

# What Happens When Real People Start Getting Cinematic: Laguna Beach and Contemporary T.V. Aesthetics

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By common accounts, *Laguna Beach* looked strange on first viewings. The show was marketed as reality television, but hardly appeared the part. While this genre of television programming has accommodated many variations, from celebrity (*Newlyweds*) to ordinary subjects (*Road Rules*), from more to less contrived situations (*Big Brother* versus *Cops*), and from competitive formats (*Survivor*) to less goal-oriented series (*The Real World*), reality television had never looked like *Laguna Beach*. [1] The series was shot with high definition digital cameras, edited like a feature film, according to continuity principles, and broadcast in letterbox format. As *The New York Times* columnist Margy Rochlin observed, "every frame of *Laguna Beach* looks like it has been dipped in honey" (Rochlin, 2005). With reality television, typically, lower production values function as a truth effect, registering as more gritty, authentic, and believable to most viewers. Thus, this less varnished style apparently delivers on the promise of reality television to offer a more spontaneous, less artificially structured encounter with its human subjects than other dramatic programming. As Robin Anderson observes,

The claim that shows like *Cops* are 'real' hinges on several formatting strategies: live action shots with extensive use of hand-held cameras, the absence of re-enactments [...] [T]he plotting of these stories is always bare-boned, without the richer and fuller devices of, say, fiction or cinema.  
(Anderson, 1994: 8)

*Laguna Beach*, by contrast, eschews the "real" aesthetic for a more lush, cinematic one. Here, I will consider the significance of the unusual pairing of reality television with an elevated visual design. To do this, I will focus primarily on questions of genre and reception, exploring what influences can be traced to and from *Laguna Beach*, and how viewers and critics make sense of this new program.

When MTV debuted its latest reality television series in the fall of 2004, the network made sure that the show was programmed with bombarding frequency; this way even casual viewers would be exposed to the show multiple times. [2] Soon enough, *Laguna Beach* was a hit. The opening season placed first among all cable shows based on its time slot and target audience, with the season finale drawing nearly three million viewers. (Chang, 2005; Rochlin, 2005) [3] The second season average increased from 2.2 to between 3.1 and "nearly 4 million viewers a week" according to various estimates, making the show one of MTV's most popular programs, second only to the long-running, eponymous series *The Real World*. (Chang, 2005; Gordon, 2005; Adkins, 2005)[4] What explains the popularity of this new show and, given its success, how can we clarify MTV's decision to re-run the program multiple times a week to generate interest?

*Laguna Beach*, shot on location over a six-month period, covers an extended group of teenage friends in southern California. Aside from the conspicuous absence of any class time, we appear to have access to every facet of our young protagonists' lives. The show follows its cast as they form cliques, gossip about one another, date, and spend their leisure time. More than anything else, though, the program focuses on a love triangle between three central characters: Lauren, Kristin, and Steven. What is unusual about *Laguna Beach*, though, isn't the story so much as the style.

Tony DiSanto, the executive producer of the series, discusses stylistic innovation as the primary goal of the project: "We've all seen a million reality shows. But can we do one that looks like a film?" (Gordon, 2005). Fittingly, *Laguna Beach* made sure to hire "camera operators, editors, and other staffers who have worked on dramas" instead of the documentary background that is more typical of reality TV crews (Kaplan, 2005: 87). According to Hisham Abed, the project's director of photography, the cameras selected to shoot *Laguna Beach* were chosen specifically for their feature-grade capabilities. These Panasonic DVCPRO50s were also fitted with telephoto lenses which allowed cinematographers to shoot scenes from a distance -- preserving the promise of naturally occurring drama -- while also producing a stylized effect more typical to feature films, in which characters (shot via long-lens close-ups) stand out from the background, as one of two layered planes (*Broadcast Engineering*, 2005). This effect is often exceptionally noticeable, as protagonists are ideally positioned in front of too-picturesque locations; faultless sunsets are the most generic example. In one instance, co-stars Stephen and Kristin kiss in front of a fairground, which appears like a postcard perfect backdrop, with a lighted Ferris wheel illuminating the scene.

*Laguna Beach* is littered with similar production techniques more typical of feature programs or films than reality shows. In one instance, what could have been a banal shopping scene, is redeemed by a striking mise-en-scène. Lauren waits in a clothing store while a friend is in a dressing room. This empty moment is made more compelling with dynamic color schemes and character placement; the medium-long shot is saturated with the white tone of the monochromatic store-set and Lauren is blocked according to the rule of thirds.[\[5\]](#) By placing this character on a one-third line, a greater sense of rhythm is created in the composition. It is easy to imagine what a shopping scene might look like in a more conventional reality series -- say MTV's *My Super Sweet 16* -- with one camera trailing the protagonists with closely framed following shots. By contrast, shots in *Laguna Beach* are often stationary -- resembling films more than any other kind of network programming. In addition to the frequent use of long lenses and balanced shot compositions, *Laguna* also utilizes continuity editing with the fluidity of a feature film.

