of gossip to carry a storyline regardless of their veracity in such series as *The Real Housewives*, with the justification of such perpetuations as the cast being forthright and “real.” The production that shows participants performing what they call “just being real” dictates what being “real” should be – namely, promoting the self in any way possible through the machine of the culture industry, all the while promoting the series and network brand through their televised visibility. Through the process of duplicating and shaping reality for the camera, the actual labor is obscured, serving to support the framework which favors the producer over the consumer, and capital over community.

## Subversion and Legitimization in Metacommentary and Self-Reflexivity

According to philosopher Charles Taylor in his text *The Ethics of Authenticity*, the agent “seeking significance in life, trying to define him- or herself meaningfully, has to exist in a horizon of important questions. That is what is self-defeating in modes of contemporary culture that concentrate on self-fulfillment *in opposition to* the demands of society, or nature, which *shut out* history and the bonds of solidarity” (Taylor’s emphasis) (40). As with such daytime talk shows as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, the “bonds of solidarity” offered in *Teen Mom OG* frame identity primarily through the assertion of one’s tastes, preferences, all of which are set within various moments of conflict to create an enticing televisual text. These configured assertions and dramatic moments are usually dispensed through messages that reject the direct address of the kinds of social issues that were discussed in early reality TV and in the daytime talk shows of the 1980s and early 1990s. There are no significant bonds of solidarity; the emphasis on the self rejects the concept of community as a viable possibility and roots salvation through a consumerist approach.

Another way these bonds of solidarity are destroyed is the way reality TV places emphasis on drama and conflict to propel the narrative. The cast often ends up acting against each other with pledges to honor one’s personal needs over connecting in solidarity with others. In the process, the onscreen producers and crew serve as a possible faulty avenue for solidarity. Examples of this form of conflict highlighted on *Teen Mom OG* include tension between castmates Maci and Farrah, Maci and her ex Ryan, Amber and her ex Gary, Maci and Ryan’s new wife MacKenzie, Farrah and the crew, Maci and the crew, Farrah and her parents (separately and collectively), Farrah and her occasional boyfriend Simon, Amber and her cousins, Amber and the crew, Amber and both her second and third onscreen boyfriend (after her

daughter's father, Gary), Amber and Gary's new wife Kristina, and Farrah's young daughter Sofia and her former boyfriend Simon. In response to the emergence of this kind of self-involved environment in contemporary culture, Taylor argues that "to shut out demands emanating beyond the self is precisely to suppress the conditions of significance, and hence to court trivialization" (40). The sheer volume of interpersonal conflicts between the young mothers and their costars reveals this trivialization at work. On *Teen Mom OG*, as with other reality programs, this trivialization is often masked as self-awareness, complicating the messages laden with ideology that are dispensed to the viewer and consumed by the viewer with varying levels of enjoyment, disdain, and glee.

These messages of self-awareness and self-reflexivity are visible in other forms of art and creative expression. In her study of the self-reflexivity of postmodern fiction, Linda Hutcheon considers the relationship between the real and the represented in the metacommentary text. Exploring practices that deploy "seemingly mutually contradictory strategies [to] frustrate critical attempts...to systematize them [and] order them with an eye to control and mastery – that is, to totalize," Hutcheon's study demonstrates how a postmodern text that utilizes metacommentary may act not merely as pastiche, but also as parody aimed to "legitimize *and* subvert that which it parodies" [Emphasis mine] (61, 101). An examination of Hutcheon's study reveals that, as with postmodern fiction, in current reality TV, a subversion of ideological apparatuses takes place in tandem with their legitimization, with the resulting instability used as a method to court viewers. Taking Hutcheon's research as a point of departure, the many instances of simultaneously questioning and accepting the veracity of claims made by *Real Housewives* characters, for example, both subverts and legitimizes the ideology that hard work

and a moral code results in success. The inclusion of the contradictions in its cast's tepid quests for the truth through superficial exclamations of self actually supports the narrative in the series.

Another example of this simultaneous subversion and legitimization may be found in network television's *Bachelor in Paradise*, a spin-off of the wildly popular *Bachelor* and *Bachelorette* programs. The spinoff gathers a handful of *Bachelor* and *Bachelorette* contestants who didn't make it to the final rose ceremony and sends them to a tropical island on the premise that they will compete with one another for the ultimate prize: love! Part-social experiment, part-schlock, the series banks on the campiness of the environment it presents to the viewer, even beginning every episode with a goofy 80s sitcom-inspired title sequence with cast members performing poses and acts that reflect their various stereotypical character traits. The series stays true to much of what *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* strives for, with ideologies of traditional family values and marriage as the optimal goal for each individual.

At the same time, some of the characters do not adhere to these values, and there are some forms of subversion taking place while the series simultaneously legitimizes the values supported in its parent franchise. *Bachelor in Paradise* also welcomes its winning Bachelors and Bachelorettes to the show for "guest" appearances, crafting its own hierarchy of success while opening the door to cross-promotion in episodes that tease upcoming seasons of each series (including *Paradise*). The series utilizes discussion about the narrative and the production within the production, and, while the crew isn't featured onscreen like they are on *Teen Mom OG*, the tactics used within the series succeed in translating a standard ideological framework related to marriage and family while also subverting it for the purpose of entertainment. These tactics stem from earlier television programs that contributed to the history of what we now consider reality TV.

## **Origins: From *Candid Camera* to *An American Family* to MTV**

*Teen Mom OG* employs established and emerging tactics and strategies to deliver ideological messaging in an entertaining program about young mothers. Self-reflexivity – where the characters rely on an excessive emphasis on the self – and metacommentary – where the production is discussed within the production – are used in the series to inscribe the televisual and its visual codes with meaning to perpetuate ideologies of consumerism, hegemony, labor, and power and to normalize oppressive surveillance practices for profit, enrich ideologies of self-commodification, and perpetuate a culture of narcissism masked as individualism. A review of early photography, documentary cinema and daytime television provides us with a view of the larger landscape within which *Teen Mom OG* resides. A look at key television programs to track the development of the tactics that shape this televisual genre helps facilitate an even deeper understanding of how self-commodification is produced through the use of metacommentary and self-reflexivity in *Teen Mom OG*.

Three television programs are examined here. The first is the 1973 PBS docuseries *An American Family*. This series follows a short period in the lives of The Louds, a white upper middle-class family in Santa Barbara, California. Many consider *An American Family* a pioneer as the first reality series, while others emphasize its differences from standard reality shows. According to writer and film curator Dennis Lim, who researched the series for the New York Times in conjunction with the release of the semi-fictionalized HBO series *Cinema Verité*, the 1973 series was unfairly “credited with — or blamed — for starting reality television. The immersive, leisurely rhythms of the series are a stark contrast from the artificial situations (lab-rat housemates, gladiatorial contests) that dominate today’s reality programs. With its grainy look and distanced camerawork, it resembles an art film more than any reality show” (par. 14).

While *An American Family* does not resemble contemporary reality TV, its tactics, strategies, and televised processes of self-reflexivity signal the beginnings of the reality TV genre that populates the television screen today.

Others argue that the first in this genre was MTV's *The Real World*, which first aired in 1992 (subsequent seasons of the series were simply called *Real World*). In this *cinema verité*-informed series, a group of strangers were put into a fishbowl-style living situation where they were watched, filmed, and, like in *An American Family*, in many ways manipulated (both on set and through the editing process) to achieve an intended result (which in this case was a dramatic interplay between a diverse cast of characters that fascinated and titillated viewers for more than thirty seasons). In many ways, *An American Family* acts as a bridge between documentary and reality television. While some consider *An American Family* the first reality TV series, the wide reach of *The Real World* on the popular cable network MTV set in motion the mechanisms that are now employed in such programs as *Teen Mom OG*.

Others argue that reality TV was first conceived even further back in the 1950s with Allen Funt's prank show *Candid Camera*. In this wildly popular series that remained on the air for decades, unsuspecting citizens were put into compromising, yet entertaining situations where they were pranked or tricked in order to create funny scenarios for the viewing audience. One of the reasons for the consideration of the contributions of *Candid Camera* to contemporary reality TV is because of its use of surveillance practices within the televised entertainment-comedy show. Placing such surveillance practices within a humorous context dispenses rich themes and questions to the audience within a seemingly lighthearted gag show that highlights semi-public events such as being trapped in an elevator or involved in a variety of hilarious mix-ups, miscommunications, or mistakes. *Candid Camera*, *An American Family*, and *The Real World* –

as well as the sociocultural contexts within which they were each produced – set the stage for what became the genre we experience, examine, and find pleasure within today.

While *Candid Camera* often relied on anonymous strangers in [mostly] public settings where pranks were used to frustrate and to entertain, *An American Family* marked a drastic shift from the reliance unknown characters to an emphasis on the family unit and on domestic spaces. In the process, the cast gained a fame and notoriety it may not have anticipated it would. *An American Family* brought the Loud family visibility, but at unforeseen costs, many of which are also prevalent in *Teen Mom OG*. When examined more closely and put in the context not only of television history, but also within an understanding of the social, cultural, political, and economic motivations to create such programming, *Teen Mom OG* reveals the way it is situated within a trajectory marked by other programs that utilized similar tactics in the past. The starting point, therefore, is to provide an understanding of the construction of the symbolic representations within the *Teen Mom* franchise, and the resulting impact it has had by looking at some of its precursors.

### ***Candid Camera: Playfully Normalizing Surveillance***

The process of normalizing ideology by including it within entertaining products, advertisements, and televisual texts can be traced to America in the 1940s and 1950s, when the Cold War anxiety felt by many was met in response with such popular television programs as the humorous hidden camera prank show *Candid Camera*. As with *Teen Mom OG*, what appears in the constructed narrative in *Candid Camera* is at once a cautious, mistrustful awareness and the normalizing of surveillance and commodification practices that perpetuate the culture industry. While *Candid Camera* made viewers aware of their paranoia and anxiety over being watched, it

at the same time legitimized being watched by presenting funny pranks that placed participants in a seemingly friendly environment after the prank was completed and the jokes were already made. In this environment, the television producers fashioned themselves as friendly co-conspirators alongside the participants. In the prank process, an exchange took place: The trick was done, the tricked were asked to join the fun by agreeing to the use of their footage in the show, and the resulting agreement saw these pranked citizens underwriting what the producers were doing and contributing to increased advertising sales, profit, and the perpetuation of favorable ideologies of surveillance. *Candid Camera* follows what Hutcheon outlines as a process of legitimization and subversion. The tether between Cold War paranoia and finding the funny within the cultural landscape was potent, and it helped keep the series popular for decades after it premiered.

On *Candid Camera*, the “tricked” are those who happen to be in the environment in which creator/producer/director Allen Funt and his crew enact their own special brand of social experiment. And on *An American Family*, the emphasis is on an upper middle-class Santa Barbara, California family as the production enacts its own experiment to film the family members navigating their daily lives both on camera (edited and presented to the audience by the production crew) and off (during the filming and after they became famous for participating in the series). The family highlighted in the PBS series were not explicitly “tricked” into participating in any form of televised antics, but they did react to the series with concerns over misrepresentation after it aired. Participation in the filming of both programs reveals the tactics that evolved into what was used in such series as *The Real World*, and then later, in many reality programs including *Teen Mom OG*.

The producer of *Candid Camera*, Allen Funt was born in NYC, graduated high school at

the age of 15, and attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn before getting a BA in Fine Arts from Cornell University. He then studied business administration at Columbia University and took more art courses at Pratt, which led to a job in the art department at an ad agency. Funt's understanding of the production of culture was informed by his education and his many jobs in various related fields. After working as a copywriter, he joined the radio division before his service in the army during WWII. Funt's precursor to *Candid Camera* was 1947's *Candid Microphone* on ABC. In that series, he used hidden microphones to record unsuspecting individuals in unexpectedly hilarious setups. Funt also developed a program called *The Gripe Booth*, where servicemen could anonymously complain about service-related issues without fear of consequences for speaking out. Funt's research with the use of a 2-way mirror at Cornell is key to his conceptualization of *Candid Camera*. In his study of *Candid Camera*, scholar Bradley Clissold discusses the reaction that servicemen had to the red light used during recording of *The Gripe Booth*. By removing the signal that the "light is on," Funt began the path which brings us all the way to present-day reality TV (Clissold 34). By turning off that red light, the panoptic gaze becomes less cumbersome, allowing for visually palatable forms of manipulation to be easily enacted. On *Candid Camera*, unsuspecting participants are "tricked" into participating in various social experiments. The viewer watches these experiments unfold, witnessing the shock, alarm, unease, and frustration of the participants, before the ruse is revealed and the reality that the subjects are being filmed is made visible.

Two important elements alleviated the embarrassment of being "caught" in the prank on the show: The element of connection which placated the recipients of the prank by considering them co-conspirators rather than dupes; and the financial compensation for agreeing to be a part of the televised prank. Funt framed the show as one where the unsuspecting participants were not

duped or infringed upon, but part of a larger network of participants. The participants early in the history of what is considered reality TV were introduced to what Andrejevic explains as the “it really could be you up there on that screen” notion that drives viewers and often acts as an invitation to participate. According to scholar Misha Kavka, Funt was adept at “cajoling people into seeing themselves as associates who ‘share’ the experience” with him, so that the subsequent legally binding release the participants were asked to sign, a statement of ‘acquiescence to ‘sharing’ the experience was a guarantee against future lawsuits...[and] a literal buy-in to the process, thereby redressing the ethical imbalance of power in the prank” (19). Part of this buy-in was also literal. Participants who agreed to sign the release guaranteed no future lawsuits and an amicable agreement to participate in the series were paid for their part in the prank. As Kavka explains, “the release constituted the basis of an economic exchange. Paid on average \$50 for signing the release, participants turned their performance into a commodity” (19). Kavka refers to Clissold’s examination of the show within the context of Cold War surveillance anxiety. By turning the pranked individual’s participation into a commodity, *Candid Camera*, as Clissold argues, frames surveillance a “business transaction” (Clissold, cited in Kavka 19). As with *The Real World* 50 years later, and *Teen Mom OG* 20 years after that, the business of performance was infused into *Candid Camera* to feature real people in constructed realities.

### ***Candid Camera, Surveillance Anxiety, and Teen Mom OG***

How does an examination of a television series which first aired over sixty years ago reveal strategies worthy of consideration today? In the 1950s, the United States dealt with increasing Cold War anxiety brought about by the growing rivalry between the Soviet Union and

its allies that were unified under communism, while the United States and its allies functioned within a capitalist framework. The exploitative elements within *Candid Camera* – highlighted and obscured in different moments – reveal critical beginnings to the overall development of reality TV as a medium that uses commodification and surveillance practices to translate self-commodification into entertainment. Clissold considers Funt's programs not only "a source of surveillance-anxiety...[but also] a cultural response to and exploitation of a social and political shift" (35). *Candid Camera* was successful in large part due to the mood following World War II in America. Clissold explains that *Candid Camera* "made surveillance entertaining, less threatening and ideologically acceptable" while at the same time providing a "cathartic release" from surveillance anxiety (35). The parallels to *Teen Mom OG* begin here, as the convergence of elements that make the series entertaining is contingent on a palatable, welcome form of surveillance. Participants on *Candid Camera* are encouraged to seek release from surveillance anxiety. The cast of *Teen Mom OG* is encouraged to continue filming, with onscreen producers acting as semi-permanent stand ins for actual friends or family, easing many of the tensions associated with the burdens of both technology and its surveillance practices. Both programs act as both source and release of the anxiety that permeates the respective cultural landscape within which each production takes place. And both productions also require that anxiety to continue in order to continue to sell the cultural and literal tools (technical devices, gadgets, social media platforms and related apps) that support and are supported by the perpetuation of these ideological apparatuses.

Like *Teen Mom OG*, *Candid Camera* places itself in a contradictory position, aiming to both subvert and legitimize that which is used to court participation from its cast. As scholar Fred Nadis explains, "In provoking these unrehearsed responses" on the program, Funt "thought

of himself as a researcher, conducting experiments in human nature; in his sketches he dared his victims to act badly and dared his audiences to consider what ‘acting badly’ meant” (11). The resulting program, while highly entertaining, made use of exploitative tactics within an environment of overall tension among citizens in order to succeed, profit, and entertain. Similarly, the producers of *Teen Mom OG* promote the series as a new approach because of the involvement of the crew within the narrative. If *Candid Camera* was an early experiment, *Teen Mom OG* is a contemporary confirmation of those tactics. And the difference rests in the response to the cast acting badly. The cast of *Teen Mom OG* is invited to participate in conflict and heated interpersonal exchanges, but only within the parameters defined by the production. As seen with cast member Farrah Abraham who eventually cut ties with the series, autonomy or decision-making without consideration of the program, network and brand is discouraged.

In his examination of *Candid Camera*, Clissold refers to Jeremy Bentham's outline of the *panopticon* as considered by Foucault, where - taking cues from a design of a possible prison system - prisoners are made to feel as though they are under constant surveillance as a response to a watchtower erected in the middle of a square of prison cells which enforces the presence of a surveilling eye. Whether or not a guard is *actually* watching, the prisoners act as if under constant scrutiny. According to Clissold, "viewers are told to expect surveillance anywhere, potentially everywhere" (39). The response to this supposed Cold War surveillance in *Candid Camera* is to seek and embrace normalcy through participation (which was rewarded with a small monetary sum by the producers). Further, because the normalcy that is sought and embraced is one that is rooted in a monetized exchange of participation for a small monetary sum, the business transaction becomes the comfort offered in exchange for this participation. As this transaction takes place – within a series designed to titillate and offer an escape, capitalistic

modes of engagement are underwritten and supported.

That Funt's program reveals such potent themes as surveillance and the panopticon is one reason it was such a long-lasting show. Another reason is that it was highly entertaining. According to Clissold, some consider *Candid Camera* “a source of surveillance anxiety, rather than seeing it for what it arguable was: a cultural response to and exploitation of a social and political shift” (35). The series allowed participants to seemingly transform from the position of being the victim of a prank to the relief of finally knowing that they were being duped. The tactics enacted that resulted in participants eventually recognizing the prank appear to soften the blow of the manipulation taking place. After the final reveal of each prank, the participants are presented as willing agents in the ruse. Funt allowed participants a certain level of authority over the decision of whether their footage would be used in the final cut. If a participant in the gag didn't want to be on the show, the footage was scrapped, which underwrites the assertion of the amiable partnership between the onscreen producer and the seemingly willing participant. Of course, the crucial detail related to this is the fact is that individuals were paid \$50 for their participation (Clissold 41). If participants refused to sign a release to allow Funt to use the footage, they were not awarded the \$50. The nexus of meaning, value, and capital lies in the agreement to participate, which in televisual media often carries over beyond the actual participation. The extent to which participation affects the individual becomes overshadowed by the monetary compensation.

This underlying consideration of the economic necessities that contribute to the monetization of participation are key to understanding both the origins of reality TV and the importance of these necessities in present day programming. Clissold argues that *Candid Camera* "created an arena in which surveillance power dynamics were for once in favor of the

average citizen" (42). And yet, as the need for content within a hybridized global network of capital grows, the participation of the average citizen is folded into a process that requires ongoing exploitation to thrive. And, as television evolved, the methods involved in that exploitation began to creep into the personal, private lives of its participants. If *Candid Camera* was a beginning and *Teen Mom OG* is the current iteration in the evolution of the strategies and practices that propel self-commodification, *An American Family*, is an important benchmark in the evolution in this process.

### ***An American Family: From Cinéma Vérité to Reality TV***

PBS's *An American Family* was conceived by producer Craig Gilbert as an exercise in *cinéma vérité* for New York public TV station WNET. In interviews, Gilbert explains that he didn't want to follow an established documentary route - which in many ways mirrors traditional ethnographic methodology - of following a number of families and filming expert "talking heads" explaining their situations, which would widen the chasm between documentary subject and expert commentator (See Ruoff, 2002). Gilbert instead wished to spend a substantial amount of time solely with one family (and their friends) to be able to delve deeper into his up-close and personal investigation of suburban California life in the 1970s. Unlike Funt and *Candid Camera*, in which there was a revolving door of participants each week, the shift in the 1970s turned to a more intimate approach by selecting one family to follow.

After an arduous process of searching for this family, Gilbert finally met the Louds at a social function in Santa Barbara. They were white, upper middle class, and lived in a ranch-style home in Santa Barbara with their five children, one of whom came out as gay during the filming of the series. The Louds as a visual representation of ideological signs and symbols on the screen

were unique material for TV because of the family's socioeconomic position, their seemingly idyllic life, the potential dramatic tension between the family members, and their initial willingness to participate in the project. Gilbert and his crew spent seven months filming the Louds, with matriarch Pat Loud as the focal point and guiding representative in the series. The entire series cost about \$1.2 million, filmed on 16mm film (Roiphe). None of that sum went toward a salary for the cast members. The crew filming *An American Family* spent ten to twelve hours a day with the Louds and filmed on 16mm film. At the time, this was an expensive and time-consuming process. Despite the costly and time-intensive medium of choice, the equipment the crew used and the manner with which they filmed was a direct precursor to the way reality TV is produced today. The camera company Éclair had just released a new hand-held 16mm camera, which used detachable film magazines which held ten-minute rolls of film. The ease with which the crew could quickly attach and remove these magazines facilitated the *vérité* approach. The crew would load up, shoot ten minutes, reload the magazine, shoot ten more minutes and so on for up to twelve hours a day, except when cast members went into a private space such as the bathroom or a closed room or deemed the scene not to be filmed.

This non-stop filming allowed for an almost uninterrupted stream of raw footage from which the director and producer could cull their narrative. This approach is a direct precursor to filming practices in current reality TV in which a cameraman – if filming on video – might start a shift by loading up on eight or ten 60-minute video tapes and subsequently spend ten continuous hours shooting footage of the subject in his environment, or B-Roll, or sit-down interviews the entire time except for the cast's bathroom breaks. The resulting library of Éclair footage – which the editors and producers of *An American Family* then wove into a the twelve-episode series – had a ratio of raw footage to final product that is strikingly similar to recent

reality TV ratios. This is now the standard approach to creating reality TV programs; a hefty amount of raw footage is digitized into the editing system with the original tapes then stored in archival vaults and only a portion of the content actually making it to air.

During the 7-month filming of *An American Family*, Pat and her husband Bill Loud separated. They subsequently divorced. In the final edit of the series, the producers begin with an explanation in narration by Gilbert that the series was an exercise in *cinema verité* and that the couple had separated and divorced after filming was complete. According to Claire Palay, who cites Jeffrey Ruoff's research in her examination of the series and its cultural context, "The teleological structure of the show suggests that the Louds' marriage was doomed to failure from the start. As a result, viewers were encouraged to analyze every action each of the Louds take as signs of what is to come" (Ruoff 2002 as cited in Palay 2012). After the initial explanation, the series uncovers the months leading up to the eventual divorce. Over the 7-month filming period, the crew filmed over 300 hours of footage. The editing process took an entire year, and the end result was twelve 1-hour episodes, which aired once a week on WNET. When the series finally aired in 1973, it had over 10 million viewers. The series received mixed reviews, but was applauded by cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead, who, in a review for *TV Guide*, called it "a new kind of art form...as significant as the invention of the drama or the novel" (qtd. in Ruoff). Its significance rests as much in the space between documentary and fiction as it does in what structural and ideological considerations the production process reveals.

### ***An American Family, Transactional Participation, and Teen Mom OG***

Unlike the various participants on *Candid Camera*, the cast members of *The Real World*, or the mothers on *Teen Mom OG*, the Louds were not paid for their participation in *An American*

*Family*. Speaking in 2013 to *New York Times* writer Phillip Galanes and *Real Housewives of New York* star Carole Radziwill, *An American Family* matriarch Pat Loud explained that the producers did not offer payment, except that “I think they gave me something like \$432 to repaint my kitchen because they put gaffers tape up on the top” (Galanes). Galanes comments briefly on the difference between participation by Pat Loud in the *An American Family* docuseries and participation by such individuals as Carole Radziwill in reality shows today by noting, “one of the big differences between you two — the alpha and omega of reality TV — is that you’re getting paid, Carole. And when people pay you, it’s more complicated” (Galanes). The observation that paying cast members complicates the relationships between cast, crew, and network is important to remember. *An American Family* offered its viewers a fairy tale that quickly devolved into a heartbreaking account of a disintegrating marriage and a broken family. That the cast was not paid for their participation speaks to the manner with which ways of being are navigated by capital.

For the Louds, social, economic, and cultural capital were already available, and thus the relationship to the production was different than it was for participants on *Candid Camera*, *Teen Mom OG*, and even reality TV breakout series such as *The Real World*. The process of exchange in contemporary reality TV commodifies its players in ways that traditional documentary and hybrid series such as *An American Family* did not. Taking Marx’s understanding of alienation (from the product, the means of production, and the “species-being” or “species-essence” of the worker) and potential liberation as a point of departure, *Teen Mom OG* plays with the ideas of freedom, surveillance, and trauma, while enforcing and perpetuating the cast’s further detachment from the self through participation in this private life performed for the screen. *An*

*American Family* contributed to the evolution of the genre within which *The Real World* and its antecedents such as *Teen Mom OG* now reside.

### **MTV: From Music Television to Reality Hub**

*Candid Camera* and *An American Family*, both fundamental to the development of reality television and its use of the mechanisms of surveillance, ideology, and celebrity, represent the beginnings of what now constitutes the genre. The series that many scholars and television viewers consider the first breakthrough reality TV program, however, is MTV's *Real World* (originally titled *The Real World*). The references in style and structure to *An American Family* in *The Real World* reveal the impact that the Louds made on the MTV program and countless future reality shows. "By comparing the two series," write scholars Laurie Rupert and Sayanti Puckett, "it is easy to see Craig Gilbert's influence [on *The Real World*]" (94). *The Real World* contributed to the evolution of the televisual representation of home life and domesticity in America. According to scholar Leigh Edwards, "A significant number of reality shows picture a seemingly newfound family diversity. For every traditional 'modern nuclear family' ... we see a panoply of newer arrangements such as post-divorce, single-parent, blended, and gay and lesbian families" (123). *The Real World* heralded an increase in diverse representations and the inclusion of unconventional living setups and concepts of family – albeit often in crisis within the series – such that, slightly more than twenty years later, this development has resulted in programs like *Teen Mom OG*. Looking at *The Real World* in the context of what generates and constitutes value serves to clarify the ways that *Teen Mom OG* presents what it deems meaningful to the viewer as a commodity.

Curnutt problematizes the correlation between talent and being cast in reality TV: “Participants’ solidifying status in television’s field of production appears to be informed by the genesis and maturation of a performative craft. But approaching reality TV’s performances as a craft requires that we question the extent to which unscripted programming actually makes allowances for its participants’ lack of exceptionality” (1062) MTV confronts, underwrites, and celebrates this lack of exceptionality in a number of ways in *Teen Mom OG*. In early reality programming such as MTV’s *The Real World*, there was already an internal hierarchy of “value” ascribed to its cast and onscreen personalities. As scholar Hugh Curnutt explains, “If *The Real World* taught viewers how to watch reality TV, it also taught television producers how to make reality TV. For Bunim-Murray, the producers of *The Real World*, this meant learning how to best procure and manage a class of performer who was by definition untalented” (1063-64). Understanding the perpetuation of value through the association between participation and profit became a key element to the development of MTV programming and reality TV in general. The original cast members were part of a “first generation” of personalities that helped shape the series and the genre at a particular moment in cultural history when the network wanted to situate itself somewhere between documentary and mass culture. Early seasons of *Real World* featured artists and young professionals still working for pay and actively seeking opportunities and visibility outside the confines of the series.

Later, as Curnutt explains, “Bunim-Murray moved away from selecting participants who ranged in age and occupation in favor of unemployed college-age participants who showed an ability to perform their identities in conjunction with *The Real World*’s increasingly formulaic storylines” (1064). And even later, as *Road Rules* became a success on the network, the “second-generation” of casting began to take shape, where those not cast in *Real World* were often cast in

*Road Rules* instead. According to Curnutt, this “can be seen as an instance in which the television industry recognized that the participant was a specific kind of talent with a use-value that directly corresponded to the process through which it was cast. Or, to put it in terms of commodity production, these participants, like any readied material, are, once assembled, inherently valuable” (1065). Like *Teen Mom OG*, which is one in a larger group of programs within a franchise, *The Real World* successfully translated this concept of value without inherent talent and assembled by the producer into a series with significant longevity. In 1992, MTV had already been on air for over a decade, but the network until this point had placed its emphasis on music videos on heavy rotation, and on programs geared toward the promotion of those videos, their respective artists, and news related to the music world. Originally produced by Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray, the first season of *The Real World* premiered in 1992. The series aired more than 30 seasons on television and was resurrected in 2019 with three separate versions filmed in different locations around the world for Facebook Watch, proving that the formula adopted by its producers was highly profitable and able to be translated into different streaming platforms.

