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*Jersey Shore: Ironic Viewing*

Susan J. Douglass

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### *Jersey Shore* Ironic Viewing

SUSAN J. DOUGLAS

Abstract: One of the most popular shows among young audiences in its day, *Jersey Shore* raises numerous questions about boundaries of taste and quality in both “real” behaviors and television. Susan Douglas argues that by looking closely at how the show addresses its audience with an assumed ironic distance, we can see how the series both transgresses and reinforces traditional social norms.

On December 8, 2009, MTV unveiled another “reality” TV show with a highly conventionalized format: select a group of male and female twentysomethings, put them in a house together, make sure the bar is fully stocked, mount cameras everywhere, see what happens, and edit for maximum drama. This was a formula that, since the premiere of *The Real World* in 1992, had served the network quite well. But while the formula remained roughly the same, the cast didn’t. Unlike *The Real World*, which over the years had come to traffic in juxtaposing different “types”—the naive country bumpkin, the urban African American woman, the homophobe, the player, the blond party girl—or *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*, which featured primarily blond So-Cal rich kids, *Jersey Shore* (MTV, 2009–2012) took quite a different tack. This time, MTV selected self-identified “Guidos” and “Guidettes,” lower-middle-class or working-class Italian Americans, the kind of young people rarely seen on TV, and threw them all together in a beach house in Seaside Heights, New Jersey.<sup>1</sup>

Amidst controversy about ethnic stereotyping (not to mention poor taste), the show quickly became a sensation and MTV’s top-rated series of all time. By the time of the show’s fourth season in the summer of 2011, which transported the cast to Florence, Italy, the trade press was labeling Thursday night television “Jerzday”; not only did the show beat its broadcast competition on Thursday night, but for weeks it was the most watched program on cable. Just as important, it was the top overall television show among that most coveted demographic, teens and young people between the ages of twelve and thirty-four.<sup>2</sup>

How are we to account for the success of this show? After all, by nearly any conventional standard, *Jersey Shore* is dreadful: it is structurally formulaic, the characters cartoonish, their behaviors crude, often anti-social, and repetitive. Each episode consists of recurring déclassé elements like excessive drinking often resulting in vomiting, grind dancing in bars, fist fights (among the women as well), multiple sexual encounters, and melodramatic conflicts over the most trivial issues, like who said what to whom in what tone of voice. Nonetheless, when a show, however banal, becomes a big hit, we need to think about what kinds of anxieties and aspirations it may be revealing and managing.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true when a popular cultural form is denounced by traditional arbiters of taste as trashy, inauthentic, and cynically manufactured. Now, there is every reason to believe that *Jersey Shore* was indeed all of these things, but it still must have been doing some kind of cultural and ideological work to be so successful.

One must always place media texts within their historical context to fully appreciate what contemporary issues they might be working through, standing back from the shows to examine how they address their audiences. Why are the cast members compelling? What behaviors, and disputes about behaviors, are the main focus of the show? How does it balance predictability and surprise? What norms does it reinforce and what taboos does it violate? And do the conflicts and behaviors tell us anything about the situation young people (and not just “Guidos” and “Guidettes”) find themselves in at this particular moment in history?

Before attempting to answer these questions, we need to review the appeal of “reality TV” programs. From an industry perspective, they are cheaper to produce than scripted programs as they don’t require elaborate sets and locations, or high-priced talent. And from *Super Nanny* to *The Real Housewives* (of wherever) to *The Real World*, reality TV shows use idiotic, arrogant, or self-destructive behaviors which we are urged to judge and which are designed to make us feel much better about ourselves: however dumb or selfish we were today, at least we weren’t like *that*. Indeed, unlike complicated economic or political debates, the dramas and conflicts on these shows hail us as absolute, knowledgeable authorities about right and wrong, what should and should not be tolerated. In particular, the “confessional” mode of address, when the various cast members talk to us directly, evokes what John Fiske has called “enunciative productivity”: completing the meaning of the show by exclaiming, along with other viewers, our scandalized sense of outrage, of who was right and who was wrong.<sup>4</sup> Another pleasure is guessing what’s “real,” what’s been staged, how much of the drama has been exaggerated, and the like: these shows wink at us, invite us to be puzzle-solvers, much the way celebrity gossip magazines do, as we try to assess what might be true and what is just made up.<sup>5</sup>

This is a key component to the pleasure of many reality TV shows: the cultivation of the ironic, knowing viewer. This deliberate, self-conscious industry

strategy became much more pervasive in the early twenty-first century, as a way to legitimate cheaply produced shows that showcased stupid or inappropriate behaviors. Irony offers us the following fantasy: the people on the screen may be rich, or spoiled, or beautiful, or allowed to party nonstop, but you, oh superior viewer, get to judge and mock them, and thus are above them. Many MTV shows elbow the viewer in the ribs, saying, “We know that you know that we know that you know that this is excessive and kitschy, that you’re too smart to read this straight and not laugh at it.”<sup>6</sup>

