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The Irony Bribe and Reality Television: Investment and Detachment in *The Bachelor*

Dana Cloud

In season 11 of the ABC reality television program The Bachelor, bachelor Brad Womack refused to choose a mate, thus breaking the romantic contract that is the essence of this reality show. In doing so, Womack exposed the emptiness of the mythic romantic script, prompting both invested outrage and ironic detachment among viewers. An analysis of the contradictions upon which the show's fantasy founders (thus encouraging an ironic response), alongside exploration of fan discussion board discourse, confirms the capacity of audiences to maintain simultaneous earnest investment and ironic reflexivity toward the program. This oscillation of stance signals a textual strategy that I label the irony bribe. The irony bribe corresponds to the paradoxical epistemology of reality television; viewers can regard the program as "real" and "not-real" and therefore worth viewing and worthless at the same time. A counterpoint to Fredric Jameson's concept of the fantasy bribe, the irony bribe wins viewers to participation in an ideological discourse by tempting them not only with the fantasy, in this case, of mythic romance, but also with the pleasures of the reaction against taking the fantasy seriously. Viewers' creative and critical responses to The Bachelor do not necessarily mitigate its ideological conservatism with regard to gender and romance; rather, they may naturalize its worldview, ironically, in the process of denaturalizing it.

Keywords: Reality television; Fantasy Bribe; Irony; Camp; Gender Ideology

We may say that we know what we see on TV is not real; but ideology uses our own cynicism against us. (Johnston, 2006, p. 129)

The ultimate Camp statement: It's good because it's awful. (Sontag, 1964)

Perhaps comedian Ellen DeGeneres (Ellen DeGeneres Show, 2007) spoke for the majority of the 11 million viewers of the season finale of the eleventh season of ABC's hit reality television show *The Bachelor* (2007) when she called Bachelor Brad

Dr. Dana Cloud is at the University of Texas, Austin. Correspondence to: University of Texas, Communication Studies, 1 University Station, A1105, Austin, 78712. Email: dcloud@mail.utexas.edu

Womack a “jerk” for failing to follow through on the romantic promise of the show: that one rich and handsome man will select a mate over a period of six weeks from among 25 beautiful, accomplished women who are pressured to confess their love for him, putting themselves at the mercy of a public (and therefore potentially humiliating), and ruthless process of elimination. Never mind that none of the couples resulting from any season of *The Bachelor* has lasted. (Only the relationship between Trista and Ryan from the first season of *The Bachelorette* has survived to date; they are married and have a baby.) Never mind how surreal it might seem for any self-respecting woman to volunteer for such a competition. For many viewers, Brad Womack betrayed the promise of true love, and they were outraged.

However, *New York Times* columnist Caryn James (2002) was convinced during an earlier season (2002) of *The Bachelor* that it was impossible that anyone could take the show seriously, writing:

Half pseudo-porn, half fairy tale, ABC’s hit reality show “The Bachelor” turns sexual stereotypes into shameless fun. . . . “The Bachelor” is the least realistic of all reality shows. . . . The show’s winking, playful distance from real life is the key to its success, a distance evident in its comical pretense that love at first sight and happily ever after do exist—if only you can find the right television producer to hand them to you.

James chastised the National Organization for Women as “tone deaf” in its criticism of the program, adding, “You could argue that “The Bachelor” fulfills brainwashed young women’s retro fantasies, but it’s more likely that young people can simply read the show’s kitschy tone better,” (p. 3). Media scholar Mark Andrejevic (2004) likewise argues, “Reality shows are becoming the latest and most self-conscious in a string of transparently staged spectacles” (p. 3).

Although *The Bachelor* is sometimes parodic, always over-the-top, and excessively nostalgic for a compliant femininity—in other words, campy (Shugart & Waggoner, 2008, p. 2)—large numbers of women and some men expressed real grief and anger at Brad’s failure to choose a mate. The *New York Daily News* observed, “Viewers felt like *they* were left at the altar” (Kinon, 2007). For example, one viewer called “ziggycat” wrote on the fan board: “Is anyone else all messed up for the way Deanna was hurt, i know i’am destroyed emotionally. I love that girl. I can’t stop crying” [all errors, sic].

How can we explain such investment of millions of viewers in the outcome of what is a transparently staged and gender-disciplining process? In this article, I argue that that *The Bachelor* invites two kinds of investment simultaneously: the pleasure of the romantic fantasy and the pleasure of irony in recognizing the fantasy’s folly. Brad Womack’s violation of the romantic contract exposed the emptiness of its promises; an ironic viewing posture enables one to enjoy both the romance and its emptiness. Below, an analysis of the contradictions upon which the show’s fantasy founders (thus encouraging an ironic response), alongside exploration of fan discussion board discourse, confirms the capacity of audiences to maintain simultaneous earnest investment in and “winking, playful distance” toward the program. This oscillation of stance signals a textual strategy that I label the *irony bribe*.

A counterpoint to Fredric Jameson's (1979) concept of the fantasy bribe, the *irony bribe* is a strategic mechanism of a cultural text that invites audiences to identify with the pleasures of the reaction against the taking seriously of a patently ideological fantasy (such as faith in true love as a source of women's agency). Ironically, the irony bribe naturalizes the worldview of a hegemonic text in the process of denaturalizing it. Irony is the fantasy bribe's Other in its production of investment through disinvestment. As such, the irony bribe corresponds to (but is not limited in its applicability to) the paradoxical epistemology of reality television (Lewis, 2004); viewers can regard the program as "real" and "not-real" and therefore worth viewing and worthless at the same time.

In what follows, I first review relevant literatures and describe the relationships among irony, fantasy, and the "reality" of reality television. Then I conduct an analysis of a series of examples of how the show, in stumbling upon its own contradictions, invites the ironic oscillation of investment and irony among viewers. An account garnered from fan discussion boards confirms the responsiveness of audiences to this dual invitation. I also address the advertising during the program, which anchors the program on the side of investment in women's passivity rather than the side of irony or critique. After the analysis of the show, the advertising, and the message boards, I take up the question of whether the enjoyment of a knowing irony serves as a *bribe* that keeps self-consciously savvy viewers watching.

The Irony Bribe: Fantasy of Transcendence

In his famous essay on reification and utopia in mass culture, Frederic Jameson (1979) argues that ideology is not so clearly a matter of false consciousness as it is the capacity of media texts to acknowledge and manage social anxieties, ultimately in the service of social stability (p. 139). To explain the "twin drives" of mass culture texts, Jameson turns to psychoanalysis, arguing that the structure of the text must "protect the psyche against the frightening and potentially damaging eruption of powerful archaic desires and wish material" (Jameson, 1979, p. 141). As a counterpoint to Jameson's concept of the fantasy bribe, the *irony bribe* wins viewers to participation in an ideological discourse by tempting them not only with mass social and political fantasy, but also with the possibility of protection against rampant archaic desires by the reflexive *rejection* of the fantasy.