One of the most surprising aspects of *Laguna*'s style is that the program dispenses with any transitional period to make the appearance of a reality-program-in-feature-style less abrupt. From the start, this show dispensed with the stripped-down techniques of reality television for more a more cinematic look. [\[6\]](#) In the opening scene of the first episode, a group of four girls gather on a balcony discussing plans for an upcoming party. An establishing shot of the deck and all the girls seated around the table is followed by a pair of two-shots, one from each side of the table. The remaining shots are all close-ups of characters talking, listening to a comment, or carrying a cut across the table with a glance from one side to the other. The continuity editing techniques used in this scene -- shot-reverse-shots and shot-reaction-shots -- are highly familiar to feature films or television dramas, but are much less common in reality shows. It is clear from this analysis that multiple cameras must have been used to

shoot this scene. It would have been impossible otherwise to cut so fluidly from one character to another in the final edit. [7]

The same could be said of another representative scene, in which a long lens is noticeable again as the crew catches Lauren looking across a swarm of bodies at a house party. Predictably, she is looking at Steven. (Lauren's desire for this character is a primary narrative thread in the show.) The following shot shows Steven sharing a laugh with his friends. The cut between these shots is motivated by an eye-line match, where one character looks in a certain direction and the following shot answers that gaze. As in the clothing store, Lauren is some combination of fortuitously captured and perfectly blocked, turning her head to look left with large, clearly outlined eyes. This is an extraordinarily legible glance for a reality show -- let alone a medium shot on *any* television program. DiSanto attributes Lauren's starring role in the show to this telegenic quality. "She wears her emotions on her face, she's so expressive," the producer commented (Kaplan, 2005: 87). As with the balcony scene, the use of eye-line matches must have required multiple cameras at the shoot so that action is continuous across the edits and, once again, it is surprising to see a live-filmed reality series work so fluidly with this convention.

Anna McCarthy even notes that *Laguna Beach* uses more complex lighting schemes than other programs in this genre: "Unlike other reality shows it uses elaborate lighting setups. Blonde hair and tanned skin emit an especially painterly glow in *Laguna Beach*, distinguishing its interior scenes from the high key studio look of shows like *The Real World*" (McCarthy, 2004). With these lighting schemes, multi-camera shoots, film-quality-DV-cameras, telephoto shots, and the fluid use of continuity editing techniques, *Laguna Beach*, clearly, raised the standards of production values for reality television considerably.

While the style of *Laguna Beach* diverges noticeably from other contemporary reality programs, its dramatic interests remain more similar to other series in this genre. Like *The Real World*, *Laguna* focuses on eight social actors in the same age group. Narrative arcs in both programs are selected similarly, with more intense developments -- attraction or resentment among group members -- balanced with less dramatic everyday activities and recreations. Pitched in the most general terms: both programs depict an extended peer network interacting in informal situations. *Laguna Beach* is also similar in some ways to *Newlyweds*, another recent MTV reality series which debuted a year earlier in 2003. This program tracks the professional and private lives of two recently married pop singers (Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey) in their early days of domestic life. Like *Newlyweds*, *Laguna* chooses protagonists whose relationships predate the program and makes romance a major point of focus. Described generally, both shows try to uncover what constitutes love or attraction in everyday interactions.

If *Laguna Beach* is relatively similar to these programs in terms of theme and narrative motivation, it differs from them more radically in style. In contrast to MTV's newer reality program, the sceneography and cinematography of *Newlyweds* and *The Real World* are significantly less elaborate. Where *Laguna* often uses the conventions of feature filmmaking, these programs fulfill standard expectations for reality television style. A close formal analysis of any short segment of *Newlyweds* and *The Real World* would reveal the following stylistic tendencies. With one camera following the action, reframing must stand in for continuity cuts. Often the trouble of zooming and moving in for close-ups is forgone in favor of humdrum medium or medium-close two-shots with both conversational partners in the frame at the same time. The mobility necessary to capture character interactions belies the

presence of a filmmaker in the subjects' midst, moving about to track their actions. These series often rely on surveillance cameras and following shots, where one cameraman trails a group of characters. Both of these techniques result in clumsy, imperfectly framed shots, with characters captured from less than ideal angles or distances in terms of narrative purposes and visual appeal. Where *Newlyweds* still forbids any direct addresses or discussion of the making of this program, *The Real World* forgoes these conventions to make participation in the program an acknowledged part of the diegesis.

*The Real World* frequently integrates "confessional" scenes with the action. These retrospective, direct address interviews are often used as voiceovers which explain ongoing action. In her analysis of *Laguna Beach*, McCarthy points to this program's avoidance of "confessional speech" as a crucial distinction between *Laguna* and other reality shows: "*Laguna Beach*'s promise of emotional realism hinges on its ability to achieve melodramatic expression without the confessional, and indeed on its refusal of the artifice of confessional speech in both teen drama and its reality TV predecessors" (McCarthy, 2004). McCarthy's use of the phrase "emotional realism" recalls Ien Ang's landmark study of soap opera reception *Watching Dallas*. Ang found that, though this program could be off-handedly dismissed as unrealistic by occasional viewers or non-fans, its devoted audience was attuned to its "flexible reality." For them, "the same things, people, relations, and situations which are regarded at the denotative level as unrealistic, and unreal, are at the connotative level apparently not seen at all as unreal, but in fact as 'recognizable'" (Ang, 1985: 42). Yet, where the "emotional realism" of *Dallas* is more adult-oriented, focusing on family life and business relationships, *Laguna Beach* trolls the more ambiguously defined experience of teenagerhood. Though the age-range of its subjects (and, by association, the target audience) is different with these shows, the nature of their appeal is similar. Ang's summation of *Dallas* reception also aptly characterizes the interesting qualities of *Laguna* to its younger audience:

[T]he 'true to life' elements of *Dallas* the concrete living circumstances in which the characters are depicted (and their wealth in particular springs to mind here) [...] are rather regarded as symbolic representations of more general living experiences: rows, intrigues, problems, happiness and misery. In other words, at a connotative level they ascribe mainly emotional meanings to *Dallas*. In this sense the realism of *Dallas* can be called an 'emotional realism'. (Ang, 1985: 45)

As opposed to *Laguna Beach*, most reality programs lure their audiences not with an elevated "emotional realism" -- in which universal aspects of experience can be abstracted from their more glamorous manifestations -- but with a stripped-down aesthetic design that appears too loosely crafted to have been faked. Mark Andrejevic defines an over-arching "goal" of reality TV as "the comprehensive documentation of the mundane rhythms of daily life" (Andrejevic, 2004: 117). The "mundane" in the case of *The Real World* is suitably conveyed with a straightforward shooting style which openly acknowledges the process of documentation via shaky hand held cameras, surveillance footage, and direct addresses to the camera in confessional scenes. Studying another canonical iteration of the reality genre, *Cops*, Arild Fetveit cites textually specific features of this program to characterize the reality genre:

[T]he proliferation of reality TV could be understood as a euphoric effort to reclaim what seems to be lost after digitalization . . . The powerful urge for a sense of contact with the real is inscribed in much of the reality TV footage.

