

HOTEL REDUX

Matt Steinglass

Forty years ago, or even five, it would have been difficult to imagine that the critics would ever find themselves lamenting the television viewing public's fondness for reality programming. Since the dawn of the televisual age in the 1950s, "reality" has been synonymous with seriousness, integrity, and the proposition that the media should serve the public good. "Reality" was 60 Minutes, the Maysels brothers, cinema vérité – high culture. It was always the rest of TV that was the problem: the sitcoms, the soap operas, the commercials, the cartoons. Above all, the cartoons.

Over the last decade, however, something in the nature of an inversion has taken place. The '90s began with what looked like a renaissance of enthusiasm for reality-based media: CNN's Gulf War I coverage, Court TV, MTV's "The Real World". Ben Stiller and Winona Ryder brought us the ambiguous notion that reality "bites" – it was dismal, but it also had bite, cachet, street credit. By the mid-'90s, practically everyone was being admonished to "keep it real". But it soon became clear that keeping it real was not so simple. The realities that were biting us were highly manipulated, and manipulative, ones. What version of her private life did Madonna choose to show us, in "Truth or Dare"? How much of Gulf War I did we really get to see?

As the '90s drew on, advances in digital imagery encouraged a pervasive suspicion of anything presented as "real" (see "The Matrix", "The Truman Show"). And at the turn of the millennium, a new breed of reality programming made its debut: the appropriately-named "Big Brother" model, which short-circuits the question of whether the "reality" we are shown is being manipulated, by creating a ludicrously artificial reality in which we already know that everything is being manipulated. The only reality in a show like "Joe Millionaire" is the reality of a TV program that is really being shot. Meanwhile, throughout the '90s, cartoons were tracing the inverse trajectory: the less authentic reality became, the more authentic cartoons did. Lo-tech cel animation and claymation, with their flat, kooky contours and their lack of any pretense of verisimilitude, began to seem more honest than anything live action could show us. From Nick Parks's "□", with its claymation based on documentary interviews, to "South Park", with its bargain-basement cutout animation, cartoons acquired the grittily authentic aura which reality TV had lost.

The BBC "docusoaps" of the mid- to late-90s fall somewhere in the middle of this evolution, and this is where Otto Berchem's "Hotel Redux" comes in. "Hotel" and "Airport" preserved a smidgen of highbrow cachet by embracing the vaguely socialist goal of teaching the viewing public something about a particular industry or institution, rather like the films about collective dairy farms which used to clog Soviet airwaves. (If only the Russians had let the viewing public vote to purge a few kolkhozniks after each week's episode! With a show like that, they could have won the Cold War.) But the docusoaps souped things up by focusing on a few key characters and critical events, so that an entertaining narrative emerged. This, of course, was where the show's directors had to intervene, teasing out the story's more farcical elements, exaggerating camera-friendly conflicts, flattening characters into stock types.

Berchem's "Hotel Redux" seeks to clarify the artificiality of such interventions by turning a pseudo-documentary into a cartoon. Even in the original "Hotel", Eileen was virtually a cartoon character – the managerial bitch, ambitious, driven, and ruthless in her dedication to the empty functional imperatives of her job. Berchem, who worked as a designer on network television cartoons in the early '90s, turns Eileen into a standard children's-television cartoon character. By flattening her this extra degree, and adding a few lines of dialogue from a hypothetical cameraman, plus the animator's stock-in-trade – absurdist background sight gags – Berchem is trying to direct the viewer's attention towards the process by which a show like "Hotel" produces a particular kind of reality.

Satire of the kind Berchem attempts here is much easier to carry off when it cuts against the grain of the original, rather than simply exaggerating it. It's easy to spoof a tragedy; it's much harder to spoof a farce, and the original "Hotel", though couched as documentary, was essentially farce. But even at the points where "Hotel Redux" doesn't entirely succeed as spoof, it foregrounds a set of fascinating questions.

Nowhere is this more so than in the episode of the Maritime Theme Dinner. A line spoken (or rather cussed) in this episode by Brian, the Hotel Adelphi's Operations Manager – "Just cook, will yer" – became a national byword in Britain, one of those odd linguistic phenoms which are suddenly everywhere for a few months. It is difficult for an American to grasp what the English found so captivating in this line, but one imagines that it has something to do with Brian's hilariously northern pronunciation of the word "cook" (rhymes with "spook"), and with the classical Fawlty Towers kitchen conflict during which it is uttered. In other words, Brian manages for the space of this line to perfectly embody a partially pre-existing stereotype of the Oafish Liverpudlian.

What's telling here is that Brian's most successful moment, the moment which public memory chose to enshrine, was the moment at which he embodied a stereotype – the moment at which he became a cartoon of himself. This was the moment at which Brian managed, as a voguer might have put it a decade ago, "to be real". He was at his realest when he was most cartoonish. And this against the background of a "theme dinner" in which the hotel staff dressed up in 18th-century sailors' uniforms, trying to fit themselves into the most hackneyed possible clichés of Liverpudlian identity. Berchem's version of the Maritime Theme Dinner episode lays this dynamic starkly out: with his sinking ships in the dining room, Berchem presents us with a cartoon version of a reality show in which the real participants were already attempting to transform themselves into cartoons.

Forty years ago, another mock documentary starring a different set of Liverpudlians helped launch a media phenomenon the likes of which the world had never seen before. "A Hard Day's Night", with its "real" footage of screaming girls and its then-fresh cinema vérité stylistic touches, forged a new and powerful mediatic trope: the rock group, a public minstrel show incorporating all the dramatic punch of the commedia dell'arte, yet purporting to inhabit the space defined by the print and broadcast media as "reality". Just five years later, the running musical comedy known as the Beatles had been hyped and flattened to the point of cartoon, and "Yellow Submarine" features many of the same strengths and weaknesses as "Hotel Redux". Where these cartoons are unsatisfying, it may be because they are unsettling: they upset our effort to imagine certain dramatis personae as "real" – not least, ourselves.

We are anxious, these days, about who we really are. We are not sure that it is possible to really be anyone. Increasingly, we see ourselves not as integrated personalities, but as collections of role-playing gestures, more or less effectively performed. (Eileen, after berating a junior employee, turns to the camera: "Did I do that well?" I'm not a bitch, but I play one on TV.) We inhabit a cultural space of pervasive reruns, revivals and spoofs, where all identity seems to quickly collapse into cartoonish cliché. Some of us respond by trying to eschew identity entirely, fleeing towards a minimalist and deadpan khaki-wearing conformity. Others of us go the opposite way, dressing up in our free time as characters from Japanese manga. Cartoon realities, reality cartoons: this is the backdrop to Otto Berchem's "Hotel Redux".

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