With *The Real World* in the early 1990s, there was a chance to present an environment that highlighted the creative Downtown New York music, art and culture within a docuseries that relied on various televisual tropes and strategic configurations of artists and outsiders. The first season was billed as an inside look at the cast members’ lives that was unconventional, unabashed, and described in its weekly opening credits narrated by the cast as “the true story of seven strangers picked to live in a house, work together, and have their lives taped to find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real.” The relationship between the cast members, strangers at the start of production, quickly evolved into a dysfunctional family of

sorts due to what scholar Michael McKenna notes as the producers' influence on the development of the series. The producers "cast the program with disparate and often combustible characters chosen selectively, with an eye toward potential drama, tension, and romance. Consequently, supporters of *The Real World* cannot legitimately proclaim it to be pure reality, considering the overt manipulation of cast and setting" (xiii). As with *An American Family* twenty years prior, a blend of production strategies gave birth to a genre that maneuvered real, but constructed conflict between its participants.

### **Introducing *The Real World***

As with documentary films such as *Nanook of North* or the PBS docuseries *An American Family* in which the "reality" of the film is shaped in order to achieve a "version of the truth," *The Real World* is as much a crafted social experiment and constructed fiction as it is a reality-based televisual and cultural document. "It was a very MTV idea," explain scholars Sam Brenton and Reuben Cohen, "one that allowed [MTV] to display their target audience *to* their target audience, in logical expansion of the channel's 'lifestyle branding,' explained by Naomi Klein as the strategic incubation of a homogenous global youth culture, the better to consume MTV products" (38 – *author's emphasis*). The cast was young, good looking, connected to art, music, and fashion, and willing to be infused into an assembled machine of promotion to promote a hip, appealing, and aspirational way of being.

This lifestyle branding was accentuated in the way the cast lived: During filming of the inaugural series, the seven cast members moved into a Manhattan loft, took a group vacation to Jamaica, and lived an exciting, drama-filled life for the cameras. As cast member Kevin Powell recounts in his memoir, "When I walked in, it felt like I'd won the grand prize of a game show. I

had been living in a dumpy room in a prewar building uptown in Harlem, and now I was moving into this four-thousand-square-foot duplex loft with six other young people” (208-9). The cultivation of a product marketed toward the growing “homogenous global youth culture” outlined by Klein required finesse that capitalized on the growing issues and conversations revolving around identity politics, race relations, gender, all of which required that it was delivered in ways that were both palatable and exciting.

The original cast, selected through an audition process, was diverse, able-bodied, attractive, energetic, and willing to discuss and debate controversial topics such as race, class, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. *The Real World* offered viewers a product that quickly transformed from documentary to a heavily mediated and produced series of images, signs and symbols that was groundbreaking in its choices of topics and the willingness of its cast to engage and have actual discussions. On *The Real World*, a young Black journalist (Kevin Powell) was given as much space to ask questions and make assertions as a young white woman from Arkansas (Julie Gentry – née Oliver) whose first trip away from home was to live in a co-ed, racially diverse televised setup. The original *Real World* presented what appeared to be a refreshingly transparent look at the publicized private lives of seven strangers. While doing so, it included multiple perspectives from individuals without the traditional voice of the “expert” dominating the narrative. This seemingly transparent tone was necessary for *The Real World*, which was created during a time of transition and growth in television history. As McKenna points out, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, “the immense pressure now placed on the networks to turn a sizable profit made the lower production costs of reality TV very attractive” (138). The number of local TV stations was increasing, and along with the competition among local stations was the competition with newly formed cable TV networks.

The challenge to keep cable programming exciting in order to retain viewers was so palpable that, as McKenna explains, “As some of these networks jockeyed for positions in an increasingly competitive industry, they diversified their program offerings by presenting original content. Once again, the lower-cost reality productions were a preferred option” (138). Inherent to the genre itself, during its ascent to mass popularity, was its setup of cheap labor which benefitted the production greatly. Cast member Kevin Powell, already a budding journalist and music writer when selected to be on the series in 1992, explains his motivation to appear on the series in his memoir, “I never thought about being famous or rich or that the show – whatever it was – might be a hit. I simply thought that perhaps I could book a few speaking gigs from the visibility, just as I remembered Sister Souljah always getting speech opportunities each time she appeared on television, especially national television” (205). For Powell and others on the show, participation in the production was part of a larger set of experiences that was independent of the actual show itself. Appearing as a cast member on *The Real World* opened the door to opportunities to speak and expand upon a larger project of understanding culture and identity.

With *The Real World*, there was a genuine opportunity to foster diversity on television. For Powell, the series was not a vehicle to singular stardom, but rather a platform from which he could develop his already-growing career as a media and culture journalist. The cast members on the original *The Real World* were working people willing to sign much of their privacy away in order to participate, be compensated, and use this project to their advantage. Powell remembers how, “we all had signed contracts that paid us \$1,300 at the beginning of taping and \$1,300 at the end of taping” (209). And yet, already during the filming of the first season of *The Real World*, the mechanisms of power as they related to compensation and branding were already in place. Powell remembers a detail that affected his understanding of the production: “One thing

that I had noticed on the paperwork bothered me: the producers would be able to use their footage from this period ‘in perpetuity throughout the universe,’ or something like that. That seemed like an awfully long time, and a great distance, but I signed the contract anyway” (209). As with the participants on other key precursors to contemporary reality TV, the compensation facilitated and framed the transaction taking place. The cast understood the unique opportunity being offered and dove in headfirst.

### **Lifestyle Branding in *The Real World***

As the filming of the first season of *The Real World* continued and its episodes began to air, what soon became clear was that the viewing audience did not want to watch programs that solely relied on traditional documentary filmmaking practices. “Late into the first season,” explain Rupert and Puckett, “the producers realized that the viewing public wanted drama” (94). And as MTV began to craft its product to fit its task of catering to a “lifestyle branding,” the network followed the feedback and interests of its consumer base – not only with the inclusion of heightened moments of drama and conflict, but also with the visual way the narrative was presented to the viewer. The first season of *The Real World* presented multiple scenes of the cast members conversing with one another in groups or in pairs. The tone was conversational, familiar, and slightly freeform, yet as the seasons progressed, the inclusion of the cast members’ commentary began to factor in very deeply, such that, as Brenton and Cohen explain, “The show made use of ‘video diary’ segments, with participants delivering first-person monologues to the camera, a technique later enshrined in the major reality game shows” (39). These diaries were utilized in the editing process to heighten the dramatic tone of each episode by playing off of the conversational sequences within the loft, juxtaposing familiarity with the gossipy, surveillance

mode of the video diaries. This pivot away from traditional documentary processes to one which offered a more complicated set of imagery and perspectives resulted in a more dramatic atmosphere presented to the viewer as the season progressed. This approach also allowed viewers to feel closer to the cast because of the intimate feel of the “confessional” video diary clips. The juxtaposition of conflict with confessionals presented a potent combination that engaged viewers and gave MTV a reality TV hit.

As the series evolved, its subject matter followed the supposed need for conflict and controversy, such that as Rupert and Puckett explain, *The Real World* “began showcasing more highly controversial individuals and issues. AIDS activism, gay rights, abortion, plastic surgery, physical abuse, politics, and even Lyme disease all found their forum on MTV” (94). The differences between what *The Real World* emphasized – even with its glorification of conflict and drama – and what programs like *Teen Mom OG* emphasize are important to track and outline. Rupert and Puckett assert that “A series such as *An American Family* or the early years of *The Real World* would never survive more than one season in today’s ratings-based climate” (95). Similarly, the representations in *Teen Mom OG* reveal important insight into the nature of the current ratings-based climate and what is required of both producer, cast, and viewer. *Candid Camera* made surveillance entertaining, less threatening and ideologically acceptable through the process of revealing an already-established mode of operation in American culture. *An American Family* normalized publicizing private family details and interactions, and *The Real World* made doing so the norm through the process of highlighting conflict. *Teen Mom OG* takes full advantage of this evolution toward the emphasis on self-commodification with a tether between drama and self-reflective self-centeredness. As MTV reaped the rewards from such series as *Real World*, it developed its approach with programs that reconfigured the lives, life events, and

legitimate conflicts of actual individuals into ritualized drama shaped into palatable televisual texts. What began to take place confronted and reimagined the notion of "real."

### **MTV, Celebrity, and the Development of Corporate Partnerships in Reality TV**

MTV soon became a hub for reality TV programming. Perhaps motivated by the success of such programs as *Real World* and *Road Rules* in the 1990s, the new century welcomed countless reality shows that targeted various subgroups within their key demographic. One such show that became highly popular was *The Hills*. Piggybacking off the success of its precursor, *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* (2004-2006), MTV cast *Laguna Beach* breakout star Lauren Conrad and her close friends in *The Hills*. What helped catapult *The Hills* to success was what Curnutt refers to as a "lack of exceptionalism" among the cast. The beautiful young Southern California inhabitants cast on what was advertised as an "unscripted" show were shaped into whatever MTV wanted to highlight in order to gain viewers, ratings and other rewards. According to scholar Amanda Klein, what made *The Hills* an overwhelming success as a "lifestyle television" series was the aspirational escape of it all. Klein explains how, on *The Hills*, "the girls never express concerns over paying their rents, finding employment in today's dreary economic climate, or even engaging in the world that (presumably) exists beyond the borders of Los Angeles' club circuit" (par. 6). It is a perfect, sunny landscape within which the cast engages in endless drama flowing from episode to episode. Within the production of the series is an intricate web of mechanisms that drive corporate consumerist ideology and actual transactions that are made for profit.

*The Hills* established corporate partnerships to drive the series, with the girls on the show highlighting various eateries, bars, clubs, and even a few educational institutions in the Los

Angeles area. In her analysis of *The Hills*, scholar Elizabeth Affuso explains the function of these corporate partnerships. In the collaboration with companies such as “Bolthouse Productions, Epic Records, *Teen Vogue*, and by extension their parent corporations SBE Entertainment, Sony BMG, and Condé Nast respectively, the narrative of *The Hills* exists to promote these companies products, arguably solely to promote these products” (par. 1). Not only is this unexceptional cast valuable in their willingness to be molded into TV celebrities as MTV sees fit, they are also pretty placeholders within this representation of a particular lifestyle being offered to the homogenized global youth culture that Naomi Klein outlined years before. And in doing so, with these corporate partnerships that affect the literal landscape of the Southern California food, fashion, and music scene, the series is both driven by and drives capital.

*The Hills* also offered viewers the chance to experience the series in a multiplatform format. Like *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* later on, *The Hills* developed their corporate partnerships in many different ways in order to engage viewers. According to Amanda Klein, the series “relies on tabloid weeklies, entertainment news programs, Internet discussion boards and even the casts’ own side projects to promote the show. These platforms also serve as alternative venues for consuming the show’s content (i.e., the characters, their storylines and the goods they purchase and promote)” (par. 11). What this multiplatform approach requires is for the viewer to continually engage with content in order to feel like they are up to speed on the goings on of the cast. The tether between the cast gallivanting around town and the private or at-home moments drives the narrative, the series, and the way the brand functions on multiple platforms.

On *The Hills*, the cast engages in conflict and conversation in a number of private and/or domestic spaces. The viewer has access to the small cubicles and office spaces at *Teen Vogue*, Bolthouse Productions and Epic Records where intimate, often vulnerable moments between cast

members are highlighted for the viewer's pleasure. And at their residences, the viewer is offered an idealized view of living in Los Angeles as a young, up-and-coming employee of any given hip and trendy company. The at-home settings present the viewer with an idealized living situation, with gorgeous swimming pools, high ceilings, and ample space to have a tantrum, paint over a graffiti mural your boyfriend commissioned from a rising street art star, or break up forever with your best friend over drama that is only half-obscured from the narrative. It is a reimagining of the consideration of the private and/or domestic space that *Real World* envisioned more than a decade prior, this time with even more corporate backing and higher stakes for the network as well as the companies involved in the promotional elements embedded in the series.

*The Hills* was initially touted as an unscripted drama, but as the seasons progressed, the heavy hand of the production began to show. MTV capitalized on viewers questioning the veracity of the storylines in ways that complicated the understanding of reality TV. According to the show's creator Avi Di Santo, "We want viewers to watch Lauren and the girls as the characters we know instead of in a show about *being* the stars of *The Hills*" (qtd. in Armstrong). This choice is evident in some of the key dramatic moments in the series, where viewers are not privy to certain information that contributes to the conflict between the cast members. The narrative becomes complicated for the viewer who do not seek out information from other sources such as magazines, blogs, or other entertainment outlets. The cast exists somewhere between truth and fiction, in that the stories they embody in the series simultaneously reveal great emotion and little detail for the viewer to consume. This approach differs slightly from the approach in *Teen Mom OG*, where the visibility and fame of the cast is a welcome topic on the series. The shift in approach in *The Hills* to the one in *Teen Mom OG* allows for different types of manipulation in order to drive the conflict, narrative, and profit.

## Conclusion

*Teen Mom OG* employs many of the tactics and strategies employed in documentary cinema, daytime television, and early reality TV. These tactics, developed over time, become enriched in a series such as *Teen Mom OG*, because the landscape within which the series resides relies on communication mechanisms working in tandem to deliver ideology through narrative and form. The process of dispensing meaning in an entertaining, pleasurable, complicated format which arranges real life into a produced reality has a long and layered history full of important ideological considerations that affect the broader understanding of labor and capital, and are infused into reality TV in various intertwining ways.

Reality-based programming first began in the 1950s with such programs as *Candid Camera*. Later, with docuseries such as *An American Family*, the “real” family document was reformulated to offer a slice of life view of a middle-class American home that was anything but functional or sound. The end of the twentieth century brought an explosion of reality programming to television, with programs ranging from competition series to lifestyle shows to makeovers to family and/or constructed family situations such as *The Real World* that revealed ideologies of family, capital, taste, and success within a growing landscape of online technology, digital connectivity, and social media. After reality television first made its official mark in the early nineties with such series as *The Real World*, the themes and approaches that had already been examined and utilized in such daytime talk shows as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Jerry Springer*, and *Donahue* began to evolve. With programs like *The Real World* and later with *The Hills*, suddenly there was the possibility of a closer look at the [constructed] work and domestic spaces that the characters inhabited within a format where these characters performed and reflected on their own environment and their experience as participants within a programs that

were driven by corporate partnerships and capital.

As with *The Real World* and *The Hills*, *Teen Mom OG* offers just enough specific personal details to the viewer to keep the narrative going. There is specific information presented to contextualize the characters in the story. The specificity surpasses such programs as *The Bachelor*, *Survivor*, or other shows where the audience barely learns general information about each cast member. But while humanizing and specifying its characters' dramas in some ways through conflict, interpersonal interactions, and emotional upheaval, the producers of *Teen Mom OG* eliminate other unique elements and personality traits from the main characters in favor of an overarching homogeneity that disconnects the cast members from interactions and environments not governed by capital. Reality TV utilizes this homogeneity and adopts processes of disconnection masked as access to greater connection that drive capital to propel the narrative, to engage the viewer in a multiplatform viewing experience, and to assure that power and authority are only reproduced by those who already have it. By studying the production process, self-reflexivity, metacommentary, and the endless call for self-commodification, an understanding of this disconnection can take place. A meticulous examination of the construction and mechanisms employed in *Teen Mom OG* will help contextualize the series within an understanding of the process of cultural production in this contemporary moment.

## Chapter 2: *Teen Mom OG*

“This time, we’re doing things a little differently!”

– Catelynn Lowell, *Teen Mom OG* Episode 1, “Back and Better than Ever” (2015)

### **First, there was *16 and Pregnant*: Production and Impact**

In 2009, MTV released a new series about teen mothers. *16 and Pregnant* (2009-2014) followed a handful of young mothers-to-be who were navigating the personal, academic, and economic struggles of being young and pregnant. One of the young couples was also considering alternatives to keeping the child once it was born. On *16 and Pregnant*, when we first come to meet the cast, our main characters are introduced in the context of their connection to their particular circumstances as well as to other individuals in their community. Screen time is given to the cast within their respective cities and towns. A poignant scene in the first *16 and Pregnant* episode (“Maci,” aired June 11, 2009) is when young mother-to-be Maci is introduced to the viewer. A very visibly pregnant Maci chats with her new classmates about her situation after having transferred schools to obtain her diploma. The emphasis is on Maci, but she is placed in conversation with relative strangers, and appears open, amiable to her classmates despite her physical discomfort over being so pregnant so young – unlike any of the other young women in the room. The vulnerability Maci shares with the group humanizes her and contextualizes her story within white working-class narrative by presenting an authentic, messy, and tender connection between Maci and the outside world. Maci then appears alongside her baby’s father Ryan – hugging him and giggling over her engagement ring. The scene appears to daintily sum up her life as a young future mother who is finishing school and planning a wedding.

The success and impact of *16 and Pregnant* led to the production of five additional seasons starring various young mothers: *Teen Mom*, *Teen Mom 2*, *Teen Mom 3*, *Teen Mom:*

*Young and Pregnant*, and *Teen Mom OG*. Neither *16 and Pregnant* nor any of the other *Teen Mom* series includes the crew in the narrative alongside the cast in the way they are highlighted on *Teen Mom OG*. Also, the tone of *16 and Pregnant* is informed by the events taking place with the narrative – doctor’s visits, arguments about money, heartbreak and resolve regarding a decision about adoption, and health concerns – more than it is by the drama within the cast’s interpersonal relationships. In placing its emphasis on the future mothers, *16 and Pregnant* was a series rooted in traditional documentary practices, closer in style and approach to MTV’s other successful docuseries *True Life* than any of the reality programs such as *The Osbournes* or *The Jersey Shore* that were produced by the network.

*16 and Pregnant* presented a compelling look at teenage pregnancy and has since been given credit for helping to increase awareness and drive down the teen pregnancy rates in the United States. In 2014, economists Melissa S. Kearney and Phillip B. Levine examined the influence of *16 and Pregnant* on teen births. They began by considering the influence of media on individuals: “It is a longstanding and open question how exposure to media images affects viewers’ behavior. (...) In some circles, the idea that teenagers respond to media content is a foregone conclusion, but determining whether media images themselves cause teens to behave in certain ways is a difficult empirical task” (3) The research was conducted for the National Bureau for Economic Research, with the goal of offering insight into ways to shape policy. Kearney and Levine considered the hypothesis that *16 and Pregnant* helped decrease teen pregnancy rates as well as the possibility that the series glamorized the young mothers.

Bringing together analysis of statistical data at the time the series aired, Nielsen ratings, and close reading of online activity including Google Trends, tweets, and internet searches in relation to the airing of episodes, Kearney and Levine assert that the series did result in a

decrease in teens giving birth. “Our estimates imply that this show led to a 4.3 percent reduction in teen births that would have been conceived between June 2009, when the show began, and the end of 2010. This can explain 24 percent of the total decline in teen births over that period” (5). Also, the research revealed that teens increased their internet activity when episodes – especially the new weekly installments – aired. The data confirmed that *16 and Pregnant* – and media texts in general – can effect change in multiple ways. The study also revealed that the series sparked increased social media use by fans during the airing of each episode that were undertaken alongside the actual practice of watching television as a form of response to the series, its cast, and the unfolding drama.

In their conclusion, Kearney and Levine point to this consideration: “The fact that MTV knows how to make shows that teens like to watch, which speak to them in ways that resonate, presumably is critical to the show’s impact. Apparently, this approach has the potential to yield large results with important social consequences” (34). With *16 and Pregnant*, the influence appears to be positive because of the subject matter and the inclusion of the consequences of sexual activity among teens within the narrative. And yet, the potential for less positive consequences remains with the *OG* revamp, as does the unanswered question of what exactly is being enjoyed in the new series. Kearney and Levine reiterate this consideration: “Presumably the effect on the attitudes or behaviors of teens and young adults could be positive or negative, depending on the specific media content and context. We find that media has the potential to be a powerful driver of social outcomes” (35). There is a marked difference between *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom OG*. A clear difference between the original series and its 2015 semi-celebrity revamp is in the difference in the ways *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom OG* employ self-reflexivity and metacommentary. The official online description of *OG* labels it as “a first for the

*Teen Mom* franchise [in which the show] will break the fourth wall, pulling back the curtain to reveal the relationships with the producers and crew, the challenges of raising children on camera, and how life in the public eye has shaped them as parents and people” (“About the Series”). This difference reveals a shift in motivation by production which is both culturally reflective and constitutive. On *Teen Mom OG*, there are very few moments between the cast and any outside characters or community members. Instead, the series utilizes the onscreen production crew, social media, text messaging, and the cast’s connection to the machinery of cyberspace to establish the realm in which the young mothers exist.

This new televisual format presents the four female characters alongside the on-screen crew members and producers, with added metacommentary in the form of the filmed participants discussing the production within the production. It signals a departure from the painstaking ways that reality TV attempted to remove or distance the production process from the final televised product. Earlier reality TV shows attempted to present a smooth and seamless onscreen landscape devoid of any mention of (or artifacts from) the production process – be they crew within the shot, discussion of the show within the show, or an emphasis on the filming process through lighting, sound, or related filmmaking procedures. Often, on many reality programs such as *The Bachelor* or *Survivor*, the presence of the production only makes it to the outtakes or blooper reels. On other shows, the fourth wall is intact except when crisis ensues and the crew steps in as mediator. With *Teen Mom OG*, the production is visible from the start, allowing for an intense self-scrutiny by the characters that vacillates between a performed self-awareness by the characters and a response or reaction prompted by the onscreen producers and crew that drives the narrative and its representations.

With *Teen Mom OG*, MTV embraces the inclusion of the crew – producers, cameramen, and production assistants – not only in the shot, but as active participants communicating with the cast as if they are friends who might ask questions to learn about the cast member’s life events taking place. The series breaks traditional modes of organizing the narrative by including the crew and its ongoing inquiries while the action is taking place. Not only does the viewer watch the cast, it is now watching the crew engaging with the cast which becomes part of the new, complicated, yet seemingly unmasked narrative. And, in addition to the disruptive nature of the crew’s intervention, the insularity of the entire setup – with not much commentary beyond its direct effects on the characters – reveals a carefully crafted attempt to create a feedback loop that revolves around the ideology of the self as a willing participant in practices of self-surveillance and self-commodification. This loop perpetuates more than just a sense of the apparatus of television production that would at best be designed to unmask the artifice the televisual experience. Rather, it does the opposite. Rather than opening the possibility to multi-layered experiences of audience appreciating the production, this loop limits the scope of the cast and others even as the series champions the choice to break the fourth wall and use related tactics as being wholly beneficial for both cast and viewer.

While the characters in *Teen Mom OG* remain as relatable as they were when navigating their teenage pregnancies in *16 and Pregnant*, their lives (as represented in the constructed televisual text) appear to embody a general detachment from the rest of the world and from broader questions of self, class, or any social interaction beyond conflict on social media that is often heightened and centralized in the narrative. While the inclusion of the *Teen Mom OG* crew alongside the cast may on the surface offer a potential for viewers to deconstruct the framework and craftiness of the series, the opposite ends up taking place. What is set up as an avenue for

deconstruction results in a new construction that reifies the performed relationship not as an actual partnership, but as a transactional one which ultimately benefits the authority figures and individuals in power even as it tells a story to the contrary . This in turn underwrites transactional capitalist ideologies within its seemingly fun-loving players on the screen.

In a 2014 New York Times article about Kearney and Levine’s study of declines in teen birth rates during the original airing of *16 and Pregnant*, Annie Lowrey reiterates how “the show and its spinoffs seem to have helped accelerate a long-term decline in the teenage birthrate” (par. 20). But, in its new format, *Teen Mom OG* as an entity appears to be less concerned with actual pregnancies and family matters than it is with a televisual tactics that support the series and network and not the actual characters or the viewers it may influence. As with such programs as Bravo’ TV’s *The Real Housewives*, drama and conflict become prioritized over actual life events, milestones, or context within a larger community beyond social media arguments with costars, fans, or internet trolls. And, by presenting the producers on screen as co-conspirators, the show actually hides authority in plain sight, and in turn creates a new way to enforce a hierarchy of authority by visually establishing the producers who *are* in charge as *not* being in charge. The producers, aware of the impact and reach of *16 and Pregnant* set out to influence and impact culture in new ways and with sophisticated mechanisms at work. The employment of this new set of tactics is implemented in ways that are made to appear benign.

### **Introducing *Teen Mom OG***

*Teen Mom OG* has proven appealing for a number of reasons. It presents its narrative to the viewer in new ways but also retains the familiarity of its cast to appeal to both new and existing fans. The series reunites four of the original *16 and Pregnant* cast members – each of

them a household name because of their participation in the original series – with fans and presents them in a new televisual product. And it continues the storyline in ways that refer to the past without relying solely on it to propel the narrative. The inclusion of the crew in the story drives this narrative. *Teen Mom OG* highlights the crew and the production-within-the-production in ways that portray the inclusion of the production process in the narrative as expected, required even. One way the inclusion of the crew is normalized in the series is by breaking the fourth wall and revealing the cast looking directly into the camera as both a shared moment with the camera crew and a moment of reaching out to the at-home audience. Another way is by uncovering the private moments within the domestic spaces of the cast members that were not examined in the same way before the series was produced. The producers and crew are featured prominently within these domestic spaces, with most of the cast reactions to this new setup with excitement. The first episode of the season begins with such a moment, as the cast chats with the crew, looking directly into the camera within the first minute of the first episode.

### **Close Reading: Opening sequence, “Back and Better Than Ever”**

In the opening scene of “Back and Better than Ever,” the first episode of *Teen Mom OG* which first aired on March 23, 2015, the viewer is re-introduced to three of the original young mothers from *16 and Pregnant* through a quick succession of graphically-animated still images followed by video footage from *16 and Pregnant* which shows each of them in their daily lives (00:00:00 –00:00:15). The fast pace of the edit feels both exciting and playful, and the viewer is quickly introduced to the main players of the series. The scene cuts to footage of the production crew filming the new season of the show.

There are close up shots of a film slate, a medium shot of a group of crew members making their way to enter *Teen Mom OG* cast member Amber's home in Anderson, Indiana with their cameras and gear in tow, a medium shot of Amber, and then a cut to a close up shot of cast member Catelynn's husband Tyler smiling at unidentifiable crew members as they each comment on being filmed in their home in Port Huron, Michigan (00:00:16 –00:00:22). The viewer then sees cast member Maci's young son Bentley breaking the fourth wall to point his finger into the camera lens during filming in their hometown of Chattanooga, Tennessee as Catelynn explains in voiceover how a new emphasis in this season is on the production within the production. The fast pace and emphasis on close up shots of the cast juxtaposed with medium shots of the crew immediately invite the viewer into the scene and feel playful, endearing the cast to the viewer.

The camera cuts to a close up of Amber's ex Gary accentuating a tail slate (in addition to the actual slate visible in the shot and held up by a member of the crew) by clapping his hands together as he sits in the driver's seat of his car, followed by Catelynn's husband Tyler explaining that with the presence of the film crew, "If anything, the cameras get us to open up even more than we would, you know?" These comments appear to be in support of the production being included within the narrative. This support feels unanimous, as Catelynn agrees with her husband, noting that the cameras make them want to "be more real." (00:00:25 – 00:00:32). After this short interaction, the video cuts to Amber's daughter Leah sitting in the back seat of a car and asking permission from her mother to say hello to the crew by looking and speaking directly into the camera while mother and daughter drive around town. It is another playful moment, and both Leah and Amber appear happy, amenable to the presence of the crew in their personal space. Amber gleefully grants permission to her daughter to engage with the

crew through the camera lens, while behind her, through the window of the moving car, the viewer notices an entirely different camera crew in a separate car filming Amber and Leah from outside. This points not only to the production process being uncovered in the series, but to the presence and abundance of crew members capturing footage. None of these cameras is obscured; in fact, they are all emphasized, welcomed, and embraced as a new norm offered to the viewer (00:00:32 –00:00:38).

As the sequence continues, barely forty seconds into the first episode of the newly refashioned series, Maci's ex-boyfriend (and Bentley's father) the viewer sees a medium shot of Ryan standing in the middle of a room in his parents' home and expressing frustration at the cameras "all up in my face," to which the crew responds by telling him that they love his face. The cameraman smiles and pushes his lens even closer to Ryan as his mother laughs in the background (00:00:38 –00:00:42). The video then cuts to a close up of Amber and then of her ex, Gary, commenting on how they've known the crew for six years, after which Gary tells an on-screen crew member "welcome back," before another cut to Maci and her new beau who playfully kick the crew out of Bentley's bedroom as the opening credits of the series begin (00:00:43 –00:00:50). Within the first sixty seconds of the first episode of *Teen Mom OG*, a complicated narrative weaving together multiple households, their inhabitants, and the production capturing the scenes begins to take shape. The cast members in favor of this production process who express their excitement and support of the production being included within the production are shown to the viewer in close up shots while Ryan, who expressed frustration is shown in a medium shot, slightly obscured, and turning away from the cameras. This subtle choice of shots edited in the way they are masterfully begin from the very first episode a less than favorable characterization of those unwilling to embrace the production process

wholeheartedly.