The rough quality of the hand-held footage draws attention to the issue of contact itself. (Fetveit, 2002: 130)

*Laguna Beach*, with its double-sided textual and thematic qualities, is much more appropriately characterized by Ang's reading of *Dallas* than Fetveit's understanding of *Cops*. If Fetveit wants to parlay his reading of *Cops* to encompass reality television as a whole, *Laguna* demonstrates that this genre, and the audiences understanding of what is "realistic" in addition to what is "reality television" is much more ambiguous than what some critics would have us believe.

In addition to differences in formal design, *Laguna Beach* violates other conventional premises of reality television. The program, in keeping with the great majority of reality shows, features heretofore unknown and untalented "members of the public." [8] The script that precedes each episode also prompts the audience for a reality show: "The following program was shot over an eight month period in the city of Laguna Beach, CA [...] The people, the drama, and the locations [...] are real." Beyond these general markers of similarity, *Laguna* differs from other reality programming of our time. If I wrote earlier that certain overarching themes of *Laguna Beach* are similar to those of *The Real World* -- to document the interactions of a young peer group -- and *Newlyweds* -- to chart the evolution of love relationships in everyday life -- the premise of these programs (as compared to *Laguna*) is remarkably different in two ways. The starting point of *Laguna Beach* is less contrived -- the location and content of these teens' daily lives and their choice of friends pre-date the show -- and it is not a goal-oriented or prize-driven series. Even greater self-knowledge, the most frequently stated goal of *Real World* cast members, is never emphasized in *Laguna Beach*. If the entertainment value of more contrived and competitive reality television formats was so established, why did MTV bother to produce this incongruous "naturally occurring," yet "cinematic" version of reality television?

More than a few articles in the popular press wondered over the same question: what, exactly, is the point of following around these young have-it-alls with glossy cinematography? Critics and columnists reached little consensus in accounting for not only why the show existed, but what it was that they were watching. Characterizations of the program's dramatic interests are split between two conclusions -- that the show is subtle or, simply, vacuous. *New York Times* columnists Margy Rochlin and Virginia Heffernan offer eloquent arguments in favor of the show's small-scale drama. Rochlin writes:

One of the most intriguing aspects of the show's popularity is that it is a drama writ very small. Though the series has been described as MTV's verite version of Fox's *O.C.*, it is the latter that contains story lines that address real-world teenager problems: the pain of divorce, binge drinking, date rape. Over the course of an episode of "Laguna Beach," a viewer can expect a few spats, a betrayal or two, maybe a trip to the beach and a lot of rapid flipping through racks of expensive, hankie-size dresses at the mall. It is a show that gets its tension from observing how rich, beautiful adolescents with few discernible responsibilities -- no curfew, no housework -- introduce Sturm und Drang into their otherwise unfettered lives. (Rochlin, 2005)

Heffernan seconds Rochlin's positive evaluation, celebrating the subtlety with which the program represents the teenage experience. She writes, "[*Laguna Beach*] stands alone among television shows at rendering the heart-stopping misapprehensions made by young minds

clouded with melancholy, euphoria and desire" (Heffernan, 2005). Heffernan also echoes Rochlin's admiration of the program's technique, calling *Laguna Beach* "ingeniously shot" and "the best-looking show on television." Finally, in her most provocative claim, Heffernan likens this recent reality program to celebrated Italian neo-realist films of the early twentieth century (Heffernan, 2005). If Heffernan and Rochlin seem to particularly enjoy rankling the feathers of staid high-brow standards in celebrating *Laguna Beach*, critics who dislike the show take equal pleasure in lampooning the program as devoid of any substance. In such evaluations, the teenage cast and the show's producers -- in addition to the program itself -- are indicted as equal culprits in a familiar television sin: the proverbial celebration of style over substance. For its detractors, *Laguna Beach* sets a new low in abject emptiness as it superficially glorifies "beach bores" and "bimbos" (Rodman, 2004; Sheffield, 2005).

In contrast to *The New York Times*'s unexpected admiration for the program's subtlety and style, a *Newsweek* column reports, "*Laguna Beach* hasn't become [MTV's] latest hit because of all the interesting things that happen on it. In fact, nothing even close to interesting happens" (Gordon, 2005). *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Boston Herald* took similar views, calling the series "lifeless" and "remarkably short on drama" (Dehnart, 2004). A consistent pattern among these columns, however, is the inclusion of backhanded concessions that the series might be more complicated than they are willing to admit. If *The Hollywood Reporter* dismisses *Laguna* as "mind-numbing," it also acknowledges that it could spawn a "new reality subgenre that's bound to be imitated and ridiculed, revered and reviled" (Pederson, 2004). Often, a critic's catchy put-down alludes, unintentionally, to the program's potential. A *Newsweek* review which reported utter boredom, also included the following observation: "One MTV executive describes *Laguna Beach*'s storytelling as 'subtle,' a charitable way to refer to 30 minutes of gossip, shopping and backstabbing. The show specializes in the 'um's, 'like's and 'whatever's of teen politics, observed at a petri-dish level" (Gordon, 2005). But why not study "teen politics" at this close level of scrutiny? Helen McCarthy, for example, attributes social significance to *Laguna*'s ability to "[read] emotional realism in gestures and [acknowledge] the fraught subtexts of everyday speech" (McCarthy, 2005). [9] Frequently situated in this way, *Laguna Beach* is in a unique position -- subject to derision and, occasionally, glowing praise. With *Laguna Beach*, one critic's "new standard in absolute blankness" is another's second coming of Luchino Visconti (Bernstein, 2004). [10]