Because *Jersey Shore* is so self-consciously over the top, with its endless scenes of hot tub hooking-up, bar brawls, public drunkenness, relentless interpersonal conflict, and displays of total ignorance, the show demands that you simultaneously mock and distance yourself from the cast members, yet hunger to know what on earth they might do next. By the time they get to Florence, one of the world’s epicenters of high art and culture, they marvel that “God, everything is in another language!” and wonder if a building they are looking at is the Vatican, which knowledgeable viewers know is in Rome. MTV deliberately draws attention to such cluelessness; it offers this irony as a shield, as irony means that you can look like you are absolutely not seduced by the mass media, while then being seduced by the media, while wearing a knowing smirk. In addition, the show certainly cultivates the “third person effect,” or the conceit among viewers that they watch the show ironically and aren’t taken in by it while other, presumably more naïve viewers must take it utterly at face value. Thus viewers can feel superior not only to the cast members, but also to other viewers imagined to be less sophisticated than they.

So on to the show itself. The first season began with eight very carefully selected cast members, and the story lines and roles for the different characters settled in quickly. Sammi Giancola, a.k.a. “The Sweetheart,” and Ronnie Ortiz-Magro, an Italian American and Puerto Rican man from the Bronx, entered a turbulent on-again, off-again relationship spanning several seasons; Mike Sorrentino, better known as “The Situation,” was the player, constantly trying to score with women; he was joined in these efforts by Paul DelVecchio—Pauly D—from Johnston, Rhode Island, and Vinny Guadagnino, from Staten Island. Angelina Pivarick was the self-important Diva whom the others came to hate; Jennifer Farley, better known as JWoww, who reportedly—and obviously—got herself breast augmentation surgery for her twenty-first birthday, struggled to remain faithful to her boyfriend. Nicole Polizzi, or Snooki, a Chilean girl adopted by an Italian family in New York, became the group’s mascot, vulnerable and easily hurt, prone to excessive drinking, and getting in trouble in ways that compelled the others to rally around her in solidarity. Thus the show offered repeated narrative cycles of conflict, retribution, and reconciliation that comingled predictability and

surprise. While the male cast members were obviously chosen for their bulging biceps and ripped six packs, and the women for their enormous boobs and long hair, none of them is conventionally beautiful. Snooki, in particular, is the polar opposite of the tall, svelte blondes who dominate the fashion magazines and Victoria's Secret ads. Clearly this is one of the secrets of her appeal to so many young women: her absolute defiance of the prevailing corporate definitions of beauty and femininity that police us all.

Various signifiers mark these young people as quite apart from the wholesome, scrubbed kids of the Disney Channel or the upper-crust characters in *Gossip Girl*. These are not people we're supposed to emulate or envy. Their speech is working class, regional, and ethnic: they drop their final Gs, as in their references to "fist pumpin'," "hatin'," the ever-present "fuckin'," and in phrases like "she's disrespectin' you." Door is pronounced "doah," and downstairs "downstayeres." Various people say "ain't," and other incorrect locutions include "my girl is more cuter" than his, "if I was you," and, as Snooki says of JWovw and her boyfriend, "I don't get them two."

More importantly, they are emphatically and proudly defiant about their deviance from mainstream, conformist, middle-class mores about appearance, decorum, and ethnicity. The men wear "wife beaters," or T-shirts, and wouldn't be caught dead in a three-button, collared polo shirt with any kind of logo on it. They are anything but modest, especially about their self-proclaimed attractiveness to women, and the women are anything but demure. All characters are sexually aggressive to such a degree that it makes viewers wonder how much they were coached to inhabit these bragging and strutting personas.

Interestingly, we get an odd working-class version of the metrosexual, in which these insistently macho guys nonetheless indulge quite readily in various feminine practices like hair care and wearing jewelry to enhance their appearance and sexual capital, muting any threat to their manhood by taking command of such behaviors and folding them into a new, dominant masculinity.<sup>7</sup> The cast members emphasize the centrality of what they call "the Guido lifestyle." For Pauly D, whose hair stands straight up on his head like a rock-solid mesa (a.k.a., a "blow out"), this means "family, friends, tannin' and gel." He has "a [fuckin'] tannin' bed" in his place because "that's how serious I am about being a Guido and living up to that lifestyle." He's a DJ who wants the Guidettes to "cream their pants" when they hear his music. He doesn't try to steal guys' girlfriends away from them—it just happens. He tells us it takes about twenty-five minutes for him to do his hair, and it always "comes out perfect." The Situation boasts about how ripped his abs are from his diligent workout routine, as he defines a Guido as "good looking, smooth, well dressed, Italian" and claims that girls love Guidos. Ronnie, who's built like the Terminator, says he just takes his shirt off and girls come to him, as

FIGURE 16.1.  
A twenty-first century television superstar is born:  
Nicole “Snooki” Polizzi.



he notes metaphorically, “like a fly comes to shit.” In the first episode, the camera shows the Situation packing a ton of hair gel and cologne to take to the Jersey Shore, and we see him putting on lip gloss as well.