The episode continues by catching up with cast member Amber, who has recently moved into her own apartment. The scene cuts from a medium shot to a close up of Amber. Enjoying freedom after being released early from prison for domestic assault (against her daughter's father, *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom OG* cast member Gary Shirley), Amber looks directly into the camera to express her excitement about getting her "motherfucking refrigerator" (00:04:30 – 00:04:40). Soon after, her cousin Krystal arrives, and they talk about Amber's drug addiction issues, her time in prison, and Krystal's guilt over not being there for her cousin more than she wanted to (00:04:40 – 00:05:55).

The scene cuts to a sepia-toned flashback sequence highlighting Amber's teen pregnancy six years ago, conflict with her ex Gary, domestic assault inflicted by Amber onto Gary, Amber's court case and prison sentence, and Amber's drug rehab program in prison. The sequence is narrated by Amber, who gives a general description of these events over clips of herself and Gary smiling with their daughter Leah, Amber slapping Gary and yelling at him, and B-roll of a woman in an orange jumpsuit walking away from the camera in a prison courtyard (00:05:56 – 00:06:22). The sequence then cuts to a medium external shot of the correctional facility with a sign noting its details, and Amber leaving prison with her family (00:06:23 – 00:06:25). The *Teen Mom* crew – visible on camera – wait outside the prison grounds. Amber asks her brother and family who else is there for her on her release day. The shot cuts to the crew filming her arriving in the car and then cheering and watching as Amber hugs MTV producer Kiki (00:06:25 – 00:06:28). As Amber emotionally embraces Kiki, it is clear that the connection between Amber and her MTV family is as potent as is the emotional bond she shares her own family. If not more.

In voiceover, Amber explains her custody situation regarding her daughter Leah and

mentions ongoing tensions with her ex, Gary. (00:06:29 –00:06:34). The scene cuts to a medium shot of Gary, his daughter Leah, and his new girlfriend Kristina at their house. The phone rings, and Gary chats with Amber about picking Leah up for a visit. (00:06:35 –00:07:10). Amber drives over, with happy music playing in the background, and Leah runs out of Gary’s house to greet her. (00:07:11 –00:07:29). Gary follows, with an insistent tone in his explanation about Leah’s medication for an ear infection. Amber immediately becomes irritated as Gary helps Leah into her car seat in Amber’s car. As he does so, Leah asks, “Are the cameras around me so they can see me talking?” Gary confirms this fact and chats with Amber as Leah makes funny faces into the camera installed in the back seat to view her directly. (00:07:30 –00:08:28).

The scene alternates between medium shots of Amber and Gary and close ups of Leah goofing off as she looks directly into the camera installed in the car so that it films her sitting in the bac seat. Amber and Leah drive off, laughing and joking as they make their way to the park to play before returning home, taking care of the ear infection medicine, and getting ready for bed (00:08:29 –00:09:38). There is a significant optimism in the tone of these clips, as Amber and her daughter are reunited and engaging playfully on camera for the world to see. The initially positive tone in *Teen Mom OG* is markedly different from the one in much of the episodes of *16 and Pregnant* in which the viewer is first introduced to the cast.

### **Close Reading: Reflections**

Within the first few moments of the first episode, the production and its technological apparatuses are foregrounded. While the cast appears amenable to this new addition to the series – even supporting it in informal, on the spot interviews and in voiceover – this normalized imposition is still an imposition.<sup>6</sup> From the start, the placement of the crew within the narrative

establishes a power dynamic that, though obscured by the seemingly good-natured tone of those involved, is nevertheless one that shapes the series and its ideological position. The editing of clips shows two of the children who were barely born at the tail end of *16 and Pregnant*. But Bentley and Leah are not simply present in the scenes. Both children actively engage with the camera and the production in the clips selected for the scene. The imprint of the production and its surveillance practices is strong, and the use of the youngest members of the cast, while endearing, is strategic. The viewer is invited to embrace the processes of surveillance and the blurred line between public and private – already established with *16 and Pregnant* – which are pushed into overdrive on *Teen Mom OG*.

The narrative relies on surveillance, participation in the commodification of the self, and ongoing access to the cast's private lives. The camera crew is presented as family members might be, amiable additions to the household for most of the participants involved. There is little objection or dissent expressed toward the invasive nature of this process, and the cast generally appears to enjoy the attention bestowed upon them by the camera crew. The discomfort expressed by Ryan (who in later seasons falls into heavy drug use that is captured on tape and included in the storyline) serves the introduction to the revamp well, for its opposition actually acts in support of the series because of the seemingly playful response of both the crew and Ryan's family members. What is presented to the viewer in the first moments of the first episode is a warmhearted environment marked by a seemingly transparent look at the construction of what is actually an intricate and masterful manipulation of reality.

The juxtaposition of Ryan's grumpy objection to the presence of the crew with Amber's excitement about a new life, apartment, and refrigerator also normalizes the power dynamic offered to the viewer. Ryan is overpowered not only by the crew, but by the participation of his

parents who support the crew and downplay the invasiveness of the production. Amber's home – unlike the small room in which Ryan complains about having no space – is quite spacious, with high ceilings and large, comfy couches where Amber can hang out while she gleefully films her new TV show. The contrast of the visual space in each home is a juxtaposition within which Amber is clearly painted as a victor. This paints the production in a favorable light and carries the role of the onscreen crew through the less happy moments throughout the season. As the series progresses, in spite of the many conflicts that take place, the power dynamic which supports the production, network, and brand is upheld in every edit that is locked. This dynamic, woven into the form of the series, supersedes the actual drama, facts, events, and cast members, to ultimately offer the viewer a series that is as much about selling the act of commodification as it is about young mothers. *Teen Mom OG* is not the first series to do this, nor will it be the last. But it does implement its strategies in unique and complex ways that are worthy of consideration and scrutiny.

### **Why *Teen Mom OG*?**

There are several reasons for the emphasis on *Teen Mom OG* in this research. As seen in the opening sequences of the first episode, the series deals with the aftermaths of personal, professional, and/or familial upheavals. Throughout the series, the narrative addresses such issues as teen pregnancy, incarceration, domestic violence, the adoption process, and the side effects of both fame and the illness or death of loved ones. The series calls upon the televisual trope of family disunion and rebuilding, and then turns it on its head by adding the crew alongside the cast and within the narrative. Its precursor *16 and Pregnant* offered the viewer an inside look into the lives of working class and middle-class teenage girls [alongside their significant others and family members] who had recently become pregnant. These are often

relatable stories. Or, if not, they appeal to viewers' emotions.

By inviting its former cast back to the franchise, MTV simultaneously calls upon the cast's visibility and existing brand familiarity and uses it to further build the franchise. There is the understanding of the appeal of using metacommentary in the choice to return to former castmates and reveal the way the series affected their lives favorably. The emphasis on publicizing the private lives of fairly visible individuals from working class and middle-class families *after* crisis relates to questions worthy of further and ongoing consideration in Media Studies scholarship for many reasons, including the relationship between class, value, and the decision to participate in presenting a private life publicly. As the characters on *Teen Mom OG* and other programs that developed this genre reveal and/or recover from some form of crisis or familial upheaval, they simultaneously reveal a culture that is itself in upheaval. A reality show about teen pregnancy – and the ensuing changes to life that include not only a variety of emotions, fears, and worries, but economic factors as well – is not only a show about its characters and their lives, but also about surveillance, performativity, gender, social class, and culture itself – as envisioned by producers of culture. But, rather than offering a program that contributes to an informed public and a drop in teen pregnancy rates (as was the case with *16 and Pregnant*), the visual construction of *Teen Mom OG* reveals mechanisms of discipline and authority that reproduce power in ways that offer little room for messages that invite actual agency.

The way the cast, their emotional lives, their relationships, and their domestic spaces are presented and/or withheld on *Teen Mom OG* reveals ideological implications that support the authority of the production and the crew which in turn supports authority and hegemony as ideological imperatives. The process of deconstructing the televisual tapestry offered to the

viewer uncovers the ways that *Teen Mom OG* presents teen pregnancy as both a life-changing event *and* a potential opportunity for gaining capital. Examining it as such can inform our understanding of the ways that exploitative corporate capitalism requires endless, increasingly commodified labor. By implementing self-reflexivity and metacommentary, MTV presents the viewer with an exciting new approach. At the same time, to the discerning eye, MTV also reveals the way various cultural and technological products increasingly infringe upon the privacy, autonomy, and agency of consumers of cultural products. Analysis of the series illuminates the way that power structures craftily enforce hierarchies of labor and authority while appearing to break them down.

*Teen Mom OG* presents four young women, their families, and their daily lives in ways that are relatable to a variety of viewers, both young and old. The mundane nature of everyday tasks is situated in contrast with heightened drama that exists as a result of the young mothers' pregnancies and related life choices. Unlike other televisual texts such as primetime dramas or sitcoms where the conflict and its resolution are often presented to the viewer within one episode, the conflict in *Teen Mom OG* (as with most reality TV series) is accentuated within each episode and carries over throughout the series. The success of this process hinges on two key elements presented as necessary precursors to resolution of conflict: Self-examination and external intervention by the on-screen TV crew and/or its technological apparatuses. The conflict continues throughout the season (and entire series) because of the structure of the production and the way that resolution is presented to the viewer. The relationship between conflict and the supposed self-reflexivity that is made to appear to cause resolution draws the viewer in and carries the program from one episode to the next. This flow of messaging helps retain the viewer while simultaneously reinforcing the authority of the producers and the underlying alienation of

the cast that contributes to (and is a consequence of) the drama in the first place. This process is continuous, carried from season to season. This continuity is important to the perpetuation of ideology that the program dispenses.

Turning toward a compulsive examination of the self as a reassurance of one's worth requires agents of authority that act as equals to the compliant participant in this hierarchy of power. In this reality TV series, the illusion of equality is ensured by the inclusion of the onscreen producer in the narrative. In this age of digital culture, public and private are presented as flattened, and programs like *Teen Mom OG* reveal this to both the viewer and the scholar. It is an insidious and complex onscreen narrative, where the hierarchy of power is presented as collapsed, with participant (young mom) and authority figure (onscreen camera crew and producer) seemingly acting (through the televisual representation) as equals, partners, and even as friends. Yet upon closer inspection, the hierarchies of power and authority are in fact concretized by utilizing the tactic of "breaking the fourth wall" and related production devices in new ways to achieve ideological and representational goals. The resulting televisual text places emphasis on young moms and their family members who are seemingly comfortable with being filmed performing their private lives on-camera in acts that normalize surveillance.

As these participants become somewhat famous and more familiar to the viewer through their participation in the program and its various related promotional tasks (such as blogs, online interactions, online endorsement deals, and series spin-offs), the program in which they participate underwrites a process that spans multiple televisual genres and multi-platform promotion to transform them from anonymity to celebrity. Upon closer consideration of this process, it is clear that most of the characters on *Teen Mom OG* rely on the show and its

producers as well as the mechanisms of surveillance that publicize the private for profit by privileging the production over the individual cast member.

By normalizing the ideological apparatuses of surveillance and unending labor through the adoption of a narrative that having one's private moments filmed is a norm to be embraced, this program also endorses the performance and labor involved in the production process. As with earlier docuseries such as *An American Family* in the 1970s, the family unit on *Teen Mom OG* becomes a *filmed* family that performs a version of reality for its viewers and online followers. Becoming a performed family through the blurring of public and private spheres underwrites the process of self-promotion through commodification via the apparatuses of technological and ideological surveillance. This process both mirrors and informs contemporary culture, such that the general public's modes of communication are increasingly informed by these modes of self-promotion, self-commodification, and a detachment from mindfully participating in actual life. The suggestion offered in this series shifts from living to *living to be seen*, reflecting trends visible in broader corporate capitalist landscapes that include social media and online culture. This performative act of self-commodification is visible within the first few minutes of the series revamp in the conversations, actions, and attitudes of the cast and the onscreen producers and crew.

### **Close Reading: Catelynn and Tyler Performing the Filmed Family**

In the first episode of *Teen Mom OG*, the first act after the intro and title credits reintroduces the viewer to former *16 and Pregnant* cast members Catelynn and Tyler who gave their first child up for adoption during the filming of that series. The camera offers an intimate view of the couple in their home as they sit in their dining room eating sandwiches and

discussing recent gossip on Twitter. There is speculation that Catelynn might be pregnant, and Tyler reads information on his phone from an online blog that cites tweets about being ready for a child that Catelynn previously posted. Catelynn calls Tyler a “phone whore” as he reads off the phone screen to her. (00:01:04–00:01:25) It is both intimate and informal, and filmed in such a way that the close ups and complete ease the couple appears to have in front of the camera gives the feeling like the viewer is in the room with Catelynn and Tyler. At the same time, the banter that is shared reveals how young the couple is. They then discuss being ready for a child at 22, add mentioning that they weren’t ready at 16 when they gave up their first child for adoption. (00:01:26–00:01:51) The cell phones they use to check social media remain a constant within the scene, and remain so throughout the series almost as if technology is a third party in their relationship. The machinery of social media and the gaze of the screen act as the spark that motivates what appears to be a generative, introspective conversation, but it also repeatedly brings the conversation back to itself, as the couple continue to discuss items related to social media rather than to their new pregnancy or personal feelings about it away from the gaze of technology. This reveals the hand of the editors, as they cut together the scene to focus on the couple’s tangled involvement in social media and online culture.

The scene then cuts to a flashback sequence in sepia of Catelynn and Tyler’s journey, with the couple holding their firstborn Carly in their arms and crying and then handing the infant over to her adoptive parents Brandon and Teresa (00:01:52–00:02:05). Catelynn provides the narrative in her voiceover, recounting her first pregnancy and conflict with her and Tyler’s parents. Catelynn, her mother, and Tyler’s father Brandon (who for a time was married to Catelynn’s mother April) argue and hurl insults at each other (00:02:06–00:02:16). The clips alternate between medium shots and close ups throughout the sequence. The scene then cuts to

a medium shot of Catelynn trying on her wedding dress as she explains in voiceover that she and Tyler are now engaged and they're planning the wedding (00:02:17–00:02:21). The scene jumps to close ups of magazine covers that feature the teen mom and her fiancé, then scenes of them arguing, and Catelynn explaining some of their tension that was highlighted in a different reality program (00:02:22–00:02:42). The pair participated in the third season of the VH1 series *Couples Therapy*, during which time their personal struggles became more prominent and they almost broke up. In voiceover, Catelynn explains that after *Couples Therapy*, Tyler proposed a second time, and they are now back on track after working things out.

The shift from sepia back to full color brings the viewer to present day. Back to the present moment in the season, Catelynn takes a pregnancy test in the bathroom while Tyler waits impatiently in the kitchen. It is a medium shot. Catelynn emerges from the bathroom with a positive pregnancy test in her hand. In a close up, they embrace, then talk about plans for the future. Scrolling through her cell phone without looking up, Catelynn tells Tyler, “I always wanted to be a Mom” and they discuss their education and career goals and how they will shift with a new baby (00:02:43–00:03:55). Again in close up, Tyler asks Catelynn how she wants to publicize the pregnancy, wondering “How do you wanna go about this? Do you wanna announce it on Twitter, do you wanna...” Catelynn looks at Tyler, and tells him, “I will announce my pregnancy when I feel the time is right” (00:03:56–00:04:06).

### **Close Reading: Reflections**

The scene where Catelynn and Tyler respond to the pregnancy test presents Catelynn as exuding a grounded feeling of empowerment. But underneath this positivity is the underlying question about the necessity of announcing personal details publicly in the first place. The way the scene is edited prepares the viewer for future episodes when the pregnancy eventually will

become public. It prioritizes the announcement of the pregnancy to the world over the actual pregnancy and the couple's initial, immediate response to the news. In fact the immediate response is about publicizing their news. Throughout subsequent scenes in the episode, whether in footage of Catelynn scrolling through social media feeds on her cellphone, Tyler reading tweets, or the pair discussing Twitter announcements and online conflicts, the presence and gaze of technology and the public facet of their personal, private, and domestic moment reveal the intentional inclusion of the production and technical gadgetry as a force that is made to appear commonplace, constant, and even expected.

### **A Whole New World Where Private is Made Public**

*Teen Mom OG* incorporates multiple different elements into its edits to include conversations between the characters and their close friends or family members that are typically had in private, counseling sessions and mental health struggles that are often obscured in the fantasy of the reality TV narrative, and the constant, ongoing onscreen participation of the production crew (especially during moments of conflict) that is rarely give this much screen time. The emphasis of the series is on both the private moments in the family's personal lives as well as their commentary on this turmoil. The joining of these private moments, heightened emotional states, and metacommentary enforces an ideological position that equates sharing information (through the use of technology such as cameras, cell phones, and social media that are also tools of surveillance) with self-improvement, personal success, and various forms of capital.

The series also reveals questions of agency and choice when it comes to consent to being filmed (and in turn, consent to participate in public forums such as social media). Many of the

show's characters grapple with the internal conflict regarding whether or not they want a life away from the series and brand or even completely off-screen (by possibly quitting the show altogether) instead of continuing to participate in a process that places them under a magnifying glass. This consideration of rejecting the seemingly no-holds-barred access to the characters' personal lives simultaneously challenges and supports the seemingly accepted notions of participation, visibility, and consent to being filmed as precursors to success, status, and achievement.

The inclusion of the production crew and their characterization as onscreen collaborators complicates questions of value, labor, participation, and self-commodification through visibility. According to John Fiske, "television provides ample evidence that our culture feels a need to rank people in orders, either by physical or mental activity, or by appearance" (130). What is important to note about *Teen Mom OG* is that the hierarchies are presented as if they are in flux, supported not by the action in the narrative, but instead by the affirmation of its participants to the camera. Yet the producers always retain control of the narrative as well as the fate of the cast, whether through covert or overt actions that guide the young mothers and their families. The fate of each cast member is in many ways dependent on their enthusiasm and willingness to be constantly revealing more personal details to the authority figure that tempers any explicit expressions of control.

The relationship between the cast and the *Teen Mom OG* production reflects a larger framework of power. Andrejevic examines this growing tendency in culture by noting how "individuals are becoming increasingly transparent to both public and private monitoring agencies, even as the actions of these agencies remain stubbornly opaque in the face of technologies that make collecting, sharing, and analyzing large amounts of information easier

than ever before” (pp. 6-7). The producers of *Teen Mom OG* replicate this relationship between producer and consumer by using tactics that attempt to portray the producer as a friend and support to the cast, and by extension, to the viewer. This strategy creates a new kind of opacity in that the crew’s influence shapes this relationship and binds the cast to the production even further. The reason this approach is successful with the cast is partly because the framework within which the young mothers are seen as valuable does not require the same prerequisites that exist in traditional television or other reality programs.

### **The Markers of Value and Success in Reality TV**

Many reality TV programs measure value using traditional markers such as talent or physical strength. On talent competitions such as *American Idol*, *So You Think You Can Dance* or *Dancing With the Stars*, the characters that excel on the shows enter the narrative with pre-existing abilities that are highlighted through various challenges and performances that are paired with a look at their personal lives. Competition shows such as *Survivor* do not necessarily emphasize one particular commodifiable talent, but do emphasize whatever will support the “Outwit, outplay, outlast” branding of the series – namely, physical and psychological talent connected to tenacity, perseverance, mental logic, and physical strength. Within this representation rests the agreement that contestants will be filmed 24/7 because of the competition to see who can persevere through any challenge. And, like talent-based competition shows, the surveillance and invitation to consent is connected to a race to the finish which requires a penchant for mastery, or a certain talent, genius, and ability to manipulate the competitor.

Unlike talent competitions such as *So You Think You Can Dance*, *America’s Got Talent*, *Dancing With the Stars*, or *American Idol*, or skill-based competition shows such as *Survivor* or

*Big Brother*, the “talent” highlighted on shows like *Teen Mom OG* is replaced with the willingness to perform self-scrutiny and reveal one’s private life. The talent is in the performance of self-promotion and self-commodification. *Teen Mom* follows the approach utilized in such shows as *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, where compliance to the invasiveness of the production becomes the avenue to fame and potential fortune. But the Kardashians were already socio-economically sound (because of the success of their father Robert Kardashian’s work in the entertainment industry and his participation in the trial of OJ Simpson as well as stepfather Bruce Jenner’s athletic success in the Olympics and beyond). With the Kardashians, the social and cultural capital is inherited and then built upon through the reality series, resulting in a different kind of relationship to cultural production than the young mothers on MTV experience.

The differences in these markers of value are critical to understanding how alienation as a result of self-commodification varies from show to show. The cast was unknown before MTV picked them to star on *16 and Pregnant*. They became famous as a reward for their willingness to be visible and to reveal their private lives on camera. Without existing capital available like it is for the Kardashians, the Hiltons, or the Osbournes (who have all had reality TV success in addition to their other successes and existing wealth), the cast of *Teen Mom OG* must rely wholly on the MTV brand to support the quest for various forms of capital. This distinction between actual talent and performed self-involvement, and between entering a show with pre-existing talent and/or capital born from nepotism versus performing a surveilled life for producers to create content through the process of self-commodification rests at the root of the exploitative nature of the MTV series.

The construction of *Teen Mom OG* raises crucial questions about everyday tasks being shaped into commodifiable ones so that just “existing,” – when presented on a public platform –

results in the detachment from one's personal life because the personal life is now comprised of labor disguised as something else. As Rachel E. Dubrofsky explains in her examination of surveillance and reality TV, "the action on [reality TV] centers on verifying authenticity: One submits to surveillance as a means of verifying authenticity...the more willing one is to submit to surveillance, the more able one is to appear 'natural' under surveillance and the more seemingly authentic one becomes" ("Surveillance on Reality Television and Facebook From Authenticity to Flowing Data" 117). This performed task of living one's life as an assertion of authenticity is made easily digestible for the viewer through the use of self-reflection and metacommentary.

Yet as this assertion of authenticity takes place, the authenticity becomes overwhelmed by the process of self-commodification which alienates the individual from any form of genuine connection to self away from the labor of continuously asserting this supposed authenticity. The "labor" here is presented to the viewing audience as positive because the self-reflexive approach to one's life is seen as therapeutic and cathartic. Thus, by performing self-reflection, one is led to believe they are in command of one's personal labor, output, environment, and value. The question thus becomes whether the performed self in the public sphere actually robs the individual of their autonomy, value, and authenticity, especially since the private spaces are now made public for mass viewing. Similarly, the inclusion of the crew in the narrative of *Teen Mom OG* acts as an assertion of authenticity of the production itself but can appear inauthentic to the critical eye when the metacommentary examined reveals the authority of the production.

As John Fiske explains, "The more closely the signifier reproduces our common experience, our culturally determined subjectivity, the more realistic it appears to be" (38). With *Teen Mom OG*, the participants are television celebrities who are [framed as] regular, relatable

people. The allure of the fame embodied by the onscreen character(s) is designed to entice, while the accessibility of a common experience shared with the viewer(s) and resulting verified authenticity make for a perfect blend of factors set in place to welcome the viewer into the narrative. The new appeal in reality TV and in programs like *Teen Mom OG* is the ideology of success through self-commodification as a tangible possibility. Taking Fiske's understanding a step further, the producer shapes how the signifier is presented, affecting the culturally deemed subjectivity of those decoding meaning from the televisual text. Viewers are invited to look to the onscreen cast member with wonderment (for both positive and negative reasons), but to also seek to emulate their actions or expressions and to believe they are able to do so with the simple click of a few keystrokes. This is a tactic embedded into the production that invites the viewer to continue watching as well as emulating the actions seen on the small screen. The televised support of the cast of *Teen Mom OG* by the onscreen crewmembers and producers (who are presented as friends and confidants) supports the illusion of access to fame and fortune through visibility. The editing of *Teen Mom OG* makes the production and crew appear friendly because of their amiable support of the main cast. The rewards for complying to the surveillance practices that are woven into the fabric of the series normalizes hegemony while on the surface presenting it as something else.

### **The Popularity of *Teen Mom OG***

*Teen Mom OG* is part of one of MTV's longest-lasting franchises. The franchise includes *16 and Pregnant*, multiple versions of *Teen Mom*, *Teen Mom OG*, and various spinoff specials focused on the parents and relatives of the main cast such as *Being Barbara*, *A Bae for Babs*, and *Being Butch*, each of which highlights the parents of the teen parents in the *Teen Mom* series. The success of the franchise is in part because, as Kearney and Levine remarked their research,

MTV knows how to craft programming that is enjoyable for teens to watch. The characters are presented as relatable “regular” people just like the viewers. The characters appear authentic, with this authenticity propelled by their visibility that results from agreeing to the surveillance involved in the production process. The success of the franchise is evident in many different ways. According to statistics provided by the Social Security Administration (as reported by Wendell Marsh and Jerry Norton for Reuters in 2011), just two years after *16 and Pregnant* first aired, the names “Maci” (one of the teen mothers on the show who is also an *OG* cast member) and “Bentley” (one of Maci’s children featured on the show) were the names with the greatest increase in popularity for newborn babies. *Teen Mom* was immediately well received, with Alex Weprin reporting in *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine that its pilot episode was the network's highest-rated premiere in over a year with 2.1 million total viewers (2009). The relatability of the characters and their stories is what drives the series. According to scholar Jonathan Cohen who studies audience reception, parasocial relationships, and media influence on viewers, “as we come to understand and care about the characters, we come to care about what happens to them and thus become involved in the plot and transported by the text” (186). In his research of characterizations and televisual tropes that capture a viewer’s attention, Cohen identifies multiple methods of garnering audience involvement depending on the target demographic. For example, with fictional televisual texts, children identify with animals even though animals do not present any similarities to young children.

Similarly, the characters in *Teen Mom OG* are presented in ways that make them appear relatable and easily received as televisual representatives regardless of whether or not their specific stories or background mirror those of the audience members. These representations offer ways of being that the viewer may potentially seek to emulate. Psychology and mass culture

scholar Michael P. Sipiora offers the reminder that “television serials advertise lifestyles; they bring styles of living to public notice” (188). With *Teen Mom OG*, the specific circumstances (of teen pregnancy) may not necessarily present any aspirational elements that the viewer wishes to embody, but the underlying ideology of overcoming odds is an established trope in American culture. This trope (and its underlying ideological apparatuses) is infused into the narrative of the series. The aspirational element resides in the methods with which these young parents appear to overcome these odds. Added to this are the promises of capital and success in exchange for visibility and access to private, domestic spaces. The way *Teen Mom OG* positions this pairing of aspirational elements of overcoming the odds and exchanging visibility for success is that it requires both a turn to the self (rather than revealing the actual real-world concerns caused by class, social status, economic matters, or the exploitative nature of capitalism) and to genuflect to authority – in this case the onscreen crew – which obscures the realities of the culture industry and the exploitative processes taking place.

### **The Perks and Punishments Embedded in *Teen Mom OG***

The *Teen Mom* franchise connects value and capital to participation in processes of surveillance and self-commodification. There is little focus by the cast of *Teen Mom OG* – as was done in *16 and Pregnant* and other versions of *Teen Mom* – on the economic or social burdens of raising children. In this way, the revamped series does not accurately represent any “regular” person’s life. It is a crafted presentation that does not reflect the actual realities of raising a child. It instead presents the realities of existing in a semi-public sphere while backed by the salary of being an onscreen talent without mentioning that financial backing at all. Despite references in the first episode to past drama the cast faced during the *16 and Pregnant* years, the

cast members initially appear put together, financially solvent, and relatively amiable when their present situation is placed (via the flashback sequences) in juxtaposition with the events of years past.

The cast members' participation on *Teen Mom OG* itself is what affords them the stability to raise their children (or navigate their decision to give up their child for adoption, in the case of Catelynn and Tyler) without the financial burdens or other challenges of raising kids. *Teen Mom OG* represents a homogenized view of motherhood, collapsing the complicated and nuanced realities of parenting and including in its place a kind of stardom through participation. This results in a normalizing of the processes involved in such programs -- surveillance, self-promotion, and self-commodification. These young mothers (and fathers) are *not* presented as wealthy, but they are not seen as impoverished either. This shapes the representation of young, unwed single parents through the televisual text. And their salaries for appearing on the show place them in a position of financial stability. In the February 2017 *In Touch Weekly* article "It Would Appear It Really Pays to Be a Teen Mom — Find out Their Crazy Impressive Salaries!" the magazine reported that most of the cast members from various seasons within the *Teen Mom* franchise make six figure salaries for each of their six-month filming contracts. Each of the *OG* cast members except for Farrah make at least \$250,000 per year of filming in addition to various endorsement deals and other reality show appearance fees. Farrah added to her fortune by appearing on other series such as *Couples Therapy* and *Single AF*, increasing her net worth considerably. Farrah also ran various businesses such as a frozen yogurt shop and a furniture store as well as deals with adult entertainment companies – a matter which led to her eventual termination from the series.