Such polarized reception points to the spectatorial confusion generated by this series. How often is a contemporary program cited as both the very best *and* the very worst that television has to offer? A third sort of review column dramatizes both of these reactions at once. In these cases, the author admits to an attraction to the program but also dismisses it as an embarrassing interest, a "guilty pleasure." A column from *E!* online -- written in the first person, but clearly design to capture the ambivalence of many viewers -- dramatizes a love/hate relationship with *Laguna Beach*. Kristin Veitch writes, "It's TV's dirtiest little secret. It's the show no one admits to watching, and when they do, they pull those curtains tight so the neighbors don't see" before finally admitting that she is "addicted" to the program herself (Veitch, 2005). An opinion column in a college newspaper discusses a similarly uneasy attraction to the program. In the end, the writer resolves not to watch such lowbrow entertainment, concluding, "If I want characters obsessing over the future but a dearth of resolution, I can watch a performance of *Waiting for Godot*" (Sherman, 2005). While the earnestness of this young columnist's move, definitively trumping *Laguna* with a high-brow reference, might seem like a weak over-statement, it also draws attention to a rhetorical strategy implicit in more professional, equally negative reviews. In such cases, the cultural imperative to praise respectable entertainment and disavow any serious interest in low-brow

genres is influential, but remains, understandably, unstated. [11] But are these critics responding to thematic and formal features unique to this program, or might their frustration with *Laguna Beach* be attributed more accurately to a reliance on traditional generic distinctions that this program calls into question? As Susan Murray notes, evaluations of programming are often determined more by the discourses that frame them: "The distinctions we make between forms of nonfictional television are not based on empirical evidence but largely contained in evaluative connotations that insist on separating information from entertainment, liberalism from sensationalism, and public service from commercialism" (Murray, 2004: 54). [12] The wildly divergent range of responses to *Laguna Beach* may be accounted for by this show's uncertain place amidst the various genres with which we are used to classifying and comprehending a wide range of programming. But, as John Corner notes, "[Television's] generic system is not, as we know, a neat and stable set of discrete categories of work. It is a changing and increasingly hybridized set of practices, forms, and functions, one in which both the cultural and commodity value lie most often in the right blend of the familiar and the new, of fulfilled expectation and shock" (Corner, 2002: 255). As outlined here, if a particular program matches generic expectations too obviously, this will lessen its popularity. Ratings success could be more accurately predicted by judging how effectively a show manages generic familiarity while also introducing differences. *Laguna's* uncertain relationship to previous TV programming encourages viewers to take an active role in its *genrefication*, thereby increasing the popularity of the show. [13]

The potentially incoherent genre status of *Laguna Beach* is made more legible if we allow the possibility that such ambiguity can function as a point of attraction for the contemporary TV audience. As Annette Hill has identified, viewers of reality shows are often actively invested in the process of genre definition. She argues that audiences,

Watch popular factual television with a critical eye, judging the degree of factuality in each reality format based on their experience of other types of factual programming. In this sense, viewers are evaluators of the reality genre, and of factual programming as a whole. (Hill, 2005: 173)

Here, reality television reception bears remarkable similarity to Ang's characterization of the soap opera audience. Ang describes the split-attraction of *Dallas* to its viewers:

[W]hatever there is to be said about the pleasure of *Dallas*, the field of tension between the fictional and the real seems to play an important part in it . . . A constant to and fro movement between identification with and distancing from the fictional world as constructed in the text therefore characterizes the involvement of the letter-writers who like *Dallas*. (Ang, 1985: 50)

With *Laguna*, as with *Dallas*, the audiences' attraction to these programs lies not in any pat identification of familiar generic formulas, but in their dynamic hybridity. If Ang details the adaptability of the *Dallas* audience to assimilate potentially contradictory aspects of the program, accepting the glamorous alongside the everyday, we ought to attend carefully to the formal design of these shows as well. Close textual analysis reveals how generic hybridity, which enables the spectatorial activity Ang discusses, is written into the programs themselves. This is not to downplay the importance or variability of viewer responses to the programs, but to make a case that the design of these shows has an active role in eliciting the flexible viewing strategies that Ang outlines.

A scene from the second season of *Laguna Beach* -- in which Talan (a male cast member) has arranged an elaborate surprise to ask Kristin to prom -- provides an example of a curious formal design that demands a critical spectatorship. Here, *Laguna*'s use of classical film style calls into question the program's status as reality television. Talan waits in Kristin's garage with rose petals, balloons, and a sign. When Kristin arrives and opens her garage door, cameras carry the action from three vantage points: a medium close up of Kristin, showing her reaction and Talan's line of sight; a medium close up of Talan, showing him in the garage and Krisitin's perspective; and an over the shoulder shot just behind Talan, giving us the most complete view from inside the garage to the driveway. [14] This scene must have been shot with multiple takes. Though *Laguna*'s producers claim that their use of multiple cameras precludes the temptation to ever re-stage an action, in this case, the third camera, placed inside the garage, would certainly have appeared in view of the second camera if this was shot in one take. In many instances, the manner in which *Laguna* is shot belies its initial promise that the show is "real," which implies that cameras shoot naturally occurring actions which happen unrehearsed and only once. [15] A lot of the extra-textual material surrounding *Laguna* discusses the use of coaching, shoot preparations, "blatantly expository dialogue," and other aspects of this show which could compromise its status as reality TV (Sheffield, 2005). [16] In the popular press, cast members discuss the crew's tendency to suggest conversational topics and schedule important meetings (such as rendezvous and break-ups) according to a shooting schedule: "I've never been handed a script," says Lauren Conrad. "But sometimes they'll suggest things, like, 'Why don't you talk about that fight?'" (High School Confidential, 2005). The freedom with which cast members discuss "fake" aspects of the show, added to the use of shooting set-ups which suggest multiple stagings, suggests that MTV might, indeed, have planned the program's liminal status as something which would attract and intrigue viewers. *Laguna* is not wholly fiction or non-fiction by design. Jeffrey Ruoff writes that:

In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, David Bordwell suggests that "the strongest illusion of reality comes from tight causal motivation." Just the opposite appears to be the case with non-fiction: if things fit together too neatly, viewers distrust the narration and question the realism. (Ruoff, 1998: 228)[17]

This description of "neatness" and "realism" as negatively correlated qualities aptly characterizes the textual ambivalence of *Laguna Beach*. [18] This program deviates from the confines of any single genre, most notably by flaunting -- through public discourse and its too-sleek-style -- its tenuous relationship to "reality." Judging by the enthusiastic, if also incredulous, responses in the popular press, *Laguna*'s fragile relationship to reality has only increased viewer interest in the program.

If *Laguna* clearly points to generic predecessors, it offers less help in weighting these particular identifications. This program can, variously, be discussed in terms of media (film versus television), programming genres (documentary, reality, or soap opera), and particular programs (the teen drama *Dawson's Creek*, or the public television series *An American Family*). In this way, *Laguna Beach* effectively finds itself at the crossroads of numerous contradictory impulses: part document, part drama; part live, part staged; part real, part fake. While work on this series or its spin-offs has yet to find a place in academic journals -- as Helen Piper notes, with year-or-more publishing lags, reality criticism is destined to always be a step behind the next big thing -- generic debates have been exhaustively hedged in the popular press (Piper, 2006).

As a matter of course, reviews of *Laguna Beach* situate the show in terms of other contemporary TV programming and within the broader evolution of TV genres. At worst, these efforts devolve in clunky neologism contests -- *Broadcasting & Cable* labels the program a "dramality" -- but this process of short-hand identification demonstrates how viewers sort out, and make sense of, identifiable generic traits alongside less familiar ones (Becker, 2005). One *New York Times* review identifies *Laguna* as a "fusion of unscripted entertainment and night-time soap opera," while another calls it a "peerlessly filmed and partly coached quasi-documentary" (Rochlin, 2005; Heffernan, 2005). A *Guardian* reviewer scoffs at the program as "A stupefying hybrid of reality, soap opera and hotel-room porn," while the *Rolling Stone* calls it a "carefully edited weekly quasi-documentary" (Berstein, 2004; Grigoriadis, 2005). The most common genres identified are "soap opera" and "quasi-documentary." Note how both reviews which see *Laguna* as documentary-like modify the term to indicate that this program *partially* occupies this generic territory.

But if *Laguna* is most suitably located at in-betweens, we can still identify two dominant points of identification for contemporary audiences. Two predecessors stand out as most influential and recognizable: reality TV, which I have already discussed in more detail, and Fox's teen-drama *The O.C.* Judging by the many similarities in content, and the predominance of comparisons in extra-textual material, the success of *The O.C.*, whose run started a year before *Laguna Beach*, was undoubtedly a dominant influence in the design and approval of the reality program.

Consider, for instance, the show's one-sentence "Reality TV Preview," in *People* magazine: "It's like *The O.C.* but for real. Cameras follow eight wealthy Orange County teens through their spats and hookups as they roam around the Southern California coast" (Bonawitz, 2004). Far from using *The O.C.* as a starting premise, this show (fully titled as *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County*) continually references its source. While popular press articles may inform us of overlapping aspects of these shows, this is hardly necessary, since *Laguna Beach*'s social actors continually do the same. [19] In the film's introductory voice-over, Lauren introduces the location as "a small town in the O.C.," assuming the audiences familiarity with this abbreviation. Admiring the construction of her new beach-house, Lauren's friend Steven remarks, "Dude, this thing is so gnarly. This reminds me of the houses on *The O.C.*" [20] *Laguna* characters even gather to watch *The O.C.* in episode six, while being filmed for the "audience-snagging facsimile" (Bernstein, 2004). In many respects, *Laguna* delivers upon the selling point of *O.C.* similarity. Like characters on this dramatic program, teenagers on *Laguna* attend parties, drive luxury cars, wear designer clothes, and hang out at the beach. [21] But, as Margy Rochlin observes, if the semantics -- the beach, sunsets, high-end consumer products, pretty people, southern California -- of both programs are remarkably similar, the syntax -- how these items are portrayed and the story structure they inhabit -- are different. [22] She notes that while *The O.C.* "contains story lines that address real-world teenager problems: the pain of divorce, binge drinking, date rape," "one of the most intriguing aspects of [*Laguna's*] popularity is that it is a drama writ very small" (Rochlin, 2005). Yet, it is important to add that if *The O.C.* gets the biggest story lines and dramatic problems, *Laguna* has more compelling and more noticeable cinematography. If *Laguna*'s style often aims to be more film-like than televisual, *The O.C.* frequently includes sequences that work with a documentary aesthetic, embedding the spectator within its fictional world with mobile cameras and constantly reframed action. *Laguna*, by contrast, uses telephoto lenses, tripods, and less camera movement. The style of *O.C.*, thus, is post-classical, while *Laguna* uses more traditional (or classical) film techniques. [23] These differences demonstrate the desire of each show to emulate the genre of the other -- the

feature uses techniques more characteristic of non-fiction programs, while the reality show works with multi-camera set-ups more typical of feature films. [24]