Just as the “Guidos” incorporate an obsession with grooming practices and appearances into their bicep-centered version of masculinity, so do the “Guidettes” adopt a tough-talking, bellicose sexuality into their spin on femininity. Thus one of the program’s fascinations is witnessing these hybrid gender forms that both violate mainstream conventions of acceptable gender performance and allow for multiple scenes in which the boundaries of these performances are completely violated. The first words we hear out of Snooki’s mouth are “I’m goin’ to Jersey Shore, bitch!” and she boasts to the camera that “you haven’t seen anything until you see me at the Jersey fuckin’ shore.” Sammi tells us, “I am the sweetest bitch you’ll ever meet, but do not fuck with me.” She defines a Guidette as someone who knows how to “club it up, takes really good care of themselves, has pretty hair . . . tanned skin, wears the hottest heels and knows how to own it and rock it.” JWoww proclaims, “If you don’t know me, then you hate me, and you wish you were me,” and adds that so many girls hate her because “whatever they are, they can’t compare to me.” In case only female viewers are intimidated by this, JWoww asserts that she is “like a praying mantis, after I have sex with a guy I will rip his head off.” As we see her sticking her tongue out provocatively, and then dancing in a bar with her gigantic breasts just barely covered, she brags that she sends men “on a roller coaster ride to hell.” Angelina, not to be outdone, emphasizes that she’s “all natural,” her boobs are hers, and asserts, “I’m hot.” Whatever the advances (or not) of the women’s movement, young women are not supposed to be this cocky and explicitly self-assured about their appearance and their ability to dominate men.

*Jersey Shore* takes the outrageous behaviors increasingly featured on *The Real World* and amps them up, combining the elements of melodrama, soap opera,

soft-core pornography, professional wrestling, and farce. With its recurrent scenes of simulated sex on the dance floor, close-ups of tongues locking and one guy kissing two girls simultaneously, various couples “hooking up” or “smushing” (having sex), fist fights in bars and violent physical cat fights among various of the female housemates, and incessant fighting and screaming over nothing, *Jersey Shore* is a smorgasbord of voyeuristic titillation. It is a fantasy of the unregulated life, where you barely have to work, have minimal responsibilities, go out every night, and rarely have to monitor your own behaviors and emotions. One appeal for viewers, then, is to escape into this carefree yet intensified world, while condemning it at the same time.

*Jersey Shore* also draws from two enduring tropes from celebrity gossip magazines that media scholar Joke Hermes has labeled the “extended family repertoire” and the “repertoire of melodrama.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, one of the cast members’ most repeated words is “drama,” suggesting they have been coached to frame as many interactions as possible as melodramatic. Melodrama involves an exaggerated emphasis on heartbreak and betrayal, as well as on sensation, sentimentality, and heightened emotionality, and here the show does not disappoint. Screaming matches over what kinds of women the guys bring into the house, disputes over who should do the dishes, and hair-pulling fist fights between the girls have all been staples of different episodes. As such, we get pleasure from witnessing the absurd over-dramatization of everyday tensions, which may make us feel better not only about our own, hopefully less fraught lives, but also about our more controlled behaviors and maturity.

Working, oddly, in tandem with such melodrama is the extended family repertoire, which ties audiences to a larger community beyond their own, makes those ties intimate by providing detailed private information about those on the screen, and constructs an imagined extended family in which, despite everything, solidarity prevails. In one of the most notorious scenes from the first season, the group is in a bar where men whom Vinny describes as “typical fraternity college guy losers” begin to take drinks the group has bought for themselves. As Snooki screams at them at increasingly higher decibels, one of the “losers” punches her in the face. (We soon learn that the assailant was no college guy, but a high school gym teacher.) As the girls comfort Snooki, the guys vow to beat the pulp out of her attacker, but the police arrest him before they can have their revenge. The event provides one of many opportunities throughout the series for the cast members to assert that they are family and that nothing is more important than that family. Thus the excessive behaviors—the drunkenness, the casual hook-ups, the fights—nonetheless provide a forum for reinforcing some relatively traditional values of community and kinship.