Distinct from both sarcasm and cynicism, irony requires sufficient detachment from experience to recognize how particular kinds of texts entail and invoke opposites to their manifest meaning or valence (Booth, 1974). Colebrook (2004) defines irony in the context of postmodern simulation as "an attitude to existence, in which the ironic subject adopts a position of skepticism and mistrust in relation to everyday language" (front matter).

Colebrook also explains that irony "rel[ies] on the audience or hearer recognizing that what the speaker says can *not* be what she means" (2004, p. 16; which is not to say that it *cannot* be what she means). In literary contexts, irony is a marker of adept double-coding, but irony need not be intentional or skillful; sometimes an ironic

stance toward a text attributes motive and value to the text and its maker beyond what may have been intended (Booth, 1974, pp. 148, 193). Therefore, we can recognize irony in any rhetorical text if it “at once made a claim to be heard, but . . . also signaled or gestured to its own limits and incomprehension” (Colebrook, 2004, p. 47). This insight speaks to the current project insofar as *The Bachelor* makes this kind of double claim, as my analysis will reveal below.

Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke (1962) put the workings of irony succinctly: In irony, “What goes forth as A returns as non-A” in a “strategic moment of reversal” (p. 517). Purdy (2000) distinguishes irony from outright cynical rejection, and Burke (1962) appreciates irony as an ultimately progressive dialectical capacity to recognize the partiality of any view on the social whole and to historicize particular accounts rather than investing in any single one of them. Likewise, Rorty hails irony as “the opposite of common sense” (1989, p. 74), or a resource for critique. The situation of irony *vis.* the political is unstable, and I do not mean to argue that irony is never productive of helpful critical insight. While on the one hand, irony can be a way of “avoiding the world” (Purdy, 2000, p. 9), Colebrook (2004) argues that irony is a crucial tactic of political critique in a range of postmodern theories (see also, Renegar & Sowards, 2003; Rorty, 1989; Winokur, 2007; contrast Galewski, 2008). Helpfully, Burke identifies a lesser form of this trope, “romantic irony,” which “arise[s] as an aesthetic opposition to cultural philistinism, and in which the artist considered himself *outside of* and *superior to* the role he was rejecting” (p. 514). It is in this sense that I use the term.

“The ironic attitude,” Purdy (2000) argues, “never invites disappointment by a movement’s decline or a leader’s philandering. There is a kind of security here, but it is the negative security of perpetual suspicion . . . So far as we are ironists, we are determined not to be made suckers” (p. 14). Purdy notes that the effort to not be taken in by the trivial and formulaic narratives of “true romance,” the ironic consumer of popular texts risks abdicating intimacy and commitment altogether. “For all its ready laughter, the ironic mood is secretly sad,” he writes (p. 19).

The sadness of refusal signals awareness that no one exists outside of the fantasy constructions that, as Slavoj Žižek (1989) explains, “serve as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and therefore masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel” (p. 45).¹ We are uneasy with devotion, but we hunger, Purdy writes, “for home” (2000, p. 27), or for the fantasy of believable relationships to others. Psychoanalytic rhetorical theorist Joshua Gunn (2004) defines fantasy as a fundamental mechanism of subjectivity that integrates the self into systems of meaning, but at the expense of identifying the actual sources of one’s discontent (Gunn, 2004, pp. 8–9). To “traverse the fantasy” (one goal of psychoanalysis), then, is to recognize it as a signal of unrealizable hopes, to come into traumatic awareness that there is “nothing ‘behind’ it, and to recognize how fantasy masks precisely this ‘nothing’” (Žižek, 1989, p. 126).

In sum, irony allows the ironist to avoid the traumatic encounter by imagining that s/he is somehow outside of the fantasy and its spectacular failures to deliver on its promises. I turn now to a discussion of how the identification with the promise of

reality television to deliver “reality” oscillates with the constant awareness that the promise is empty in what Lewis (2004) describes as the paradox of popular epistemology. In this attitude toward the real, what passes by as “A” returns as “non-A” in the cycle between the fantasy and its ironic Other.

The Ironic Epistemology of “Reality” Television

The emerging literature in media and cultural studies on reality TV has explored its genres (including game shows, competitions of various sorts, romances, surveillance shows, and others; see Clissold, 2004; Couldry, 2004; Gillan, 2004; Kleinhans & Morris, 2004; Murray, 2004); the political-economic and technological conditions of its production (see Hartley, 2008; Jermyn, 2004; Magder, 2004; Raphael, 2004); and the operation of mechanisms of ideology, representation, and stereotype with regard to race, gender, and sexuality, and class (see Andrejevic & Colby, 2006; Brown, 2005; Edwards, 2004; Harvey, 2006; Heinrich, 2006; Johnston, 2006; Kraszewski, 2004; Le Besco, 2004; Maher, 2004; Orbe, 2008; Ouellette, 2004; Palmer, 2004; Pullen, 2004; Rapping, 2004; Schroeder, 2006; Stephens, 2004).

A significant number of critics are concerned with how the conflation of intimacy and publicity parallels blurring of reality and representation in reality programs. Confusion of intimate exposure with truth may warrant surveillance and cultivate an obsessively self-governing citizenship in accordance with societal norms, all under the cover of a “democratized” or even interactive format (see Berenstein, 2002; Dean, 2002; Escoffery, 2006; Franko, 2006; Friedman, 2002b; Hartley, 2008; Jordan, 2006; King, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Lewis, 2004; Miller, 2002; Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Trottier, 2006). On the other hand, a number of scholars have attended to the demographics, desires, pleasures, and agency of reality TV audiences and their prospects for resistance (see Biltereyst, 2004; Foster, 2004; Haralovich & Trosset, 2004; Ogdon, 2006; Tincknell & Raghuram, 2004; Wilson, 2004).

Above all, however, scholarship about reality television is preoccupied with the questions: How real *is* “reality TV,” and *how* does it work to establish itself as real? (See Crew, 2006; Escoffery 2006; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Friedman, 2002a, 2002b; Hartley, 2008; Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Kilborn, 2003; King, 2005b; Murray & Oulette, 2004). From the early days of *The Real World* to *American Idol*, from makeover shows to athletic spectacles such as *American Gladiator*, quiz shows, and even *polygraph* shows challenging contestants—as in *The Bachelor*—to “tell the truth,” reality television has promised us access to the ostensibly real thoughts and behavior of people allegedly like ourselves. “What aspects of everyday experience,” asks King (2005b), “dispose people to seek truth inside manifest fabrication?” (p. 43).

On the one hand, Dubrofsky (2006) argues, “What occurs on reality-based shows is a constructed fiction,” not a representation of what “really” happened” (p. 41). On the other hand, several prominent scholars of reality TV complicate what it means for a program to be “real” to viewers. Andrejevic and Colby (2006), for example, suggest that reality television is real like a laboratory experiment—a set-up that nonetheless can discover meaningful truths (p. 195).

