

“the one thing they are not is reality” (1)

Reg Grundy, September 20, 2010

TV’s appeal was so decimated by the late 1990s, under the blitzkrieg of competition from a host of new media forms, that the only diversion still available to us, apparently, was our plain old reality.

Henceforth, the audience would tune into itself....

It almost goes without saying that Reality Television disappointed the expectations generated by its name; no mode of cultural production can transparently re-produce whatever reality might really be.

Still the rise of this remarkably disingenuous genre—in all its passive-aggressive glory of mock-epic household tiffs and singers being shuffled straight back to the shower stalls from whence they came—was important in at least one respect. It gave fresh legs to perhaps the central question for anyone concerned by TV: Who does television think you are?

“Idiots” springs to mind, as a response derived from “idiot box”—slang term for the TV set. But another meaning of idiots is more to the point here, one that can be excavated from the classical Greek etymology of idiot, which links the word, according to The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, to “private person [...] ignorant person.”

It’s easy to forget that so far as commercial television is concerned the privileged audience sector is not those who watch TV but those who pay for the advertising that we watch on TV. And what advertisers want for their audience are precisely “private persons [...] ignorant persons:” idiots, that is, in the classical sense.

The idiot meets advertising culture on the latter’s very doorstep. Connected to nothing, idiots must invest in their own separate reality, through the acquisition of everything, which is advertising’s chimera.

No more radical privatisation of the self can be imagined. The idiot is the ideal target for television advertising, which gets to pitch to selves of this nature all that a self ignorant and shut off from the world may be lead to believe it requires.

Handily, being ignorant of others, idiots are dupes of the idea that all the resources of the world are available solely for their benefit—this is, of course, the unspoken premise of all advertising.

Commercial TV must consider its viewers idiots therefore, in order to ensure its own survival, and Reality Television is idiocy incarnate because it re-produces us—on screen—as persons severed from any relations with the world: either literally (no news penetrates the walls of the Big Brother house) or figuratively (the Idol experience as reductivist allegory of the entertainment industry).

Requiring us to identify with cast members who are so decisively cut off from the everyday world, Reality Television actively invites idiocy through a take-no-prisoners individualisation of those it depicts. Reality Television creates the self to which it denies all the reality of life. It is the televisual equivalent of solitary confinement, incessantly sampling Margaret Thatcher's infamous mythologisation of the individual: "there is no such thing as society." It makes the self into all that there is....

This making the self into an idiotic act of the first degree, warrants linking Television Studies to Philosophy as the pre-eminent study of selfhood. According to John Rajchman, in his introduction to *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life* by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, "Unlike the life of an individual, a life is thus necessarily vague or indefinite, and this indefiniteness is real" (2). Trapping the self within the confines of the "the", if there is anything Reality Television is not it is "vague" and "indefinite"—life upon it has all the clarity and definition of the most crystallized zones of fiction.

To this extent, in addition to being divorced from the world as a determinate domain, those selves catalysed at the intersection of viewer and viewed upon Big Brother or Idol are even more dramatically severed from life itself. Life here being the maximisation of reality (as Deleuze would have it), as opposed to the minimised reality of Reality Television. What we mean here is life in the indefinite mode. Perhaps the only sort of life that is worth living.

We might ask ourselves why—in those days when Reality Television ruled—we felt so powerfully connected to selves with even less of a connection than any TV fiction to life—when life is taken, on the philosophical definition just supplied, to mean a sense of indefinite reality. We might ask ourselves just how tightly we were held in the grip of an advertising culture dependant for its very existence on the death of the living self.

We might ask ourselves why the day finally arrived when the irreality of reality would leave us cold, and the cooling entrails of Reality Television were scattered to the remotest borderlands of television scheduling. Perhaps we had simply had enough of unreal reality. Or perhaps we were simply sick to death of our selves.

For better or worse though, TV was far from being sick to death of us, and in 2009 the ecology of the small screen would throw up a fresh mutation of programming that, while it would ultimately converge on the same zone of viewer identity previously targeted by Reality Television (the idiot self), began with the very opposite principle to the reality principle of Big Brother or Idol.

The very title of Lie to Me (3) is the subtlest of deceptions. To whom is this invitation addressed? Surely it could only be to us: the viewers. But what could possibly count as a falsehood—as non-reality, as a lie—at this intersection of viewer interpellation and fictional television ... where it is only too easy to lie, in circumstances under which lying is the very currency of the truth of TV?

Be honest, Lie to Me is a bog-standard police procedural. But who has ever looked down the barrel of the camera the way Cal Lightman (Tim Roth) does in the opening credits? Superimposed with the show's title, his face pours all manner of agonies and intensities into the command of those three little words.