This information is readily available to the public, but it does not result in a formal questioning of the representation of the cast on the screen. In fact, in the construction of the series, the question of capital and socioeconomic standing is obscured, allowing for a whitewashing of important ideological questions related to race, class, surveillance, and success. The cast themselves support this representation in some ways. In her 2015 book, *Bulletproof*, Maci downplays her wealth with a dose of transparency. “Reality TV can make you very famous, but you basically get the shit end of the deal,” she writes. “Everyone knows your name and talks about you, but there’s no red-carpet prestige or glamorous piles of money” (119). Maci continues by affirming that her life hasn’t changed much from day to day. “The fact is, my real life isn’t that much different from what it would have been without MTV. I still live in Chattanooga and go to Walmart and buy bread and milk” (119). Maci’s assertion conveniently upholds her characterization on the series .

As the private domestic space becomes public within and through the series, the representation of the cast is simplified in favor of ideological positionings rooted in exploitation. *16 and Pregnant* may have shown the cast interacting with other individuals in their community, but the shift in focus in *Teen Mom OG* is one that emphasizes the interpersonal drama with family members and the relationships with the onscreen producers and crew. Maci may still shop at Walmart, but we never see her actually *at* Walmart in *Teen Mom OG*. These mothers, through navigating daily commotions ranging from potentially relatable, real life matters to soap opera-style melodrama, achieve success on many levels through their participation in a produced set of signs and symbols sanctioned by a television network, its advertisers, and their supporters that shape the representation of their lives in specific ways that benefit the series and the network. And, if they are seen in spaces outside the domestic realm in the series, these are environments

that are separated from the actual public. The camera crew, by its very presence, already creates a separation from the community. This creates not only a detachment from some forms of real life, but it also creates a new sense of self that, when supported by the production in ways that appear to benefit and support the cast, it appears there is no choice but to continue participating in the process of production. The cast realizes this as they also realize the inescapability of what they chose in starring on a reality TV series.

### **Close Reading: The Entrapments of Reality TV**

Midway through the first episode of the season, Amber, her mother, and her cousin Krystal get pedicures together at a local salon. While sitting at the individual pedicure stations lined up in a row in a medium shot, Amber's mother begins to criticize Gary for not being good enough (00:25:55 –00:27:03). Amber becomes irritated, sticking up for her ex for taking care of Leah when she was in prison (00:27:04 –00:27:10). Amber's cousin Krystal steps in to support Amber, but Amber's mother shuts her down. Krystal begins to cry, and Amber threatens to leave as the crew appears in the frame surrounding the drama (00:27:11 –00:27:52). The camera is shaky as Krystal leaves, ordering the crew to remove her mic pack as Amber's mother talks to *Teen Mom's* Executive Producer Morgan J. Freeman about how certain family members and friends only show support to Amber when the cameras are around (00:27:53 –00:28:10). The scene ends with everyone retreating to their respective corners with emotional music playing in the background (00:28:11 –00:28:15).

Later in the episode, in a wider angle filmed outside at dusk, Amber and Krystal talk in front of her house. Amber talks about feeling triggered to use drugs and her wish to just see her daughter (00:31:10 –00:31:43). Two camera crew are visible in shot and filmed by an additional

cameraperson. Amber and Gary then chat on the phone. Gary explains details of a vacation he will take with their daughter and his current girlfriend. Amber hangs up the phone and is shocked and begins to get irritated. After she hangs up, visibly affected by the conversation, she yells out in frustration into what initially seems like an empty room. The scene cuts to show MTV producer Heather standing at the foot of Amber's bed listening to Amber rant about her situation with Gary. Amber expresses her frustration and implies that she still has feelings for her ex (00:31:44–00:33:20). The camera is close and catches the heightened emotions in the room.

The conversation between Amber and producer Heather continues later in the episode. The scene, like many before it, is intimate, and reveals Amber's heartbreak and frustration. In voiceover, Amber explains that she is close with her producer, and has cut ties with many of her friends because she can no longer trust them since she's sober and they may not be. Amber elaborates on her woes over still having feelings for her as producer Heather looks on, quiet again except when Amber complains that she feels like she lost her whole family. Heather asks Amber to clarify how she lost her family, to which Amber responds that she didn't. The emphasis is on Amber realizing she has not lost her family because she is still alive to be there for her daughter (00:38:18 –00:39:28). In a close up, Amber looks over at Heather, wipes tears from her eyes, and regains her composure.

### **Close Reading: Reflections**

In both scenes where Amber finds herself in the midst of conflict, the production acts her mediator and protector. The inclusion of the production in this scene reflects the tactics used in other reality programs where the camera, boom mic, producers, or items that make up the set are revealed only when there is palpable tension, and it is made to appear like the production is

stepping in to help everyone regain calm.<sup>7</sup> This mediation is framed as an intervention or mentorship type of support, when in fact the inclusion of the crew – both in the actual narrative and in the final edit – reinforces the authority within the hierarchy outlined by Fiske and others. The participants on *Teen Mom OG* willingly agree to reveal personal details of their lives as an extension of their ongoing public narrative, but the exploitative nature of the series is still important to dissect, particularly as the series places intense scrutiny on the characters' personal dramas and familial dilemmas for the viewer's consumption. In order to keep viewers interested in the narrative, the conflict is usually what is highlighted most vividly in the episodes and across the span of the season and series. But the positioning of the onscreen producer and/or crew within this narrative is what actually navigates the story and manages the characters.

During Amber's rant about Gary, MTV producer Heather suddenly appearing in the scene is a jarring moment, because the viewer is reminded that a crew is there filming and watching the drama unfold. The jump cut from Amber by herself to Heather in the shot with Amber as she complains changes the dynamic of the action taking place. The choice to use the onscreen crew in the way MTV does is used to mollify the overwhelming nature of how invasive this kind of scrutiny actually is. The jarring moments are often framed in ways that humanize the crew or present them as support to the cast. Normalizing ideologies that are oppressive and problematic in favor of those in culture who enjoy positions of authority and power helps to make surveillance, exploitative labor practices, and alienation from the self as a consequence of treating the self as commodity appear less crushing. In turn, this helps to make the imposition of these same mechanisms and agents of power appear manageable for the at-home viewer.

The moments from the first episode of the first season of *Teen Mom OG* that are examined in close reading in this chapter highlight the different ways that the crew is included in

the action and in the visual space of the series. The intention is clear: including the crew in these scenes shows the closeness they share with the cast. But the motivation and the resulting configuration of messages is far more complicated. While it is clear that the cast and crew have a bond solidified over years of filming *16 and Pregnant*, multiple reunion specials, and now *Teen Mom OG*, critical scrutiny of the way the crew asserts its authority reveals the complexities in this new method of branding the series. The crew is ever-present, and in the final scene examined here, the framing of the intimate conversation and the editing of the scene leaves the producer with the last word in the conversation because of how she is able to calm Amber down. The inclusion of the crew in the series is handled masterfully, for the imposition of the production on the cast, while jarring, is presented (through the cast's voiceover and general tone between cast and crew) as supportive.

In consideration of the complicated tangle of ideas and themes revealed in this series, a number of questions are revealed: If the argument being made in seminal Cultural Studies theory is that circuits of culture depend upon *both* producer and consumer, what happens when both producer and consumer are included together within the televisual text? Does this deconstruct the process of cultural production or uphold its machinations with new kinds of opacity? And, how does this affect the reception, enjoyment, and pleasure of the televisual text? The production tactics revealed in this chapter show that the crew is presented in ways that make them appear amiable, warm, relatable, and not imposing, while the production continues to uphold its authority over the entire process and the crew has the last word more often than not. What results in the confirmation of this framework of authority affects the cast, altering their agency and autonomy whether or not they agree to participate in ways that follow the network's terms.

## The Outcast: Farrah Abraham

While the themes of empowerment and overcoming the odds are woven throughout *Teen Mom OG*, agency is treated in more complicated ways. At different points throughout the series, many of the main characters express apprehension regarding their participation in the production, challenging the normalization of surveillance and participation. This apprehension is framed as a continuation of the upheaval the characters experience in their filmed lives and is incorporated into the televisual flow of *Teen Mom OG* to embolden the overall mood that vacillates between tension and ease. The production capitalizes on this upheaval, piecing together the narrative in order to promote the kind of single-mindedness that author Barbara Ehrenreich refers to as “reckless optimism,” ensure ongoing participation in acts that blur the lines of the public and private, and framing potential revelatory acts within structures that [further] normalize the control of the production (Bright-sided 24). Most of the cast complies with this agreement.

The characters who refuse to participate or express frustration about the production process suffer consequences within the televised narrative by, for example, being vilified, placed in a position of pity, or dropped from the show altogether. Value is asserted in this program through the participation as well as the *assertions of participation* as a representation of an embrace of self-commodification and cultural production. Unlike the other cast members who threaten to leave at different points throughout the series but never do, Farrah recognizes her capacity to act independently and make decisions on her own, eventually deciding in the 2018 season to part ways with MTV for good. The conflict is captured on tape, and the footage is included in a multi-episode storyline as part of a multi-season flow of tension that reaches all the way back to the first episode of *Teen Mom OG* in 2015. In the first season, Maci objects to having Farrah return to the show because of her participation in an adult film. Unlike some of the

other cast members, whose only venture away from the MTV brand are book deals, a few small clothing lines, or reality shows that capitalize on their existing visibility as it is connected to MTV and to *Teen Mom OG*, Farrah expands her reach by starring on such shows as the British installment of *Celebrity Big Brother* and VH1's *Couples Therapy*. The appearances hinge as much on her connection to MTV and the *16 and Pregnant/Teen Mom OG* as they do on her infamy from involvement in productions unrelated to the network and series. Like her return to *Teen Mom OG* after appearing in a leaked sex tape (that may have been planned from the start), all of the reality experiences external to MTV were wrought with drama.

Seizing the opportunity, Farrah capitalizes on that drama to propel her brand toward global recognition, no matter her characterization or the consequences. It is a form of agency she seizes, but it requires a different relationship to the production process than MTV wishes for her because of the *Teen Mom* brand. The complicated form of agency embodied by Farrah is one made of a different artifice than MTV cosigns, therefore rendering Farrah a liability. Farrah undergoes multiple plastic surgeries, enjoys the tangled identity of young mother, entrepreneur, and adult entertainer, but this proves outside the brand identity envisioned by MTV.

Later seasons of *Teen Mom OG* show Farrah exploring many career paths including owning a frozen yogurt franchise, booking speaking engagements at entrepreneurial events and conferences, doing celebrity appearances at nightclubs, and running a furniture store. In numerous scenes in the 2018 season, Farrah and various producers and crew erupt in tension over Farrah's attitude and her potentially lucrative offers to star in adult-related content online. While all of the cast members explore their career moves in the series, it is Farrah's choice to explore the field of adult entertainment that MTV does not condone. Ultimately this particular issue deepens the rift and leads to her subsequent break with MTV. With the other cast members,

ideology is dispensed through a combination of fun, easy, palatable moments in conversation with ongoing bits of tension and conflict that capture the viewer's attention. Yet ideology can also be dispensed by revealing the consequences that happen to those not falling in line. The characterization of Farrah as an unsavory, "difficult" participant is evident from the very first episode of *Teen Mom OG* even before Farrah returns to the show as a regular cast member.

As the tension between Farrah and the production escalates, *Teen Mom OG* includes her explosive interactions with producers of the series, always emphasizing Abraham's volatility in the final edit. The episodes in which she engages in the conflict with producers receive extensive coverage in online blogs and entertainment talk shows, fueling the tension even further and strengthening her brand visibility, despite the negative backlash. The conflict between Farrah, the other cast members, and the [onscreen and behind-the-scenes] producers is presented as a liability, and her communication with the producers is presented as discord unfit for the network. But a critical interrogation of the series suggests that the actual conflict lies within Farrah's willingness to prioritize her body as a commodity in adult films and web series while simultaneously commodifying her immaterial labor within her domestic space for MTV.

In the March 12, 2018 episode ("Choose Your Path"), Farrah sits down with Executive Producer Morgan J. Freeman to discuss her future with the network and the series. Episodes leading up to the confrontation reveal Farrah arguing with junior producers over their treatment of her daughter and their "attitude" toward Farrah and her family during filming. The February 26, 2018 episode ("I'm Beautiful, I'm Smart, I'm Strong") sets up the conflict by showing extensive footage of the producers and crew chatting about Farrah's insufferable demeanor and career choices. The producers head to Texas for a sit-down, after which Farrah ultimately quits. On the series and in online coverage of the conflict, MTV and its producers are portrayed as the

reasonable party engaging with an unstable young woman. Yet it is crucial to remember that the choice being highlighted as problematic is simply Farrah's wish to exercise a right to control her brand apart from and beyond *Teen Mom* and MTV.

What Farrah's narrative points to is the implementation of a structure of authority imposed upon the cast members within which the young women and their family members are asked to follow the directive of the producers or risk consequences. Like other messaging embedded within the series, the vilification of Farrah and favorable representation of MTV are repeated throughout the season until Farrah's departure. These repetitions become ritualized as they continue through the series, supporting the way meaning is infused into the televisual text. By utilizing a somewhat friendly tone, the producers who appear in the series put themselves in the position of the relatable confidante that the cast adores. By doing so, the producers enforce a pre-existing hierarchy of authority and power upon both cast member and viewer. Characters such as Farrah are vilified in the series not only because they are difficult to work with, but also because they refuse to be obedient to the type of performed transparency and opacity put in place by the production. In the end, despite Farrah's departure from the series – or perhaps because of it – the frameworks put into place remain intact, and the remaining cast members continue their ongoing work or self-commodification within the structures of power that require this ongoing work.

## **Conclusion**

By scrutinizing *Teen Mom OG*, the imprint of ideology on the cultural product begins to reveal itself. The inclusion of the crew within the series is made to appear as if it is breaking down the divide between producer and participant in fun, mutually agreed upon ways that frame

the production and cast as equals. And yet, the production upholds this divide and the existing hierarchy of authority in ways that are enacted with new and complicated methods. Not only does *Teen Mom OG* rely on commodification to perpetuate ideology, it also complicates the role of the producer of culture through the use and representation of the onscreen crew. This complicated terrain of producer, consumer, and *producer alongside the consumer* reveals the ways this visual landscape informs the process of media reception and affects our understanding of media and culture.

In order to frame the ways that the tactics used in *Teen Mom OG* work to build a narrative that functions within an ongoing neoliberal project designed to retain a passive, obedient audience while supporting the production and producers of culture, it is important to consider the theoretical underpinnings that reveal themselves in this study. An understanding of how labor, alienation, and pleasure are carried within media designed to retain a structure of power rooted in capital and profit is necessary to media literacy on many levels.

### Chapter 3: Media and Cultural Studies Frameworks

"I saw otters in real life, which was very exciting for me. I love otters, big fan! So I post about it on Instagram, 'cause that's how you prove life happened."

- Michelle Wolf in *Michelle Wolf: Joke Show* (2019)

*Teen Mom OG* is a popular MTV series about young mothers navigating motherhood, family life, relationship issues, and the perks and consequences of agreeing to have their lives taped six years after they first appeared on the MTV docuseries *16 and Pregnant* in 2009. In each episode of *Teen Mom OG*, the viewer is welcomed into the cast members' homes and relationships to view what is presented as any typical day in their lives. Daily dramas such as interpersonal conflicts, custody issues, drug abuse, and mental health concerns are woven into a narrative that places onscreen production crew alongside the cast as costars.

What *Teen Mom OG* does is publicly present what typically takes place in private, domestic spaces. In doing so, the private sphere is transformed into a site for ongoing commodification of the self. This process reveals a significant shift in the concept of labor. It also situates what was once typically unseen (or not seen in this manner) within a performative framework that necessitates continuous publicized labor. The quote at the beginning of this chapter, stated by comedian Michelle Wolf in her 2019 Netflix stand-up special *Michelle Wolf: Joke Show* illustrates the way capitalism becomes internalized and the way individuals now feel compelled to perform acts that publicize private moments, feelings, and sites of pleasure in order to feel legitimate or validated. Yet these acts may actually contribute to the individual becoming even less connected to the self than before.

#### Labor, Capital, and Social Reproduction Theory

*Teen Mom OG* reveals significant theoretical considerations of capital, power, and public

and private labor. In examining the labor that workers provide in order to generate profit, Social Reproduction Theory scholars ask an important question: Who produces the worker? By asking this question, theorists in this field of inquiry attempt to address the importance of the kind of labor that takes place outside the typical workday that informs and shapes the worker. This question provides a starting point for the research into the ideologies of self-commodification and alienation that are embedded in *Teen Mom OG*. In the third volume of *Capital*, Karl Marx discusses public and private labor and the alienation the worker feels in the productive sphere, where the worker “only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working, he is not at home” (959). In their research, Social Reproduction Theory scholars emphasize the work done in private spaces (such as the home) that allow the worker to then contribute what Marxist theory positions as the labor that produces capital and wealth in society. This labor is ongoing, as the worker becomes compelled to incessantly create the commodity and replicate this process.

*Teen Mom OG* publicizes and commodifies the cast performing these at-home practices, diminishing and/or eliminating any privacy from the away-from-work spaces that Marx considers the sole sites where individuals are themselves (meaning where they are connected to the “species-being” or “species-essence”). On *Teen Mom OG*, the “at home,” which is typically considered separate from the labor that produces capital, is now transformed into a site where domestic, private, intangible labor is made profitable. By publicizing the private, it appears there are no longer any spaces away from forms of labor that alienate because the private and domestic have become coopted by neoliberal corporate capitalism. The tactics of metacommentary and self-reflexivity that are employed in the production contribute to a false sense of agency through which the cast is actually further alienated from the labor they provide and the means of

production.

The process of alienation dwarfs and potentially eliminates the connection to the self as well as to community. Reality TV contributes to complicated processes of off-site (away from the traditional) labor that individuals increasingly perform publicly and on social media in promotion of this labor. The function of the culture industry is to underwrite the ideological positionings that these exploitative systems and processes support. Television programs such as *Teen Mom OG* make these ideological impositions appear manageable or even appealing by presenting them in ways that appear benign. The mechanisms utilized by the producers of this televisual product make this private-made-public labor digestible for the viewer who then may internalize these ideologies of labor, performativity, and self-commodification in everyday life.

Many scholars working in Social Reproduction Theory emphasize the importance of understanding and prioritizing the labor that takes place away from the typical work environment or working hours. A Marxist understanding of this labor is crucial to a deeper understanding of what produces the worker. And, understanding what produces the worker helps understand the tactics used to effectively and seamlessly invite the consumer into the process of endless private labor made public that cements the individual's place within the hierarchy of power. The production tactics that are used to present a seemingly transparent cast, crew, narrative, and filming process disperse the problematic elements of this exploitative environment to the tame margins of comprehension. This is done while the consumer is asked to focus their attention elsewhere. This distraction is successful because of the emphasis on the easily digestible processes. One process is looking at life from a position of distance, either once removed from the event itself (which can be considered "looking at looking"). Another might be looking from a position twice removed by repetitiously emphasizing the self (which can be considered

“performing to be seen”) while existing at a distance from the actual event taking place. These distancing processes support the ongoing commodification of the self and contribute to the perpetuation of a hollow culture of individualism that allows for the system of capitalism and its gatekeepers to thrive and to rob the individual, the worker, and the consumer of their “species-being” or “species-essence.” What is promoted as a way of being that seemingly brings people deeper into themselves actually does the opposite by further alienating individuals and inviting them to perform increasingly toxic forms of self-commodification that exacerbate the exploitative nature of competitive individualism under neoliberal capitalism.

In Social Reproduction Theory, the life of the worker outside the workday is prioritized as a site of inquiry. Rather than consider the worker’s private and/or unpaid labor irrelevant or not instrumental to understanding the functions of capitalism and the hierarchies of power, these scholars choose instead, as Tithi Bhattacharya explains, to “interrogate the complex network of social processes and human relations that produces the conditions of existence for that entity” (2). With *Teen Mom OG*, the footage is filmed mostly inside the homes of its cast members, in domestic spaces and in seemingly private familial moments so that the viewer then sees the home life of the characters on television. What is presented in the series is private physical (tangible) and emotional (intangible) labor done primarily in domestic spaces (at-home interactions, conversations about childcare, relationships, daycare and parent custody exchange points in parks, cars, and nondescript public spaces, and home improvement projects). But with *Teen Mom OG*, the process (as Dubrofsky explains) of taking real-life moments and creating a constructed fiction called reality TV takes place within a framework where this private labor is *not* presented as labor. As a result, the notion that Marx outlines where the worker only feels himself outside his work becomes complicated, because the private sphere is now the onscreen

character's workspace made public.

### **Alienation and *Teen Mom OG***

In consideration of Marx's theory of alienation as it relates to *Teen Mom OG*, workers undergo alienation from themselves through the process of an increasingly intrusive environment where the home becomes the workplace, and the worker essentially never leaves. In this case, both the cast members and the onscreen crew members who are included in the narrative potentially suffer certain burdens of alienation, but in different ways. While neither the cast nor crew are factory workers and cannot be considered in the same manner as Marx's understanding of alienation in the mechanistic part of society, a form of alienation still takes place. Following Marx's line of thinking, cast and onscreen crew who sell their labor power are both potentially alienated from their labor as a result of their economic, social, and cultural capital being inextricably tied to their participation on this particular series in support of the MTV and *Teen Mom* brand. Because of this, the private life of the cast member is coopted into the cast member's labor power and made a commodity to be sold through the series. In the process, the life of the onscreen crew member is also forever altered because of their inclusion in this televised process. The difference here lies in the literal and the performed role that each participant embodies.

Onscreen, the crew is presented as doing their job, while the nature of the series – and much of reality TV itself – functions to present the cast not as explicitly working, but instead as living while the crew works by filming their daily lives. This distinction serves the production, for it supports the framework of authority that the tone of the series attempts to soften by showing the cast and crew as friends and collaborators. While alienation may affect both cast and crew, the authority of the production remains relatively untouched, while the cast members' lives

are changed forever. The crew can leave the production, while the cast are tethered to the production in multiple intertwined ways. And, in keeping with Marx's theoretical outline, the process of alienation also affects the relationship between individuals, changing the structure of social life in contemporary culture itself. According to Marx, "in the relation of alienated labor every man sees the others according to the standard and the relation in which he finds himself as a worker" (qtd. in Simon 65). Marx points to the competition that arises as a consequence of the process of alienation. The cast of *Teen Mom OG* – in an environment and a genre that thrives on competition and drama – internalize this way of being, perpetuating it as part of their job, while the onscreen and offscreen crew continue to navigate and manage the narrative and its characters even if they appear not to.

The hierarchy of authority embedded in the framework of the series allows for the onscreen crew member to inhabit sites away from their work where they may return to that "species-essence" as examined by Marx. Paired with the established role of the crew and onscreen producers, the freedom to leave work facilitates the autonomy of the onscreen crew regardless of their inclusion in the televisual text. Because of the fame and visibility of the cast members, the actual spaces and opportunities outside the cast member's contribution as a working participant on the series diminish as the processes of self-commodification become increasingly prominent and overwhelm the cast member's sense of actual community, self, and worth. The series, which requires drama and conflict in order to retain viewers, hinges on the exploitation that causes this alienation to propel the narrative. It is generally true, as queer activist, author, and professor of sociology Alan Sears explains, that "in capitalist societies, there is a separation between household and workplace," but with *Teen Mom OG* (as with other reality shows that highlight domestic life), this separation is collapsed and in many ways undone in

order to present a product that generates profit through ratings, advertising, and the social media reach of promotional content (“Body Politics: The Social Reproduction of Sexualities” 179). Private labor and the labor power of the cast are now commodified in the public realm, even as this labor is packaged as entertainment and presented simply as a glimpse into a young mother’s home life.

Economics scholar Serap Saritas Oran examines the understanding of labor power through interrogating Danish sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen’s concept of the decommodification of labor power. Oran reminds the reader that under capitalism, “workers themselves become commodities when they must rely on their labor power for survival and compete with one another to sell their labor power” (160). This process is made complex when this competition involves publicizing the private and the domestic on shows such as *Teen Mom OG*. The competition involves being so transparent that one’s personal life – part of what Marx considers the time when the worker feels the most connected to a true self – becomes the commodity being utilized for profit. And to keep this process continuous, the program employs such strategies as bringing the cast and crew on camera appearing as friendly equals to make this competition look pleasurable. Yet as author and *Jacobin* editor Nicole Aschoff explains, under Marxist considerations of the issue, “even though workers and investors meet each other in the marketplace, they do not confront each other as equals (...) Workers are free to sell their ability to work for a wage, but history also ‘freed’ them from owning the means to support themselves in any other way” (71). Utilizing such strategies as self-reflexivity, metacommentary, and breaking the fourth wall to include the crew alongside the cast underwrites hegemonic structures of power and cancels any other significant means of support, self-actualization, or agency outside the framework of capital.

## **Labor and *Teen Mom OG***

The publicized domestic moments on *Teen Mom OG* are comprised of acts and processes of labor. The producers unmask the private labor that takes place inside the homes of these cast members and embed it into new frameworks of labor to commodify the cast members' participation for profit. They do this while also simultaneously presenting parts of their own labor for the viewer within the narrative. This publicizing of the private and its repercussions mirror the ways that culture at large (with the help of social media) has taken a turn toward an emphasis of the personal and a neoliberal emphasis on competitive individualism over legitimate consideration of critical engagement, and a genuine consideration of the collective. This process of publicizing the private reveals the exploitative functions of the culture industry in ways that are new to this televisual genre. It is true, as Aschoff explains, that "the vast majority of people go to jobs that were not created to meet human needs but to give the owners of capital a return on their investment....not to satisfy human needs or provide for the common good" (2). What Aschoff points to is an oppressive framework that favors a certain population and requires the ongoing labor of another.

This ongoing labor results in what Sipiora explains as an estrangement that occurs "when people are separated from the process of externalization so that the what, how, and why of their life activities is determined by forces both independent and alien to them. Alienation is thus understood as a disruption of the relationships which structure the human world" (182). What is taking place, in part with the support of such cultural products as *Teen Mom OG*, is a change to the structure of the world in favor of welcoming, adopting and internalizing increasingly exploitative practices that erode the strength and power of collective action that supports the common good. The labor that results in this alienation requires upkeep, which requires the

ongoing use of ideological apparatuses that help retain the worker and physical practices enacted by the individual to uphold this process. The success of the perpetuation of these ideologies of labor, power, and hegemony requires an embrace and internalizing by the general public. In short, it requires framing ideology within a process that produces pleasure. How do the producers of culture enforce the mechanisms of capitalism in ways that are subtle or even pleasurable? Through the culture industry!

Producers of culture enforce mechanisms of capital, commodification, and alienation by infusing the ideologies of capitalism into the everyday items, products, and events that the consumer can enjoy in what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) explains as the imprints that form our *habitus* or our socially ingrained habits, responses, or dispositions. As the detrimental elements of these imprints of ideology become increasingly normalized through the consumption of cultural products, publicizing private labor is made to feel pleasant, enjoyable, and necessary to life and to achieving capital of all kinds. Aschoff is correct in her assertion that “for capitalism to survive and thrive, people must willingly participate in and reproduce its structures and norms” (2). One of the tools that supports these norms is the screen, which is examined by scholars such as Aschoff and Sherry Turkle. As Sipiora explains, “the television screen becomes the psychological world and, as we gaze into its mirror, a vicarious self-knowledge is programmed through the stories told” (185). That *Teen Mom OG* (like other shows) obscures the labor involved by framing it simply as at-home living with a friendly crew that appears to be casually and amiably surveilling the cast’s every move for as long as is humanly possible reveals the ways the televisual reinforces the structures and norms of capitalism. This is especially important in *Teen Mom OG* because the program is targeted to young viewers beginning to embark upon a lifetime of various forms of labor and the commodification of their own public and private lives.

To make labor not look like labor, and to make the exploitation of labor power not feel exploitative – while bringing the private into the public – requires the ongoing and repeated or ritualized commodification of the self so that consumers internalize and embody the ideological apparatuses that propel this process. A question that follows: How does *Teen Mom OG* make publicizing the private labor enacted by its cast palatable, relatable, and enjoyable for the viewer?

