

**Tucking Good *Drama*? Documentary Diversions and Performing  
Subjects in *RuPaul's Drag Race UK (2019-)***

The ‘documentary’, described by Bill Nichols as a “discourse of sobriety,” has traditionally been regarded as a ‘high-minded’ form, thought to present informative, authentic, and socially engaged representations of reality.<sup>1</sup> In comparison, the cultural currencies that distinguish reality television as purely ‘commercial entertainment’ have provoked doubts amongst academics and/or viewers over the ‘authenticity’ of its participants: such individuals are often assumed to be sensationally and deceptively ‘performing’ for the camera.<sup>2</sup> To address these concerns, this essay will explore representations of performance in the first season of BBC 3’s *RuPaul’s Drag Race UK (RPDR)*; a hit reality programme, originally aired in the U.S., that follows RuPaul ‘across the pond’ to find the ‘queen’ with the most ‘charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent’ in the United Kingdom. *RPDR* provides a fascinating context here as the show simultaneously constructs the ‘performance’ of its contestant’s drag personas against the subsequent reveal of their ‘authentic’ selves behind the drag; yet, the blatant artifice inherent in the reality show’s construction of ‘reality’ blurs these distinctions between ‘performance’ and ‘authenticity’. These ambiguities shouldn’t be equated with deception, or be viewed as mutually exclusive, however. Rather, I argue this obscurity in reality T.V.’s depiction of its subjects challenges documentary’s utopian pursuit to produce authoritative, absolute and untampered representations of actuality.

Contextually, the introduction of ‘docusoaps’ and reality television into domestic households, a trend which gained considerable traction in the U.K. during the late 90s, has significantly disrupted the field of factual filmmaking.<sup>3</sup> ITV’s *Up Series* (Almond and Apted, 1964-) is an early example, which adopts an unobtrusive style reminiscent of ‘observational’ documentary.<sup>4</sup> However, the increase of televisual non-fiction has led academics to defend the documentary form. John Corner, for instance, has claimed

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Murray, “‘I Think We Need a New Name for It’ The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV,” 40-56, in *Reality TV Remaking Television Culture*, eds, Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), p. 43-4.

<sup>3</sup> A ‘docusoap’ is a documentary with multiple episodes that follows people over a period of time, often focused on their occupation or home life; see *Driving School*, BBC One, 1997; *Airline*, ITV, 1998; *Vets in Practice*, BBC One, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Almond directed the original installation, *Seven Up!* in 1964; the subsequent films were directed by Michael Apted. The programme observes the lives of fourteen British children with subsequent additions every seven years.

reality television, through its “extensive borrowing of the documentary look” has complicated the rules of recognizing a documentary, thus “weakening its status.”<sup>5</sup> Despite this, and as Susan Murray has similarly stressed, my intention is not to redefine or reclaim the documentary form.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, I approach genres as malleable sites of exchange, with particular attention to how they become defined, interpreted and evaluated.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of *RPDR*, although the show employs some elements of the ‘documentary look’ (as I will later explore), it also has distinctly staged and theatrical aspects. These moments occur most prominently on the ‘RuPaul runway’ and are integral to the programme’s extravagant game show format and, simultaneously, its portrayal of the contestant’s drag performances. Here, the contestants perform their drag personas according to the set ‘maxi challenge’ of the week. Each episode unveils the ‘RuPaul runway’ with a short light show routine. Gleaming stage lights surround the runway and flash ‘on’ consecutively to the beat of RuPaul’s song, ‘Cover Girl’. This is followed by an out of focus shot of the glamorous host on the runway’s entrance as a filter of sparkling glitter adorns the image. After which, the camera ‘focuses’ and viewer is finally granted a clear view of RuPaul’s ‘fabulous’ outfit. Long and close-up shots are then edited together to dramatically present the ‘spectacular’ drag.