Soon enough we see, in a manner of speaking, what he is looking at. Lightman is looking at us. And we are being invited to stare at ourselves.

For there we are in myriad self-permutations, mirrored in a rapid sequence of facial expressions (comprising both complete faces and parts of faces) infrequently intercut (in approximately a one-to-four ratio) with shots of other culturally expressive parts of the body, most saliently hands and throats. At one point the face is also, as it were, seen from behind—in a shot of the back of someone's head.

Many of these images are accompanied by emotional labels: disgust, contempt, pleasure, fear, surprise. Randomly interspersed with these are characterisations and physical descriptors: manipulator, pupil constriction, genuine smile. Some presumably mumbo-jumbo algebra is also tossed into this mix, serving to emphasise, if only ironically, the (pseudo-)scientific basis of the show's

central conceit.

At the climax of a final flurry of increasingly rapid facial images, the opening credits conclude with a shot of Lightman's face drawing back from the aperture of the tube device down which he has been staring. As already suggested, the overall impact of the visual metonymy is irresistible. We are those faces, etched with the names of emotions unable to be hidden, while TV itself has been staring at us. Television (the medium of light subjectified through the gaze of a Lightman) is the "me" of the title, expressing something about who it thinks you and I are.

Lie to Me thus expresses what we might call the truth of lying as it applies to the TV audience: all we can do is lie. From having truth imposed upon us in the form of Reality Television, we are now entrapped in what purports to be its exact opposite: our incapacity to tell the truth, our in-built, televisual, lying mechanism. Lie to Me is the bastard offspring of Reality Television—equally, its perfect, fictional inversion.

Reality Television made it obvious that when TV looks at us it sees no more than what we see looking at it. What else, in its blindness, could it see? Still we sense that it sees us as if it were looking at us itself, and the trick Lie to Me plays on the viewer depends on the notion that it has never been possible to do anything else but lie to TV when it gazes upon us.

That is, we are always lying to TV (and TV seems to know this) because in our responses to it we necessarily exclude from our selves whatever parts of us will never appear on the screen. How, in our involved watching, could we ever do otherwise?

TV knows us too well because in knowing itself it knows all it needs to know of us—given our almost total implication in the medium in the post-Reality Television era—and Lightman's invitation always already contains the only possible response: a lie passing for a truth.

Lying is thus embedded in the DNA of any televisual performance whatsoever, but our dangerous dalliance with Reality Television has caused us to forfeit any other resources by which to perform our selves in relationship to the zone of reality. Advancing upon us from the flanks of a lost world, the genre effectively boxed us into the role of the self-preoccupied idiot. It made us private, ignorant—perfect idiots.

Fast forward a few years and Lie to Me has got us pinned down in the crossfire of our sorry attempts, having once been forced to accept our own peculiar brand of idiocy, to recapture reality. Lie to Me ... the invitation comes at us at that particular and painful moment in television history when—smarting from the aftershocks of Reality Television—we are least capable of doing anything but continuing to lie, in dutiful, idiotic fashion. At the very least, Lightman’s interrogative makes bad losers of us all, confronting us as it does with the insurmountable gap separating idiocy from what we might have formerly known as reality.

To this extent, Lie to Me is the programme we had to have after the era of Reality Television. All the compromised truth of us has merely been replaced by all of our compromised falsehood. Now, as before, we are sutured to the screen. Once more the audience (as in the classic forms of Reality Television) has been invited onto the TV screen—an arena in which every gesture of Lie to Me is only ever (could only ever be) a performance, a lie in that this is merely TV. Yet there we are, dragged in by the title, which takes us for a certain sort of person, and by Lightman’s gaze, which does not allow for any deflection of the title’s injunction.

Watching the opening credits of Lie to Me, we find ourselves face to face with characters who, in their explicit televisuality, can only ever be lying (it’s as if the bluff of Method Acting has finally been called). The taken-for-granted truth of the viewer as non-idiot (open to the realities beyond the realm of the TV screen) has entirely disappeared, and so Lie to Me “heals” the scar of selfhood created by Reality Television, compelling us to adopt as our truth an idiotic, self-conscious performativity, borrowed from the endless repertoire of TV’s affectations.

Such self scrutiny—such an endless re-creation and makeover of the self—may find itself having to draw heavily on the embellishments for our “private and ignorant” selves that are offered by advertising. So much the better for the coffers of the television stations. There is profit in the production of idiots.

