"The Political" in Reality Television: A Case Study of Academy Fantasia Fan Phenomena

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Abstract

This article aims to define the concept of "the political" in Thai media through relationships between reality television and its fans using Jean Baudrillard's ideas namely political economy of the sign, the four logics of consumption, simulation, hyperreality, and silent majority. The study shows that reality show "Academy Fantasia" can create simulation through the presentation of signs that are coherent with social script of its audience. Together with multi-channel, real-time participation, audience and fans of this show experience the simulation by themselves. The existence of fans is both the concretization of simulation itself, as well as the rejection of Baudrillard's notion that audience would become a mere silent majority when simulation works perfectly. This fan phenomenon is therefore proof of operation of power in the realm of media where everything seems to be solely about entertainment, and not politics.

Keywords: consumption, simulation, hyperreality, silent majority, fan phenomena

Introduction

"When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become the real things"

Guy Debord

During the past decade, reality television programs have become very popular among viewers around the world, judging from numbers of both reality-based programs and the viewers they attract[2]. The reality-based television genre includes, among others, documentary-style programs, reality game shows, makeover shows, talk shows, dating experiments, and hidden-camera shows. The popularity of this new style of entertainment together with the wide variety of reality-based programs available has caught the attention of scholars in the fields of television studies and mass communication. Bignell (2004: 184) states

² For example, in 2000 the UK's Big Brother drew over 10 million viewers, which brought the commercial rate up to GBP 40,000 for 30 seconds. In 2006, over 30.6 million people watched American Idol, roughly 4 million more than the previous year, while the final episode attracted over 36 million people. This makes American Idol the third most watched program after the Super Bowl and the Academy Awards.

that such programs are based on the unscripted actions of ordinary people, while Hartley (2002: 196-197) argues that it is problematic to clearly define such shows. This leads to the use of terms such as "factual television" and "popular factual entertainment" to reflect the characteristics of reality entertainment. Hill (2005: 55-56) compiles the views of media professionals, academics and TV audiences regarding the categories of reality-based programs, such as infotainment, docu-soaps and reality game shows. She asserts that this type of entertainment is built upon a variety of television genres, such as lifestyle and documentary, thus making reality television a hybrid genre. She also points out the ability of reality television programs to show their audience what happens before their own eyes. The audience then can analyze elements of the show and judge its realness accordingly.

As for realness in reality shows, the fact that such shows claim to present their audience with reality so that they can see what happens before their own eyes has captured the attention of academics in the fields of television and mass media alike. Lunt (2004) describes how reality shows and factual television are a combination of performance and spontaneity: this leads one to question whether these programs represent the whole truth or merely the use of live materials. Hartly (2008: 164-167) points out the very distinct characteristics of reality television, adding that its 'liveness' allows television to narrate in the present tense, thus making it appealing to the audience. Moreover, the feeling that no one, not even the cast or crew, actually knows what is going to happen next is tangible in the domestic environment of the audience's homes, where they are likely to be in the accompany of other family members. Therefore, television can assert its influence over the audience when they are likely to be more vulnerable to the illusion. He also draws into the scene what Benedict Anderson refers to as the "imagined community", in which an audience in totally different locations can watch the same television show simultaneously. This can create the same effect as watching international sports competitions or national events that symbolically connect citizens across a certain country.

While Lunt (2004) and Hartly (2008) attempt to bring out the key characteristics of reality-based entertainment, academics such as Hill (2005) and Huff (2006) express different points of view. Hill (2005) further suggests that there is a "sliding scale of factuality" in reality shows where facts with interesting elements are added to make the show more appealing to the whole audience range. According to Hill, therefore, the success of such shows is solely dependent on the sense that they have been carefully and skillfully crafted for the sake of their audience and are not merely copycats of already well-established television formats.

Apart from the realness and the 'liveness' of reality television, another characteristic that makes reality-based programs different from their antecedents is that they allow for audience participation in real-time experience. With the help of digital broadcasting technology, the audience is now able to participate in their favorite show while watching it. The array of participation channels includes voting, and texting as well as chatting live on the internet. For the first time in the history of television, the audience is able to express its own opinions spontaneously. In many cases their comments have been taken up by the producers and thus have pushed television show critiques onto a whole new level of play. Andrejevic (2004) believes that by participating in reality shows, the audience has become part of the crew, making everything even more "real." He cites the example of America's favorite *televisionwithoutpity* website where fans can express their opinions about their favorite shows. Some visitors to this website actually express analytical points of view about plot development as well as technical

details that would be useful to the show producers. These effects lead to the transformation of what Andrejevic calls "sites of ostensibly passive consumption" into the "place of media power." Real-time audience participation is the key element to the shrinking distance between the show and its audience and the justification of its realness. To better understand "politics" in reality television, it is helpful to take a look at the case of Academy Fantasia in Thailand.

Why Academy Fantasia?

