

## The Osbournes': Genre, Reality TV, and the Domestication of Rock 'n Roll

by Rick Pieto and Kelly Otter

The latest trend of television programming is reality TV, a genre that finds its most valuable content in the unabashed display of individuals willing to be put on display as they part with their privacy, dignity, and composure. The genre is clear, yet the formula varies so as to keep it fresh and increasingly bizarre to maintain its audience. Young women compete for a husband on camera by attempting to win the affection of a bachelor in six weeks; individuals compete for money by conquering their fears and consume live insects or allow themselves to be submerged under water for as long as possible; and couples test the strength of their relationships by subjecting themselves to the temptation of desirable strangers. Love, fear, and conflict provide the substance of a good story, and television producers have found a context in which drama is manufactured before a camera crew. But given the absence of a constructed context and specific roles to play, how do we define *The Osbournes*? How should we generically define this program about an aging heavy metal rock star and his “dysfunctional family?”

One way to begin to place *The Osbournes* within an appropriate genre is to look at MTV's presentation of the show. MTV sells *The Osbournes* as a reality TV sitcom and indeed its narrative structure is loosely similar to the sitcom formula, with real-life segments edited and sequenced to be reminiscent of a scripted program. More specifically, the show is framed within the genre of 1950's sitcoms. The opening credits have a self-consciously retro look to them. The theme song replays a lounge music aesthetic both in its melody and in the voice of the male singer. The title of the show,

*The Osbournes*, connotes early sitcom family names such as the Cramdens, The Cleavers and, of course, The Nelsons. Indeed a visit to *The Osbournes*' website explicitly draws this connection between the archetypal '50s father Ozzy Nelson and MTV's incarnation Ozzy Osbourne. *The Osbournes* is obviously too dark and "dysfunctional" to fall within the boundaries of '50s sitcoms, however the ironic '50s signifiers in the show's opening credits contradict the typically straightforward use of generic signals, especially as they are used in movie and television credits. Traditionally, with television and films, genre is clearly signaled for and marketed to the target audience. The correct packaging of movies and television programs according to genre is meticulously researched so as to appeal to the appropriate audience. The tongue-in-cheek opening credits of *The Osbournes* do something more than signal an audience or define a genre: they suggest to the audience a possible intertextual reading of the show. The opening credits do not say to the audience "This is a fifties style sitcom," rather they say, "This is *not* a fifties style sitcom but you can read it as though it were one." By ignoring the typical conventions of generic signaling, MTV invites the audience to perform an intertextual reading, juxtaposing the heavy metal rock star dad within markers of a genre in which the signifiers of "dad" connote Ward Cleaver as opposed to Ozzy, creating an appropriate amount of added-value irony.

*The Osbournes* seem to be more closely aligned intertextually to another more recent subgenre of sitcoms, the anti-fifties sitcoms such as *Roseanne* and *Married with Children*. *The Osbournes* share with these sitcoms a cynical and dysfunctional view of modern family life; a self-conscious denial of the optimism and mutual appreciation associated with fifties sitcoms. However, what distinguishes *The Osbournes* from

*Roseanne* and *Married with Children* is not so much the difference between fiction and non-fiction (reality TV), but the way highly visible markers of class operate within each show. Whereas these sitcoms present membership in the working class as an insurmountable given (particularly *Roseanne*'s final season with the revelation that the Conners's lottery win was a fantasy), *The Osbournes* proves that even a working-class kid from Britain (whose "class" was tantamount to poverty) can realize the American dream of upward mobility and wealth, especially when paired with an ambitious upper middle-class wife/manager. There is a reversal here that reveals problems with the basic generic distinctions of fact and fiction: the *fictional* narratives of *Roseanne* and *Married with Children* present a more "realistic" portrayal of the experience of working class families and the minimal probability that could attain financial success at the level of the the Osbournes. The Osbournes, on the other hand, through their reality-based show, exemplify the American ideology of upward mobility. The reality of the Osbournes' affluence is an ideological fiction for most working-class Americans.