Given this latest manifestation of reality television, it is difficult to read this genre (as some scholars have) as reflective of "longing for a lost touch with reality, prompted by the undermining and problematizing of indexicality" (Fetveit, 2002: 132). Other theorists have offered a more complicated reading of audiences' understanding of the "reality" at stake in these programs. In an article that compliments my claim that *Laguna Beach* has generated audience interest through its ambiguous genre status, Annette Hill writes that reality TV audiences have long been skeptical of the "reality" they portray: "The general public does not believe in the reality of real-TV, which is thought to be exaggerated or even made up, and, in relation to this, the public expects real people to perform for the cameras" (Hill, 2002: 337). In this context, viewer interest hinges on active attempts to judge what is staged versus what is natural: "The focus on the degree of actuality, on real people's improvised performances in the program, leads to a particular viewing practice: audiences look for the moment of authenticity when real people are "really" themselves in an unreal environment" (Hill, 2002: 324). Even though Hill's notion of "performing the real," where the production process is recognized by the audience, suitably describes *Laguna Beach*, part of her description alludes to crucial differences between this program and *Big Brother*, the show which Hill uses as a case-in-point (Hill, 2002: 337). [25]

As opposed to *Laguna*, *Big Brother* makes frequent use of surveillance cameras, has a competitive format, and an obviously contrived set-up; characters relocate to a fully surveilled house in order to compete for prize money. John Corner writes:

*Big Brother* comprehensively and openly gives up on the kinds of "field naturalism" that have driven the documentary tradition into so many contradictions and conundrums for near on eighty years, most especially in its various modes of observational filming... *Big Brother* operates its claims to the real within a fully managed artificiality. (Corner, 2002: 256)

*Laguna* diverges from *Big Brother* in seemingly contradictory ways. On the one hand, it retains the "field naturalism" that *Big Brother* abandons by shooting its subjects in everyday life, however, *Laguna* also dispenses with the low-tech, hand-held and surveillance footage that *Brother* uses. In this way, *Laguna* is, at once, both more invested in the cinematic and the documentary than *Big Brother*. These impulses, though, need not be contradictory. McCarthy writes, "In calling their approach cinematic, the producers imply a desire to connect [*Laguna Beach*] to both the emotional depth of classical Hollywood melodrama and the sociological depth of observational cinema" (McCarthy, 2005). Yet, if *Laguna Beach* makes the theorization of the naïve reality TV spectator increasingly difficult, this does not mean, by definition, that this program abandons all stakes in the social world. As Helen Piper notes, while contemporary reality shows may bastardize a variety of cinematic techniques, this impurity should not be conflated with a demise in quality or disengagement:

[T]he new formats' increasing reliance on fictional techniques has almost invariably been a source of regret [for academics]. That is, the emphasis is largely on what they are no longer (factual, and for this we can also read "objective", serious, truth-telling, and so on), rather than what they have become (dramatic, or perhaps "playful", in both senses of the term). (Piper, 2004: 273-274)

Reliance on traditional genre markers, in this view, obscures our ability to recognize new configurations of "reality" as portrayed by newer, increasingly hybridized programs. *Laguna Beach* fits this description -- occupying an uncertain place between reality television, soap operas, and feature films; it flaunts the inability of reality TV to capture untransformed reality at the same time that other critics point to its revitalization of cinéma-vérité style. Where *Big Brother* served as an ideal text for reality television criticism interested in the baseness of the genre -- with shoddy production values, a profit-driven premise, and the glorification of surveillance technology, *Big Brother* was ready-made for criticism -- *Laguna Beach*, a more complex cultural and formal production, is less easy to denounce.

If *Big Brother* characterized the last wave of reality television, we may, in fact, already be in the next paradigm of reality programming. *Laguna Beach* has run for three seasons, and has been spun off into two new series: *The Hills* (now in its fourth season) and *Newport Harbor: The Real Orange County*. Numerous other reality programs with similar characteristics -- expensive equipment, multi-camera shoots, "real life" settings, and open-ended premises -- are cropping up across the dial. A&E's *Rollergirls* fits this description as do MTV's *8th and Ocean* and *The Hills* (Becker, 2005). Even pay-network It's-Not-TV-It's-HBO has entered the reality game with *Family Bonds* and *House Arrest*. *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, a mini-series that ran on Bravo in 2006, was clearly designed to capitalize not only on the successes of *The O.C.*, and by extension *Laguna Beach*, but also the ABC series *Desperate Housewives*. Network news is even showing signs of *Laguna*-influence. CNN's equivalent of *Wired* magazine, *Future Summit*, a roundtable technology discussion group, apes *Laguna* style with high-grade stock and multiple cameras used for closely framed action and shot-reaction-shots. The producer for *The Hills*, the spin-off series which follows Lauren, a *Laguna* cast member, as she leaves her hometown for L.A., commented that the staff plans to intensify the film-like qualities they began with the original series: "Like *Laguna* it's going to shoot in a cinematic style. But you'll notice subtle differences that are more classic cinematic devices for storytelling" (Kaplan, 2005: 87).

What all this points to -- not only *Laguna* and *The Hills* feature-like appearance, but its apparent influence on programs across many channels and genres -- is that style is no guarantor of a program's generic identity, at least not any singular or stable one. Given that the popularity of this program can largely be explained by the way it thwarted conventional expectations with such an incongruous pairing of style and genre, viewers ought to prepare themselves for more confounding programs, in which the look appears to clash with the content, until viewers realign their expectations once again.