For my purposes, the most significant criterion for realism offered by critics and viewers is the perceived authenticity and sincerity of affect. Andrejevic and Colby (2006) note that reality programs offer therapeutic truths about human nature and identity, stripped of social or historical context (p. 205; see also White, 2002). Importantly, what counts as “real” in romantic genres aimed primarily at women is not empirical truth but *affective* fidelity to women’s expectations about how love *feels*. Elizabeth Johnston (2006) compares shows such as *The Bachelor* to eighteenth century fiction; believable emotions are the *sine qua non* of identification of viewers with characters. In spite of knowing how implausible the premises of such programs, audiences:

acknowledge the shows’ artifices, but believe that their content reveals moments of intimate truth about real people. Comments one avid viewer: “How the players feel is real. You can see their true emotions, their frustrations, their joy. That’s real enough for me.” (Johnston, 2006, p. 118)

This epistemological splitting characterizes the two modes of enjoyment of reality television: the earnest and the ironic. The situation for the viewer of reality television is paradoxical. Viewers become invested in, and reward, authenticity and truth-telling, condemning manipulation even as they must recognize it before them. On this point, Biressi and Nunn (2005) write, “The contestant, as he or she appears before the media audience, can be courageous, bold, greedy, bitchy or ruthless but they cannot appear pretentious” (pp. 151–152). In order to avoid pretension, the shows operate as if in denial of their own staged process; in this way, they attempt to naturalize the routine humiliation and hierarchy of competition and loss. Žižek describes the powerful ideological appeal of such shows, which is “not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape” (quoted in Andrejevic, 2004, p. 215).

Following Žižek’s lead, I argue that viewers’ creative and critical responses to *The Bachelor* do not necessarily mitigate its ideological complicity with an oppressively gendered social order. Žižek’s description of the traversal of the fantasy suggests that a critical approach to *The Bachelor* would take advantage of contradictions between the awkwardly played-out fantasy of romance, on the one hand, and women’s desire for authentic agency, on the other, driving these contradictions to their end. Irony, on the other hand, rests upon the mere recognition of the contradictions without forcing a break with the fantasy itself.

So far, I have explained how an ironic stance with regard to mass culture is a counterpart to what Jameson calls “the fantasy bribe,” and that the paradoxical epistemology of reality television tempts the viewer to suspend the “real”–“not-real” tension in favor of either a standard of narrative or affective realism and/or an ironic (dis)engagement with the text. In the analysis below, I demonstrate how the show’s producers and editors retained self-conscious segments in which the fantasy of romance quite literally stumbles over its own impossibility. These moments co-occur with the performance of authenticity that is the obsessive promise of reality television, as the participants and interviewers insist that each

woman discloses her true self, honest life story, and authentic feelings toward the bachelor.

The Fantasy of True Love (Through Cutthroat Competition)

The basic storyline of each season of *The Bachelor* is quite simple: 25 women compete for the attention and desire of one bachelor over the course of eight episodes set in an exotic location (season 11 takes place in Malibu in 2007), each of which includes two one-on-one “dates” and at least one group “date.” The program intercuts “live” footage of unfolding conversation and action during dates, or in the mansion where the women are housed, with interviews with participants and footage of scenes and with voiceover of characters involved. These multiple techniques enable editors to shape viewers’ understanding of events as well as to comment upon them. Episode 5 of season 11 is no exception. Because it is the episode before bachelor Brad Womack, an Austin, TX bar owner, “gets serious” in visits with the families of four of the women, the competition, and therefore the narrative, are particularly intense.

In this episode, three major mechanisms work to establish the content and the credibility of the romantic fantasy for both contestants and viewers. These are the pressure to disclose, the restriction of women’s agency to *appearance* rather than action, and the prohibition of their sexual autonomy. First, the program insists that each participant hypocritically invokes the importance of truth, sincerity, and authenticity; those who are there “for the wrong reasons” (material gain, self-promotion, sex, or anything other than the earnest desire to find one’s soul mate) are subject to criticism and punishment. The program requires the women to be parts of a sexualized and racialized harem (see Yep & Camacho, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2006; Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008), but punishes women who express open sexual desire or demand recognition of it from Brad. Finally, the continuity between program and advertisements anchors the representation of women as constituted in passive appearances. The contestants seem to have internalized these expectations, so that when their fantasy dissolves, as it is nearly sure to do, the rejects are devastated. I take each of these features of the text in turn.

The Pressure to Disclose

The first one-on-one date of episode 5 features Brad and Bettina (a realtor from Hermosa Beach, CA)² riding in a gondola. Before the romantic scene unfolds, we get to listen in as three other women in their Malibu mansion hot tub measure up the competition. Right away, the tension between sincerity and manipulation reveals itself in the women’s conversation about Bettina. Sheena (a marketing executive from Walnut Creek, CA) describes her as “our biggest competition,” but criticizes Bettina for regarding the show as a competition in which the man is the prize rather than the unfolding of an actual romance. Hillary (a nurse from Philadelphia) and Kristy (an acupuncturist from Chicago) respond with hopes that Brad will figure out “who’s for real and who’s not” and accuse Bettina of being an insincere player. The contest is

revealed to be, ironically, over who can best perform her sincerity, even as every participant proclaims that she is truly “falling for” Brad. This tension is characteristic of reality TV in general; in the romantic sub-genre that includes *The Bachelor*, the obsessive expression of one’s feelings determines the credibility of the contestant and allows viewers to remain in the world of the show.

For example, when the scene shifts to the couple in the gondola, Brad assumes the role of confessor. Exemplifying Foucault’s insight that it is the person who listens rather than the one who speaks who holds the power in a confessional or therapeutic interaction (Foucault, 1978/1990; White, 2002), Brad is in a position to command “the truth” from Bettina. Indeed, as King (2005b) explains, reality TV participants are “forced to authenticity,” with authenticity meaning close conformity with stereotypical expectations implied in the competition (p. 48). King (2005b) calls reality TV programs “training camps of the modular,” “synthetically engineered utopias” (p. 52) that model successful social behavior and impression management for their audiences.

The Bachelor exhibits these imperatives. Both in private interview and in the pair’s interaction, Brad presses repeatedly for Bettina to disclose her *real* feelings, to be *herself*. He asks her, “What’s up?” and Bettina acknowledges the pressure to disclose, repeating “I know I need to show him more,” twice, in voiceover. However, Brad is under no such injunction; it is his role to guard any feelings he may have in order to sustain the possibility that he could pick any one of the women during the next rose ceremony. To this end, he announces to Bettina his goal: to meet someone, fall in love, to recognize it immediately and implicitly, and to become best friends and lovers forever. Every woman is led to believe that she could still be “the one.” Thus, the women’s role is that of supplicant, waiting passively for the redemption of romance.