All of which is ultimately to say that Lie to Me makes it near impossible for us to lie—in the strictest sense—since Lightman’s invitation rules out that species of lie that would be the truth. Forced to lie, we lie very easily, mimicking the true lies of TV. Forced to lie, we lose something about ourselves that is human and not of TV.

The question remains then of that lie that, in the very peculiar circumstances of television, would be the truth? How might we genuinely lie to TV? How might we mount a counter offensive such that we resist TV's invitations to re-produce a lie already supplied? (Lie to it as opposed to on it moreover.) Lie to Me, Cal Lightman encourages us, but Me to Lie? Not likely. At least, not while Lightman is staring me down. And not after all the assaults upon the zone of my self by Reality Television.

Nowadays, from only being able to be real on TV (in the era of un-real Reality Television), we are only able to lie to it—and we are as unreal (living out the truth of a lie or the lie of a truth) as we ever were. Absolutely nothing has changed. From being caught in a reality that was necessarily false (to wit, Reality Television) we are now trapped in a falsehood, with Lie to Me, that must be real.

What lie might stand for the truth then, in a world in which all reality has become idiotic, in the saturation of all the circumstances of life by the powers of television? Can we any longer think about our selves without reference to TV?

Classical Greek culture regarded the citizen as the idiot's opposite. This figure seems a facsimile of selfhood well beyond our reach, after Reality Television, and after what came after Reality Television. How might the spark of citizenship be re-lit, now that the reality of every self has been televised, idiotised, privatised?

Who does television think we are?

Apparently, it thinks of us as creatures very much at ease at this site of the suturing of what's true and what's false. This may be a portal to our thinking our selves otherwise. Which is to say that perhaps television is a little too smug in its sense of who we are. Possibly, one day, we will learn how to lie, in truth, to the idiot box. The invitation of Lie to Me will, one day perhaps, be met with a lie that TV will not be expecting: some other truth of us. Do we even know this truth ourselves, yet?

The late Australian poet John Forbes was conceivably onto something like this with his poem "T.V." from the collection *Tropical Skiing*: "don't bother telling me about the programs / describe what your set is like the casing [...]" (4). Can we imagine a world, not necessarily without TV, but where television is more marginal to reality? A world where the programs are not to be bothered with? A world where, as in that fleeting scene in the first Terminator film (5), humans might gather for warmth

around a fireplace created out of a converted idiot box?

The problem with such utopianism though (if that's what we should call it), is that Lie to Me very explicitly blurs Forbes' distinction between itself as program and the "casing" or external reality that frames it. Lie to Me frequently slips a punchy, non-diegetic montage of images of real figures (Hillary Clinton always seems to stand out) into the interstice of itself and the advertising break. That is, at the juncture of the show and of the consumerist imperatives that drive its production as commercial television, an imported grab bag of reality is inserted.

This reinforces how embedded Lie to Me is in the tradition of Reality Television. It's as if the show, to the degree that it enacts a seemingly careless appropriation of non-fictional moments of truth, is being driven by elements of the genre it extends and transcends to perform the role of an insouciant bricoleur of the zone of reality.

How effectively Lie to Me taunts and outmanoeuvres us from the vantage point of fiction. Contrary to the assumption in Forbes' poem, the "casing" of reality is not lost but has been actively enlisted in the production of the consumerist idiot.

Instances of real life are now merely way stations for the ever more effective and cynical linkage of fictions like Lie to Me to those self-addressing and self-serving fictions that encourage us to be all that TV allows us, in our privacy and ignorance, to be. Reality is now simply kicked to the curb of both fiction and consumerism.

Television knows very well who it thinks we are.

The sad thing is that the zone of TV and the zone of us coincide so very nearly perfectly. In that "very nearly", however, lies a glimmer of hope that citizenship may one day emerge from idiocy.

Notes

(1) "Television pioneer Reg Grundy's disappointed with reality shows," AAP, Herald Sun (online), September 20, 2010,

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/entertainment/confidential/television-pioneer-reg-grundys-disappopinte>

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(2) John Rajchman, "Introduction," in *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, by Gilles Deleuze (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 13-14.

(3) *Lie to Me*, Fox, 2009-2011.

(4) John Forbes, "T.V.," in *Tropical Skiing* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1976), 78.

(5) *The Terminator*, dir. James Cameron, Hemdale Film Corporation, 1984.

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Lie to Me. Fox. 2009-2011.

Rajchman, John. "Introduction." In *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, by Gilles Deleuze, 7-23. New York: Zone Books, 2001.

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The Terminator. Dir. James Cameron. Hemdale Film Corporation. 1984.