This short routine is a staple of the show and this dramatic filming style effectively sets the stage of the contestant’s drag performances. Here, sequences presenting the queen’s runway looks, dance routines, lip syncs and other performances are captured from multiple angles, or even in split-screen shots, to capture every detail of their performance. Rather than portraying these events with a single angle or shot, this heavily edited construction, with a certain level of extravagance, emphasises the ‘to be looked-at-ness’ and spectacle elements of the reality game show. This emphasis on the visual aspect of drag performance is amplified as these sequences are cut with voice-overs of the judges’ critiques, and interviews with the contestants themselves, to inform the viewer of the success or potential failure of their efforts. Furthermore, often these challenges set for the drag queens involve RuPaul’s original songs, either as the

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<sup>5</sup> John Corner, “Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions,” *Television and New Media* 3 (2002), p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Murray, “I Think We Need a New Name for It,” p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Jason Mitchell, “A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory,” *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 3 (Spring, 2001), p. 9.

show's soundtrack or for the subject of a performance. In effect, this establishes the game show within its own 'drag' universe, a representation of reality which seemingly appears entirely different to that of the viewer's own lived-in world.

Critically, this highly constructed and theatrical style of the reality game show diverts from the 'observational' style of documentary and 'direct cinema' of the U.S. This documentary mode sought to 'observe' events in front of the camera without the explicit intervention of the filmmaker, with portable equipment that could freely move about a scene, capturing 'what happened as it happened'.<sup>8</sup> Brian Winston, on the work of Roger Graef in the 70s, has defined this method as the "purest of cinematic modes," its 'pure' observation and minimally interventionist approach far superior in representing non-fictional events than the invasive mechanisms of the voice-over, interview or overt presence of the filmmaker.<sup>9</sup> However, with this observational style comes a sense of 'fidelity': events are conveyed as if they 'simply happened', or would have been the same without the presence of the filmmaker when, in fact, they have been constructed to precisely have that appearance.<sup>10</sup> Rather, reality television (and as I will develop further) can show us to a greater degree of how the intrusion of production team, through either voice-over, editing style or interviews can shape the representation of reality.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, *RPDR*'s overly staged setting and heavy stylisation can convey an element of honesty in its blatant manipulation of actuality.

Yet, in spite of the show's playful artifice, at the programme's core is the encouragement for the contestants to 'love' or 'be themselves', as RuPaul's motto proclaims, "If you can't love yourself how the hell you gonna love somebody else!" In perusing this goal, scenes in the 'werkroom' often serve to reveal more about the individuals on the show. Here, the contestants dress out of drag and their artifice breaks down as their 'true' selves are revealed.<sup>12</sup> In *RPDR* some notable examples are The Vivienne's confession of her struggle with drug addiction, Sum Ting Wong's admittance of his difficult relationship with his parents and their ignorance of his drag

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<sup>8</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to documentary*, 2nd ed (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), p. 208.

<sup>10</sup> Nichols, *Introduction to documentary*, p. 177.

<sup>11</sup> Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 126.

<sup>12</sup> Niall Brennan, "Contradictions Between the Subversive and the Mainstream: Drag Cultures and RuPaul's Drag Race," 29-43, in *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture*, eds, Niall Brennan and David Gudelenas (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50618-0> [accessed 19/11/2019].