Academy Fantasia (AF) is a reality singing competition, with contestants from all around the country being chosen to compete in a 3-month-long weekly singing contest judged solely by the number of SMS[3] votes from the audience. This Mexico-originated reality show has become a big hit among the Thai audience since its premier in 2004, with over twenty million votes in Season 4. What makes this show more popular and different from others of the same kind is that it allows the audience to watch the contestants, known as dream chasers, live, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, throughout the broadcasting period. This way, not only does the audience get to see the contestants performing live on stage every Saturday night, they can also watch the dream chasers eat, sleep, practice, gossip, do the dishes, etc. Real-time participation is arguably the main reason for its popularity. Apart from watching around the clock using television, mobile phone or the computer via hi-speed internet, the fans can chat online via a special website, send SMS and MMS[4] to express their feelings during the specific period of time, and even listen to the show on public radio.

On top of all this, True Corporation, the show's producer and license owner, is one of Thailand's leading telecommunication companies, with a variety of mass communication channels: cable television, internet, telephones, and mobile phones. Part of this conglomerate is a retail business, including the rapidly growing convenient store chain, *7-Eleven*, and the nation's largest agricultural business group, *Charoen Pokphand (CP)*. Not only that, as the winner gets attractive prizes such as an elegant condominium, a car and a large sum of money, being part of this show ensures that they have a career in Thai media as True Corporation launched True Fantasia to take care of these dream chasers after each season ends.

As the seasons have passed, AF has become ever more popular among the Thai audience. It claims to have fans from different age groups, genders, educational and economic backgrounds. Groups of serious AF fans can be seen everywhere the dream chasers go. Some of these fans claim to have spent thousands of baht on weekly votes; some claim to have watched the show more than twenty hours a day; others know everything about their favorite dream chasers; and real addicts even spend most of their time on activities related to AF and the dream chasers. This fan phenomenon, coupled with the specific elements of reality television described above, can be understood in terms of what Jean Baudrillard describes as simulation and hyper-reality through the development of the four logics of consumption in capitalist society of our time.

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[3] SMS-Short Message Service

[4] MMS-Multimedia Message Service

Theoretical Development

Baudrillard developed the four logics of consumption through the break with Marxism, with semiological influence of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes. Marx (1990) asserts that for the Marxist labor theory of value, exchanges in capitalist production are classified as use value and exchange value. Under the social and economic conditions of Marx's time, emphasis was put on the utility, or use value, because the means of production were not modern. It was then essential to produce enough goods to satisfy the needs of the laborers. However, by Baudrillard's time, the meaning of need had shifted: overproduction rather than scarcity was the issue of concern.

Baudrillard (1981) then came up with the idea that during his age, consumers were not only driven to consume the utility of goods and services, but the socially constructed meanings of them as well. He asserted that human consumption can be understood via interconnected sets of logic of exchange. First, the functional logic of use value is the relationship between a person and the utility of what they consume: for example, a man driving a car as a means of commuting. Second, the economic logic of exchange value is the relationship between the human exchange of goods and services based on their utility. Third, the logic of symbolic exchange refers to human relations in which goods and services are not only based on their utility but also the symbolic meaning conferred upon them. Fourth, the differential logic of sign value refers to the relationship between certain goods and services, the utility of which is turned into "sign" systematically and hierarchically measured against each other to make a social difference to the person who consumes them. These four logics of consumption explain how consumers can endlessly consume not only utility but the meanings of goods and services. Thus, capitalism has sustained itself until the present day.

After thoroughly exploring the logics of consumption, Baudrillard moves on to critically discuss the role of the media in capitalist society. He believes that the media consists of one-way communication. The relationship between the media and its audience is always ironic, as the media brings social relations to its audience but at the same time rejects social relations itself. Whatever forms and images are broadcasted by the media, they are never meant to be realized as part of social relations but as what he called *simulation*.

Simulation is a concept designed to explain relationships between the semiological concept of sign and its reference. Baudrillard (1993) gives a full account of the three orders of these relationships, namely counterfeit, production and simulation. Counterfeit refers to the imitation of nature from the Renaissance until the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Examples include the use of stucco in chapels, palaces and theatres to imitate anything from curtains to the human body. However, Baudrillard does not stop here. He postulates that such imitation also signified the centralization of state power to control the lives of its citizens as well.[5] The second order of simulation, production, refers to the ability to reproduce a series of identical objects brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The goods were then perfectly equivalent to one another, rendering the concern of reference in the first order of simulation unnecessary. However, industrial production did not remain at the centre of his ideas for long: as media technology

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[5]   Baudrillard cited the examples of the Jesuits' mechanisms to control its citizens through systematic youth education and bureaucracy.

leapt forward, especially television, all relationships between the audience, reality and the media then become centered on what Baudrillard calls "models". This is the third level of simulation, in which models take over their reference and diffuse themselves into society through the media to affirm their realness by making themselves the reference for other sets of reality. The social relationships of the people became one form of "hyper-reality" in which models perfect their very own reference. Baudrillard takes Disneyland as an example of this stage, where the imaginative concretization of fairy tales is meant to cover up the banal lives of people in the City of Angels.