Men Act, Women Appear

John Berger’s (1972) dictum, “Men act, women appear” (p. 47) is carried out in the advertisements during the commercial break following the gondola scene. Women are featured in advertisements for beauty enhancers, while men are active agents making a difference in the world around them. In a Wendy’s advertisement, for example, a young man in red pigtailed stands during a political rally speech to demand variety in his choices of sides for his burger. Even in partial drag, apparently, men in advertisements are agents with choices in the arenas of politics and consumption. A driver in a Honda Civic commercial is motivated by more than hunger. By picking up and “returning” another man’s refuse (and crafting it into a tree), he turns trash into social influence. Even the klutzy custodian in an Energizer ad who spills his drink on the master board at the power plant has the power to re-light an entire city with a push of the button that invokes the Energizer bunny.

In stark contrast, the women in the advertisements, one for Avon night cream and the other for Olay lotion, are defined in terms of how they look. Both advertisements promise youthful radiance—the ability to glow with light. The Olay advertisement for moisturizer with “radiance ribbons” features an ecstatic woman swimming,

surrounded by green ribbons, eventually shooting up out of the water. In voiceover, a woman promises “youthful glowing skin” made possible by the product’s “light enhancers.” In striking contrast with the custodian’s ability to light the world, women in the world of advertising can’t even light themselves; they need products to “turn the lights on your skin.” The message of the ads taken together is that the ideal woman is one who is visible and available for the looking. In this way, we must regard the advertisements as part of the flow (Williams, 1974/2003) of the program sustaining its key themes and marshalling the desires invoked in the narrative in the service of advertisers and their products.

Prohibitions on Women’s Sexual Agency

Indeed, in the transition from *The Bachelor* episode into that commercial break, the emphasis is clearly on women’s appearance and sexual desirability. The preview of the group date in the segment to follow the commercial break reveals the date to be a pool party, in which Kristy refuses to play, thus securing her dismissal at the end of the episode. The contestants must open themselves up not only to the ear of the confessor but also to the gaze, as we see one attractive woman in a bikini after another propelling herself down a water slide or riding on Brad’s shoulders (Thus, in a game of chicken, the women literally fight each other “over” Brad).

During this pool party, Hillary expresses direct physical desire for Brad. While others appreciate his body in confidence, she regales the viewer with a long and mostly bleeped-out list (although one can read her lips fairly clearly) of sexual acts she would like to undertake with Brad before “calling it a day.” She also violates the taboo against making emotional demands of Brad when, floating beside him on a pool mattress, she asks him point blank what he feels toward her. Required by the conventions of the show and the necessity of sustaining suspense to respond vaguely, Brad fumbles for an answer. Her request makes him visibly uncomfortable, demonstrating once again the asymmetrical control over the terms of intimacy between the women and Brad. Here and elsewhere in the show, it is clear that Hillary has regarded Brad and their romance as absolutely real. Her assumption that the process is unstaged and that he is sincere (in other words, that the show and its producers and editors do not constrain them and that he would tell her if he were uninterested) leads her to express herself directly and to assume agency, both sexual and emotional, in the narrative.

Hillary is crushed when Brad rejects her at the end of the episode. This conclusion to her tale is not surprising; the episode treats her as comic relief and as naïve to the fact that Brad regarded her as “just a friend.” Viewers are granted access to her pain, displayed in what was described as the most shocking, the most painful, and the most dramatic exit in *Bachelor* history. It is difficult not to conclude from this segment that Hillary’s tragic ouster is the outcome of her frank assertiveness. Naomi Wolf’s 1997 book *Promiscuities* is a lament over growing up in a culture that does not honor women’s and girls’ sexual agency. To be successfully sexual in dominant terms, she

argues, “we must not seek and initiate but wait and yield” (p. 26). In a passage that speaks directly to the situation of the women on *The Bachelor*, Wolf writes:

Desirable girls were completely different with boys than they were when they were being what we thought of as normal. They got quiet, and hesitant and appreciative, and they broke off the string of clever, ironic social observations that characterized their usual speech. Being sexy meant waiting and not doing, being watched rather than watching. Behaviorists have a name for it: operant conditioning. You do this, you get that. (p. 25)

Hillary clearly violates the code of the harem (see Dubrofsky, 2006), and, as in operant conditioning, her behavior is not rewarded (see also Waggoner, 2004).

Ironically, in this and other instances (e.g. that of Jenni, discussed below), it is the *most* authentic and sincere contestants whose behavior is described as extreme and out of bounds—in a show that obsessively pledges itself to truth. Hillary is purged for her honesty, even as the show insists in mantra-like fashion that what is required of the women is to express their “true” feelings and to “be themselves.” This contradiction and many others reveal the demand for authenticity to be somewhat cynical. However, for viewers wedded to the promise of a happy ending (and the advertisers wedded to the viewers’ pocketbooks) the illusion of romance must carry on. It cannot do so uncritically, however. The sheer excess of the show’s promises alongside the inclusion of comic moments that break the realist frame license potentially critical viewers to enjoy the program in spite of its ultimately misogynistic content.

Johnston (2006) describes how the genre demands a particular kind of femininity: good women, defined by their passivity and commitment to real love on patriarchal terms, are pitted against “bad girls” who seem to be in the game out of self-interest or who do not display the proper docility. During *The Bachelor’s* eleventh season, the “bad girls” are Bettina (whose reluctance to disclose her feelings and acknowledgment of the material rewards of winning render her suspect) and Hillary (whose openness about her sexual desire marks her as too assertive). In addition, Jenni (a Phoenix Suns dancer from Wichita, KS), rejected in the finale, prioritized her dancing career and expressed unwillingness to move at Brad’s discretion. The morality play among the appropriately feminine and rebellious participants, as Johnston (2006) explains, is not silly: The shows offer agency of a sort, articulated through romance, consumerism, and connection with other women, albeit competitive and male-centered (pp. 127–129). Investment in the fantasy of agency in a male-dominated environment is redirected, then, as the program resolves in favor of those women who are the most compliant, who seem to achieve their heartfelt ambitions by abnegating their autonomy (see also Brown, 2005; Ogdon, 2006).

Up to this point, my analysis of the program has emphasized the mechanisms and potential consequences of viewer—and contestant—investment in the unfolding of a romance authorized by the “success” of women who exercise simultaneous self-disclosure and self-restraint. Identifying with the women who receive roses at the end of the day (indicating that they get to stay until the next week, at least) could lead to the internalization of the lessons described by Naomi Wolf: Good women appear—and

disappear—by the actions of men. However, the text is not seamless. Moments of humor, contradiction, and excess threaten to fray the fantasy, if not tear it open. I turn now to an analysis of how these features of the episode at hand invite viewers to adopt and enjoy an ironic or detached attitude toward the program: comedy, the exposure of material motives, and Brad's betrayal.

