

Maxwell Sutton

Halk

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Critique of “Voting Democracy Off the Island”:

An Argument That Won’t Hold Water

In “Voting Democracy Off the Island: Reality TV and the Republican Ethos”, Francine Prose examines reality TV and its potentially problematic influence on United States citizens and their engagement with politics. Prose suggests that by normalizing several forms of bad behavior and portraying a democracy that focuses on the success of the individual, reality TV influences people to adopt bad habits and develop a skewed understanding and acceptance of questionable progressions in politics. Some components of Prose’s argument offer valid and thought-provoking critiques about reality TV media, but her argument’s overall structure is often problematic. She relies too heavily on faulty evidence that provides a weak amount of credible information to support her conclusion. Although I agree with Prose’s assertions about the importance of reality television creator analysis, I suggest that her conclusion that reality television has a negative influence on citizens’ involvement in and acceptance of political and moral issues is shaky due to its flawed logic.

In “Voting Democracy Off the Island”, Prose discusses the manner in which certain forms of reality television have conditioned Americans to react and behave differently when responding to political matters. Prose first asserts that reality TV satiates viewers’ desire to view watered down forms of cruelty. The “real” life elements of reality TV are broadly appealing and more influential than situations that are viewed as fictional. Reality TV relies upon individualism

and survival of the fittest ideologies but with a democratic slant, applying an inherently group-minded democratic layer over individualistic lessons and sensibility. Prose explains that reality TV normalizes these ideas and methods that are similar to those used by the United States' Republican process of politics. Reality TV also normalizes morally questionable methods of achieving personal success as well as harmful race, class, gender, and sexual orientation societal norms. Prose argues that these shows, with their increasing frequency and prevalence in the television landscape, will ultimately influence future generations to engage with politics and society at large in a dangerously relaxed, misinformed and egocentric manner. Prose finally claims that the structure and ideological influence of reality TV will numb citizens to the methods and actions of American political leaders while perpetuating the idea of a democratic process that benefits individual interests as opposed to the common good.

I would first like to address where Prose's strengths lie. Though I disagree with some of her methods of argumentation and the ultimate conclusion she draws from her analysis, the more compact critiques upon which her final argument is built provoke a unique discussion about reality television. Throughout the text, Prose makes note of several ideologically problematic elements of reality television. Though Prose backs these smaller assessments with minimal evidence, these ideas offer compelling insight into some harmful elements of reality TV. Briefly, Prose addresses the issue of representation in reality TV by acknowledging that reality TV relies upon stereotyped portrayals of groups and that romance-based programs generally lack interracial couples (63). This substantial issue has a lot of broader implications about how reality TV reflects and influences modern culture. Later, Prose discusses the influence that creators and producers of reality TV have on their programming. Prose examines the significance of *Survivor* executive producer Mark Burnett's involvement in the British army. She suggests that his history

as a military man is relevant to the nature of the popular programs he is producing and the influence that it has over its viewers (61). Burnett's history has shaped his ideological viewpoint, and the programming produced by his military-influenced mindset now has the opportunity to affect millions of viewers. She emphasizes the importance of investigating the history and interests of those in control of popular media, and I agree that it is a severely unexamined aspect of culture that requires closer criticism when analyzing media. Broadcasting mediums like television have a broad and far reaching influence that has the potential to affect the ideologies of millions of people. The source of these influences can indicate how particular media texts may affect the audiences that consume it. Prose is successful at acknowledging some of the complexities of media's influence. She touches upon vital yet uncommonly addressed components of media that have a far-reaching effect. These assertions are key to understanding the basics of the relevance and worth of critical media study, and Prose does an excellent job at establishing the validity and complexity of the discourse that she is creating.

Observations like these, which Prose's core argument is built upon, are strong, but the structure of her argument itself is weak and the validity of her conclusion is undermined by the faultiness of elements of her argument style. Prose's argument heavily relies upon several false analogies. During one notable analogy, Prose draws upon the comparison of *The Simple Life's* ratings to the lower ratings of an interview of George W. Bush after Saddam Hussein's capture as evidence that citizens are more engaged with reality TV than politically-minded programming (64). Prose uses this single bit of information to support her suggestion that reality TV is better at ideologically influencing people as opposed to political programming. There are several key problems with this piece of evidence. First, this analogy suggests that the degree of viewership is indicative of a program's ability to create internalized values within the viewer. The information

Prose provides suggests nothing about how thoroughly the viewers engaged with the media.

Second, Prose uses two specific programs on a specific evening to suggest that this is a broader trend that has no exception and is only a signifier of viewer interest alone. Third, Prose does not address several factors of reality TV programming that differ from political or news programming including advertising, the nature of the broadcasting channel, and the returning audience that a one-off interview would not have. The difference in ratings is more of a product of external factors as opposed to the inherent appeal or engagement that the audience has with the content of these programs. This analogy is problematic because it relies upon a false correlation that fails to acknowledge influential factors that might not support Prose's argument.