### **Individualism, Self-Actualization, and the Culture of Narcissism**

In his examination of our American culture of narcissism (from the end of World War II to the 1970s when he wrote the text), historian and social critic Christopher Lasch attempted to understand culture through an examination of psychoanalytic terms and frameworks. He did so to illuminate a period in western culture when psychoanalysis and varying modes of therapeutic means of self-discovery were employed within a larger ideological movement. His was an understanding of the burdens of capitalism and the infusion of commodification into the everyday habits and rituals of the masses. The exploitative underbelly of this consumerist framework continues to reveal itself today. Within this period of post-World War II American enlightenment are revelatory moments that problematize this purportedly therapeutic and empowering mode and reveal a narcissism masked as self-exploration and self-actualization. Lasch examined various examples of “the culture of competitive individualism, which in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war on all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self” (xv). The culture that Lasch criticizes and laments is one that operates under the premise of individualism as a channel toward deliverance and liberation. The ideology of American individualism is supported in programs like *Teen Mom OG* by rooting the pleasure of witnessing individuals

watching and performing various versions of the self for the camera within a competitive capitalist framework that is made to appear appealing and relatable. This individualism rests within two coexisting notions: the capitalist receives the benefits of the worker individual, and the individual must conduct themselves as a self-commodifying entity in order to succeed within capitalism. Yet within this process lie the conditions that Marxist theory confronts as manipulative and wholly exploitative of the labor of the working subject. As media scholars Toby Miller and Alec McHoul assert, “For radicals, the taste for therapy and personal growth is a bourgeois phenomenon, a luxury of commercial interiorization unavailable to those preoccupied with subsistence living” (96). Programs such as *Teen Mom OG* address this phenomenon, romanticizing these bourgeois notions to infuse them into the viewer’s consciousness while simultaneously perpetuating them in every episode. By presenting a cast consisting primarily of lower middle class and working-class young women attaining various forms of capital as a result of their participation in the publicizing of their private lives, the possibility of class ascendance and increase in various forms of capital appear tenable and possible for the viewer. But this ascendance requires new, perpetually replicating forms of sacrifice and is not tied to any specific talent, athleticism, intellectual prowess, or ability to strategically maneuver in any sort of competitive arena. Within the televisual text, these sacrifices must be made to appear manageable enough to disguise the authoritative manner with which they govern the individual.

The culture which Lasch illuminates is one where “strategies of narcissistic survival now present themselves as emancipation from the repressive conditions of the past, thus giving rise to a ‘cultural revolution’ that reproduces the worst features of the collapsing civilization it claims to criticize” (xv). Lasch’s argument that the repressive shackles that are seemingly cast away but are actually reinforced in the ideologies of self-commodification resonate even now (see De Vos,

2010). Lasch highlighted the development of this culture of narcissism with an examination focused on psychology and theory. As the tactics that perpetuate this narcissism masked as self-exploration and self-improvement became increasingly infused into popular televisual texts in the 1980s and 90s – first with daytime talk shows, and later with the confessional aspects within early reality TV crafted for mass consumption – the emphasis on the self was infused into a consumerist ideology where self-analysis and self-promotion became conjoined. Scholars such as Janice Peck have examined the confessional elements to what can be called an “Oprah phenomenon” in its influence on culture. As Aschoff explains (referring to Peck’s work), “Oprah’s evolution from pathologizing problems to spiriting them away is mirrored in the evolution of neoliberalism starting in the 1980s” (87). Viewers who look up to such cultural icons as Oprah engage in a parasocial connection to the onscreen icon. Grasping onto the aspirational tone infused into the Oprah brand, her fans often wish to emulate her approach, which she presents as wholly embracing habits, rituals and practices rooted in the consumption and practice of self-improvement and wellness products, exercises, and conversations.

Thus, the shift from critical self-examination as connected to self within a community and its potential collective growth to a neoliberal, consumer-based self-help approach that is rooted in individualism and easily allows for the exploitative mechanisms and consumerist frameworks of the producers of culture takes place. The viewer does not immediately realize this is taking place, because, as Aschoff reminds her reader, “Oprah is appealing precisely because her stories hide the role of political, economic, and social structures” (100). And in hiding this role, the hierarchy of power within culture is protected, all while the promises of the American Dream are dispensed and upheld through the messages, representations, and products offered to the viewer. This hierarchy of power and authority is retained and reproduced in programs such as

*Teen Mom OG* even as it is presented in ways that make it appear broken down in favor of the cast member as representative of the empowered individual and not as a worker beholden to the producers of culture.

The evolution of this commodified individualism is one that gives rise to a guise of self-exploration within conventional consumerist boundaries. Elements integral to the holistic approach to spiritual enlightenment are now infused into this consumerist framework. The repetitive mantra, for example, is now less about spiritual practice, and more about a ritualized repetition of a commodified spirituality often connected to products and gadgets and wellness plans for sale. The focus turns from understanding the self, to *performing an understanding of the self* for the goal of self-promotion, brand expansion, and self-commodification. The shift in content on Oprah's daytime talk show in the early 2000s reveals this evolution. Reality TV weaves these complicated matters into messages that mirror those in daytime talk shows. The reality TV genre both obscures and reinforces the ideologies it asks its viewers to adopt through a process of escape from the difficulties of reality and pleasure in the act of watching television. Television itself succeeds in dispensing these signs and symbols because of the way the medium functions and because of its ability to provide seemingly endless televisual imagery and stimuli. This constant and ongoing televisual mechanism which began in the analog age and adapted to the digital age and to social media is part of a natural evolution of the process of televisual *flow* in the culture industry.

### **Televisual *flow***

The study of the landscape within which exists this ongoing and unending need for content, labor, and commodification that reinforces and reproduces power has roots in Cultural

Studies scholarship. Theorist Raymond Williams investigated the concept of the *flow* of televisual messages in 1974, acknowledging the existence of “interruptions” (via the television commercial, for example) to a continuous stream of broadcast imagery. Challenging the existing understanding of interruptions to the televisual, Williams examined how modern broadcast television presents imagery – and its signs, symbols, and ideologies – in a manner that comprises an *uninterrupted flow* geared toward the television consumer. What is being offered, Williams argues, is not, “in older terms, a programme of discrete units with particular insertions, but a planned *flow*, in which the true series is not the published sequence of programme items but this sequence transformed by the inclusion of another kind of sequence, so that these sequences together compose the real *flow*” of broadcasting itself. (91) Television, as Williams sees it, is less about distinct and discreet visual narratives, the way one may refer to a book or a magazine article, or even a film, but a continuous *flow* of images and, in turn, an ongoing presentation of their representation of ideology. As Williams sees it, one does not really watch specific shows rather than watching television as a whole. When reality TV officially became a staple in televisual culture in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as Curnutt explains, “The significance of this moment was also reflected in the way reality TV’s participants went from being ‘on television’ to being ‘on reality TV’” (1061). *Teen Mom OG* – as part of a larger franchise including but not limited to *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* – is no different in its approach. As with most other reality programs, the flow moves from the series to other series that exist alongside it, to blogs and websites about it in an endless flow of content for the viewer to peruse or engage with in a number of different ways.

Not only does reality TV follow Williams’ understanding of *flow* in terms of broadcasting, narrative, and access, but, in this new age of digital technology and surveillance

practices, televisual texts now perpetuate the *flow* of continuous visibility through surveillance, self-surveillance, 24-hour access to news, entertainment, and related online content. If, in Williams' time, the shift moved from watching a specific film, play, or musical event to the process of "watching television," it is now one step further with the advent of online access. There is rarely a time – save for power outage or mass catastrophe – where our access to content is interrupted. The access to thousands of titles, memes, tweets, films, and commentary online is advertised and promoted as a way to ease or inspire the consumer through the process of choice, but the end result may also be considered as an all-encompassing blob.

The *flow* of televisual content in contemporary online culture allows the viewer the ability to binge-watch an entire TV series in one sitting or view content on a phone, tablet, or computer at any hour of the day. One may watch something while simultaneously looking up its cast members' social media pages or recent tweets. And, as revealed in the study conducted by Kearney and Levine, *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* did spark new forms of engagement whereby fans simultaneously checked social media before, during, and after watching the new episode of their favorite television show about teen mothers. Viewers have moved from watching specific programs to watching television to consuming content. And, as content is now available anytime, so is the need for new content to be generated and displayed at all times. This need is met with such an abundant output of televisual texts that the competition for viewership is intensified and met with new tactics such as characters perpetually performing self-reflexivity and metacommentary in their publicized private spaces to invite viewership through seemingly endless visibility.

The *flow*, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is one that requires ongoing consent to surveillance, acquiescence to the authority embedded in the hierarchy of power in cultural production, and the

breakdown of boundaries between public and private. This requirement of ongoing and increasing obedience to and participation in practices that pacify and dilute individual agency necessitates the implementation of tactics that normalize production processes that require visibility, surveillance, and consent. These tactics are used to normalize the *flow* of the televisual and the system of authority and power within which the televisual resides. The most enticing way that producers of culture have been able to court viewership as a means to invite consumers to engage in this process of flow is by emphasizing the compulsive act of looking at oneself. The embedding of ideological messaging that promotes acts focusing on the self occurs on multiple levels, be it within a particular program, in multiple programs in conversation with one another, or in layers of media under an overarching umbrella of visual content. And the motivator within such visual content is what viewers find enjoyable, fun, exciting, enthralling, and pleasurable.

### **Organizing Pleasure and the Act of Viewing**

What drives viewers to continue watching is the pursuit of pleasure. Ang considers the kinds of pleasure experienced or obtained from the act of watching television. In her research on viewer responses to the popular 1970s television series *Dallas*, Ang confronts the process by which pleasure is produced. She begins with the reminder that many scholars point to by connecting television and advertising: “Nobody is forced to watch television; at most, people can be led to it by effective advertising. What then are the determining factors of this enjoyment, this pleasure?” (9) Her examination delves into the functions involved in watching television. Ang’s consideration offers an understanding of the mechanisms that are enacted in organizing pleasure for the viewer. As she explains, “It is in the actual confrontation between viewer and programme that pleasure is primarily generated” (10). Ang points to the relationship between viewer and

onscreen talent as well as to the solitary and collective acts of receiving and decoding meaning from within the televisual text.

Ang explores what she identifies as the *ideology of mass culture*, which places “bad objects” such as *Dallas*, talk shows and other low culture “trash” TV in comparison or in contrast with high culture or “good culture” which may be more intellectually stimulating or aesthetically pleasing (94). What is key to the way viewers differentiate between bad and good in their response to the televisual text is embedded in performing this *ideology of mass culture*. Whether employing irony or humor into their response, or downplaying interest in the cultural product by prefacing expressions of interest with criticism, the response to the way pleasure is organized or produced reveals the potential sites of agency for the viewer as well as the tendencies to deflect which may perpetuate passivity among the viewer.

The construction of *Teen Mom OG* makes it such that the confrontation between viewer and the series includes more layers to it than other programs in which the crew is not featured prominently. What this inclusion may do if the process of viewing is appealing for the viewer, is suggest (in not-so-subtle ways) that the confrontation become infused with acts of self-promotion in the way the cast of the series does and figures of authority – as represented by the crew in relatively favorable light – support. The process of engaging with the feeling of pleasure is coopted by the invitation to engage in ways that require labor and obedience but are framed visually and technically as simply living on camera.

With *Teen Mom OG*, the reconfiguration of the mechanisms of pleasure contribute to the experience of watching the program. And, as the possibilities of engaging with multiple platforms while watching television grow, what is important to consider when examining the reception of this televisual *flow* by closely reading the blog pages and fan comments is whether

or not viewers engage in ways that stretch beyond the passive consumption of the television series. How are the responses rooted in the expressions of the *ideology of mass culture*? How do viewers perceive the cast and crew, and what does that reveal? Do the online responses from *Teen Mom OG* fans simply reveal another manifestation of the *ideology of mass culture*, or do viewers create new forms of community, connection, and critical consideration in their interactions about the show? And, how do the problematic and potentially exploitative ideological messages embedded in the series compel viewers to adopt or reject the habits, acts, and practices normalized in the series in ways that will potentially help or hurt them?

### **Looking at Looking**

One practice revealed in *Teen Mom OG* and in other reality programs is something that may be called “looking at looking.” This is where the process of watching or of participation is documented and then prioritized over the actual event that is taking place. “Looking at looking” shares some elements with metacognition, which is generally explained as “thinking about thinking.” According to scholar Jennifer A. Livingston who cites and examines the work of developmental psychologist and researcher John Flavell (1979,1987), “metacognition consists of both metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive experiences or regulation. Metacognitive knowledge refers to acquired knowledge about cognitive processes, knowledge that can be used to control cognitive processes” (3). Livingston summarizes Flavell’s studies by outlining three categories: Knowledge of person variables, task variables and strategy variables. The implementation of metacognitive practices is linked to an increase in reaching cognitive goals such that, “Cognitive strategies are used to help an individual achieve a particular goal (e.g. understanding a text) while metacognitive strategies are used to ensure that the goal has been

reached (e.g. quizzing oneself to evaluate one's understanding of that text)” (4). Livingston adds that metacognitive acts often occur when cognition fails, and the individual performs self-assessment in order to devise strategies for future cognition and success. While metacognition is referred to in the self-reflexive and metacommentary acts that drive reality TV, the difference lies in the site of power that is engaged.

When considering “looking at looking” and its manifestations in self-reflexive televisual content or metacommentary in popular cultural products, critical thinking is not the primary emphasis. The turn to oneself is emphasized as a perpetual enactment of self-involvement that producers of culture coopt in order to create a successful series, brand, and cultural product. The turn inward is managed by external forces of capital. Further, while processes such as metacognition aim to enrich the individual with tools (or the search for tools) for better cognition or thinking, self-reflexivity and metacommentary in *Teen Mom OG* is often nudged along by the onscreen producers, such that the end result takes the agency embedded in the cognition, understanding, or problem-solving away from the cast member. This mode of cultural production and courting viewers bears significance in the ways it is inscribed with value, and the way it underwrites acts that support continuous [paid and unpaid, public and private] labor. For, inscribed in the perpetual enactment of self-involvement as supported by the onscreen producers is the acquiescence that perpetually upholds structures of power. This acquiescence is achieved on *Teen Mom OG* not only with positive representations of publicizing the private for profit and various forms of capital, but with moments of conflict or refusal to participate that also enforce these frameworks as well.

As Aschoff explains, “at the systemic level, critical voices are productive and fruitful for capitalism, forcing capitalism to evolve and temporarily resolve some of its contradictions and

thus preserving it as a system for the long haul” (3). While a threat to quit by cast members on any television series may seem dangerous, when it is infused by the producers and editors into the narrative, it becomes utilized as a critical voice that continues to perpetuate ideologies of capitalism, labor, and surveillance. The frustrated or disgruntled cast members on *Teen Mom OG* whose exasperation over having their private lives publicized almost always decides to continue filming, in part because their participation in the filming process seems to uphold their cultural, social, and financial capital. And, most of the potentially “metacognitive” moments that the cast may have undergone to reach certain decisions are conveniently omitted from the final cut of each episode. Capital in this case requires continued allegiance to MTV and the *Teen Mom* brand. While this allegiance is somewhat profitable to the cast members, it is contingent on labor which favors the network rather than the individual. This framework does not translate in the same way to the average working person who is not supported by a multi-million-dollar television network. Thus, the ideology presented in the televisual text, while aspirational for the viewer, is ultimately illusory. And, when adapted into everyday life, the framework upheld by these ideological apparatuses confirms and perpetuates social, economic, and structural inequality while simultaneously supporting the continued passivity of the viewer and reality TV fan.

The pleasure in watching television is often explained in Media Studies as an escape, a rejection of what plagues the viewer’s everyday, mundane life. Yet according to literary and cultural critic Michael Wood, entertainment is not, “as we often think, a full-scale flight from our problems, not a means of forgetting them completely, but rather a rearrangement of our problems into shapes, which tame them, which disperse them to the margins of our attention” (18). Taming these problems makes them easier to digest. Making these problems appear relatable and at the

same time more burdensome than the viewer's own life also appeals to the consumer. This paradoxical rearrangement of problems delivers the viewer the opportunity to find safe, often passive pleasure in the viewing process. Pleasure, it seems, lies in passively consuming rather than actively engaging in the televisual text. This behavior may then become incorporated by the viewer into daily life when the performed self-reflexivity witnessed on the television screen is adopted under the illusion of agency and without consideration of its consequences, diminishing the authentic and genuine connections to self (that actual metacognition embodies) and to community that the televisual appears to support. *Teen Mom OG* reveals the ways in which MTV has taken its cues from social media and online culture to embed their own cultural products with practices and approaches that are prevalent in the digital world that are themselves rooted in ongoing intangible labor.

Social media practices and platforms – which emphasize “looking at looking” rather than bearing witness to [or participating in] the actual event, problem, or discussion – increasingly influence the taming and rearrangement of problems and concerns in everyday life. Examples in online culture of the type of “looking at looking” that informs this study include the repetitive nature of the 24-hour news cycle, the disappearing “story” in such apps as Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook (where one may design their own daily narrative using text and images), the use of selfies (where individuals emphasize the self-portrait snapshot in front of a place or event to online “followers” rather than simply taking a picture of the thing they happen to be looking at), the “Share a Memory” feature on Facebook (where the online platform selects a post that the user uploaded in the past with the option for the Facebook user to repost it to their Timeline with a new idea or comment related to the “remembering” of that event), trends on Tik Tok where users imitate short dance sequences that have already been performed by countless others and are

making the rounds online, and the #ThrowbackThursday and #FlashbackFriday (#TBT/#FBF) trends on social media platforms where users post childhood photos or related nostalgic posts that point to older content. These tools exist under an overarching system of *flow* that keeps the viewer occupied and consumed much like the way Williams viewed broadcast television as a seamlessly *flow* from one program or set of visual material to the next.

These social media tools invite users to think less about what is taking place in the world around them within a larger context of systems, mythmaking, power structures and ideology, and more about how these events can satiate their own desires. This process of “looking at looking” relies on the inclusion of the self in the foreground. There is trickery taking place, for it appears as if the focal point is on the self in relation to the world, with the promise of empowerment in the expression of the enriched self who is seeing and experiencing life. But it is actually the self *in relation only to the self* in which this expression requires the endless labor of self-assertion (which simultaneously perpetuates the alienation of the self from their labor, the products of their labor, and their “species-being” or ‘species-essence’). This emphasis (by producers and consumers alike) on the self only somewhat in relation to what is happening rather than in examining and engaging with the actual events taking place also shapes the way news and current events are reported.

On mainstream American news these days, it is often less about the actual event transpiring. Instead, it is about the coverage of the event, and retaining, preserving, or rebuilding the cultural capital of the reporter, pseudo-celebrity, criminal suspect, or the commentator presenting the event. Or, it becomes about provoking reactions to the event rather than bearing witness – as part of a community as a collective entity – to the actual thing taking place. An examination of both the 2016 and 2020 US presidential election processes and the news coverage

of their events reveals daily instances where actual issues were trumped by sound bites, tweets, commentary, or revisionist spin of the items in discussion that serve to reproduce power rather than critically motivate the audience.

Often, participants engage in what might be considered a reformulating of encoded messaging in order to create new content which follows the negotiated or oppositional codes as outlined by Hall in his understanding of the circuit of culture. For example, while some news outlets focused on the events of the first night of the Democratic National Convention in July 2016, other reporters and outlets emphasized panel discussions in response to the convention or promoted articles and stories about watching the convention taking place, sometimes from afar. Seattle-based writer and Editor-at-Large of *The Establishment* Ijeoma Oluo constructed an entire story about her night of “drunk-tweeting the DNC,” as much for entertainment value and certain forms of pleasure and/or titillation as for a shift of focus from the actual Democratic National Convention event to the act of watching and witnessing the event taking place. The difference between an engaged process whereby metacommentary and/or self-reflexivity can act as a catalyst for generative metacognition, critical engagement and a disengaged act of “looking at looking” is rooted in whether or not the act prioritizes a resulting visibility, likes, or retweets, which in this cultural moment are inextricably tied to capital and value whether or not they reformulate or reimagine existing content. And many, including politicians, rely on any path to increased and ongoing visibility, especially if it obscures other potentially damaging or exploitative acts taking place.

According to Tony Brasunas, writing about Donald Trump on *Medium* online about the 2016 presidential election, “If any candidate receives hours of coverage by the major media, for free, every single night, for a year, he or she will win elections, and possibly the presidency”

(par. 4). An important caveat is that misrepresentation, within this framework, is excused for the sake of contributing to the creation of more content and viewership, which then requires ongoing participation. This process of self-promotion becomes its own self-consuming monster, detached from the interrogation of actual issues and events, and eventually doing little more than simply perpetuating the process of commodification and reproducing power. Within the political context, the approach that propelled the 2016 presidential election cycle continues in the 2020 election race, perhaps as part of an ongoing *flow* of political televisual media.

This detachment from critical and genuine consideration of the event itself to focus on “looking at looking” as an extension of self-promotion, entertainment, and popularity is as evident in our political and cultural leaders as it is in our journalists, reporters, and entertainers. Peter Pomerantsev explains in *Granta*: “We are living in a ‘post-fact’ or ‘post-truth’ world. Not merely a world where politicians and media lie – they have always lied – but one where they don’t care whether they tell the truth or not” (par. 1). Opinion, provocation of emotion, and constructed public relations promotion that obscures the truth are now accepted as on par with – and as legitimate as – fact. The supposed transparency offered with metacommentary is now legitimized with the use of photo, video, audio, or linguistic “proof” that the consumer consumed what was being offered for consumption. What is taken as fact in this process is not reality, but a highly produced, performed reality designed to evoke emotion to promote products and ideologies for a desired outcome and keep the consumer detached from the actual events taking place that affect individuals, communities, and culture at large. This process is a form of discipline imposed on individuals within a televisual and digital panopticon. It is visible to the critically minded viewer. And yet, in spite of understanding it, the emphasis still tends to shift from critical intervention of the event itself to performing the witnessing of the event, which

devalues and conceals the importance of the event itself (and its consequences) in order to situate the consumer as commodity. It is as if Adorno's words have come to life. The consumer desires the deception but asks for it to appear uncovered for their enjoyment and entertainment.

### **The Inauthenticity in Performing the Self as a Commodity**

The reproduction of power within the culture industry requires the participation of both producer and consumer. This is one reason why the invitation to engage in the culture industry must be made palatable, pleasurable, and fun. In televised sporting events, the TV camera will often pan to the crowd, where viewers see attendees watching the sport and then recognizing themselves on the stadium TV screens that air the live feed from the camera. The camera crew captures and presents to the at-home viewer the open access to someone looking at something else, then becoming exponentially more excited about seeing themselves on the Jumbotron, normalizing this performative act and its embedded ideologies along the way. This tactic of engagement is not always embedded in a spontaneous act. The 2018 Super Bowl halftime musical performance not only featured singer Justin Timberlake belting out some of his greatest hits, but it also highlighted fans taking selfies next to and in front of the singer as he ran through the crowd.

The selfie takers then performed unacknowledged labor by posting their selfies on social media. Social media users then performed additional unacknowledged labor by reposting these selfies, making them go viral and further promoting the singer, the sporting event, and the multimillion-dollar entertainment event backed by billion-dollar corporations such as Pepsi and Budweiser that sponsor the sporting highlight of the year. While Timberlake himself – like all Super Bowl performers – did not get paid for his performance, the performance offered lasting

support of his cultural capital, overall popularity, and future profit. As Zack O'Malley Greenburg explains in a 2018 article for *Forbes*, “Halftime show stars in recent years have seen double- and triple-digit percentage spikes in the consumption of their music in the days following the Super Bowl” (par. 5). But the success of the event required the contribution of audience members providing labor to promote his brand online. As with the cast of *Teen Mom OG*, the labor by fans at such events is made to appear fun, personally rewarding, and not actual labor, while the pop star – like the onscreen producers and crew – are recognized as the ones working for the enjoyment of the viewer.

The interaction between onstage talent and the selfie-taking audience members (and folks tweeting at home) reveals its performative aspects in its emphasis on capturing and presenting commentary supported by participants who perform unacknowledged labor rather than on emphasizing the facts, specific event, or larger ideas themselves. When a film crew captures imagery of individuals at sporting events, a similar process takes place. The moment of onscreen recognition of the gaze of the camera by the sports fan reveals the process whereby the acknowledgment of seeing and being seen then quickly transfers into *performing* the “seeing to be seen.” The viewer becomes infused into the processes of production and consumption through the act of showing they are watching as a proof of participation. These acts of “performing to be seen” are noticeable in social media, where the initial excitement of engaging with an app or particular networking site soon results in the user either inadvertently or intentionally promoting the app through a variety of forms of self-expression.

On online platforms, the invitation to engage through assertions of the self requires engagement in a promotion of the platform and the tools that offer this engagement. This interaction results in a coopting and a commodification of the user as consumer-promoter with

applications and pastimes advertised for social and entertainment use. These platforms and tools promote the desire to endlessly engage by existing in a constant state of promotion (of the self, of the product – which is often also the user themselves). In the process, a deceptive pleasure in self-commodification is rendered as a component that is as important as the sporting event, the items being advertised, or the highly paid athletes competing ferociously to win titles, medals, and product endorsements. The seductive nature of visibility and fame adds to the appeal.

In online culture, “looking at looking” is a kind of endless process fortified by social media algorithms that are designed to “match” users with other users, posts, or pages depending on what the user prefers depending on their “likes.” Yet according to business professor Kartik Hosanagar, “the primary issue is that we deliberately choose actions that push us down an echo chamber” (par 15). Presenting research on the parallel between the gentrification of neighborhoods of citizens from similar socioeconomic backgrounds to the landscape of social media, Hosanagar emphasizes the consumer’s role in the perpetuation of this echo chamber, reminding his reader that, “social discourse suffers when people have a narrow information base” (par. 2). Similarly, critical thinking suffers when the consumer’s myopia contributes to an ongoing culture of narcissism fueled by repetitive or ritualized acts of self-commodification. No longer is the product the only commodity. It is now framed so that the consumer becomes the commodity.

Within this context of considering the consumer also a commodifiable entity, the process of “looking at looking” is manifested not only in the simple act of recognizing oneself on the sports arena screen or the computer screen or a smartphone app, but also in the acts of surveilled and/or televised self-expression. Self-reflexivity becomes performance through a superficial assertion of self-expression, ideologically supporting the commodification of the self. The

emphasis on “looking at looking” – whether in the televisual reality TV text, in social media, in broadcast sports, or on the news, confirms what Lasch understands as “the narcissist’s pseudo-insight into his own condition,” where the emphasis turns to “deflecting criticism and disclaiming responsibility for his actions” (19). According to Lasch, these narcissistic processes of self-expression do not reveal an authentic voice or identity, but instead, embody the opposite of authenticity, resulting in the degeneration of the individual into a parody of the self (through the process of self-commodification), while at the same time insulating them “against the horrors around them – poverty, racism, injustice” through the processes of pacification and quietude (25).

Even as parody, self-expression through its various modes of self-reflexivity provides the individual a protection from genuine engagement with the world by offering a seemingly legitimate emphasis and focus. Further, it allows space for deceptive practices rooted in the act of self-promotion. Reality TV stars, celebrities, and even political candidates are given the platform to speak untruths into existence simply by the repetitious nature of self-promotion. With the young mothers on *Teen Mom OG*, as with contestants and characters on other reality programs, this deceptive process can be damaging and even lethal, as it directly affects not only the onscreen participant, but also the viewer who develops a relationship with the onscreen figure.

### **Self-Commodification and the Parasocial Relationship**

In order to interrogate and further contextualize into scholarship what is labeled in this research as “looking at looking,” the emphasis on the self as a process of self-commodification must be problematized by uncovering its complex method of engaging the consumer. In the

framework of the Parasocial Interaction (PSI), the relationship is between the at-home television viewer and what scholars Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) refer to as the onscreen “persona” in conversation with the at-home viewer. In the traditional understanding of the psychology of relationships, a parasocial dynamic is one that is typically one-sided, requiring energy and investment primarily from one party involved (See Giles 2003). In the case of the interaction between television, film, and/or other forms of media audience members and the onscreen persona, the element of celebrity is infused into this uneven relationship. In their research, Horton and Wohl examine such representations as *The Lonesome Gal* on the radio in the 1940s and Miss Nancy Berg in television’s *Count Sheep*, produced in the 1950s. In each example, the star plays to the whims of the viewer/listener in ways that invite them into a performed world designed to invite intimacy and evoke familiarity through the cultivation of a kind of relationship with the audience.

In televisual media, the parasocial interaction is created through the use of various tactics to mesmerize the viewer into feeling as if they are acquainted with the onscreen persona. Put simply, the parasocial helps explain what makes an onscreen stranger seem relatable, authentic (or not), and in many ways exciting to watch. As Horton and Wohl explain, “the spectacular fact about such personae is that they can claim and achieve an intimacy with what are literally crowds of strangers, and this intimacy, even if it is an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by that word, is extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive it and share in it” (216). In the case of *The Lonesome Gal* on the radio, and *Count Sheep* on television, the producers cultivated a sense of intimacy between the onscreen persona and the at-home audience. The way they did this was through the use of sex appeal and verbal assurances meant to help ease the at-home viewer’s loneliness.