Invitations to Irony

Camp and Comedy

The second one-on-one date in this episode attempts—in extravagant, excessive terms—to establish the dream of idealized romance in an instance of what Shugart and Waggoner (2008) identify as a “heterosexual camp” marked by irony, excess, and comedy (pp. 42–46). In the episode, Brad treats Sheena to a Cinderella evening in yet another mansion. On this date, Brad offers Sheena diamond earrings, a choice of gowns, and, later, a romantic dinner and dance by candlelight to the music of a string quartet. “It’s like a fairytale,” she comments. Brad says, “I’m a romantic. This is as romantic as it gets.” But there are moments at which this most elaborately staged fairytale meets its contradictions. Upon entering the mansion, Sheena gets to choose among six gowns; one cannot help remembering that Brad gets to choose among 25 *women* in an implicit analogy between women and other pretty consumer goods. Key to his appraisal of Sheena is how she wears the gown—in other words, how she manages and embodies the fantasy. The difference in power between them is profoundly apparent. Her lighthearted remark, “I think I’ll save the white [gown]” reminds viewers that this is not just a date; it is a shopping trip—for Brad, on the market for a wife. “Good call,” he responds. Implicitly, she has asked him what her chances are. Predictably, he cannot say.

To swelling music, then, Sheena descends the staircase in a red strapless gown as Brad gapes up at her. Suddenly, the entire fantasy falls down—quite literally, as Sheena slips and tumbles down the stairs. The editors chose to retain this moment in the footage, stopping the background music abruptly (adding a screeching halt sound effect) to amplify the scene’s comic dimensions. In her interview after the date, Sheena says she was “mortified” at having fallen, adding, “I hope I didn’t just really blow it.” This is a very self-conscious moment, during which Sheena calls attention to the stakes of the game. It’s a competition that one can blow, not the romantic story of a truly loving relationship in the making. At the same time as it reveals the narrative as a fabrication, however, the moment also reinforces the credibility of the text as unpolished “real life” where people “blow it” (see Friedman, 2002b, p. 13, on this double meaning of the reflexive gaffe).

“She’s Not Here for the Right Reasons”

The economic stakes of this competition are barely masked as the episode progresses. Sheena’s date and its aftermath demonstrate how each encounter unfolds as a

romantic dream, reinforced by continual self-disclosure, denials of any mercenary motivations on the part of the women, and condemnation of women who seem to be in the game for opportunistic reasons. Of course, nearly every one of them reveals mercenary motives in regarding the show as a personal opportunity—for a mate, for material rewards, and for the publicity that up to eight weeks on a hit network television show can garner.

The dynamic of recognition and denial of desire for personal gain of various sorts plays out very clearly when Sheena returns to the house from her fairytale date. Excited, Sheena enters the living area where Jenni, Bettina, and Hillary are conversing. They rave over her gown as she explains that Brad said she could keep the diamond earrings she is wearing. Bettina shocks the others when she announces that, by comparison, her date “sucked.” After she skulks out of the room, the other women criticize her extensively, saying that they would never criticize a date with Brad and emphasizing how inappropriate it is to, as it were, look a gift horse in the mouth.

However, the many actual qualitative and quantitative differences between the dates are apparent for viewers who may draw different conclusions. While Sheena was offered a fairytale evening, Brad grilled Bettina in the gondola because she had not yet offered the compulsory confession of her feelings. Bettina was clearly nervous and uncomfortable with the pressure. In addition, Sheena got *stuff*. The implication is that the women know that they are operating in a system of reward for disclosure, and that some of the rewards are material. (Kisses and the roses given to those selected to continue are the other major forms of reward.) Bettina’s upset that she was not equally rewarded is understandable to those watching, but unthinkable in the cultural environment of the show. The other contestants criticize her, challenging her authenticity and sincerity, for the remainder of the episode. In the end, Sheena and Jenni condemn Bettina, whispering, “She’s not here for the right reasons.” “The right reasons” include the desire for love and marriage, but not for goods benefiting one personally, even though only one woman out of 25 has a chance to win the fantasy reward: a proposal for lasting love. Even this reward was not forthcoming—for anyone—in season 11.

The Fantasy Founders

Austinite Brad Womack has met with extensive criticism from viewers for his betrayal of their expectations. Even when recognizing Brad’s attractiveness and wealth, many contributors to the show’s discussion board notice his strangely flat affect and icy gaze. Throughout the season, many discussion board fans doubted his sincerity, although he also had defenders—until he committed the ultimate betrayal of the romantic script: He refused to choose. In the final episode (episode 6) before the moment of “truth,” Brad seems troubled, pacing, walking into a stand of rose bushes and shaking his head, leading many viewers to believe he intended to run or be sick. Eventually, he takes his place on a platform in the beachside rose garden. He explains first to Jenni that his feelings for her were not strong enough. “I want something more,” he said, “and I can’t find it.”

That statement is a clue as to what comes next: He tells DeAnna (a realtor from Newnan, GA) that he had sent Jenni away, but then tells DeAnna, likewise, that he did not feel enough for her to promise a relationship. "I have to be completely honest with you," he says. DeAnna is dumbfounded, because he had hinted to her previously that the day of reckoning would be a good day for her, *and* the show's producers had flown out her father, ostensibly so that Brad could ask his permission to wed his daughter. DeAnna departs, angry and in tears, and Brad sits on the platform, head in his hands. It is possible that Brad was being "completely honest" in his disappointment not to have found authentic "true love." It could be that he had bought into the fantasy of love at first sight, when making the show turned out actually to be laborious, confusing, and unreasonable in its demand that he find his soul mate from among 25 more or less arbitrarily chosen women. He seems genuinely confused and anxious as the moment of revelation nears.

By some accounts, however, Brad played the situation strategically; he reaped all of the rewards that come with publicity without having to commit. Significantly, Brad's position in the drama is that of ironist; he could enjoy the courtship "as if" it were real without risking real investment in the outcome. It came out after the season's conclusion that he had made sure there was a "none of the above" option in his contract, cementing viewers' belief that he had never intended to follow through. DeAnna became the icon of earnest faith in the promise of true love and the standard-bearer of public disappointment; her image has haunted every media appearance Brad has made in the form of photographs or video of his rejection of her.

Redeeming the Fantasy

To recover viewer allegiance, the producers and advertisers of *The Bachelor* must continually re-establish the program's connection to the promise of true love. Reporting on his interview with Mike Fleiss, Christopher Rocchio (2007) writes, "While he's uncertain what was going through Womack's mind, Fleiss said he's aware that *The Bachelor* 11's ending was 'going to be controversial and that some viewers would say, F**k that. I'm never watching the show again.'" Fleiss reported that the people at ABC "weren't happy about it . . . They would much prefer a proposal and a happy couple" (quoted in Rocchio, 2007).