career. Here, these scenes serve to disclose the harsh reality of the drag scene, from the late-night party lifestyle, to the repression of the LGBT community from more diverse backgrounds – and with particular attention to the difficulty to be openly proud and/or ‘yourself’. The ‘werkroom’ is also a place for queer discourse: in the fifth episode Divina De Campo explains to Blu Hydrangea of Margaret Thatcher’s ‘Section 28’ law, which prohibited discussions of LGBT relationships/lifestyles in classrooms and led to the subsequent ‘invisibility’ of the gay community. In doing so, these discussions effectively subvert the assumption that only documentaries have the capability to be informative or socially engaged, as *RPDR* provides insight into the real and critical issues that affect the gay community.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, these emotional declarations and/or moments of discourse in the ‘werkroom’ adopt a more naturalistic style than that of the runway sequences. The scenes are captured with more simplistic camera angles and editing, often keeping to a medium framing, and with longer takes that can appear handheld. In effect, this has more of an observational appearance, with a level of intimacy appropriate to probe into the contestant’s confessions. This gives the impression that these moments of emotional disclosure and conversational segments are separate from the extravagantly stylised scenes of performance on the runway. The contestant’s interactions with one another appear like personal moments that just ‘have happened’ to be captured, and thus more ‘authentic’ and less overtly ‘produced’ or ‘manipulated’.

Critically, my objective is not to assert whether these seemingly ‘genuine’ confessionals from the *RPDR* contestants, or from the subjects of reality television more largely, are either ‘authentic’ or ‘false’. In particular, ‘authenticity’ is a vague term. As Annette Hill contends, if something is ‘authentic’ it can “signify the genuine article,” it can also mean that something is “just like the original,” is “authorised by the originator” or “is true.”<sup>14</sup> In this case, I am taking on Leewnan’s definition: what is authentic is ‘to be to the essence of something, to a revealed truth, a deeply held sentiment’.<sup>15</sup> And here, I wish to examine the relationship between these scenes of presented ‘authenticity’, as in the contestant’s confessions appear true to life, with the overtly constructed and artificial style of the reality game show. And furthermore, to explore how this may tell

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<sup>13</sup> Murray, “We need a new name for it,” p. 43-4.

<sup>14</sup> Annette Hill, *Restyling factual TV: audiences and news, documentary and reality genres* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 113.

<sup>15</sup> Van Leewnan, “What is Authenticity?” *Discourse Studies* 3, no. 4 (2001), p. 393.

us more about how modes of documentary have presented, or hidden, the interaction between the ‘social actor’ and the camera/filmmaker.

Notably, a key distinction of reality T.V., in comparison to observational styles, as Bruzzi has argued, is how the format often requires its contestants taking part to be “transported to an unfamiliar environment, of which they have limited control”; this heightens the importance of personality as the person’s character has to “transcend the alien situation it has be propelled into.”<sup>16</sup> Reality television requires ‘telegenic’ contestants who can be intriguing and expressive characters for audiences to relate to, who are able to fluidly perform in front of the camera in ways which appear ‘natural’.<sup>17</sup> This is certainly the case for RPDR, as the contestants are drag performers and experienced in acting, performing and entertaining fans/audiences. This raises questions of authenticity and provokes a striking contradiction. *RPDR* relentlessly pursues moments of ‘authenticity’, openness and vulnerability from its queens behind their drag – a critique which is often raised by the judges during the runway performances; however, due to the possibilities of ‘performing’ contestants, how do we know these scenes are ‘authentic’ or true to life?

Yet, it is important to consider that performance and enactment are also contentions that have hung over the documentary tradition since its beginnings.<sup>18</sup> For instance, exponents of direct cinema pursued subjects who were professional performers (and a built in crisis-structure), such as in *Meet Marlon Brando* (Albert and David Maysles, Charlotte Zwerin, 1966) and *Bob Dylan: Don’t Look Back* (D. A. Pennebaker, 1967).<sup>19</sup> This was sought after to reduce the ‘distorting effect’ of the cinematic apparatus on the subject’s behaviour.<sup>20</sup> As Mast asserts, a key difference is that “‘social actors’ in reality television stray from the ‘virtual performance’ of the documentary subject acting as him/herself, and increasingly move toward premeditated, camera- and self-conscious performances.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> Jelle Mast, “Documentary at Crossroads: Reality TV and the Hybridization of Small-Screen Documentary,” in *Sociology Compass* 3, no. 6 (2009), p. 889 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00242.x> [accessed 19/11/2019]

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, p. 133.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Mast, “Documentary at Crossroads,” p. 893.