Each of these programs presented audiences with a sexualized yet approachable female who spoke to the audience and invited the audience into a parasocial relationship. The authors explain how “both programs were geared to fostering and maintaining the illusion of intimacy ” (225). This intimacy allows the spectator a glimpse of what is presented as the private environment of the onscreen persona. The viewer (or radio listener) may enjoy this illusion of friendship, familiarity, or intimacy from the safety and comfort of their own home. It is a private interaction with a public figure that is designed to mimic a genuine relationship that is offered within a framework of idolatry and authority because of its aspirational representation of celebrity rather than solidarity rooted in communication and equality. This idolatry upholds the culture industry by inviting passivity by the viewer, who nevertheless feels emboldened by the intimacy they are seemingly privy to as a result of the successful implementation of the tactics employed in the framework of the parasocial. Unlike the sexualized characterizations in *The Lonesome Gal* and *Count Sheep*, the young mothers in *Teen Mom OG* (who were pregnant at as teen during the filming of *16 and Pregnant*) are desexualized. In fact, overt sexuality appears to be discouraged on the series, as is revealed in the way Farrah is characterized after appearing in an adult entertainment production. A few examples of this discouragement are the latent shame associated with teen pregnancy that occasionally bubbles up to the surface in the series, the overt disdain by Maci for cast member Farrah Abraham, or the various expressions of judgement and shame toward Farrah by the MTV producers and crew. With *Teen Mom OG*, viewers are not necessarily invited to covet or desire the specific cast member(s) but are instead invited to witness their vulnerabilities and potentially adopt certain performative actions in their own lives. The parasocial in contemporary reality TV promotes practicing the assertion of the self through

the form or tone of the practice of self-expression rather than supporting the exercise of genuine awareness of the self.

What is important to remember, particularly as the concept of the parasocial relates to *Teen Mom OG*, is the homogeneity in the portrayal of the cast members. With the characters that Horton and Wohl examine in their research, “their actual personalities, and the details of their backgrounds, are not allowed to become sharply focused and differentiated, for each specification of particular detail might alienate some part of the audience, or might interfere with rapport” (225) Further research in the decades since Horton and Wohl’s initial findings suggests that it is less a matter of the persona being relatable to the viewer than it is the supposed relationship between onscreen character and at-home audience member. According to semantics scholar and professor Mark R. Levy (who researched parasocial relationships between news anchors and viewers), the personae encourage this parasocial interaction “by speaking in conversational tones directly into the television camera, by engaging in clever monologues which appear to require audience reciprocity, and by interacting in a casual way with other media communicators (‘side-kicks,’ confidants, antagonists, and the like)” (69). The cast of *Teen Mom OG* participate in the cultivation of the parasocial in ways that incorporate the same tactics used in news, entertainment, and other media.

The parasocial relationship is fueled from the very first scene of the first episode of *Teen Mom OG*, which is itself a continuation of the narrative of each of these original *16 and Pregnant* cast members. The choice to return to these individuals already refers to the familiarity and intimacy of a parasocial interaction that viewers may have cultivated when watching these participants on the first season of *16 and Pregnant* in 2009. The connection between the original series and the new program facilitates the relationship between cast and viewer. In the opening

scene of the first episode of *Teen Mom OG*, each cast member is introduced during at-home moments of laughter, joy, and frustration showing a humanity that is made relatable to the viewer. But while each character is made to appear accessible and relatable, as with other reality series, the context remains only within the landscape of the show, and not within a larger, collective context beyond the span that MTV designates as appropriate. Unlike in the original *16 and Pregnant* season in 2009 where the *OG* cast was initially introduced and shown interacting with schoolmates or other community members, the scope of the young mothers' lives is narrower and much more insular on *Teen Mom OG*.

The producers and crewmembers make themselves familiar and friendly to the cast and, by extension, to the viewer. In this way, the crew mimics the methods that propel neoliberal ideology in culture. According to writer Yasmin Nair, this form of ideology is “capitalism made familiar” and “survives on vectors of intimacy, transforming capitalism into an emotional matter rather than an economic one, even though its incursions and devastations are deadly and long-lasting precisely because of the way it serves to insinuate itself into the machinations of the daily world” (par. 44). The lack of racial diversity adds to the homogeneity which keeps the cast familiar and safe. With the exception of Farrah Abraham, who is of mixed heritage (Syrian, Italian, and Danish), the main characters on *Teen Mom OG* are white, *not* living in abject poverty, and seemingly equipped to navigate the financial burden of having a child at such a young age with minimal worry. Later seasons within the broader franchise do a more diverse socioeconomic and racial spectrum, but the general whitewashing taking place with the emphasis on characters who are primarily white and middle class on *Teen Mom OG* supports and is supported by entitlement and privileges that allow for an emphasis instead on the superficial dramas and self-assertions highlighted in the series.

With an emphasis on feelings and a generic sense of identity, the result is such that, as Levy explains, “except for a presumably complementary desire to inform and to be informed, there is little identity of goals between the audience and the personae” (78). In consideration of this approach, it is revealed that in order to cultivate a lasting impression that courts the audience and keeps viewers watching, the persona is a simplified one which on *Teen Mom OG* is presented as a one-dimensional youngster who is solely focused on themself and whose vacillations between conflict and resolution comprise the flow of meaning that is both facilitated and overseen by the producers and crew acting as pleasant authority figures. Similarly, the relationship between the cast and onscreen crew is simplified, obscuring the complexities in their relationships. And so, as *Teen Mom OG* takes everyday problems and reshapes them to be pleasurable to consume, it also replicates the very frameworks of culture that it pretends to dismantle. To the casual observer of the television program, the cast members are simply living their lives while the crew films these daily interactions. But looking at this process through the lens of the parasocial helps the understanding that, as Horton and Wohl explain, “the persona’s image, while partial, contrived, and penetrated by illusion, is no fantasy or dream; his performance is an objectively perceptible action in which the viewer is implicated imaginatively, but which he does not imagine” (216). The relatability of the characters and the homogenized interactions offered to the viewers are craftily constructed in *Teen Mom OG*.

According to Horton and Wohl, an audience is enmeshed in a program more deeply than simply being spectators, such that the audience response is “as it were, subtly insinuated into the program’s action and internal social relationships and, by dint of this kind of staging, is ambiguously transformed into a group which observes and participates in the show by turns” (215). The reception of popular televisual texts is made pleasurable when viewers find attitudes,

approaches, and events taking place on screen that they relate to and/or interact with, either positively, or in ways that make use of the *ideology of mass culture*. In this series, the producers at MTV focus on the simplest way of courting appeal: emphasis on the self. The producer/crewmember is not an onscreen persona in the traditional sense, as Horton and Wohl outlined it to be, but instead acts as a conduit by which the ideology of authority is presented to the viewer in an agreeable manner. But the onscreen producer/crewmember is *presented* as a conduit of relatability to the at-home viewer through a performed positionality of the kindhearted authority figure. In framing the cast, crew, and audience in this way, the series that proclaims that breaking the fourth wall is a groundbreaking way to undo certain frameworks actually creates new boundaries behind which its creators can uphold structures of power and ideologies of authority while perpetuating the position that the illusion of transparency is now more important than the truth itself.

### **Parasocial Relatability and Social Media**

*Teen Mom OG* supports the element of familiarity as a tactic to court viewers by including discussions about social media and moments showing the cast using technology such as cell phones and various online platforms. By tapping into the parasocial using various relatable tactics and tools in a program geared toward a younger demographic, MTV presents a view of the world as a transformative agent of neoliberal competitive capitalism packaged as something entirely different, a document of the lives of four young mothers. This is made to appeal to a younger demographic. As social scientist and Media Studies scholar Toby Miller explains, contextualizing his argument within an understanding of surveillance culture, “Youthful audiences are of particular surveillant concern to the industry, because the young are

thought to be still deciding on their favorite commodities – toothpaste, transport, tutus, and so on” (93). By presenting a group of cast members not much older than the viewer who interact with authority figures such as the onscreen TV crew with relative ease and who have daily interaction with technological apparatuses just like those watching the series from a comfortable distance, MTV and *Teen Mom OG* are able to infuse multiple ideological apparatuses into a series that will help shape the decisions of the viewer for a lifetime.

The inclusion of social media use as a televisual trope or narrative element is on the rise in reality TV. Examples on MTV include *Catfish*, *Road Rules*, *The Challenge*, *The Hills* and *The Gauntlet*. Other networks also use social media and technological apparatuses in their storyline. Examples include TLC’s *90 Day Fiancé* and Netflix’s *The Circle*. Many network series use texting and social media to engage the viewer in weekly vote processes and related shows of support. British dating series *Love Island* and its American and Australian versions employ a text message bit where cast receive challenges and directions on the competition via SMS/text message. The “Got a text!” moments on *Love Island* are both entertaining and nerve-wracking for they signal a new twist or change to the game. This engages the audience, for it sparks both an anticipation of conflict and the excitement over upcoming events within the series, playing on the conflict-disclosure-resolution process in the televisual text.

## **Conclusion**

By examining Marx’s fundamental question of alienation within the context of the construction and functions of reality TV, it is clear that questions of labor, self-actualization, and technology are increasingly complicated in programs that promote surveillance, digital culture, and self-commodification in new forms where the mechanisms of production are uncovered in

certain ways yet simultaneously obscured in others. While the way the tactics used in *Teen Mom OG* are not common in reality TV, producers of imagery and other media have been developing these tactics since the beginnings of moving images. A depth of understanding of the way these tactics function in media will help map the importance of these developments in *Teen Mom OG*.

While all reality TV deals with these types of ideological questions in the construction and presentation of its characters, scenarios, and narrative, *Teen Mom OG* complicates questions of communication (through the parasocial and the use of technology), obedience and authority (through the inclusion of the crew on the show), and relatability (through the emphasis on its characters' homogeneity and self-involved tone). These themes and the tactics that help deliver ideology to the consumer are visible in all televisual media. Tracking the course of their evolution from early photography and documentary cinema to TV prank shows and daytime talk shows to early reality TV through to the present reveals the intricate and increasingly complex nature of media and its tactics.

## Chapter 4: Self-Reflexivity and Compulsive Self-Promotion

Warren Beatty [after Madonna declines to talk to her medical professional off-camera]: She doesn't want to live off-camera, much less talk. There's nothing to say off-camera. Why would you say something if it's off-camera? What point is there existing?

– *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991)

Self-reflexivity is often used as a televisual tool that contributes to self-commodification when participants perform publicizing the private and the domestic in reality TV. The use of self-reflexivity has the characters in *Teen Mom OG* in introspective confessional moments. Not only does this propel the narrative of the series, but it also tempers recognition or critical confrontation of the exploitative practices taking place. This works in favor of dispensing ideologies that support surveillance and complicity to authority by coopting the private and domestic for the benefit of the television series and the network.

The use here of the term “self-reflexivity” recognizes the way the main characters of the series place emphasis on themselves in their actions, their conversations, and especially in their perception of the world. Another way is to consider their actions as “self-referential,” taking into consideration the ways in which the subjects refers to themselves and disconnect from external subjects, systems, and events. As linguist and semiotician Winifried Nöth explains, “No message in the media is completely devoid of self-reference. Even in everyday verbal communication, the speaker indicates himself or herself as a speaker, whether intentionally or unintentionally” (13). What is prevalent in *Teen Mom OG* happens beyond this established and everyday self-reference. It is what Nöth refers to as enunciative or communicative self-reference, making the author, character, or actor the “topic of the message. Instead of presenting or representing ideas or events in the world from elsewhere, the text deals with its own communicative context, its function, the

presuppositions of its narration, and the text has thus its own communicative situation as its topic” (20). In tracking the evolution of *Teen Mom OG* by examining it and its precursors, what becomes clear is that way the series attempts to appear more genuine and transparent with the use of this turn inwards through self-reflexivity or self-reference.

*Teen Mom OG* makes use of the parasocial relationship so that the cast appears endearing to the viewer and fan. Nöth explains how “The more the pictures distance themselves from reality, the more doubts in the authenticity and plausibility of the feigned worlds arise” (21). *Teen Mom OG* constructs its narrative reality by intertwining homogeneity, parasocial interaction, and the familiarity of a returning cast. Also, as in other MTV series such as *The Real World* and *The Hills*, the structure of the narrative of *Teen Mom OG* relies on the production and its characters to uphold the constructed reality taking place on the screen regardless of the veracity of the items being captured. Critical questioning of the series and its characters’ actions by viewers and fans is possible, but the tactics used in the series complicate the function and reception of the text because of the self-referential arranging of meaning and message.

### **Self-Reflexivity in *Teen Mom OG*: Publicizing the Domestic Space**

Crucial to scrutinizing the structure of *Teen Mom OG* is understanding how tactics promoting self-reflexivity enforce ideologies of self-commodification and labor that result in alienation. These ideologies perpetuate homogeneity and isolation in the individuals publicizing their private domestic lives through their participation on the series. Yet the series frames the drama and narrative so that it appears as if the cast attains and exerts agency through the televised process of the assertion of the self. These ideologies perpetuated by the series are made available to be adopted by the viewer and replicated in the viewer’s own daily life. It is a cycle

that continues with the aid of both the producer and the consumer of culture. Over time, this approach – which prioritizes publicizing the private in ways that require a form of ritualized repetition of self-commodification – informs culture through the televisual text.

In this examination, “ritual” is considered in terms of what the characters encounter and react to in their day-to-day domestic functions in the episodes of the series. The reason for this contextualization is that the organization of imagery in *Teen Mom OG* is made by duplicating and rearranging the lived experiences of the cast to create a televised experience that offers both escape and a suspension of disbelief. This is done effectively in the series through tactics that refer to repetition, ritual, and reaction. An important component to this research is understanding what is being ritualized in *Teen Mom OG*. Many studies of ritual reveal the ways it resides in the repetition of religious or folkloric customs or traditions. Referencing religious scholar Jonathan Z. Smith, Leah Rosenberg notes that ritual is both mode and process of paying attention and marking interest through the recognition of place and space, since “this issue of place and ritual seems especially important when it comes to discussing the personal and cultural significance of how place is constructed” (19). On *Teen Mom OG*, the cast members are not involved in specific religious rituals or traditional cultural events or traditions. But their daily lives are crafted for the viewer in ways that ritualize an emphasis on the self, on conflict, and on the disclosure of personal details and feelings to the onscreen producers and crew.

There is also a limited selection of space which the cast inhabits in the episodes, namely the home, the car, and the occasional external site such as a park, restaurant, or school. This marks a departure from the tactics used in such series as *The Hills* that rely heavily on corporate partnerships and external sites to drive the narrative. As the first season of *Teen Mom OG* progresses, place is primarily defined as the domestic space which is presented without

connection to community. Relationships, family, and community are presented as disjointed, juxtaposed with the relationships with the onscreen producers which are highlighted as supportive. On *Teen Mom OG*, it is the publicized self-reflexivity under the gaze of the camera (as represented by both the crew and the actual cameras filming the scenes that are visible in the frame) within the domestic space that becomes ritualized through an ongoing tether between conflict and resolution. Confession and performed reflexivity are the tools with which the narrative moves from conflict to resolution and back to conflict again.

The domestic space is further flattened in favor of self-expression that courts and responds to drama and conflict. The cameras and onscreen crew act as both a symbol of authority and a conduit for resolution of conflict. In order to push the narrative, the cast is seen connecting – in both positive and negative ways – to their fellow cast mates living elsewhere (each cast member lives in a separate US state) and to viewers and critics online. These online exchanges are highlighted while interactions with neighbors or fellow citizens are not explored. The way the scenes are constructed to privilege self-reflexivity, interaction with the crew, and communicating online over engaging with community in person reveals an emphasis motivated by digital culture and the influence of hybridization that prioritizes digital connections over actual engagement with the outside world. The series, like previous programs such as *The Real World*, is designed to brand a lifestyle that prioritizes the rituals, habits, and practices that serve the brand and the mechanisms it serves rather than the cast's individuality, authenticity, or genuine connection to others. This prioritization welcomes and supports ideologies of surveillance and labor that both require ongoing self-commodification. The signs and symbols revealed in the series support this intense self-involvement by promoting them as acts of self-determination. The series succeeds in its efforts by presenting disclosure, confession, an insular

emphasis on the self, and complicity to the authority of the gaze of the camera and the crew co-starring in the series as a way of being that inscribes value rather than devaluing its participants.

### **Ritual and Discipline Imposed by the *Teen Mom OG* Production**

In thinking about what becomes ritualized in and through *Teen Mom OG*, it is important to interrogate ritualized self-reflexivity within a larger discussion of media in contemporary culture. To do this involves consideration of the perspective offered by sociologist Nick Couldry, where “Understanding ‘media rituals’ is not simply a matter of isolating particular performances (rituals) and interpreting them; it is a matter of grasping the whole social space within which anything like ‘ritual’ in relation to media becomes possible” (2). Couldry emphasizes talk shows in this research, but his insight is relevant to a study of reality television as well. *Teen Mom OG* reveals the increasing hybridization of genres in the way it blends documentary practices, the drama and conflict in talk shows, and performed intimacy in private, domestic spaces. And like talk shows, *Teen Mom OG* both informs and is informed by everyday life. Couldry emphasizes the simultaneous acts of unmasking specific rituals and examining the political, cultural, and ontological frameworks in which they reside. With this grasp of the broader social space, it is possible to fully problematize the ideological apparatuses at play.

Consideration of this larger ontological framework may serve as a reminder of the work of Foucault and his examination of ritual, confession, and the function of power in culture at large. Foucault explains just how often confession is enacted on a daily basis. One of his concerns is to locate “the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior” (11). Foucault connects these channels and modes as part of the “polymorphous techniques of power” which reveal

themselves in specific examples and can be utilized to reveal broader frameworks as well.

Foucault situates some of his study in problematizing confession with the reminder that “when it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat...Western man has become a confessing animal” (59). What he points to becomes complicated in contemporary media and digital culture. This is due, in part, to the mechanisms of surveillance that are supported and reinforced by the culture industry.

In consideration of Foucault’s understanding of the violence or threat that leads to confession, it is important to remember the hierarchies of power within reality television production in which these impositions begin to reveal themselves. This hierarchy applies not only to the onscreen cast and crew, but to the production staff as well, as it applies to all producers and consumers of culture. The external imperative informs the internalized imperative of which Foucault speaks. On *Teen Mom OG*, the producers are present in the narrative in a way that appears to appease and support the cast member. This serves as a means to normalize the environment in which the exploitative acts of commodification of the individual, the wholly intrusive imposition of surveillance (and its side effects) on one’s private life, and the notional that one’s private, personal life is now simply another chance for the participant to perform a form of labor govern the everyday. The process of performing the personal and private within the domestic space becomes ritualized through the involvement of both cast member and onscreen production crew.

The imperative that Foucault examines is put in place by the threat of external forces that inflict violence or threat. On *Teen Mom OG*, this is not a threat of literal violence, but a threat is present nonetheless, for the cast members are under contract and may suffer the potential of losing the salary, visibility, celebrity, and cultural capital that a TV star appears to enjoy if they

choose to leave the show. The presence of the crew within the narrative acts as a reminder of this threat, and the choice of clips to use in the narrative present this framework to the viewer. This sense of threat acts as motivation to engage in an ongoing participation that relies on ritualized self-reflexivity. Oftentimes, the potential threat of an external force becomes an internalized force that drives the cast member to participate, confess, and engage with the onscreen producers and crew even if their personal lives may suffer because of it. Each of the four young mothers perform in response to imperative and threat, and the crew drives this relationship forward with their presence and reminders of the production taking place within the production itself.

### **Close Reading: “Surprise Surprise” and the Producer as Confidante**

In the fifth episode of the first season of *Teen Mom OG* (“Surprise Surprise,” first aired on April 20, 2015), Amber is frustrated that her ex, Gary, is flirting with her even though he has a new girlfriend with whom he will soon be having a child. The scene begins with a close-up of a camera slate followed by a somber Amber looking at her phone as Gary calls her, and producer Heather asking her who keeps calling. (00:07:35–00:07:41). The shot-reverse-shot clips are close up, in the corner of Amber’s bedroom, where Amber sits next to an electrical outlet on the wall to which a phone charger is attached.

Amber refuses to answer Gary’s call, but looks down at her cell phone incessantly. The tone of the scene is somber, and Amber appears crestfallen and distraught. Heather and Amber discuss the situation with Gary, as they sit across from each other on Amber’s bedroom floor. Amber shows Heather a picture of her and Gary on her phone. “It is a picture from Season 1,” Amber explains to producer Heather who replies, “Oh my God, I filmed this” (00:07:42–00:08:28).

The photo is from *16 and Pregnant* in 2009, when Amber and Gary were still together romantically. Amber somberly explains that she needs closure and doesn't want to be with Gary again. Heather pushes the issue by asking why she thinks it could never be a possibility again. That Gary is having a child with his new girlfriend Kristina weighs heavily on Amber, and she explains this to Heather.

The scene cuts from single shots of Amber and Heather to a medium shot of them interacting back to single shots. Heather listens with her production headset and other gear on display around her neck and on her body as she remains seated on the floor on an even plane as Amber. She tells Amber that they will film her getting ready and then wrap up the shoot day. Heather leaves by playfully referring to Amber as "Amby" as Amber looks down at her phone in sadness and frustration. (00:08:29–00:09:06).

### **Close Reading: Reflections**

What resonates in the scene between Amber and Heather is the reminder of how long Amber's life has been intertwined with the *Teen Mom* brand. There is also an underlying sense of duty to continue filming regardless of the pain it unearths. The realization of the longevity in both Amber and Heather's history with MTV is revealed in both a lived and a documented experience. Amber lived it, Heather filmed it (and also lived it), and Gary tries to reconnect with Amber by sending a screen shot from the series that they then discuss in the scene. Each of the three participants in this scene is umbilically connected to the other through technological apparatuses: cameras, footage, smartphones, and the resulting cultural product. The series (and the technology featured in it) is the conduit through which Amber craves closure, Gary seeks connection, and Heather affirms her closeness to the story and its players in order to keep the TV

shoot going and on schedule. The act that is made to appear to carry the onscreen characters is the successful completion of the task of filming the scene.

The primary goal is surveillance and documenting the process, and not necessarily addressing or resolving the issue at hand. The depth with which the series has affected Amber's personal life and decisions is clear, but it is the producer included in the scene and in the narrative who determines and voices the necessity to continue filming as the primary act that Amber needs to perform. The assertion to complete filming is offered as a tender, playful way to get Amber to keep going just for a few more minutes, but it reveals the forces of discipline at work and points to the many times when conflict and vulnerability in the private, domestic space are ritualized for the cameras. Amber continues to film, but her reluctance is palpable. And, as with many other scenes in the series, production has the final word in the interaction and in the final edit that airs.

The internalized imperative to continue to participate in the production process is also fueled by what theorist and activist Tiziana Terranova explains as a new system with "a tendency of informational flows to spill over from whatever network they are circulating in and hence to escape the narrowness of the channel and to open up to a larger milieu" (2). Terranova's research points to the ways that utterances asserted by what Foucault considers the "confessing animal" now reach past their original medium and network, resulting in a landscape where each sign, symbol, or message from a particular form of cultural production, as Terranova explains, is "increasingly inseparable from the wider informational processes that determine the spread of images and words, sounds, and affects across a hyperconnected planet." (2). In this case, there is a television series within which the cast and crew discuss the production, online web pages including personal blogs that the cast contribute to with first-person accounts of the drama in

each episode, an after-show chat series produced by MTV where a host and guests comment on the events, reunion and catch-up specials where the cast talk to each other (and often fuel ongoing conflict), Twitter, Facebook, and other online series such as AfterBuzz where hosts recap and discuss the show, and related social media pages where the cast members contribute to an ongoing discussion about the mothers and their lives and viewers offer their own opinions and feedback about the show and its production. It is a new landscape where the *flow* examined by Raymond Williams reaches far beyond previous boundaries, and requires ongoing participation.

This *flow* spans not only different platforms and interconnected forms of medium, but also time, as the narrative simultaneously reveals current issues and points to past issues that were revealed in a different time or on the previous television series. *Terranova* points to a framework informed by Foucault's confessional imperative that eternally replicates itself using any medium it sees fit, where one sign connects to another symbol, sometimes regardless of origin or context. Similarly, *Teen Mom OG* is structured in a way that makes the hierarchy of power, authority and discipline appear unstable while at the same time underwriting and enforcing that hierarchy in covert ways. The external imperative is internalized through the framework within which the cast members appear to vacillate between communicating their situation to a costar (usually a family member or friend), some third party (which may or may not be the viewer) through the absence of a reverse shot in the construction of the clips, or the onscreen members of production who insert themselves into the conversation. The series does not rely on one singular tactic, often obscuring the imposing presence of the producers that were there, surveying and crafting the drama the entire time, but always reminding the viewer that the production has the final say, whether or not this is explicitly clear to the viewer.

## Ritual, Conflict, and Validation through Commodification

Programs such as *Teen Mom OG* reveal the ways that acts that enforce hegemony are transformed into rituals to infuse content with ideological messaging in ways that are at once new and familiar. These repetitions reveal and represent social formations and systems beyond the specific televisual text. Couldry explains his understanding of media rituals as “the whole range of situations where media themselves ‘stand in,’ or appear to ‘stand in,’ for something wider, something linked to the fundamental organizational level on which we are, or imagine ourselves to be, connected as members of society” (4). The approach he outlines rejects blanket categorizations or adherence to one theoretical understanding of social spaces and culture itself, for as Couldry explains, “The term ‘media rituals’ is designed to imply neither a simple order nor a simple disorder, but a complex and never fully stable interaction between order and disorder” (15). This relates to scholarship that aims to problematize, as Gerd Baumann explains, “rituals as crystallizations of basic values uniformly endorsed by communities that perform them with a view to themselves, ultimately to create and conform their cohesion as communities” (113). It is within the instability of disorder that this field of cultural production thrives, whether by simultaneously subverting and legitimizing structures of power, presenting and reproducing power within a setup that appears not to do so, or attempting to offer transparency while continuing to obscure reality. *Teen Mom OG* privileges conflict over cohesion, inviting its cast to enter into a binding agreement which requires ongoing participation, and endless acts of disclosure within private and domestic spaces.

The “community” the series supports is one that, like *Candid Camera*, *The Real World* and *The Hills* is contingent upon a transactional relationship between producer and onscreen talent. The pairing of conflict resolution navigated by the crew offers the appearance of cohesion,

yet this cohesion is limited, for it rests on the ongoing ritual of participating in conflict. In this series, ritual is distinctly connected to both confession and conflict, and it is revealed in the ways that disclosing the private on a public platform moves the televisual narrative. This is not limited to a television series, as it refers directly to the ways that public confession or disclosure is utilized in social media and other online platforms. According to Couldry, “The relationship between the meanings of self-disclosure and technological form is a subtle one and goes on changing with the expanded possibilities for self-disclosure on the Internet” (115). The compulsion to document one’s life online as a process of legitimacy and accountability as well as a confession points to new self-imposed ideological imperatives that inform and are informed by such participants as the cast in *Teen Mom OG*.

Unmasking these imperatives rests on the understanding of what media theorist Joshua Meyrowitz considers “the overall pattern of situated behaviours” (42). In expanding upon Meyrowitz’s understanding, Couldry addresses the layers related to class that affect the performances within the televisual. These layers, as Couldry explains, reveal the socioeconomic hierarchies existing in culture itself. In publicizing the private through self-reflexivity, confession and disclosure, it appears, as Couldry explains, that the cast member has a sense that “they and their story have somehow been validated or certified” (122). This quest for validation is evident in almost every facet of contemporary culture and has been examined in numerous contexts by such theorists as Bourdieu (in his understanding of class, field, habitus, and taste) and Ang (in regard to situating oneself in relation to the reception of low culture). More recently, scholars such as Biressi and Nunn examine this quest as it is governed by public disclosure and the narrativizing of the personal experience as it is revealed in reality competition shows such as *Big Brother*. They unfold in their research the ways that narcissism, surveillance and performing

identity are complicated because “the apparent omnipresence of media observation is internalized as a sort of self-scrutiny. But also the self becomes dependent on the consumption of media images” (100). Expanding upon this consideration, Biressi and Nunn outline the ways in which the performance of the self through self-reflexive utterances becomes as way of being that is embedded in the sociocultural landscape of this contemporary moment, because “crucially, our sense of self is guaranteed by the fantasy of an ‘other’ who observes us and whose gaze confirms the solidity and worth of our existence. Therefore, rather than fearing the omnipresent surveying gaze we embrace it” (101). And yet, the consequences of this embrace endure, especially with the cast members on these reality programs.