Prose further supports her argument with hasty generalizations about the effects of reality television on future generations. She claims that people who will potentially be raised watching reality TV will have difficulty separating reality from the image of reality portrayed on these programs (64). This assertion would be somewhat negligible if it was a broad introduction to her piece, but instead, Prose uses this claim to draw the audience into her concluding analysis of reality TV. She follows this statement with several hypothetical visions of a future political climate in which this naïve, entertainment-saturated reality TV generation exists and is far less effective at dealing with our government. Prose states that "It's all too easy to envision a time when the White House will no longer feel compelled to sell a projected war to the American people but can merely pitch it to Jerry Bruckheimer, whose new series will show us why we need to spread our influence..." (64). Televisual texts are influential on the viewing public, but Prose insists that this influence is exponentially greater than what can be logically argued or proven in her piece. A vague thesis about the future followed by vague visions about the future to craft some semblance of support is not a strong crux upon which an argument can rest. The

assessments that are most important to Prose's argument are ineffective hypothetical situations with no real evidence supporting their plausibility.

Aside from the specific problematic passages that I've focused on so far, throughout the text Prose uses emotionally loaded terms to emphasize the common negative aspects that U.S. Republican governmental tendencies and reality TV share. Prose uses inherently negative terms like "human-behavior laboratory" and "concocting" to suggest malicious and manipulative interference in society on the part of the government and reality TV (60,61). Later, Prose uses strong, negative terms like "death matches" to describe the competitive formats of reality TV and their influence on the viewers' understanding of the political democratic process (62). I do not mean to suggest that these terms invalidate her argument, but the general implementation of them throughout the text is a manipulative way for Prose to push her critique of reality TV even when proper evidence does not arise or suffice. Prose uses the term "human-behavior laboratory" to describe the similarities between reality TV and government tendencies, suggesting that they both treat humanity like a "population of lab rats" from which they can profit (60). She uses this negative language as filler, padding out her argument to give the illusion of more evidence than what actually exist. This issue arises again when Prose describes "mating" reality TV shows as "death matches" simply by virtue of being competitive programs. These words strike an emotional nerve that overemphasize the negative aspects of reality TV and Republican politics without offering any substantial correlation or evidence for the negative slant. The phrases that she uses to fill the gaps in her piece where solid evidence is missing are misleading. She does offer valid forms of evidence throughout the paper, but these emotionally loaded terms are used in place of strong evidence rather than as strong language to appropriately support existing evidence. Although Prose's article was crafted for a more casual audience, being that it was

published in *Harper's* and not in an academic journal, that does not excuse a more manipulative writing style. In fact, I feel as though these tactics should be omitted from an article that is constructed for a potentially more impressionable audience that isn't looking to critically analyze the text beyond an initial few readings. The piece can be accessible without Prose shoddily manipulating her audience to agree with her argument.

Overall, I disagree with Prose's argument and I do not think the support and construction of her argument are strong or successful. Throughout the entirety of the text, and especially in moments when it really matters such as in her concluding paragraphs, Prose resorts to noticeably transparent attempts at hastily supporting her views with far too little sound evidence. I am predisposed to agree with her analysis as I am ideologically aligned with two assumptions that her piece relies upon: (1) that I can or do see a flaw in the current and potential future climates of United States politics and government and (2) that I believe that reality TV can and does have a negative or substantial influence on its viewers. Though I agree with both of these assumptions, I still disagree with Prose's conclusion about reality TV's influence and its relation to citizens' engagement with politics. I do not see any recognizable connection between the two and Prose's attempt to persuade me made me more averse to the idea. I am entirely on Prose's side when she examines the flaws in the influence and construction of reality TV texts, but ultimately she draws an entirely different reading from them than I would ever imagine agreeing with.

"Voting Democracy Off the Island: Reality TV and the Republican Ethos" by Francine Prose suggests a connection between reality TV's influence and the future of U.S. government and the democratic process at large. Though Prose begins the piece with compelling examinations of the reality TV medium, the text is plagued with false analogies, broad generalizations and emotionally manipulative wording that weakens and occasionally invalidates

her stance. It is difficult to refute the idea that the content of reality television is directly correlated with the ideologies of the masses that consume it, but Prose makes bold claims that are too assuming of the power of this specific form of media without a substantial amount of reliable information to support her stance. However, reality television's influence is still real, and continuing efforts to examine and analyze the effects it has on its viewers provides an important understanding of our cultural climate as broadcasting media and society move forward.