Moreover, the confessionals from the contestants and moments of queer discourse in *RPDR* face further dilemmas as they exist in clearly manufactured situations (the reality game show) that wouldn't have happened unless the format hadn't 'created it'. This dilemma is brought to an extreme when these emotional declarations spill onto the runway. In a repeated segment of the final episodes, RuPaul lifts a picture of the contestant's younger selves and asks his 'final girls' to give advice to their childhood selves – and addressed as such by their 'original' (non-drag) names. This is an integral moment which requires the individuals on the show to break from their drag personas and expose their 'realo selves'. Notably, in the finale of *RPDR*, The Vivienne cries passionately about her difficult past and how she's come so far to deserve the title of U.K.'s next 'drag superstar'. However, the emotional intensity of these instances partly contradicts the artificial game show format; for instance, as an audience how can we be sure The Vivienne's emotional outburst is genuine or for the purposes of winning the show? In effect, this question confronts the viewer with the artificial and 'staged' environments in which the contestants are filmed. Here, *RPDR*'s formatted construction lays bare the existence of the camera and thus confronts audiences with the possibility of its subjects 'acting up' or 'performing' in front of its presence.

This contention is also evident in scenes of 'drama' in *RPDR*, with high-tension conflicts which are essential to the soap-opera inspired aspects of reality television. A standout example in the show is a dispute between Divina De Campo and The Vivienne, where Divina 'acts out' in retaliation to The Vivienne's supposed 'underappreciation' or 'disrespect' for her style of drag. During such disputes, producers of the show insert interviews with bystanders or those involved to capture multiple perceptions of the 'drama'. Moreover, in this instance, RuPaul himself questions Divina about the argument, working to overtly 'stir' or provoke further controversy. This conflict is intensified, and as observed in much soap-inspired reality television, by fast editing accelerating the drama which switches between people's expressions or reactions to the fight. And of course, the drama in *RPDR* is also never complete with the infamous 'rattlesnake' sound effect to emphasise the 'throwing of shade'. As Bruzzi observes, these formal techniques work to forward a narrative, like in the soap-opera, than to propose a particular argument or thesis, which is often associated with the 'informative' reputation of the documentary.<sup>22</sup> Significantly, it is

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<sup>22</sup> Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, p. 138-9.

as if these moments, where the subjects of reality television scream, shout or cry are so predictable or even integral to the format that they signal, rather than mask, its formal rigidity.<sup>23</sup>

A consequence to the presence of overt construction and artificiality however, as Hill contends, is that most viewers regard reality television as narrative entertainment in which they expect people to perform, and find little truthful about these performances.<sup>24</sup> Although it may be problematic to make such assumptions about audience behaviour, Hill backs up her claims with a survey on the perception of performance in factual and reality TV, which found that 88% of British viewers thought that people ‘act up’ to the camera.<sup>25</sup> Evidentially, the implications of reality television’s brazenly performative nature has raised a certain awareness of how constructed the technologically produced image can be.<sup>26</sup> Such attitudes can also reflect what Jay Ruby describes as the demise in our ‘naïve trust’ at the camera’s ability to tell the truth.<sup>27</sup> Yet, these cynical evaluations on reality television are also dependent on a comparative trust of a ‘documentary authority’: a belief that documentaries are informative, serve the public interest and are therefore authentic.<sup>28</sup>

However, what ‘truth’ RPDR, and other forms of reality television, does lay bare is the existence of the camera and the artifice of its own construction. For instance, as Bill Nichols has claimed, observational methods of documentary which strive to authentically reproduce an untampered reflection of the actuality they film is an ironically deceptive practice.<sup>29</sup> This poses a problem because ‘pure’ representation is unattainable: too many variables during filmmaking can influence the interaction between the filmmaker and the individuals/world they are trying to portray – such as the relationship between director and social actor, possible power dynamics, the setting for the film, contextual motivations for the film or bias and so on. However, *RPDR* exposes a certain reality of what happens when subjects react or perform in front of the camera’s presence. Nor does the show try to hide this: in some sequences

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> Hill, *Restyling factual TV*, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> Corner, “Performing the Real,” p. 264.