In the case of *Teen Mom OG*, the quest for validation takes place in a number of interconnected ways: During the filming process when the producers and crew intervene and participate within the narrative as they are documenting and publicizing of the cast’s private lives, the actual production centers the production while following the cast. This succeeds in validating and supporting the participation of both the cast and the onscreen production crew. This validation continues when the show airs, and viewers participate in the public consumption of the cast’s seemingly private moments. Yet in both instances, the cast members are participants in an exploitative cycle comprised of conflict followed by confession, consumed by the cameras, their operators, the producers, and the at-home audience acting as a team of technicians managing this complex validation that is contingent on the participation and the cast’s complicity. By understanding the way that alienation functions in this process, it becomes clear that the transactional relationship between producer and cast relies on the individual as commodity. Through a ritualized repetition of this message within the televisual text, the message is then delivered to consumers who may or may not adopt it in their own lives.

The tension documented on *Teen Mom OG* exists in layers and is often a result of the production's intention to highlight and even instigate the drama rather than the cast member's overall personal life or multifaceted relationships. The producers interject to ask questions, which often leads to new drama or exacerbates existing tensions. Each of the four young mothers on the series has had her moments of refusing to participate. In almost every case, the cast member relents, deciding to stay on to film more episodes and more seasons. When a cast member such as Maci, for example, returns to the production, she acts as if all of the issues that existed before were resolved, yet the viewer rarely sees the interactions that led to these resolutions. This obscuring of vital moments in the process is an obfuscation that acts in contrast to the assertion of transparency and the representation of a supportive entity made by MTV. When actual transparency is revealed in the form of a cast member's frustrations with the series and choice to leave, the producers rely upon an established imperative in order to retain the cast member. The reaction and subsequent symbolic and representational consequences that take place when cast members want to quit the show confirm and underwrite the imperatives used to retain the cast member in the first place.

### **Close Reading: Refusing to Participate and the Limits of Agency**

What *Teen Mom OG* reveals, in addition to the breakdown of public and private and the consequences of the surveillance by the seemingly friendly crew, is the necessity to participate no matter the consequences. This is revealed in subtle and in obvious ways. The subtlety lies in the way the producers and camera crew, now placed within the narrative and interacting with the cast within the scenes, act in ways that normalize the surveillance and participation in a process that entangled with alienation. The obvious ways this necessity to participate are revealed are when a cast member refuses to participate. Each season of *Teen Mom OG* features multiple

instances where a cast member threatens to quit the show. In the 2015-16 season, which was the inaugural *Teen Mom OG* season that welcomed four of the original *16 and Pregnant* mothers back to the network full time, the producers invited cast member Farrah Abraham, initially dropped from the show because of her participation in a sex tape she filmed with adult actor James Deen. The April 27, 2015 episode (“The F Bomb”) focuses heavily on the producers and camera crew as they travel from state to state to reach out to each cast member to inform them of the decision to bring Farrah back to the show. The emphasis is as much on the producers as it is on the cast members and their willingness to film when Farrah returns. In some scenes, the producers are featured more prominently than the cast themselves as the crew step out from behind the scenes to participate within the show even more than they already were throughout the season.

Each scene where the producers approach the cast begins as if the producers are seeking the cast members’ consent to bring Farrah back. Yet as each scene continues, the producers assert their decision to bring Farrah back rather than asking for permission from the cast. When co-executive producer Larry arrives at Amber’s house, he expresses how nervous he is to share some news with her. Larry explains the decision to bring Farrah back to the series, Amber expresses support of the decision, saying that Farrah deserves to be on the series. Amber refers to her recent incarceration and the idea of second chances as a reason to bring Farrah back (00:04:39–00:05:31). The scene cuts to Catelynn and Tyler’s house, where a crew member is adjusting Catelynn’s microphone pack. Executive producer Dia and Tyler talk about how Tyler is nervous for the news they are about to share with him and Catelynn.

Dia explains the plans regarding Farrah to Catelynn and Tyler. They immediately light up and smile, exclaiming that they knew this was the news. Catelynn explains that her conflict with

Farrah is over, and that Farrah can be a good person but that she “has a lot of issues.” Catelynn and Tyler support the decision to bring Farrah back and decide to call Amber to discuss it. (00:06:15–00:06:50). The clips are connected with the phone call between Amber, Catelynn and Tyler. The cell phone unites the households, machinery tying these families with laughter and agreement, and everyone acts warmly with one another over the phone. Tyler explains that Farrah seemed to express genuine remorse and a willingness to change when they starred on a different reality series together. Both of the young mothers express their support of the decision made by MTV, but all three involved in the conversation laugh about whether or not Maci will object. . (00:06:51–00:07:30).

The tension exhibited by Maci carries over into the following scene, where Catelynn, Tyler, Executive Producer Dia Sokol Savage, and a cameraman discuss Maci’s refusal to continue if Farrah returns. Catelynn expresses her wish to talk to Maci on the phone, to which Dia responds with the information that Maci is refusing to film if Farrah participates. (00:09:59–00:10:10). The producer and cameraman sit on one side of the room, while Catelynn and Tyler recline on sofas on the other side of the room. Catelynn expresses her frustration over the situation, calling Maci a “diva,” while Tyler takes a moment to offer his own take on the matter by stating that “controversy’s good for reality TV” (00:10:11–00:10:46).

### **Close Reading: Reflections**

The focal point of the scenes between Larry and Amber and between Catelynn, Tyler and the producers shifts throughout the scene. The camera pans back and forth between the cast members and the actual crew who are acting as secondary cast members as they are being filmed by additional crewmembers not visible in the scene. This triangulation of cast members,

onscreen crew, the crew not visible in the scene that are filming, and the off-screen cast member Maci refusing to participate in the production initially appears to prioritize and privilege the actual cast because of their situation. But upon further consideration, the authority of the visible and the hidden production crew remains in place throughout the interaction. This is partly due to the element of confession and disclosure, which delivers the narrative with the use of self-reflexivity. The editing of the scene places co-executive producer Larry saying he feels very nervous against executive producer Dia who calms Tyler down because he is nervous. It is a sweet way to join the cast and crew through quick moments of vulnerability and emotion, but joined in ways that attempt to humanize the crew and place them on an even playing field with the cast. When Dia explains the facts about the situation to the individuals in the room, Catelynn and Tyler are made doubly vulnerable – first by the possible ramifications of Maci quitting she show, and also by the position they are in as cast members tasked with expressing their feelings on camera for the public to consume.

While Catelynn and Tyler appear excited and joyful about the return of Farrah, the potential consequences of being unable to perform this vulnerability affect the cast deeply. This is especially visible in the Catelynn/Tyler storyline throughout the series and its multiple seasons. Catelynn and Tyler often revisit the decision to give up their firstborn child for adoption. Their role as ambassadors in support of the adoption process appears to motivate this ongoing conversation despite the overwhelming mental health issues that they each experience throughout their tenure on the show. In Catelynn's case, she appears wholly forthcoming and transparent from the beginning about the impact of allowing the MTV crew to film and publicize her decision to give up her first child for adoption and the way her choices have shaped her life moving forward. Yet this transparency reveals a complex set of perils connected to self-

commodification, and her subsequent personal difficulties reflect these perils. In later seasons of the series, Catelynn opens up about a miscarriage and her bouts with mental health issues and drug abuse. In its own way, her reflective position in the admission of – and ongoing onscreen discussion about – how the filming process affects her personal life offers a narrative that works in opposition to the stories of the other three lead cast members who decided to keep and raise their children. Again, the instability revealed in the narrative and its messengers carries the series even when it debilitates and potentially paralyzes its main characters.

For Catelynn, her cultural (and literal) capital rests on her continued participation as an on-camera ambassador and advocate. Yet it is clear that this responsibility affects her personally as she struggles between needing space to recover from these matters and simultaneously feeling compelled to devote herself to the gaze of the camera. In later seasons of *Teen Mom OG*, Catelynn has a second daughter which the couple decides to keep and raise, then suffers a miscarriage, and then temporarily leaves the show for treatment of depression and anxiety. The couple initially refuses to allow the cameras to film her, but Catelynn eventually relents, allowing for filming her inside the facility when her husband, their daughter Nova, and other family members visit her. The pervasive gaze of the camera is unavoidable, and the return to documenting her drama, stories of trauma, and ongoing personal challenges becomes ritualized once more. The camera is made to appear as a companion, its gaze normalized and made to appear pleasant by the inclusion of the crew within the televised program. But it is nevertheless weaponized, revealing the imposed imperative in these moments of refusal.

Both Catelynn and Tyler discuss various modes of refusal to participate with the crew in the series. For Catelynn, it is a question of leaving the show – either to complete rehab, or to simply walk away from filming for good. For Tyler, it is ultimately a question of whether or not

he can cope with his wife's mental health issues, or if he wants to leave her and the family entirely to be on his own. Both cast members always relent, choosing to return to the series as regular participants. Their momentary consideration of refusing to participate is downplayed as simply a passing thought, since the producers and crew are presented as extended family that has somehow adopted the couple because of the production of *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom OG*. The potential departure acts as both tepid criticism and assertive confirmation of the landscape, hierarchy, and authority at play in the series, especially since it never becomes a reality.

### **Alienation and Publicizing the Domestic Space in Reality TV**

After the birth of their daughter Nova in a later season, the domestic space that Catelynn and Tyler inhabit are forever changed, and the circumstances the couple endures become even more emotionally taxing than before. Catelynn and Tyler begin to unravel, as Catelynn begins to abuse drugs to mask her worsening depression. She enrolls in rehabilitation programs multiple times, leaving her husband and child at home while she detoxes and receives intensive mental health assistance. Perhaps to capitalize on this heightened state of emotions endured by both Catelynn and Tyler as well as the entire extended family who are featured on the series, the subsequent emphasis on Catelynn's mental health concerns (both before and after her miscarriage) offer the viewer numerous moments where she considers leaving the show, either temporarily or permanently. The exploitative nature of this choice to include Catelynn's mental health issues is downplayed by framing the storyline as beneficial to the general public who may also suffer from mental health issues.

By the 2018 season, Catelynn's mental health declines even further, and it is reported in news and media outlets that she is entering rehab for suicidal ideations. As this takes place,

Catelynn continues to retain her ties to MTV via social media and a return to later season of the series. The moments of refusal and return on *Teen Mom OG* reveal and reflect the complicated terrain of celebrity, fame, and labor performed for visibility. The Foucauldian imperative on *Teen Mom OG* becomes internalized through the process of publicizing the private so that the cast does not follow the natural impulse to quit or the practical considerations rooted in actual reflection and introspection, because entertaining either would alter the cycle of drama and confession the production relies on for the success of the series. In order to perpetuate the machinery within which the cast and crew function, the cast continues to commodify their private lives. What is crucial to understanding why this process continues as it does is the response to the series by viewers. A question that follows: How does *Teen Mom OG* make publicizing the private labor enacted by its cast palatable, relatable, and enjoyable for the viewer? What remains is an inquiry to determine how fans of the series receive and respond to the messaging embedded in the television text to consider the potential sites of agency that the series may open.

### **Self-Reflexivity, Fan Reception, and Critical Media Literacy**

Research into fan responses demonstrates more than just the qualitative responses of the audience to the story-line and characters. It also reveals that systems of power and social hierarchies are structured and confirmed in the show. Here if one plumbs the posts and comments on two *Teen Mom OG* fan blog sites – *Teen Mom Junkies* [teenmomjunkies.com](http://teenmomjunkies.com) and *Teen Mom Central* on Tumblr, one develops a nuanced sense not just of the show but the structuring of power. Both blog pages studied for this research are long-standing sites, created before *Teen Mom OG* premiered its first episode in 2015. The analysis examines posts from the time period from when the first episode of *Teen Mom OG* first began airing to the end of airing

of that specific season. The analysis was of over 500 posts and comments on both pages combined. A guiding consideration in the analysis of this fan page content is whether fans recognize or critically confront the tactics used in the series that reveal and confirm the hierarchical organization embedded into the imagery. Much of the responses on the pages are negative toward various cast members, as fans appear to be motivated to communicate on the blog sites in order to gossip about the cast and sometimes the production. One question regarding these online interactions is: In critiquing the cast, do fans engage in ways that are fruitful as far as community or agency are concerned?

In general, fans communicated politely with one another on both blog sites, but they were hypercritical of the cast and various moments revealed in the season. Miscommunication between fans were resolved quickly and without much fanfare, with fans apologizing for misunderstandings, and pursuing additional interaction amicably. The most popular themes as revealed by the number of responses were about the production and onscreen camera crew and producers (68), posts and comments that revealed a parasocial connection between viewer and cast member (60), posts and comments about *Teen Mom OG* villain Farrah (56), and posts and comments in which fans and viewers discussed or referred to motherhood and the cast members' character as it relates to their potential abilities as a mother (52). The general response to the series reboot reveals the complex way viewers of the series approach the program and the way the confrontation between viewer and program generates pleasure.

Pleasure, it appears through these responses, is in the blend of criticism and hopefulness. The fans do not hold back in their criticism of the cast members in their comments, and yet, the response to the young mothers' mistakes and difficulties reveal an overall trust in the redemptive process that starting new, admitting mistakes, being honest, and being kind can offer. For

example, in the response on *Teen Mom Junkies* to a thread about Catelynn and Tyler who commit to the process on *Teen Mom OG* as a way to get “more real,” Catelynn Carly writes, “Lol at Catelynn and Tyler saying they wouldn't let fame get to their head. Tyler is such a fame whore. They both constantly check their social media accounts because they're obsessed with other people talking about them. They didn't go to college or get real jobs because they think the MTV money will last forever.”

Another fan on the same page (with the screenname Yes to the...) comments on the new tactics on the series “The *OG* series looks like they are slowly letting all the girls' secrets out. I always felt like I found out more about Maci from gossip sites, but these days it's like I'm seeing the real her on the show.” In studying the responses on these blog pages, it becomes clear that while fans recognize the tactics and manipulation of reality going on in the series, there is also an embrace of what the production presents as real without much criticism of the production itself. The reinvention of the wheel of production does little to motivate any change in the processes of reception and pleasure in the cast. Fans have their favorites as well as those they despise, but apart from interacting with other fans in amiable ways, there is little in the form of an oppositional code decoded from the meaning embedded into the televisual text by the producers.

While many of the fans use the pages to gossip and criticize the cast, there are also comments and exchanges in which fans consider the real-life influence of the series. For example, in a thread on *Teen Mom Junkies* about *Teen Mom OG, 16 and Pregnant*, and attributing the drop in teen pregnancies to these programs, fan Catelynn Carly comments in response to a post about Farrah and compares the original series to the *OG* reboot, stating that *16 and Pregnant* is a better series “to show teens who think that having a baby will be fun or easy. These girls aren't living the lap of luxury and accomplishing all these things in an unrealistic

amount of time. Most of them suffer quite a bit and are still suffering when the cameras turn off and the production crew goes home.” This comment reveals genuine consideration of the ramifications of both having a child young and appearing on a series about having a child young. Related to this theme, many fans do communicate with one another about birth control and their own personal choices related to pregnancy, birth control, and family. Some fans reveal personal details on the page, and are welcomed by the other fans with kindness and support.

The posts on these pages reveal that fans do care for the wellbeing of the cast members, but in their comments, they measure wellbeing through assertions of remorse. For example, on *Teen Mom Central*, an anonymous fan responds to criticism about Farrah, “I think if Farrah would just own up to her all her actions then people wouldn’t have as much of a problem with her. I would definitely respect her more if she did that!” Similarly, many fans reach out on the blog pages in support of Amber after her time in prison away from drugs and her daughter Leah. Analysis of the fan pages within the context of self-reflexivity results in an understanding that, while viewers use the opportunity to connect with one another that *Teen Mom OG* offers, the actual engagement in the blog conversations does not show any groundbreaking changes to viewer literacy of media.

## **Conclusion**

In this new framework of reality TV which has evolved in exciting and complicated ways, by fulfilling the desire to place oneself within the act of watching or doing, the consumer is simultaneously consumed, perpetuating an ever-present ideology of self-commodification. The collapse of the division between public and private fosters the individual’s constant state of ritualized self-reflexivity. This practice serves as a mask under which the perpetual process of

self-commodification alienates the individual from their true self, which exists, as Marx outlines, when the worker is *not* working. As is expressed in the exchange quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the act of self-commodification becomes a compulsion that defines the individual's life. Moments of refusal or attempted refusal to participate underscore this perpetual cycle of commodification and increased alienation, as they reveal the potential consequences that will affect the cultural, economic, and social capital that the cast – and by extension, any creator of content – appears to enjoy. As revealed on blog pages devoted to commentary on the series, this self-reflexive approach manifests in self-expression by *Teen Mom OG* fans in everyday life, but it does not result in drastic changes to the practice of media consumption to reflect an established or growing critical media literacy.

## Chapter 5: Metacommentary and the Reproduction of Power

Kris Jenner: MTV Award! (hands Khloé an award). Best reality show!

Khloé Kardashian: (Smiling) This is so much pressure!

Kris Jenner: Who would you like to thank?

Khloé Kardashian: My Lord and Savior...and Kimberly for fucking on camera!

- *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* season 16 episode 2, "Kourtney's Choice" (2019)

Metacommentary is a process by which characters, cast members, or other participants present a narrative within the narrative. This can happen by highlighting the overall intention of the production within the production, or by commenting on the action during an event or scene taking place. The structure of *Teen Mom OG* hinges on the ideology of self-actualization and reclamation of power that the young women in the series are perceived to have lost after they became pregnant as teenagers but are regaining through their participation in the series reboot. When uncovering the mechanisms involved in the production of the series, the suggested reclamation is not what actually takes place. What ensues is a situation where the potential for reproduction of power is situated within the performance of the self within the televised rearrangement of the cast's real lives. Many scholars have examined the approaches to self in media. Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood outline the spectrum of voices from Foucault to Hearn who seek to confront the "increased significance of the self as an aesthetic project" (49). The authors examine the ways that "reality television thrives in a culture in which value is performed through intimate and domestic relationships" (59). Like others such as Biressi and Nunn, Skeggs and Wood consider the notion that the performance of the self in these personal spaces is now overtly enacted. As the exchange from *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* quoted at the start of this chapter suggests, the performance of the self in reality TV requires ongoing and sometimes even increasingly intimate expressions that are then made palatable to the consumer through the production process.

Metacommentary has also been investigated in other areas of media studies. In video game scholarship, Kevin Wong outlines the use of metacommentary typically as the “breaking of the fourth wall,” when the characters on screen appear become aware of their existence in “an electronic game and engage with the player directly. Taking cues from film and literature, story-driven games have cleverly deployed self-reflexivity to critique formal issues such as the narrative limitations imposed by interactivity, society’s attraction to violence in entertainment, and geek culture’s disinterest in reality” (par. 2). The allure of “looking at looking” welcomes the user’s commentary and performative acts within the game, yet what is important to remember is that this process of commentary and “looking at looking” within such games also cement the player’s hierarchical position by framing the action so that the player wants to continue playing and is thus compliant to the will of the designers, manufacturers, advertisers, and producers of the game. The game may flirt with ideas of subversion, but it does so within a product wholly reliant on its legitimization through gaming and technological gadgetry sales and game use.

On *Teen Mom OG*, the return to the TV show six years after the cast’s initial onscreen experience of 2009’s *16 and Pregnant* is presented as the vehicle through which this self-actualization and reclamation of agency, self-awareness and self-confidence takes place. What is revealed – through the structure of the series and the metacommentary in the episodes where the series breaks the “fourth wall” to include the crew within the story alongside the cast – is that this reclamation does not necessarily emancipate the cast in the ways that are intimated by the series and its producers in the promotion of the series. What metacommentary does is present an awareness of the production process taking place within the actual televisual product. The act of acknowledging that one is placing oneself within the event as a participant within the event

changes the narrative, the overall event, and the intricate tapestry of meaning embedded within the text. While what is promoted by the production is the assertion that the production is an avenue for personal growth, the messages embedded within the televisual text tell a different story.

### **Metacommentary and the Disciplining Reality TV Production**

Metacommentary is the tactic or connected tactics used to direct the reader or viewer to note the production process and/or the overarching purpose of the narrative and messages dispensed to the viewer within the text itself. For example, on a nightly news broadcast, the anchor may explain the mechanisms in place that contribute to the process of producing the news. They may mention where a colleague has been sent for on-the-scene reporting or mention technical difficulties. Or, they may offer overarching messages that relay the goal of the news staff and network to bring the most up-to-date information to the viewer. This may be done seriously, or with humor in the way Khloé Kardashian references her sister Kim's infamous sex tape catapulting the family to stardom in the quote at the beginning of this chapter. On *Teen Mom OG*, self-reflexivity and metacommentary are used together to dispense the messages that the producers wish to emphasize. But whereas self-reflexivity deals mainly with the individual characters and their personal issues, thoughts, and feelings, metacommentary draws attention to the mechanisms involved in the production. The key difference between self-reflexivity and metacommentary resides in the emphasis on the production crew, staff, and related participants within the actual series.

By breaking the "fourth wall," *Teen Mom OG* appears to deconstruct the production process by showing the "story within the story." The layered way in which this is done weaves

together self-reflexivity and metacommentary, collapsing the space between the individual and the production. Self-reflexivity emphasizes the cast and their [performed] introspection as an extension of the overall act of performing the self, while the use of metacommentary – though seeming to not do so on the surface – emphasizes and maintains the authority of the production by supporting the narrative and the messages that the production wishes to offer the viewer. The ritualized imposition of the crew in the series acts as a form of discipline, guiding its cast back to filming because the personal and the public are no longer separate. Ultimately, with the pairing of these tactics of self-reflexivity and metacommentary, the production benefits.

### **Close Reading: Maci and the Disciplining Power of Metacommentary**

In episode 6 of the first season of *Teen Mom OG* (“The F Bomb” which first aired on April 27, 2015), cast member Maci reacts to the news that MTV will bring former castmate Farrah back to the show. It is a dramatic storyline that carries over multiple episodes in which the cast engages in varying degrees of disagreement with the production about Farrah’s return. The interaction between Maci and the crew reveals Maci’s refusal to participate. The scene features Maci, her new fiancé Taylor, and a number of production crew including *Teen Mom OG* Executive Producer Morgan J. Freeman. The scene cuts back and forth between the many camera angles while Maci becomes increasingly emotional about Farrah’s involvement in the adult entertainment industry (00:07:30–00:08:25). She gives Freeman an ultimatum, which he tries to temper by justifying the inclusion of Farrah as part of the process of showing four very different women sharing their lives on camera. (00:08:26–00:09:58).

Maci speaks to the producers outside her home, telling Executive Producer Morgan J. Freeman “I don’t appreciate them going behind our backs.” Her response is of shock and anger

that MTV did not consult with the rest of the cast, because Farrah – who is promoting adult entertainment videos, webcams, and products at the time – will be on a show alongside the other moms and their young children. The producer responds by mentioning the other cast members who have had difficulties but stayed on the show. “Do we give Farrah the same chance that Amber had,” he asks. Another point argued is that everyone involved in the series has made mistakes at one point or another (00:08:00–00:09:58). While the focus in this scene is on Maci and her reaction to the news about Farrah, the underlying emphasis – as it is argued by the two onscreen producers – undercuts Maci’s frustration and anger about Farrah returning to the series. The scene ends with Maci refusing to film if Farrah is in any way involved in the production. She is adamant, but her emotions are heightened as she talks to production. That Maci expresses her feelings on the matter cogently and directly to the onscreen producers reflects the use of self-reflexivity as a tool that can drive the narrative and engage the viewer in a positive way. The discussion of the production within the production offers the viewer a look at the way metacommentary functions within the narrative.

In the following episode (“First Time For Everything” which first aired on May 4, 2015), the cameras follow producer Kiki who is tells everyone “We have to shoot one more scene with [Maci’s ex Ryan] now that we can’t shoot with Maci and [her son] Bentley.” As Kiki speaks, one of the many cameras filming the scene pans across the scene and across the other camera crew that is filming to show Maci, who tells the crew that they can keep filming her because she’s decided to continue participating as a cast member (00:05:55–00:06:43). This adjustment, Maci explains, is the compromise she made with production in order to continue filming. As the conversation continues inside Ryan’s parents’ house, Ryan joins in (00:06:44–00:07:28). It is a joyful environment, devoid of any reference to the ultimatum made in the previous episode.

Later in the scene, when Maci and Ryan's parents discuss cast member Farrah's budding career in porn, the group jokes about Maci, Taylor, and Ryan filming their own adult film to gain more press and popularity. Audible during this exchange is a producer asking her crew to set up Ryan's microphone pack. The entire room (including the crew) laughs at the conversation about porn, with Maci jokingly mentioning how lucrative an idea this may be (00:07:29–00:08:02).

### **Close Reading: Reflections**

In the scene that offers the viewer a resolution to the conflict about Farrah, Maci's demeanor is placid. Maci appears to have made peace with the decisions made by production to bring Farrah back, but a close reading of the text reveals the way the storyline once again privileges the production, the producers, and the overall authority of the team that is crafting the story. When the producer tries to steer the crew away from filming Maci, her tone is neutral, but the words and edited action point to Maci's decision as more of a nuisance than an assertion of choice rooted in empowerment or stemming from a sense of personal integrity. Kiki, the producer commenting on the filming process, frames Maci's absence as an inconvenience to the production. After Maci arrives and explains that she's back to the show, the crew is once again amiable and share hugs with her. Maci staying on the show returns the environment to stasis. The message offered is that continuing on the series is advantageous, but the underlying message is that making one's home and personal life open to the cameras restores and upholds the status quo constructed and shaped by production, which in this situation is framed in a positive manner. The ideological messages in support of surveillance are positive and favor the authority of the production, its key players who are the onscreen representatives of the production, and ultimately, MTV and its partners.

The interaction in these scenes between Maci, the producers and crew, and Maci's ex Ryan is cordial, but in examining the relationship between cast and onscreen crew more carefully, the imposition of the producers becomes clear. It is an assertion of authority made to appear pleasant. Its players are made to look amenable to Maci's initial decision, but when this is juxtaposed with how elated they appear after she shares her decision to stay on the show, the preference of the producers and the ideological underpinnings are revealed. The cameras and related gadgets and gear are displayed prominently as the crew works and engages with the cast. In the end, Maci's son Bentley does not appear in the episodes as part of an agreement Maci strikes with MTV. But the way her decision to stay on the series is revealed in episode 7 sidelines any genuine sense of agency or empowerment. Any empowerment in this case, as revealed in this and other scenes, resides within the confines of capital and ongoing commodification, which is ultimately not in the hands of the cast member. The imperative to keep filming is upheld repeatedly. What is presented as the conflict resolved as a series of lighthearted moments, like many of the moments where the camera crew communicates with the cast within the series, reveals the serpentine way that cast members and crew are interconnected and tangled with little room for escape. Ultimately, it is the promise both of visibility and of capital that keeps the players playing, even as they joke about the process of self-commodification along the way. And, this promise reveals a sense of expectation that arises from this private life made public. It is only cast member Farrah - whose response to those expectations does not bow to the authority of the production – who ends up in a position that explicitly reveals the insidious ways that ideology is upheld. MTV capitalizes on this refusal to participate and then denigrates the only cast member who is unwilling to comply with the authority and force of discipline embodied by the production.

Returning to a consideration of violence as an imposed tactic as revealed by Foucault and others, the imposition of the crew in *Teen Mom OG* is twofold: By implementing metacommentary into the narrative, the production not only imposes its authority onto the cast, but also onto the viewer through the messages dispensed in the text and in the narrative. The perpetuation of authority masked as a call for enthusiastic participation builds throughout the series. This imposition perpetuates messages of power through the production and reception of the cultural product. And, throughout the entire series, the repeated use of metacommentary becomes ritualized. The *flow* of televisual imagery also embodies a *flow* of ideology and cultural habit-building. Repeated in each episode in different ways, metacommentary and self-reflexivity offer an ongoing and evolving template by which the producers of culture dispense messages.

*Teen Mom OG* calls attention to the use of metacommentary in the layers of narrative and response to this narrative infused into the story. To be aware of the story by commenting on it at length within the story is presented as wholly authentic and transparent. This structure mirrors online culture and the way social media perpetuates ideologies of visibility as authentic and profitable (in a number of different ways related to various forms of capital) through the over-sharing of information as an assertion of the value of the self. And yet, as Dubrofsky explains in her examination of surveillance in reality TV and on Facebook, reality TV is largely considered “a low form of entertainment (“trashy” TV), whereas [Social Networking Sites] are gaining traction in every facet of the public and private arena, with private citizens, celebrities, and politicians” engaged in social media practices (115). It is perhaps for this reason that *Teen Mom OG* utilizes social media tactics in the structure of its television programs.

When utilized in the framework of a pleasant, entertaining series full of moving snapshots of the personal lives of four young mothers that is less low culture and more a

platform for tactics used on social media and in online culture, metacommentary reveals the ways that asserting power can be manipulative in intention and oppressive while simultaneously appearing fairly innocuous as it is woven into a family-friendly series about amiable participants. The structure and editing of the episodes develop the representation of the crew as onscreen collaborators who act as agents that design the narrative to favor the production even as the story focuses on the cast in their daily lives.