## Notes

[1] "The style is so foreign to the genre that when strangers approach Kristin Cavallari, a *Laguna Beach* cast member, the conversation always starts the same way. "The No. 1 question is, 'Is it real or not?'" Ms. Cavallari said" (Rochlin, 2005).

[2] As one popular journalist noted "[W]ith the gazillion airings nearly every day of the week, you'd probably have to be a cave-dwelling TV phobe not to have gotten sucked into at least one episode of MTV's *Laguna Beach*, which by the way, is now the ninth highest-rated cable series on television" (Veitch, 2006).

[3] The age range for the young audience is specified as 12 to 34. The show's original time slot was Tuesday at 10:30pm ET.

[4] *Newsweek* reports the second season average as "nearly 4 million" as opposed to the *New York Times*, which reported the 3.1 million average "according to Nielsen Media Research." *The Chicago Daily Herald* reports that the second season drew more than 7 million viewers.

[5] For an explanation, with diagrams, of the "rule of thirds," see John Cantine, 2000: 57-58.

[6] The notion of cinematic richness signifies doubly with *Laguna Beach*, as the heightened style with which this program captures its social actors compliments their status as members of high-income families and communities. This produces a thematic in addition to a stylistic link to feature filmmaking as this form has traditionally depicted wealthy characters much more frequently than television, where the middle-class sitcom family is a staple of dramatic programming.

[7] *Laguna Beach*. Season One. Disc One. Chapter 2: 2:30-3:45.

[8] Sam Brenton and Reuben Cohen suggest that reality television is best defined as "various kinds of unscripted entertainment involving members of the public" (2003: 8).

[9] The *Rolling Stone* review could also be added to this list of popular pieces that suggest potential at the same moment that they pan the series: "What's the deal with *Laguna Beach*? Is it a reality show? Or is it all fake? Semi-quasi-fake? Nobody knows for sure. It's a magic place [...] where all the girls look like Mary-Kate and the boys look like Ashley [...] These well-lubed young things are middle-aged divorcees in high school drag, giggling for the camera while reciting soap opera dialogue no kid would ever say. But me, I believe every word. Like on Kristin's Valentine's Day date with Stephen, when she looks into his eyes and tells him 'Every time I see you, I feel like, like it's, uh, for, you know, whatever. You know what I'm trying to say?' I think we all do" (Sheffield, 2005). The *Boston Herald*'s Sarah Rodman skewers the show's focus on upper-class teens with the quip that this variant on the genre might be called "the out-of-touch-with-reality show" (Rodman, 2005). While Rodman intends to dissuade viewers from watching the program due to this contradictory quality, this put down offers a compelling point of attraction: a reality program that, by design, undoes the premise of most shows in this genre.

[10] Zachary Sachs writes "[W]here Visconti defined a tone for his epic drama with a compositional virtuosity peerless in '40s Italy, Hisham Abed makes his triumphant return to the TV format (though notably with an aspect ratio somewhere between the two) with carefully laid out perspectives that jump cut, finding through niche and crease the inner dimension of human expression. With both photographers, their control of atmospheric set shots allow them to bend the cinematographic mood into shades of desolation, either in the craggy spires of Aci Trezza's shore or the towering fronds of California palms" (Sachs, 2004).

[11] Here, too, *Laguna's* similarity to soaps can explain the imperative of some critics to downplay their interest in the show. The program's emotionalism, persistent focus on the interpersonal relationships, and its dominantly female audience, all bear resemblance to soaps. Ann Gray, who, like Ien Ang studies the soap audience by analyzing letters from devout viewers, finds that these women often downplay or dismiss their interest in these programs as frivolous or embarrassing. If soaps are acceptable guilty pleasures during the daytime, the films that families rent for collective viewing tend to be chosen by the husband,

and "mainly offer a masculine subject position which the women seem to take up through their male partners, who in turn give their approval to such texts" (Gray, 1997: 244).

[12] Helen Piper also discusses the role that framing discourses have on program reception. She writes that the classification of reality television programming could conceivably be positioned along two opposing points of argument—one which situates the emergences of this genre as a decline, and another which can just as plausibly (though this is far less explore) situate this genre as a paradigmatic shift analogous to developments in "serious" artistic forms. She writes, "Might it even be said that these programs represent a rupture with conventional television drama that is comparable to the rupture with classical doctrines of, say, Balzac and Stendhal, who for the first time, as Auerbach points out, took the random individual and his/her daily life and made it the subject of 'serious, problematic and even tragic representation'? Or does the proliferation of banality TV instead provide the next 'anti-aesthetic' stage that Jameson predicted would follow the realism / modernism / postmodernism sequence? Such a stage, he suggests, might herald a return to the 'denotative' or 'literal' language often associated with documentary 'from which the illusions of the aesthetic have been expunged, so that. . . knowledge cannot be exercised in some pure and unmediated form' (Piper, 2004: 285).

[13] This phrase is often used as short-hand for "the creation of genres" in Altman, 1999. In this text, the author makes a similar distinction about the importance of innovation in genres. He discusses how the most derivative genre texts, as opposed to popular belief, are often the least saleable films.

[14] This scene can be found in episode 12 of *Laguna Beach*'s second season.

[15] For McCarthy, the show's treatment of phone calls most clearly signals its affiliation with filmic narrative techniques over "fly-on-the-wall" documentary practices: "[W]e witness both ends of telephone conversations, a strategy that signals the show's commitment to narrative form and continuity over the pretense of spontaneous action" (McCarthey, 2004).

[16] *Rolling Stone* speculates: "The producers keep insisting the show is "unscripted," which is a bit suspicious[...] for every key phone call, there seems to be a camera crew ready in each room. I love how the cast talks in blatant expository dialogue, like when Stephen drives over to Dieter's house so he can ponder whether he should ask Kristin to be his valentine. 'I need a valentine,' he confides. Right. Teenage boys love to make plans for Valentine's Day and talk to each other about it. Or when Morgan greets Taylor at breakfast with the bombshell 'I drove home the other night and Kristin's car was right outside Talan's house.' The other night? How long did she sit on that juicy little nugget?" (Sheffield, 2005).