This brings us to a more pertinent genre for classifying *The Osbournes*: reality TV. As a popular term, reality TV denotes a variety of shows from *Cops* to *Survivor*, from the *The Bachelor* to *The Osbournes*. The term reality TV implies the documentation of the "reality" of an event or "referent" that somehow, in some way, exists independently of the recording machines that capture the event. Not only does MTV bend the conventions of the fictional genre with its ironic use of opening credits, but it also bends the codes, conventions, and ethics of documentary filmmaking so as to capture a segment of the youth market. This practice efficiently produces an ironic brand of media for a presumed media-savvy, (read: young) audience. The footage of police

pullovers that are recorded by dashboard-mounted cameras for the reality show *Cops*, however problematic, more accurately fit the description of *reality* TV. Programs such as *Survivor*, *The Bachelor*, *The Real World*, and even *The Osbournes* do not document or observe an independent reality through a camera, as documentary films purport to do; they record the behaviors and activities appropriate to self-consciously constructed situations. As Erica Goode stated in a *New York Times* article, shows like *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, and *The Bachelor* are direct descendants of the social psychology experiments of the sixties and seventies.<sup>i</sup> The film version of Stanley Milgram's infamous study *Obedience to Authority* and Philip Zimbardo's 1971 Stanford study provide the generic roots of reality TV. What these texts have in common, from Milgram's study to *Big Brother*, is the construction of an all-encompassing social situation with compelling rules and rigidly defined roles that influence, in often highly predictable ways, the social actions of the people who are in the situations. What reality TV presents is not the unobtrusive observations of an event that would have existed independently of the camera, but a highly controlled situation that produces a social drama constructed specifically for the camera (or experimenter).

What is key here is that the type of manipulation and control which television shows like *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, or *The Bachelor* perform regularly with impunity would never be allowed in any kind of legitimate social science experiment, at least not without rigorous and strict oversight by a Human Subjects Review board.

As the institutional representation of the formalized code of the rights of participants in experiments or research, it is the principles of Human Subjects Review that suggest the deeper problems of the reality TV genre. Two of the fundamental

principles of subjects' rights are the right to confidentiality and the right of voluntary participation<sup>ii</sup>. The first right does not apply to the landscape of reality TV; indeed the participants of *Big Brother* or *Survivor*, we assume, gladly waive the right of confidentiality for their 15 minutes of fame. However, the right to voluntarily participate and to be free from coercion, carries with it some interesting corollaries that directly affect the manipulation and control that goes into the production of reality TV. Included in the notion of voluntary participation is the right of participants to review any and all materials that are derived from their participation (e.g. audio or video recording) and even to have them destroyed if they wish. It is the goal of this rule to shelter the participant from any embarrassment or discomfort (just think of Milgram's "teachers" and their extreme unease as they believed they administered electrical shocks to the "learners"). This right of participants, which is a given in legitimate social science research, would completely transform the nature of production of reality TV. To give the participants or contestants of a reality TV show the right and power to destroy any part of the record would shift the power from the producers of the show to the participants. We see within this set of issues the coercion that goes into the making of reality TV; the contestants have no rights to the final text, which they have had a real hand in producing. The participants have only two choices; they can submit to the wishes of the producers or walk off the show. This lack of control on the part of the participants of reality TV mirrors the more subtle lack of choice of television viewers. Just as reality TV show participants have no say in the day-to-day production of the shows they take part in, so television viewers have no control over what appears on their television screens.

Viewers, like reality TV participants, have only one limited choice of any consequence; submit to the wishes of the broadcasters or turn off the show.