### **Metacommentary and the Assertion of Authority**

The inclusion of the onscreen crew in the story creates a complicated juxtaposition for the viewer. The pairing of the cast's voiceovers with the animated title sequences filled with quirky images and line drawings infantilizes the cast to make the narrative more palatable with its youthful tone. At the beginning of the season, the onscreen crew appears as a colorful reminder of the fun process of reality TV production. Yet the crafty positioning of the crew is evident from the start. As the season progresses, the crew appears in the narrative more frequently, asking questions to interject in conversations or gain insight into the specific matter being discussed. The careful crafting of a narrative that supports the authority of the production grows with each episode.

As with other reality programs, the crew also becomes more visible when the drama within the cast members increases. Yet unlike other series such as *The Bachelor* or *Survivor*, where the invisible line between cast and crew still remains intact, the MTV producers break down that separation in order to enforce other boundaries and frameworks of authority. It is as the Maci/Farrah conflict progresses that the producers begin to ramp up their involvement beyond serving as pleasant additions to the conversation within the series. The action of

increasing the crew's visible involvement in the onscreen narrative through metacommentary takes its cue from other reality programs which include clips of the crew intervening when the drama reaches a breaking point. The way that MTV and *Teen Mom OG* incorporate "breaking the fourth wall" into the story differs from other series and alters the equation in favor of the crew intervening in multiple covert and explicit ways.

Theorists have examined the strategies that are used to garner and retain viewers. In a 1971 essay, literary critic and political theorist Frederic Jameson considered the concept of metacommentary within literature and art. In his response, Jameson argues: "What is wanted is a kind of mental procedure which suddenly shifts gears, which throws everything in an inextricable tangle one floor higher and turns the very problem itself...into its own solution...by widening its frame in such a way that it now takes in its own mental processes as well as the object of those processes" (9). The producers of *Teen Mom OG* use their own participation as onscreen co-conspirators to manifest the inextricable tangle that Jameson describes. Inserting themselves into the program to shift gears and offer themselves – as representatives of authority, power, and surveillance – they appear to answer the problems they simultaneously propel using their participation and imposition in each scene. As tensions increase, the crew steps in to act as mediator, solidifying the ideologies associated with surveillance, hegemony, and authority. In this regard, they follow what Jameson outlines in his confrontation of metacommentary in art and literature.

Acting as the solution to the problem they created, the producers and onscreen crew of *Teen Mom OG* control the narrative and its underlying messages. Power and its structures of authority are presented in a positive light and are supported by the cast members. In the case of its characters, self-reflexivity and metacommentary are the tools with which the cast moves from

conflict to resolution (and often back to conflict again). This tactic is evident from the very first episode of the series. Despite assertions [made by the producers in promotional material about the show] that it is a groundbreaking series that utilizes a unique, unconventional approach, *Teen Mom OG* is conventional and rooted in conservatism in that it privileges and upholds the production, and by extension, established structures of power. Yet unlike in art, literature, or other televisual texts where this disruption offers the possibility of active engagement in the process and what it reveals, it is unclear if viewers of *Teen Mom OG* question or critically interrogate the process utilized in the series.

### **Close Reading: Breaking the Fourth Wall With “Old Wounds”**

The third episode of the first season of *Teen Mom OG* (“Old Wounds,” originally aired on April 6, 2015), includes a scene where Maci has planned to meet her ex, Ryan, at a public location to drop off her son Bentley so that he can spend time with his father. Ryan is late for the drop off, and Maci becomes frustrated (00:05:58–00:06:00). As Maci, Bentley, and her fiancé Tyler get into the car to drive over to the meet up spot, the camera crew stop them to adjust one of the dashcam devices that records the cast members as they drive (00:06:01–00:06:10). This detail reminds the viewer that the production is taking place. Maci then reaches out to Ryan via text while waiting for him in the car with Tyler and her son Bentley. Ryan finally responds to the text, and the two have an argument over the phone (00:06:11–00:07:01).

Maci, Tyler, and Bentley drive off after deciding to drop Bentley at Ryan’s parents’ house instead of waiting around even further. Ryan and his girlfriend Shelby drive to the original meeting place, but production stops them twice to let them know to reach out to Maci regarding the situation (00:07:02–00:08:18).

### **Close Reading: Reflections**

The tension in the scene highlighting the Bentley drop off is not just between the two parties involved in the situation. It is a triangulation of each parent and the production, with a palpable imposition of the production on the narrative as well as the visual and literal environment. MTV advertises these moments as simply “breaking the fourth wall,” because they offer a kind of transparency as far as the production process is concerned. But this transparency does little to shake the jarring nature of the imposition of the crew within the personal or private spaces in which the cast members interact. This imposition also changes the action within the episode. Without the production crew, Ryan might not know to drive to his parents’ house to pick up his son, for example. Without their interruptions, he also may not be as frustrated with his ex and everyone involved.

Like the drama in each episode, the imposition of the crew repeats as it transforms into ritual, driving the series as a guiding force while presenting itself as an inconsequential added element. The element of metacommentary imposed upon the scene with the inclusion of the crew reproduces power and positions itself to stay in the viewer’s consciousness as a reminder of the authority of the production, of the surveilling technology, and of the external and internalized imperatives involved with participating in the production as cast members. The private and personal is wrung from the individual to be made public in various tangled ways. The cast member consents to this process, yet the blurred line between public and private remains, and the presence of the crew within the narrative confuses the relationship between viewer and onscreen talent. This triangulation of cast, onscreen crew is a boon to the production, for it allows the crew to tangle and untangle the conflict and the players as they see fit, upholding the expectations and requirements that affect and motivate the cast to continue in the production process.

## Metacommentary, Labor, and Alienation

While metacommentary offers the potential for genuine commentary on an event, situation, or site, it often becomes an integral part of the process of alienation that takes place because of the way it privileges the networks of power, authority, and capital that work in tandem to serve the production of (social, economic, and cultural) capital. The superficial message offered to the consumer depicts metacommentary practices as devoid of the exploitative actions involved in late capitalist culture. *Teen Mom OG* offers the cast member and the at-home viewer the sense of empowerment, agency, and self-assertion. But, what is promoted ultimately benefits the network and the production rather than supporting the cast or any of their specific victories or successes. The structure of the series aids the seamless incorporation of metacommentary into a commodifying act of publicizing private trauma, challenges and vulnerabilities for profit.

*Teen Mom OG* includes multiple instances of this type of underhanded, exploitative metacommentary in each episode. The structure of the scenes allows for this to take place. The main imagery captured on *Teen Mom OG* is similar to most other reality shows: A mix of “action” footage such as dramatic exchanges and travel shots in cars or on foot, and B-Roll (which includes insert shots of nature or neighborhood scenes nearby to be used as introduction or closing shots). Where the production of *Teen Mom OG* differs from typical construction of reality programming is in the way it substitutes in-person informal discussion between cast members or between cast and crew woven into the narrative in place of formal sit-down interviews typically used in traditional reality TV. In a many reality programs, the action or drama between cast members takes place in one set of clips while the camera (and by extension, the producers) acts as an all-seeing eye that follows the narrative. Within these clips are often

interspersed a number of [on the fly or formal] interview clips, music to affect the tone of the scene, “confessional” interviews, and sound bites that weave the scene together. These sound bites often flow from one clip to the next, acting as a glue to the scene. The interviews that are intercut are typically in a formal setting, but they can also be constructed within the set like in the first season of *The Real World* where they took place in various spots around the Manhattan Loft.

Also used is footage from the “confessionals.” These interviews and confessionals in formal settings act as a structuring device which also cements the authority of the production because the producers, editors, and network shape the narrative and imagery and have the final say over what makes it to air. Any episode on programs such as *Survivor*, *The Bachelor*, *The Apprentice*, or traditional reality programs will include such interview footage and/or audio as a way to guide the narrative and insert a formal moment that includes details that drive the story. *Teen Mom OG* does not follow this method. The cast narrate their own storylines in voiceovers at the head and tail of each sequence, and the crew jump in and out of the narrative, disrupting the understanding of their function in the series. On most traditional reality TV shows, the producers or crew appear voiceless, hidden from the viewer except in an emergency. The cast member is instructed to answer interview questions with the question folded into the answer so that the producer’s voice is not included in the clip. On *Teen Mom OG*, the producers alternate between asking questions off-camera that are heard and highlighted in the scene and involving themselves directly in the action by appearing alongside the cast as costars. The ensuing onscreen relationship that is nurtured through the exchange between cast and crew upholds their authority of the production while making it appear as if the influence and authority of the production are somehow shaken away in a newly democratized environment. The editing of the

series supports this process, for each scene almost always returns to showing the cast's compliance and willingness to proceed, even when other figures of authority like family members attempt to influence or motivate the cast.

### **Close Reading: Beyond Self-Promotion, "This Ain't It"**

In episode 3 of the first season of *Teen Mom OG* ("Old Wounds," first aired on April 6, 2015), Tyler and his mother chat about Catelynn's new pregnancy at a park on the waterfront (00:03:24–00:03:40). Offscreen, a producer asks Tyler if he has wanted another baby since their first child Carly, who they gave up for adoption during the filming of *16 and Pregnant*. Tyler answers quietly with a tone of frustration. Of course he wants another child, he replies, he already wanted one when Carly [the daughter they gave up for adoption] was born. Tyler's mother then changes the subject to ask him if he registered for classes at the local college. She urges him to do so, turning directly to the camera as she mentions her son having an actual career, adding "No offense, MTV, this ain't it" (00:03:41–00:04:01). It is a tender dose of reality delivered by Tyler's mother and a reminder that being on a reality TV show is hopefully not the final and only career choice for her son.

The conversation does not progress, however, as Tyler changes the subject again to lament over not seeing his first-born daughter Carly too often. Later in the episode, Catelynn and Tyler discuss their daughter Carly who they gave up for adoption six years prior. They explain to Tyler's mother that signing away their rights for the adoption affects their access to Carly even though it was arranged as an open adoption with access in the beginning. The discussion turns to the other children featured in the series. Catelynn and Tyler express concern about the kids who appear in the series, saying "They don't have a normal life at all. They get noticed all the time.

They are stopped all the time, asked for pictures all the time.” Catelynn expresses her support for Carly’s adoptive parents who wish to limit Carly’s access to her birth parents because of the series and its visibility (00:22:00–00:24:43).

In the following episode, (“New Kids on the Block,” first aired on April 13, 2015), Tyler continues this discussion, saying “we never knew we were gonna have millions of followers on social media” (00:34:30–00:34:53). Yet moments after sharing his concerns about the way their fame affects them as a couple and a family, Tyler sticks capitulates to stick up for the series and the filming process, suggesting that Carly’s adoptive parents should “accept the fact that your daughter was born on MTV. Her birth parents are followed on reality TV, and that’s just life” (00:34:54–00:35:12).

### **Close Reading: Reflections**

The scenes are edited to highlight Tyler talking about his feelings about being a father rather than elaborating on what his mother or wife refer to when they discuss privacy, opportunities outside of MTV, and the consequences of being on the series. In later episodes, Tyler revisits the possibility of going back to school, yet the emphasis remains on personal and family issues rather than on career or related external connections. As with many of the narrative arcs of the story, Tyler’s is one that benefits the network, the series, and the brand.

This capitulation by the cast to continued and constant surveillance by MTV regardless of the consequences serves the production and the MTV brand. The scenes use metacommentary about the environment in which Catelynn and Tyler find themselves to block any potential criticality toward the production process, self-commodification, or ongoing surveillance apart from Tyler’s Mom’s moment of candor. MTV creates a landscape for both the cast and viewer

that envelops both parties in an illusion. The playful tone highlighted from the very first moments of the series, when the young children of the cast members eagerly ask to be filmed as the young parents exchange banter with the crew reveals the entry point into this agreement. It is one that reveals its complexities while obscuring related manipulations. And it is all structured into a narrative and visual landscape that the production presents as transparent to the viewer.

The production dispenses messages that uphold and normalize the practices taking place in the series and in contemporary culture. These practices are painted as benign, part of one's daily life, and ultimately beneficial if adhered to with loyalty and willingness to sacrifice one's privacy. And yet, *Teen Mom OG* also contains moments of doubt or concern over the effects of the production on the cast and their family members. This is done not to generate a genuine critical response. The moments of concern simultaneously subvert and legitimize the production itself. The resulting messages offered to the viewer – underwritten with the use of metacommentary paired with the self-reflexivity of the cast – reveal and contribute to wider formations that perpetuate the reproduction of power through the implementation of ideological apparatuses that act as a set of guideposts and markers for the viewing audience.

### **Metacommentary, Fan Reception, and Critical Media Literacy**

As with the research involved in understanding the tactic of self-reflexivity, the research on fan responses to *Teen Mom OG* for the understanding of the function of metacommentary in the series is comprised of analysis of posts and comments on two *Teen Mom OG* fan blog sites – *Teen Mom Junkies* (teenmomjunkies.com) and *Teen Mom Central* on Tumblr. The keywords used in organizing the fan responses on both pages were: Money, Motherhood, Beauty, Fame, The Parasocial Relationship, Production (signifying both the MTV crew/producers and the

production process), Remorse, Redemption, Class, Comedy (referring to fan creativity and humorous comments), Pornography/Sexuality, and each of the main female cast member's or their child's father's names. A guiding consideration in the analysis of this fan page content as it relates to metacommentary relates to the reception of the televisual text that is shaped by the use of this tactic. Do fans respond to the series in ways that take notice of the inclusion of the production within the production? Also, do fans engage in ways that adopt metacommentary practices into their own participation on the blog pages? And, how is pleasure generated in ways that take into consideration the practice of metacommentary as it revealed in the fan blog posts and comments?

In general, the fan response to metacommentary is that there is a general understanding of the influence of the production on the product (and its players), but there is little critical intervention in the blog pages that reflects interest in the uses of this tactics beyond that it offers a chance to see the crew onscreen. In one post on *Teen Mom Junkies*, *teenmomofthemoth* comments on a scene in which Gary talks about private matters in a scene, suggesting that the scene is "scripted for drama." The same fan comments on another post with "That scene seemed very staged and scripted to me." In another post about how insufferable cast member Farrah is, *erb121* comments "I can't believe the producers don't refuse to work with her." Both comments reflect a success on the part of the production to deflect criticism of their actions and instead focus all energy and attention on the cast. When there is discussion of MTV or the production, it is as if viewers prefer to avoid acknowledging the influence of the producers and crew on the cast and the finished product beyond simple statements about scenes being staged or scripted. In one *Teen Mom Junkies* post about MTV and decreases in teen pregnancies, *Catelynns Carly* comments, "I can't credit MTV with this. It's too much for me to handle." What these comments

reveal is that other than a response rooted in what Ang considers the *ideology of mass culture* in the way the fans criticize the cast for their many flaws and mistakes and find joy in sharing their criticisms with others, there is an overarching desire to disregard the imprint of the production and network. The only exception is when fan teenmomofthemonth comments on Dr. Drew Pinsky who hosts the Teen Mom OG reunion specials, “I get annoyed when Dr. Drew comes on no matter what, because he’s a pushover and an insult to anyone who practices medicine.” In this case, even though Dr. Drew presents as an authority figure and expert on the series, he is treated as a cast member and not a representative of the series and the production.

One delightful way that fans incorporate metacommentary into their own practices is in the way some narrate their own actions while on the blog site. On Teen Mom Junkies, a fan with the username rae dreams up a fantastical horror movie scenario that involves cast member Farrah. At the end of the creative offering, rae explains, “Sorry, I’m working a midnight shift and I’m super bored.” This and related comments reflect similar considerations as those revealed in the context of self-reflexivity. There is genuine engagement with the televisual text, and an acknowledgment that metacommentary is used to guide the narrative and manage the cast, but beyond simple connection to other fans through personal anecdotes or humorous delusional stories punctuated by details about the fan’s particular situation at the time they commented, the engagement does not reflect an interrogation of the tactics, practices, and ideological apparatuses at work on *Teen Mom OG*.

## **Conclusion**

Metacommentary can elevate individual stories to court viewers and aid the reception (and popularity) of a series by engaging in ways that promote active participation in the process

of spectatorship and consumption of the cultural product. But, metacommentary is often used to court passivity in the viewer, even as it appears to welcome engagement with the cultural product. The distinction between engagement and empowerment is important here, as the two are often presented as interchangeable in televisual texts such as daytime TV, drama, and reality TV. Failure to distinguish between the two misses an important critical assessment of the culture industry. The impact of the use of self-reflexivity and metacommentary in *Teen Mom OG* is necessary to confront. The messages and frameworks that metacommentary accentuates, elements that are discarded or made less important, and the overall effects of metacommentary on the messages offered to the viewer are carefully arranged in order resulting in a set of messages within a televisual text that delivers conservative, market-driven imperatives to the consumer in order to quiet criticality and encourage the adoption of these very same practices in their own daily lives.

## Conclusion and Future Areas of Consideration

“You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.”  
– “Hotel California,” The Eagles (1976)

This project is being completed during the outbreak of the global Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic. During this time, many cities in the United States have shut down as their inhabitants work, study, socialize and shop all online. At the same time, as the US continues to experience ongoing police brutality and abuses of power, there is a public reckoning with history and the age-old racisms that have long plagued the United States. The themes and problems addressed in this research couldn't be timelier. For, in this state of pandemic pandemonium, where work is home and home is work and there appears to be no difference, the imperative to continuously be present and online and ready to hustle as and be surveilled is palpable. But also, in this state of mass uprising, many are beginning to seek genuine community through acts of protest and rebellion, mutual aid, and related exchanges that can be supported by digital culture, but are not governed by it. It is a time when many are asking themselves important and crucial questions about selfhood, success, privilege, and community.

On *Teen Mom OG*, the ideologies of individualism, success and the American Dream are reinforced in complicated ways. The way these ideologies are infused into the narrative normalizes and romanticizes them for the viewer. The answer appears to be an overwhelming emphasis on the self – by focusing on the cast members' self-reflexive moments, and by fostering a production environment primarily within the home that pulls the cast away from the community in which they reside and isolates them within an insular relationship in an imagined community where producer and cast member are on a level playing field. Conveniently, this allows for the production to form the narrative and the representation of the cast even when it

appears not to. The production exerts control by placing its own players directly into the narrative, inviting increased self-reflexivity from the cast as a distraction and disciplining tool, employing skillful tactics of metacommentary, and crafting a narrative in ways that obscure the complexity of these new forms of manipulation while appearing to do the opposite. The intrusive setup (for the cast and the viewer) is made to appear palatable, friendly, and enacted with the best of intentions. The ease with which this form of control is possible is because of the nature of reality television in its choice of casting, its treatment of talent in the characters (or navigating its absence), and its position within a growing multiplatform system.

These tactics are pervasive in all contemporary media, for they help reproduce power and soften the blow of surveillance, exploitative labor practices, and increasingly unobtainable standards of participation as a means to legitimacy, verified authenticity, and increased capital. As with social media, reality programs such as *Teen Mom OG* emphasize a wholehearted embrace of the confessing, self-involved individual governed by the processes of expression and the machinery that records them that in this framework requires an ongoing, increasingly sacrificial acts of self-commodification that court alienation from the self and from the bonds that give meaning to one's life. The way of being that is endorsed is navigated by capital, and rooted in situating oneself a step away from the actual thing by *watching the watching of it* which serves as a distraction from the agents of authority that require the reproduction of power in order to obtain and retain power. This is not reserved for reality TV. Politics also employs these practices, with its players offering one aspirational, tantalizing, or infuriating distraction after another to turn the attention away from the functions and consequences of capital and power.

Participation in programs such as *Teen Mom OG* offers the cast financial, social, and cultural capital, but requires the cast to change their way of living to accommodate the intrusion of the crew, the camera, and the surveilling gaze on an arena with a worldwide reach which rarely rests. The transactional relationship required in participating in this kind of program is made appealing to the cast with salary, the allure of fame, and the promise of visibility and recognition. The relationship into which the cast is invited is made sweeter by the kind of connection that the producers and crew appear to share with the cast. The resulting interaction is filmed, and shared with the viewer, who may be motivated by a parasocial connection and aspire to emulate such processes, relationships, and ideological positionings as well. Much like the ideologies of excellence that personalities such as Oprah Winfrey represent within this framework of capital, success, and fame, the cast and crew of *Teen Mom OG* also support actions and characterizations that emphasize performing the self, self-commodification, and consent to endless surveillance in exchange for visibility and increased forms of capital. And the way the series presents this to the viewer is done in a way that normalizes these actions, making them appear appealing, even if these actions cause conflict or discomfort at the time of filming or beyond.

The reasons the cast may continue to participate and reject the idea of stepping away or even quitting altogether rests in the relationship between capital, talent, and the flimsy promises of fame embedded in reality TV and contemporary culture. When there appears to be no other commodifiable talent or skill to draw attention to, the emphasis becomes publicizing everyday exchanges in private and domestic spaces through processes. The adverse effects of participating in this process become infused into the narrative to actually support the series when the use of tactics such as metacommentary help to simultaneously subvert *and* legitimize the process. In

order to retain control of the narrative, the producers of these cultural products twist and shape these lived experiences that are now filmed into a configuration that serves to retain the structures of capital and power in the way they currently exists. The preceding chapters that outline how this takes place serve to answer one of the guiding questions of this process to reveal how *Teen Mom OG* and reality TV function to aid in the reproduction of power within an ongoing neoliberal project that is upheld by the culture industry.

A question that persists: Is it possible to be critically aware of the way capital and power function and still enjoy media and cultural products? This question points to an unresolved, ongoing consideration of the ways, if any, that viewers and fans can engage in ways that acknowledge this system and its tools while continuing to enjoy the process of consuming cultural products. A hope is that engagement with cultural products may become even more enjoyable when experienced from a perspective informed by a rich and growing practice of media literacy. The fan responses to *Teen Mom OG* reveal little in the form of viewers questioning the characterizations as they are shaped in the narrative by the production. Uncovering what is seemingly already uncovered is one tactic in response to this proposed blend of awareness and enjoyment. Another tactic might be to seek insight into the ways that practices such as textual poaching or reappropriation might energize the criticality of fans and viewers in creative ways.

The existing areas of consideration outlined in this dissertation open many possibilities of future study. One application of this scholarship might be to expand its reach to examine how the compulsion to treat the self as commodity manifests on various social media platforms. How does TikTok stardom, for example differ from reality TV fame? How does the framework of alienation function in a purely digital landscape that appears to be more user-driven than a reality

series? How might social media practices characterized as empowering avenues of self-expression and agency retain similar kinds of opacity as what is revealed in how breaking the fourth wall and including the “production within the production” function in *Teen Mom OG*? Embedded in these areas of interest are questions of race, class, and ideologies of upward mobility and/or privilege. An examination of the commodification of motherhood on television, social media, and in visual culture may open important channels of scholarship. For some celebrities, motherhood becomes an avenue to exponentially increasing profit through the sale of children’s books, clothing, health and beauty aids, and the production of more visual content. Yet for other mothers in the public eye who come from working class families like the cast of *Teen Mom OG*, the burdens often outweigh the perks.

Another area of consideration is the physical and emotional effects and consequences that the alienating process of participating in reality TV or any number of related manifestations of publicizing one’s private life may have on the individual. This alienation manifests among the young mothers in *Teen Mom OG* as depression, anxiety, drug abuse, and even domestic violence. These consequences and manifestations of self-commodification and alienation are not unique to the cast of *Teen Mom OG*. In fact, they have existed since the genre began. This alienating process has even become lethal. On the British series *Love Island*, for example, two cast members from different seasons committed suicide after appearing on the series. The series incorporates audience tweets and viewer votes on popularity into the narrative, causing considerable stress and anxiety to some contestants who are unable to handle their newfound visibility and the burden that comes from the public seeking 24-hour access to their lives. After the deaths of 2016 *Love Island* cast member Sophie Gradon and 2017 cast member Mike Thalassitis, their castmates were outspoken about the lack of aftercare by production after each

season. British paper *The Sun* also published an online article noting that 38 people have died in suspected suicides linked to participation in reality TV shows (Spencer 2019).

In a growing number of cases, existential alienation leads to literal isolation and eventual self-harm or even death. Like *Love Island* contestants Sophie Gradon and Mike Thalassitis who both committed suicide soon after their participation on the competition series, cast member Hana Kimura from the Japanese reality series *Terrace House* also recently committed suicide after being extensively harassed and bullied online. While the cast of *Terrace House* is not obligated to remain filming if they choose to depart, and any consideration of terminating one's tenure as an on-camera participant is accepted and even welcomed, the visibility that participation on the series brings can still become crippling for some. *Terrace House* incorporates the "production within the production" by presenting a panel of comedians and actors who watch and comment on the series in a studio separate from the filmed location. The panel discusses many themes with a generally favorable response to a cast member deciding to leave the show to move on to other opportunities. Despite what appears as support of the power to choose how and how much to participate, issues of self-commodification and alienation remain, as does the divisiveness that drives social media and online culture. There appears no other option than the assertion of participation and allegiance to an incessant force of surveillance despite these possible consequences. The enduring illusion is that value is contingent on remaining within this circuit of visibility and surveillance in multiple interconnected ways while becoming increasingly alienated from one's true self. As the song lyrics go, "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave."

A wise person recently advised me to consider the dissertation process not an ending, but a beginning. A mission, as this project comes to a close and new projects begin, is to imagine the

ways forward. Implementing an approach rooted in media literacy, the goal is to confront the oppressive structures that encourage the reproduction of power in damaging ways, and to do so through scholarship, an emphasis on community, and the hope that perhaps, if we're lucky and smart enough, we will turn away from the weighty anvil of capital toward a system rooted in solidarity, discourse and genuine support.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Examination of many current or recent reality dating and/or competition programs will reveal the way ideological apparatuses that uphold and reproduce power are promoted through tactics break down the barriers between public and private. A few examples include *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*, *Survivor*, *Love Island*, *Love at First Sight*, *American Idol*, and *Big Brother*. In these programs, the domestic and/or interpersonal relationships are highlighted in ways that exploit the personal and private for the sake of capital, profit, and support of exploitative practices that pull its participants into an ongoing process of self-commodification or eject cast members into obscurity and often, toward personal, professional, or economic failure.

<sup>2</sup> The starting point for understanding the ideas and questions here is “Culture Industry Reconsidered” by Theodor Adorno. A study of Adorno’s work can then be paired with reading the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* by Karl Marx in which Marx outlines the concept of alienation or estrangement from the self. Roland Barthes examines the way ideology is infused into visual media in *Mythologies*, and Ien Ang examines how ideology is infused in media in ways that elicit pleasure in *Watching Dallas*.

<sup>3</sup> See *Watching Dallas* by Ang (1985), *The ‘Nationwide’ Audience* by Morley (1980), *Television and Everyday Life* by Roger Silverstone (1994). Also relevant are Silverstone’s 1991 paper “From audiences to consumers: the household and the consumption of communication and information technologies” in the *European Journal of Communication* and Silverstone’s paper co-authored with David Morley “Media audiences communication and context: Ethnographic perspectives on the media audience” in *A handbook of qualitative methodologies for mass communication research* (2002). Stuart Hall’s 1980 paper on “encoding/decoding” is available in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During (2007).

<sup>4</sup> See Hutcheon’s *The politics of postmodernism* for further consideration of this theme.

<sup>5</sup> The worker in the context of the Marxist understanding of alienation is typically used in regard to factory workers. For the purposes of this research, the term is reimagined within the framework of the reality TV production process.

<sup>6</sup> These seemingly spontaneous interviews filmed within the action taking place are referred to in reality TV post-production as OTF or “On the Fly” interviews. They are often contrasted with formal interview “INTV” footage where the cast appears seated, sometimes with a green screen background that shows a static image of the interior of a home or film location. The difference in tone, pace, and perspective (the cast may not be looking directly at the producer conducting the interview like they would be in a formal interview) that can be created with an OTF can alter the direction of the narrative of any given scene or episode when edited together in a crafty and creative way. To deliver a type of message or meaning with the use of this kind of skill is beneficial to the production, network and sponsors because it constructs an appealing product - exciting, and potentially frustrating - leaving the viewer in anticipation for the next episode.

<sup>7</sup> In many ways the performed heroism revealed in scenes where the crew steps in to intervene during times of conflict can be traced to daytime “trash TV” talk shows such as *The Jerry Springer Show* where security often jumps into the scene when an individual launches at another in a moment of rage. But this inclusion of the production’s intervention is not limited to daytime talk shows. This tactic is used on such programs as *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, where the crew will step in whenever there is a heightened moment of tension or emotion. What is different about the intervention of the crew on *Teen Mom OG* is that the crew is part of the narrative all along, jumping in to ask questions, stoke conflict, step in as savior, or act as mediator in some sort of performed advocacy for both the cast and the production.

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