<sup>27</sup> Jay Ruby, “The Ethics of Image Making; or, ‘They’re Going to Put Me in the Movies. They’re Going to Make a Big Star Out of Me...’,” 209-219, in *New Challenges for documentary*, eds, Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 210.

<sup>28</sup> Murray, “We need a new name for it,” p. 43-4.

<sup>29</sup> Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983), p. 19. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3697347>

contestants and producers converse during the interviews, and often reflexively address what might make the final cut of the episode. And perhaps, the evolution of reality television suggests the ‘puritanism’ of early direct cinema has been replaced by more realistic expectations, with more obtrusive elements rather than a portrayal of ‘untampered truth’ that observational styles often aspire to.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Bruzzi has also drawn comparisons between reality television’s disclosure of its own construction and openness if the camera’s manipulation to that of Cinema Vérité.<sup>31</sup> A landmark example being Jean Roche’s *A Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), which similarly reveals the presence of the camera, direct interaction between the filmmaker and social actors, and how a director’s perspective can shape the portrayal of events. However, this documentary mode used such techniques as an alienating device, to distance itself from narrative elements or catharsis, in order to portray a ‘film truth’ to its audience. In contrast, reality television subjects, as seen through the strong characters and emotional declarations in *RPDR*, are often chosen and constructed for audience members to engage or connect with.<sup>32</sup> This provokes contradictions as although reality television reflects a level of self-aware artifice, the soap-inspired elements which portray likeable or strong ‘characters’, able to produce emotionally powerful moments, that appear narrative and performance focused.

Alternatively, Elizabeth Marquis suggests performance should be viewed as on a ‘spectrum’: at one end the “spontaneous actions of individuals captured by a hidden camera, and on the other, individuals consciously presenting and/or enacting roles outside their own identities to the camera”<sup>33</sup> And possibly, as Christopher Globe outlines, one could assume many of reality television’s confessions are simultaneously theatrical posturing *and* authentic behaviour.<sup>34</sup> *RPDR*’s playful ambiguity between performance and actuality is also seen through how the contestants are credited. During the interviews, even when dressed out of drag, their title cards name their drag personas. Additionally, in the show’s end credits the contestants are referred to with both of their names. Even in this essay, I am referring to them through their drag

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<sup>30</sup> Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 74.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Marquis, “Conceptualizing documentary Performance,” in *Studies in Documentary Film* 7, no. 1 (2013), p. 46 [https://doi.org/10.1386/sdf.7.1.45\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/sdf.7.1.45_1) [accessed 19/11/2019]

<sup>34</sup> Christopher Globe, *The art of confession: the performance of self from Robert Lowell to reality TV* (New York: University Press, 2017), p. 196.



personas, demonstrating the power of the ‘performance’ of the contestant’s drag identities and simultaneously an unclarity of identity. On one hand, this ambiguity effectively emphasizes the playful nature of drag: the art exposes how notions of gender are often performed through our bodies, and how such performances don’t belong within rigid categories, but rather can fluidly transgress across boundaries.<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, what the overtly constructed artifice of reality television shows like *RPDR* can tell us is that documentary’s most significant ‘truth’ is that which materialises through the interaction between the filmmaking and the subject in front of the camera. However, interpretations of performance as inherently ‘deceptive’ or ‘misleading’ in reality television still reflects how, in comparison, documentary’s aim is still to produce an absolute ‘reality’ without manipulation, a utopian aim which, ironically, may ultimately be impossible. This evaluation also presumes to authentically ‘live’ and to ‘perform’ are entirely separate states. But perhaps what the ambiguity of reality television suggests is that performance is also an integral part of living.

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