What seems to give reality TV its feeling of reality, its “reality effect,” is the consolidation within the reality TV text of two powerful social discourses: surveillance and therapy. We can easily see a version of Foucault’s panopticon at work in this genre.<sup>iii</sup> For example, the total surveillance imposed on the Osbourne family, with 50 cameras following them continually, is an attempt to capture and display to the viewing audience the intimate elements in the lives of the Osbournes, much in the same way the observation tower of the panopticon aims to place the prisoners under constant inspection (or at least make them feel that way). However, the surveillance of reality shows differs from Bentham’s and Foucault’s formulation in a fundamental way: Bentham’s panopticon disciplines the prisoner by inhibiting and thus curtailing behavior, but reality TV’s panopticon sanctions (and disciplines) the participant to exhibit all types of behavior. Bentham’s panopticon implants in the incarcerated a controlling gaze; a gaze once internalized within the incarcerated produces a self-disciplining, self-regulating subject. This discipline works through the interaction of the panoptic architecture and the subject’s visible body to limit and reduce any unwanted behavior. Reality television works differently, as it imposes on the participants a visual regime that requires the exhibition of all kinds of behavior. For reality TV, behavior of all sorts must be rooted out, not for the sake of limiting it, but for the sake of multiplying it, for expanding it and permitting it to play itself out. This can be seen in *The Osbournes* as we witness the family dealing with not only small domestic problems but with the major crises of alcoholism, drug use, and cancer. We have a kind of discipline (because the participants

of reality TV are pressured to deliver the goods) through the *disinhibition* and exhibition of what we believe is private behavior for television cameras. This surveillance does not stop at presenting the participants' actions, but must penetrate to the interior of the participant and expose for the spectacle his and her inner thoughts and emotions. This is the point at which mass media surveillance easily slides into the therapeutic realm.

Scholars such as T. J. Jackson Lears<sup>iv</sup> and Mimi White<sup>v</sup> have pointed to the prevalence of the therapeutic ethos in modern culture, from advertising to talk shows. Reality TV has adopted the techniques of therapy, the use of the confession, the interview and the intimate disclosure, to extend its surveillance of the participants from their behavior to their emotions, desires, and thoughts. Surveillance must penetrate the exterior behavior of subjects and reveal the contents of their consciousness, and conscience. What was once the strict and private domain of therapists, psychotherapists, and counselors and their clients, is now open to public inspection. At one time it was enough for an individual to privately disclose to a professional their secret traumas, but within the mediatized therapeutic ethos, individuals must confess to the listener/camera and its audience, and we must listen and watch. In a society of total surveillance, therapy is no longer a means of helping people with their problems, but has become a technique of rendering us visible and transparent in all aspects of our lives.

So what about *The Osbournes*? Each member of the Osbournes has a developed performance persona in contrast to the anonymous celebrity wannabes who participate in reality shows. Unlike the participants in most reality shows, the Osbournes have a considerable amount of control over the conditions of production of the show. They negotiate a contract for an amount of money to which they agree, and cameras are not

permitted in Ozzy and Sharon's bedroom; in most shows there is no guarantee participants will get the prize and they have no say as to the ground rules.

Furthermore, performance plays too much of a central role in *The Osbournes* for the show to be categorized within the traditional definition of documentary, according to which any hint of self-conscious performance is an example of artifice or artificiality which then negates any claims to truth or reality. Their lives, up to the point of the show, were intertwined in the music and entertainment industries. Kelly and Jack's careers grew out of Ozzy's career: family life was often "on the road" and contextualized by his performance career. To support this value, each of the Osbourne children dropped out of school, with Sharon's blessing, to pursue their careers. To separate the Osbournes' real lives from performance seems impossible.

*The Osbournes* may more accurately be defined as a performative documentary, which records the highly reflexive exhibitions of its participants. This subgenre records the presentations of performers from drag queens to rock stars, as exemplified by the film *Paris Is Burning*. As Stella Bruzzi states, "Performance has always been at the heart of documentary filmmaking and yet it has been treated with suspicion because it carries connotations of falsification and fictionalization, traits that inherently destabilize the non-fiction pursuit."<sup>vi</sup> The question that remains, then, is what are the Osbournes performing?

One level of performance is that of the rock star playing "dad." *The Osbournes* is an example of ethnographic programming, which instead of providing a representation of an obscure tribe in a mountain village to a Western viewer, it brings to mainstream middle-class America this "other" in our midst: a heavy metal rock star and his family in Beverly Hills, a remote community of extreme wealth and fame inaccessible to most



Americans other than via television. But Ozzy's perennial working-class features reveal that he is not so "other" to most of us as he putters around the house taking out garbage, scooping up dog waste, and admonishing (with great irony) his kids not to use drugs. There is no otherness evident in these domestic scenes. We're amazed to see this celebrity functioning very much the way we do; we find the familiarity bizarre. Another level of performance is that because real families are so unlike any television portrayal of the family, the Osbournes may flaunt the other end of the TV family/real family dichotomy. They are aware of the precedent and the irony they provide.