ABC had an opportunity to redeem the fantasy in the usual "After the Final Rose" (2007) episode hosted by Chris Harrison. In this show, Jenni and DeAnna confront Brad in front of a live studio audience. For obvious reasons, this season's audience seemed especially intent on getting an explanation. The introductory segment of the "After the Final Rose" program recaps the very real devastation wrought by Brad and the show on the two women, but before bringing them and Brad to the stage, Chris announces three special guests: Trista and Ryan, the only successful couple produced by *The Bachelor* series (actually and notably, from *The Bachelorette*, not *The Bachelor*),³ and their new baby, Max, as proof that the dream can be real. This "television debut" (as he calls it) may have been designed to renew viewers' faith in

the series. Chris's gushing over baby Max and the audience's (possibly cued) "oohs" and "aahs" over the child model the correct responses for viewers at home. The episode does feature a grilling of Brad, but not until we all understand that his maverick decision was peculiar; it is set up in stark contrast with the happy family scene that signals the possibility of another, happier—in conventional familial terms—outcome.

In this section, I have argued that the narrative of each episode of *The Bachelor*, exemplified clearly in episodes 5 through 8 of season 11, affords viewers opportunities not only to align themselves with the punitive logic of the harem, but also to inhabit a critical, detached, campy, or comic attitude toward the show's gaffes and contradictions. The disciplining of contestants to confess their "true" feelings, contain their own desires and interests, and prove the purity of their motives encourages viewers who identify with the contestants to cheer on these strategies—and, perhaps, to internalize them as common-sense rules governing the performance of gender in daily life.

In exposing the romantic fantasy as such, did Brad unwittingly enable critique of the program's promises? As I have suggested, it is more plausible that his betrayal was that of the ironist, not of the critic. In other words, his refusal to commit was shallow, having nothing to do with any criticism of the show's premise. On the season 11 discussion boards, hosted by abc.com,⁴ viewers revealed their own simultaneous capacity for emotional investment in the show's outcome and ironic suspicion of its "reality." Generally, viewers either embraced the fantasy of true love, accepting the bribe of romantic fulfillment in return for the sacrifice of any feminist ideals; or they embraced the irony bribe, the position of pleasurable detachment that licenses ongoing viewing without commitment to critique. In the next section, I survey audience reactions, moving from the devoted believers and betrayed blamers to the detached ironists.

Devotion and Detachment in Audience Reactions

"Sweet and Touching"

Committed viewers on the discussion boards are of multiple minds about this turn of events. The longest and most recent thread in the discussion is one inviting fans to reminisce about their favorite moments of the show. Fans' recollections are both romantic and credulous, on the one hand, and ironic and detached on the other. The segments involving DeAnna are the subject of most of the romantic posts, perhaps because Brad and DeAnna evolved as the closest couple with the most "natural" chemistry. One writer comments, "[I loved] DeAnna's face when she told Brad she cared for him. It was lovely and she seemed sincere. Brad gave his feelings away (none) in his body language, but none of us wanted to see the real Brad. He is such a jerk. Glad you're gone, Brad."

A viewer named Opa1Opa2Opa3, who started the thread, disagreed about Brad's character:

I liked the expression, the big breath and release Brad took, along with the adjusting of his tie, when he first met DeAnna. It was obvious he thought she was lovely when she walked up to him from the limo. I also liked the way Brad gave his jacket to DeAnna on the first night they met. It was thoughtful because the night was chilly.

Brad's visit to DeAnna's Greek family stands out in a number of these posts as an authentic and "true" moment. Brad and the extended family danced in a circle shouting "Opa!" and then sat down for some ouzo. "Gosh, the best part of the show, maybe it was when Deanna took him to meet her family," one person writes. "They welcomed him and were great people."

Jenni's family was also a big hit. One fan comments:

I loved Jenni's grandma. The comment [the grandmother made to Brad] about Jenni not being a baby factory was precious. My grandmother (a southern lady from Georgia) would never have had the gumption to say something that straightforward. I cried when they showed the tribute clip after we found out she passed away [before the show aired]. It was so sweet and touching.

Fans recalled Brad's dates with Jenni as among the most romantic. One writes:

I think Brad's dates with Jenni were the most romantic. He was physically attracted to her. She has a happy spirit and loves to laugh. Probably their date in Cabo was the best. Swimming with the dolphins, then a nice place to stay. They didn't even bother reading the fantasy suite card [the invitation to the overnight date]. Sweet.

Even producer Mike Fleiss—whose job is to script and stage the show—was touched by Jenni's authenticity:

Jenni might have been more open with her emotions than any other girl in the history of the show. She wasn't a blithering, crazy girl. You felt like she was truly in love. I really felt for her. I felt myself tearing up, which almost never happens. (Rocchio, 2007)

Fleiss's praise of Jenni suggests that it is unusual for the women to really fall in love, even while depending on viewers' identification with the expectation that they will. He also implicitly admits that he rarely regards his own program as worthy of deep emotional concern.

In addition to Jenni's openness, DeAnna's grief was a significant romantic focus of the season 11 post-mortems on the boards. Viewers wrote that they "wanted her to be happy." Others connected her loss to their personal lives: "I had a guy dump me in a very similar way with no explanation . . . I learned so much from the experience and I know that guy is still trying to figure out his issues . . . I was so confused like DeAnna is." Writers in a DeAnna-oriented thread describe her "a casualty" of Brad's need for personal growth. The person making that comment, however, included the line, "I hope she at least generates some good business from her exposure on TV." As I argued above, viewers are capable of sustaining both faith in the romantic narrative and ironic awareness of the economic and personal motives for participating simultaneously.

Blaming Brad

Some fans are critical of the show in a non-ironic way aimed at events happening internal to the narrative; for example, commenting upon Brad's and/or the women's bad behavior. One of the longest threads starts with a post called "Brad is a manipulator," which, predictably, blames Brad for the unsatisfying conclusion. Contributors to this thread argue that Brad was either a great actor who "planned the whole thing," or just a jerk with "issues." The idea that he "led the women on" is a major source of anger. A viewer called Bizoploopt2 blames the outcome on Brad's not "being in the right frame of mind," that is, not being in it for true love the way they believed DeAnna was. Occasionally, a participant in this thread defended Brad's decision as the most honest one he could have made. Significantly, viewers in this category did not question the authenticity of the program itself, instead taking the feelings and motives of the players as sincere.

There is yet another subset of "blamers": those who found Brad too simple-minded to have plotted so carefully in advance. Such viewers blamed Mike Fleiss, the show's producer, for allowing Brad's betrayal to happen. For his part, Fleiss claims the fault is Brad's. In a story on realityTVworld.com, he does not mince words: "He just woke up that day, was sort of cranky, and sort of said, 'F**k it. . . It was a shock to the whole staff. . . He couldn't see himself with either of those chicks and so he blew them both off'" (quoted in Roccio, 2008). Fleiss added, "When we knew how he wanted to play it, it was like a morgue around here. Usually at the finale there's a happy couple afterwards and they're all drinking champagne. This time when it happened the staff just freaked out. Everyone shlumped back to their cars. It was really dark" (quoted in Roccio, 2007). Fleiss, of course, has a vested interest in convincing viewers that the problem lay with the bachelor, not the show or its premise/promise.⁵ In general, the blamers do not necessarily regard the program as essentially inauthentic, but are angry about the characters' and producers' choices.