[17] Though there wasn't room for a proper discussion of this material in my paper, Ruoff's writing on *An American Family* (1973), potentially the first "reality" program to air in the United States, parallels my study of *Laguna Beach* in numerous ways. Like *Laguna*, *An American Family* hybridized multiple genres. Ruoff writes that this program, "bridges the stylistic conventions of independent documentary film and broadcast television, marrying the innovations of American cinéma-vérité to the narrative traditions of TV" (Ruoff, 1998: 286). Also like *Laguna*, this program confounded many critics due to its uncertain genre status: "While many reviewers saw the series as the high point of film and television realism, others compared it to fictional forms. Large segments of the audience contested the impression of reality that the series offered. On the one hand were critics who believed *An American Family*

was 'more candid than Allen Funt's wildest dreams' and that 'never was there greater realism on television except in the murders of Oswald and Robert Kennedy'. On the other hand, some reviewers claimed that it was 'a most artificial situation', 'a bastard union of several forms', and that 'the mirror is false'" (Ruoff, 1996: 272).

[18] Mark Andrejevic provides a larger context for situating the dilemma of is-it-acting or is-it-real debates that *Laguna Beach* raises for many newspaper critics. Andrejevic notes how the popularity of surveillance technologies-- both in reality television programs and personal gadgets-- "[cater] to a reflexive savviness about the staged character of our public personae and offers a default strategy for getting behind the façade" (Andrejevic, 2005).

[19] Characters in *Laguna* "shop for [their] M.A.C. cosmetics at South Coast Plaza megamall, the same mall where Marissa infamously shoplifted during *The O.C.*'s first season" (Williams, 2004).

[20] Both of these scenes are in the first episode of season one.

[21] In even more specific scenarios, the two programs imitate each other. Beyond generalized teenage activities like parties or time at the beach, both programs feature "fashion show fund raisers." In another episode, when *Laguna* characters decide to go to Mexico for Spring Break, Lauren's mother warns her not to end up like Marissa, who ran into trouble during *The O.C.*'s Spring-Break-in-Mexico episode. The teens in *Laguna Beach* also compulsively parrot the catch-line from the same *O.C.* episode: "What happens in Cabo stays in Cabo."

[22] For more on the semantic/syntactic distinction in genre studies, see Altman, 1999.

[23] For more on this distinction between classical and post-classical film style, see Elsaesser, 1998. This distinction can be easily observed by comparing the opening episodes of both programs. See *Laguna Beach*. Season One. Disc One. and *The O.C.* Season One. Disc One.

[24] Anna McCarthy reconciles *Laguna Beach*'s claim to be cinematic by looking at two traditions that fall under this term "melodrama" and "observational documentary:" "*Laguna Beach* turns to a tradition that established itself as the opposite of melodrama's cheesy formulae: the rigorous observational modes of independent documentary film. Is this still melodrama? Yes, in that it results in candid and acutely drawn portraits of emotional conflict. In calling their approach cinematic, the producers imply a desire to connect their work to both the emotional depth of classical Hollywood melodrama and the sociological depth of observational cinema" (McCarthy, 2004).

[25] Though *Big Brother* has attracted a majority of attention in recent reality television scholarship, the success of *Laguna Beach* points to the fact that this genre cannot be fully accounted for with summaries of a single popular format. The paradigm of reality programming that *Big Brother* embodies varies from *Laguna Beach* in important ways. See, for instance, Helen Piper's review of recent critical studies of reality television texts (Piper, 2006). Piper expresses a similar frustration about the lack of attention devoted to "docusoaps"-- the British term for cinema-verite style reality television-- as compared to *Big Brother* format shows: "My objection here is to the typical deployment of 'reality TV docusoaps' (like the 'so many talk shows' of a later discussion) simply as an undifferentiated,

negative standard-- a point below the waterline. At no point is a popular or landmark series (such as the BBC's *Driving School*) subjected to the depth of analysis, the critical skill or the eloquent description that is reserved for the works of Lindsay Anderson, Ken Loach, Penny Woolcock, Jane Treays, John Edginton, Errol Morris and Andy Warhol. As a strategy this is clearly unjust, and arguably, the comparisons are inappropriate, particularly when so little consideration is given to the differing contexts of production and reception for popular television programmes, 'authored' films and visual art installations, none of which are adequately referenced." For another article on the rote dismissal of verite-style reality television see "Lord of the fly-on-the-walls," 2002. This article covers the career of Paul Watson, "the man who arguably invented the docusoap in 1974 with his then astonishing series *The Family*."

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## Filmography

*8<sup>th</sup> and Ocean* (2006) MTV.

*An American Family* (1973) PBS.

*Big Brother* (2000-present) CBS.

*Cops* (1989-present) Fox.

*Dallas* (1978-1991) CBS.

*Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003) WB.

*Desperate Housewives* (2004-present) ABC.

*Family Bonds* (2004-2005) HBO.

*Future Summit* (2006-2007) CNN.

*The Hills* (2006-present) MTV.

*House Arrest* (2006) HBO.

*Laguna Beach: The Complete First Season* (2005) [DVD] Paramount/MTV.

*Laguna Beach: The Complete Second Season* (2006) [DVD] Paramount/MTV.

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*Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica* (2003-2005) MTV.

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*The Real World* (1992-present) MTV.

*Road Rules* (1995-present) MTV.

*Rollergirls* (2006) A&E.

*Survivor* (2000-present) CBS.