The better answer is that the Osbournes, as performative documentary, are performing a new myth of rock 'n roll: the myth of the aging rock star as doting father and the rock star as domesticated family man. Up to this point we have had only two myths for aging rock stars; old Mick and dead Janis. Rock stars either rust or fade away. Ozzy provides us the intimate details of an older rock star as he lives his life outside of his rock 'n roll image: it is an image of an exasperated father and a homebody.

Also, it is important that we realize that MTV was the producer of this new myth. It is now a truism to say that MTV changed rock 'n roll by making it more image-conscious. As the theory goes, rockers themselves were less image-conscious before MTV, less ruled by the laws of photogenic selection, and listeners were free to imagine their own stories and images along with the music. Critics of the music video phenomenon argue that MTV somehow dominated the listener's imagination with a cultural imperialism of the image, though their theory is unfounded because whether or not listeners create their own little narratives or what they do is never discussed or proven. MTV did not make rock 'n roll image conscious; the image was a key

component of the performance of rock 'n roll from the beginning, as evidenced by the  
visuality of live concerts with the youthful male body as the focus. Only think about the  
pouring over of album covers, magazines, and rock stars appearing in movies and making  
TV appearances. MTV may have intensified it, but the importance of images for rock 'n  
roll was always there. What MTV did to transform rock 'n roll was to domesticate the  
image of rock stars: MTV turned rock stars into TV stars. The image transformed them  
from rare and luminous to mundane and pixelated. Just as the image of a movie star is  
elusive in contrast to the pedestrian television star accessible in every home, the presence  
of rock stars became a standard feature of the home, as ever present as soap operas,  
commercials, and sitcoms. It is a logical extension of MTV's televisual domestication of  
rock 'n roll that a rocker's family would star in his own show about home life on MTV.

Yet, is it really a myth if we see their lives in such intimate detail? The myths of  
rock 'n roll are very distant to real lives. The myths of the lives of Jim Morrison, Janis  
Joplin, and Elvis were about living fast and dying young, something most of us don't do.  
The aging rock stars are still rock stars, of sort, but we don't have the kind of knowledge  
of their lives as we have about Ozzy's life. In fact, aging rock stars are really caricatures  
of their former selves, sans their sex and physical appeal and their connection to youth  
culture. Rock 'n roll was never about the home; it was about people who lived outside  
the conventions of patriarchy, the nuclear family, and the traditional home, which was  
marked by monogamy, sobriety, heterosexuality. The myth of rock 'n roll rebellion  
offered youth a means of subverting the hearth and home, and the associated drug culture  
represented a means of escape from those boundaries and rebellion to family and rules.

What makes this new myth resonate is that Ozzy is an established icon of the rock ‘n roll-as-rebellion myth. Looking at Ozzy as the doting husband, bat-head biter.

MTV had prepared the way for a performative documentary about a rock star “performing” in his home by continually broadcasting into the home images of rock stars performing. Furthermore, Ozzy was the perfect person for this. He has all the characteristics of rock ‘n roll excess, but is unusually grounded in his family life. The reason the show was so popular is that, unbeknownst to MTV, by sheer luck all these elements came together in *The Osbournes*.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Goode, Erica. “Hey, What if Contestants Give Each Other Shocks?” *The New York Times*, August 27, 2000, in *Ideas and Trends*, pg. 3.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Belmont Report*, Office of the Secretary, Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research, The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, April 18, 1979.

<sup>iii</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books: New York, 1979.

<sup>iv</sup> Lears, T.J. Jackson, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930”, in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980*, Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, ed., Pantheon Books: New York, 1983.

<sup>v</sup> White, Mimi. *Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American Television*, The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1992.

<sup>vi</sup> Bruzzi, Stella. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge: London, 2000, pg. 125.