

## Essay Excerpts about Reality Shows

From: Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs- A Low Culture Manifesto

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### Excerpt 1

"I don't know how I feel about MTV's *The Real World*," he said. "I mean, is it really *real*? How real is it, really? Is it a depiction of reality, or is it a reflection of what we *perceive* to be reality? They advertise this as 'reality programming,' but isn't anything *programmed* inherently fabricated? How real is real, you know?"

She said nothing. She continued smoking a menthol cigarette. Twenty seconds passed.

"Well, what do you think?" he finally asked.

"About what," she asked, exhaling through her teeth.

"About *The Real World*," he repeated. "Do you think it's real?"

"Compared to what?"

"Well . . . to . . . I guess compared to things that are completely real."

Twenty more seconds passed.

"Is the show taped or edited in the Fourth Dimension?" she asked.

"No."

"Are the characters robots?"

"No."

"Can the episodic plotlines only be perceived by people who have ingested mind-expanding hallucinogens, such as lysergic acid diethylamide, mescaline, phencyclidine, ketamine, or psychedelic mushrooms?"

"No."

"Well then," she concluded, "it sounds real to me."

### Excerpt 2

When I initially heard CBS was creating the quasi-Orwellian reality program *Big Brother*, I was wildly enthusiastic. It sounded like a better version of *The Real World*, because the premise seemed to guarantee emotional conflict: Not only were they going to force total strangers to live together, but these poor chumps wouldn't even be allowed to leave the room. I imagined it would be like jamming Puck and Pedro and Amaya and that drunk Hawaiian girl into Anne Frank's annex and forcing them to emote at gunpoint. This would be perfect television.

However, *Big Brother* was a failed experiment, and I know why: They don't use music. I never knew what was going on. During key moments on *The Real World*, we are always instructed how to feel; if two people are playing chess to Soundgarden's "Black Hole Sun," I know their relationship is doomed; if they're playing along with Sheryl Crow's "Everyday Is a Winding Road," I know they are mending fences and exploring a new level of companionship. But on

*Big Brother*, there is never a musical subtext; in this particular instance, we'd merely see two hollow stoics moving rocks and knights, wholly devoid of sentiment.

Without a soundtrack, human interaction is meaningless. I once spent an evening chatting about the complexity of modern relationships with a male acquaintance, his ex-girlfriend, and her roommate. When I went to bed that night, I thought our conversation had been wonderful. Twelve hours later, I was informed that the ex-girlfriend spent the entire evening "in a rage," apparently because the other male in our foursome had been "brooding and surly," creating a tension that subsequently made the ex-girlfriend's roommate "completely uncomfortable" with the nature of our dialogue. I never noticed any of this. I never have any idea how other people feel; they always appear fine to me. But if somebody had pointedly played Pat Benatar's "Love Is a Battlefield" that night, I'm sure I could have constructed some empathy.