"All Cut-and-Splice"

In contrast, the audience members taking the most detached ironic stance point out (to the more naïve viewers on the boards) that the show's story wasn't real and ought to be enjoyed as spectacle, not taken seriously. These reflexive comments often call attention to editors' choices. For example, one viewer commented on the literary device of "foreshadowing" of the unhappy ending in an image of Mexican *Día de los Muertos* [Day of the Dead] figurines. Another broke the realist frame by wondering what the camera operators or directors were asking of participants at various points (thus calling attention to the presence of directorial influence). This approach clearly recognizes the staged and scripted character of the show's "reality." For example, "Medfruitfly" comments that one of her/his favorite moments on the show was the two-on-one date with DeAnna and Jade: "Brad's head goin back and forth like he's watchin a ping pong game. Ya jest know it's all cut&splice but it were a hoot anyhoo." This viewer can realize that the reality presented is fabricated—"all cut-and-splice"—and

still enjoy it because the final product is pleasurable. One of the most reflexive posts came from “what2say,” the same viewer who thought Brad was too stupid to manipulate the show (commenting, “That’s what the producers are for”): “*The Bachelor* itself is stupid beyond belief. It’s a formulaic show that’s run its course. It jumped the shark years ago. Brad was there for the ride.”

This thread demonstrates how the epistemological paradox identified by Lewis (2004) parallels the oscillation between investment and detachment. One can feel on some level that the program offers something “real” and recognize it as “not real” at the same time. The inclusion in the show of comic moments with participants and their families gently encourages this transition, offering the viewer the enjoyment of humor in exchange for realism.

For example, the “favorite moments” thread on the discussion board features viewers’ accounts of a number of comic gaffes that reveal the manufactured quality of the show and implausibility of the romantic fantasy: Sheena’s eccentric new age mom insisting that Sheena was the one, if not Brad’s “one,” then someone’s “one”; Brad’s clumsy attempts to reassure skeptical parents that he was not stringing people along; Bettina’s father’s creepy resemblance to novelist Stephen King; the contestant whom fans started to call “pretzel girl” because she contorted herself in ways that viewers (and Brad) found “freakish” (with one ironic take from a witty viewer: “She was cheated out of being a major part of a twisted plot. She would have bent over backwards for Brad”); the inability of Hillary to “get” that Brad “wasn’t into her” when it was obvious to everyone else; and Jenni’s departure for the airport in tears but arrival home “into the arms of her old boyfriend.”

These comments recognize that the program offers a construct of femininity and romance that cannot meet any standard of “authenticity.” As Rorty (1989) argues, this awareness of the contingency of representation is the catalyst for a productive irony, which for him is an ethical stance against identification with any one rendition of “reality.” His point is well taken. Even so, there must be some vantage point between pure fantasy and pure contingency, from which one can mount a critique of common sense *based on truths necessary to the democratic project*, such as recognition of the oppression of women. Some narratives exhibit greater fidelity to the interests of those represented, and a turn to pure contingency and the ironic stance may prohibit critical assessment by this criterion.

In sum, devotion and distanced reflection occur in more or less equal measure in these online conversations. Fans on the boards move easily among identification with the “reality” of the women’s situation, to internal critique of Brad’s behavior, to ironic and reflexive commentary recognizing the show’s fictive quality, and back again, sometimes all within the same post. Does this mean, however, that the show and others like it are fundamentally democratic texts enabling viewers to participate in the construction of meaning? Should we be relieved that audiences are not “duped” by an ideology that positions women as passive and objectified commodities? I think not. If nothing else, the *advertisements* tell us that women and men watching are expected by advertisers to take their respective orders: women wait, men choose. The inclusion of scenes in which the show self-consciously bursts the romantic bubble allows even

viewers who see themselves as knowing and modern to invest themselves in this fantasy without shame.

The Irony Bribe, Media Studies, and the Traffic in Women

In spite of all of the intriguing contradictions and foundering necessarily generated by the imperative of authenticity in a contrived version of reality, and in spite of audiences' intelligence and creativity in response to the program's disappointments, *The Bachelor* cultivates mass public enjoyment of what anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1975), in a famous essay, calls "the traffic in women." Marriages, Rubin writes, "are a most basic form of gift exchange, in which it is women who are the most precious of gifts," but who "are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation" (p. 171).

In *The Bachelor*, the women serve as a conduit for negotiating broader social and political relationships, profiting Fleiss, the network, and its advertisers. Brad's betrayal of the romantic promise is simultaneously a breach of an economic contract. Fleiss comments in the interview cited earlier that Brad was a great guy because he "worked really hard," revealing that, no matter how much of a jerk Brad Womack may be, he, Chris, and all the women are laborers in the manufacture of a highly profitable cultural product. That product is the construction of a compelling social "reality" in which smart, beautiful women become helpless objects at the mercy of another's choices.

I have argued that this construct is given double authority in the oscillation between its insistence on the fantasy of romantic love—a carefully scripted story foundational to the justification of gender inequality in modern society—and the ostensible ironic transcendence of this myth. In the process, I have introduced and defined the new concept of the *irony bribe*, a strategic mechanism of a cultural text that invites audiences to identify with the pleasures of the rejection of a patently ideological fantasy.

I aim for my analysis to make three significant contributions, both theoretical and methodological, to the critical study of media texts. First, I believe that the concept of the irony bribe will be useful to other media scholars, perhaps especially those interested in reality television, because it aptly captures the paradoxical epistemology of reality TV; the concept describes how viewers may regard reality TV as "real" and "not-real" at the same time. This distinction corresponds with two modes of enjoyment, one the result of affective identification with characters/contestants and outcomes, and the other the result of recognizing the text as artificial construct. Thus, audiences for programs such as *The Bachelor* may enjoy something that is, in Susan Sontag's (1964) terms, "good because it's awful."

In addition, my analysis reinforces what Raymond Williams (1974/2003) noted long ago, namely, that television programs do not stand alone (although the digital video recorder and online episodes make attention to advertising less obligatory); especially on commercial network TV, we must attend to the flow of program and advertisements, even as these become increasingly difficult to distinguish from one

another.⁶ Commercials remain the material anchors of televisual epistemology: Regardless of the complexity of a program, advertisements tell us what the bottom line is. Regarding *The Bachelor*, women may recognize the ambivalence of the show itself regarding the show's fantasy of harem subjectivity, but the advertisements provide concrete instructions in realizing or—continually, hopelessly—striving to realize that fantasy through consumption of goods that make women more visible as objects of exchange.