By examining which activities the camera foregrounds, what the biggest fights are about, which language is the most inflammatory, and what the cast members

comment on most frequently or passionately, it becomes clear that *Jersey Shore* is primarily about relationships and behavior, particularly the sexual behavior of young women. While the female housemates can easily be seen as promiscuous—Snooki, in the very first episode, strips down to her bra and a leopard thong in the hot tub and slithers up against the guys, and JWoww, with a boyfriend back home, nonetheless gets into bed with Pauly and admires his pierced penis—they condemn other young women from outside the house who behave similarly as “sluts,” “whore bags,” and “trashy skanks.” Vinny helps viewers see the difference. If it takes a couple of meetings with girls before they’ll hook up, then they aren’t whores, and he distinguishes between girls who will just strip off and get into the Jacuzzi at a first meeting versus those you have to “treat like girls, human beings.” So despite its libertine sensibility, the show reinforces the virgin-whore dichotomy and utterly justifies the objectification of some women more than others.

Because JWoww and Angelina have boyfriends back home, their storylines provide dramas about fidelity, cheating, and the missed sexual and romantic opportunities that remaining faithful forecloses. The show poses a central question: when you’re young and surrounded by opportunity for lots of sex with multiple partners, is it better to be promiscuous and unfettered, or have a partner you can trust, rely on, and be intimate with, but who limits your options? The show repeatedly wavers on this question, and while the female cast members dance like strippers in the bars they frequent, make out with other women, and hook up with men, these behaviors are meant to titillate, shock, and provoke scandalized outrage from viewers. Thus, like so much of contemporary popular culture, the show is simultaneously prudish and pornographic, and urges viewers to calibrate what is appropriate sexual behavior along this spectrum.

The ignorance and stupidity of the cast members are both a source of humor and means for flattering the audience. In the first season, Pauly D is so dumb he puts charcoal in a gas grill, with the expected disastrous results. In anticipation of going to Florence, Snooki opines that when she thinks of it, “I think of *Lady and the Tramp*, you know, just beautiful.” When they arrive, they note that the city is like the Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast* (which, of course, takes place in France); they expect people to lean out of their windows and start singing. For anyone with a modicum of cultural capital, it is impossible not to feel superior to these clueless narcissists whose main cultural references seem to come from cartoons.

As we stand back from a show addressed to young people at the height of the Great Recession, where connections and cultural capital matter more than ever in landing a job, where rampant acceleration pervades so many lines of work, and where class distinctions are becoming more acute, *Jersey Shore* is almost like a class and ethnic minstrel show, providing a place where young people can project

(and release) their anxieties about not having the proper decorum or work ethic to succeed in today's job market. In addition, with so many contradictory expectations around gender roles and sexuality, where young women in particular are expected to look "hot" yet damned if they're "sluts," and constantly pitted against each other over appearance and sexual appeal, *Jersey Shore* stages parodies of female sexuality and aggression run amok. It simultaneously blasts and reinforces the sexual constraints imposed on women, a contradiction many young women confront every day.

It is these excesses that provide voyeuristic pleasures in watching irresponsible, even dangerous behaviors with no risk to ourselves. We are transported into a realm where we can try on identities unthinkable in our own lives and then vicariously test out our own ethical and sexual limits. The show is a fantasy about escaping from middle-class conformist strictures that govern success at work and acceptable codes of interpersonal behavior. It simultaneously reinforces exaggerated gender roles—muscled men and buxom women—while offering deviations—men who spend a half an hour on their hair, women who relish a good fist fight—in a way that reassures us about our own gender performances, however circumscribed they might be. In analyzing such "bad" television, paying attention to what behaviors are made salient, which gender norms are reinforced and violated, how class is performed, and how difference and solidarity are staged, can help us understand how a show as obviously and deliberately trashy as *Jersey Shore* can nonetheless be doing significant cultural and ideological work.

#### NOTES

1. I would like to thank Chaz Cox for his help with the research for this essay.
2. Robert Seidman, "The MTV 'Jerzday' Phenomenon Continues as 'Jersey Shore' Leads All Thursday Night Television," *TV by the Numbers*, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2011/08/19/the-mtv-jerzday-phenomenon>.
3. Frederic Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* (Winter 1979), 130–48.
4. John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in Lisa A. Lewis, ed., *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 37–38.
5. Joke Hermes, "Reading Gossip Magazines: The Imagined Communities of 'Gossip' and 'Camp,'" in P. David Marshall, ed., *The Celebrity Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 295.
6. This discussion draws from my book *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010), 14–15.
7. See Stan Denski and David Sholle, "Metal Men and Glamour Boys: Gender Performance

in Heavy Metal,” for an analysis of the incorporation of female traits into masculine performance in Steve Craig, ed., *Men, Masculinity and the Mass Media* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1999), 41-60.

8. Hermes, 297-99.

FURTHER READING

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