Finally, the idea that what seems like critique may license the enjoyment of that which one is critiquing speaks to the relationship between ironic critique of popular texts and projects of social change, particularly feminism. On the one hand, Sowards and Renegar (2004) argue that irony should be the basis for third-wave, postmodern feminism because irony exploits the debilitating contradictions of modernist feminisms. On the other hand, Purdy (2000) warns that ironic distance can breed indifference to appeals to political accountability pp. 185–207; in the present case, to a critique of the traffic in women and its ideological justifications).⁷ Shugart and Waggoner (2008) acknowledge that apparently potentially resistive media practices of camp might be understood as strategies of dominant ideology, or that the sensibilities are an expression of that ideology in a way that belies its moorings and ideological functions (pp. 9–10). It could be that, far from undermining oppressive gender scripts, camp sensibilities resonate with a dominant culture emphasizing aesthetics, parody, irony, detachment, and incoherence. Thus, Shugart and Waggoner (2008) cite Jameson, who describes camp as “postmodern pastiche” that is tragic, without a satiric and critical impulse (p. 11).

I do not mean to say that television content is monolithic in its service to the social order; nor do I mean to imply that people consuming media texts are ignorant dupes of commercial interests. Henry Jenkins' (1992; 2006) research into the intelligence and creativity of fan communities suggests otherwise and gives critics some direction for additional study. Further research could explore when, how, and under what conditions audience members go beyond irony to “traverse the fantasies” that sometimes keep us wedded to practices not in our own best interests. I doubt that these opportunities are frequent in reality television, because its epistemology is conducive to the oscillation between investment and detachment characteristic of the irony bribe.

Both reality television and its advertisers generate contradictory desire for the epistemologically, politically, and ethically ruinous (e.g., the fantasy of women's fulfillment through artificial competition for a man) and then attempt to “remedy” the resulting unease through the offering of more consumption, even—or especially—in ironic posture (see Miller, 2008, p. 3). Irony fills the gap between immanent social relations and the critical aspiration to freedom from them. It is, in Hegelian terms, self-consciousness trapped and made to return empty handed to the “real” world.

Thus, “savvy” viewers of *The Bachelor* may recognize the fantasy as artificial, archaic and implausible—not to mention oppressive—but react by embracing it with tongue in cheek. Cultural critic Elizabeth Shulte (2007) warns us, however, that it's

not enough to argue that it is “all tongue and cheek.” “You’re not crazy,” she concludes. “It’s sexism.” The ironists among the viewers of the show may feel free to enjoy the show anyway, so long as they laugh at themselves while doing so. In this way, Sheena’s falling down the stairs, Bettina’s envy of Sheena’s date, Hillary’s raunchy admiration of Brad, self-conscious editing choices that reveal the narrative as construct, and Brad’s violation of the romantic promise of the show all offer viewers a bribe in exchange for consumption of the program: the ironic enjoyment of, the enjoyment of, the traffic in women. We must ask ourselves whether this price is too dear.

Notes

- [1] Indeed, the key insight of structuralism may be that human communicative agency is always-already ironic; the speaking subject cannot be willfully agentive if subjectivity is a social construct (see Colebrook, 2004, pp. 72–110, 120). Thus, for such theorists as Judith Butler, the performativity of the impossible self is the irony-saturated domain of the political (Colebrook, 2004, p. 126). The critique of irony, therefore, must invoke an “outside” to the ironic performance. For example, feminist critique of discourses that locates women in relations of subordination and self-denial offers this type of non-ironic evaluative stance.
- [2] In order to avoid representing these women as sexual objects, I am not providing physical descriptions of them here. Readers can find images of all of the season 11 contestants at <http://realitytv.about.com/od/thebachelor1/ig/The-Bachelor-Contestants/>
- [3] Although *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* are not ideologically interchangeable, they are part of a single intertextual family, sharing the same webpage at abc.com and regarded in most popular media as episodes in the same unfolding story. The introduction of Trista, Ryan, and Max in the “After the Final Rose” show for *The Bachelor* indicates the imbrication of the two programs, offering the restorative familialism of *The Bachelorette* as remedy to the breakdown of romance on *The Bachelor*.
- [4] The “official” fan discussion boards for the shows are at <http://abc.go.com/primetime/bachelor>, but only boards for the current season are displayed. For this reason, unfortunately, the season 11 discussion boards upon which this analysis is based are inaccessible.
- [5] Furthermore, although both Womack and Fleiss deny any advance planning, it is possible that in the show’s eleventh hour (or eleventh season, as it were), producers encouraged Brad to do something surprising that would sustain viewer interest. “Tracy,” a viewer commenting on the blog nothingbutbonfires.com (Burns, 2007), wrote, “ABC is where the real anger should go. Brad misled both women because he was under contract to mislead (i.e. keep everyone guessing enough to make for good television).” This interpretation is given weight by the choice to feature the fortuitously single DeAnna, rejected by Brad, as the star of the next season’s *The Bachelorette*. Viewers angry with Brad or the producers may have been motivated to watch *The Bachelorette* to see a woman with whom they identified triumph over rejection and passivity. On a less empowering note, viewers’ identification with DeAnna and her “real” but intensified-for-TV emotions may have produced ongoing investment in her opportunities and choices. On *The Bachelorette*, DeAnna chose snowboarder Jesse Csincsak to be her mate. DeAnna’s second choice, doctor Jason Mesnick, became the next star of *The Bachelor*, while naval officer Andy Baldwin, season 10’s bachelor and certified minister (whose romance with his selection from season 10, Tessa, was broken off), is slated to officiate DeAnna and Jesse’s wedding in May 2009 (Lover, 2008). However, in the 2008–2009 season, Deanna will make a surprise appearance to appeal to Jason, now the bachelor, to consider her once again. The confusion is agonizing. Clearly, the crises and dramas of these

characters are inexpensive fodder for ongoing investment in the series and its outcomes in the short and long term.

- [6] Competitive “reality” television may be special (in the same way as televised sporting events) in this regard, because committed viewers watch at the original airtime in order to share their reactions with others (often online) immediately. Those delayed risk having the viewing experience spoiled (by knowing ahead of time who wins). One could speculate, therefore, that viewers watching the original airing of the program would “not want to miss anything” and would continue to watch through the advertisements. To my knowledge, and unlike a number of other reality shows, there are no obvious product placements in *The Bachelor* with the exception of necessities such as cars and hotels; it is unclear whether makers of either paid ABC to use their products. See Paulsen (2003).
- [7] Rorty (1989) argues that ethical judgment and political solidarity are possible in the ironic frame; if one refuses transcendent norms and foundational narratives, he claims, one may establish solidarity with others on the basis of shared suffering (p. 192). In my view, acknowledging the performativity of identity and lack of firm foundation for judgment in a contingent set of political relations does not necessarily produce or require an ironic stance.

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