His interest in the role of the media in capitalist society has transformed his analysis to one in which people actually consume the reality posted by the media. Baudrillard (2001) states that people no longer survive on conventional consumption, but on news, entertainment and constantly updated information. With hyper-reality, social relations are unnecessary as people in any society can be easily replaced by models that assert their realness through the disappearance of the real relationships between members of society. Baudrillard (2007) explains that as society turns into one of hyper-reality, the power of people to express themselves no longer exists. The audiences are merely turned into "the mass", the faceless and silent crowd trying very hard to keep up with the constantly updated flux of information. The silent majority is thus the black hole that feeds on society, waiting for its occasional presentation as statistics shown in the media. Whether this is true for every circumstance is the substance under consideration in this paper.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research aims to study power relations between the audience and the show Academy Fantasia Season 4 using Baudrillard's concepts of consumption, simulation and hyper-reality. The framework of this research is drawn from two different levels of analysis: textual and audience. The textual analysis is the study of how the show can construct what it claims to be "reality", whilst the audience analysis is the study of how the audience is transformed into serious fans. Emphasis is given to a wide variety of fan activities, such as the hours spent watching the show, money spent on SMS voting, concert attendance, etc.

The research methods of this study are in-depth interviews and audience research together with documentary research. This research employs the purposive sampling technique in order to acquire audience with direct and mediated experiences. A total of thirty fans were divided into three groups according to levels of interaction with the show: four audience members with only mediated experience; twelve with both mediated and direct experiences; and fourteen with direct contact with the dream chasers on a regular basis. The in-depth interviews aimed to understand the reasons behind the fans' decisions and behavior in relation to the show, especially financially and in terms of time spent with AF-related goods and services. The audience research method allowed the researcher to engage with the fans in order to understand the specific context of fan activities. These combined methods facilitated better understanding of the fan phenomenon than any one single technique.

Applying Baudrillard's Ideas to the Case of Academy Fantasia Fandom

This section tries to demonstrate that the Academy Fantasia fan phenomenon is a good example of how Baudrillard's concept of simulation transforms the status of the show's audience from a mere silent majority into active participants. To better explain this transformation, it is appropriate to apply the four logics of consumption, together with concrete examples of each set of logics.

First, the functional logic of use value can be analyzed through the audience's utility consumption of the show. Some may see the show as a form of entertainment, just like a televised soap opera, that is always available at a touch of the remote control. Some are drawn into the joy of the weekly concert. In any case, it is obvious that the audience consumes the show's utility as the first logic of Baudrillard's theory. Secondly, the economic logic of exchange value can be observed when members of the audience send short messages (SMS) via their mobile phones to vote for the contestants. As a ground rule, each SMS counts as one vote and the contestant who gets the most votes wins the weekly challenge. In Academy Fantasia Season 4 over 20 million votes were casted over the whole period of the show. The audience can also send an SMS to express their opinion or chat with other audience members using the bottom of the TV screen as a chat board. Another obvious example is money spent on weekly concert tickets and cheer gadgets such as signs, team t-shirts and themed accessories.

Thirdly, the differential logic of sign value can be understood through different sets of signs surrounding this particular show. The most visible element is the Thai name of this show which translates into English as "dream chasing mission." This signals the dream chasers' long, challenging journey towards stardom. The show brings its audience into the dream chasing experience at every single step of the way, from the initial country-wide selection rounds to the all-day, all-night finals. The winner is someone who has both ability and patience, and who receives more votes than others. With this show, the audience is no longer passive because they are the only ones who can bring each contestant one step closer to victory. Another example is the Academy, a club-house turned into a residential entertainment summer school where all the dream chasers spend their time training for the weekly shows. The Academy, therefore, has to make the dream chasers and the audiences feel as comfortable as if they were in their own private home, with a spacious living room, stylish dining area and cozy bedrooms. On the other hand, this house is a professional training Academy where contestants strive to improve their singing, dancing and acting skills. Thus the Academy also includes classrooms fitted with the world-class equipment needed for each training session. The audience now can witness the contestants' dream-chasing journey to become the next champion of the season.

The most interesting feature of this show is that the daily routine of the dream chasers is structured to reflect the lives of the middle class: waking up early in the morning, attending classes and working hard until late in the evening. Not only does the audience spend their day in the same time-spans as the contestants, they can also understand what these teenagers are going through. This is one of the reasons which influence the audience to cast their votes.

Lastly, the logic of symbolic exchange can be concretized by the act of gift giving, one of the most important activities for serious fans. These gifts, such as dolls, clothing, accessories, even jewelry, must be carefully selected to match the characteristics as well as color code of each dream chaser. The value recognition of the gifts is therefore based on how carefully the gift-giver can match the gift with the distinct personality of the recipient. On many occasions fans try to win the hearts of the dream chasers by buying them expensive items. However, this is not as important as the effort invested in them. Hand-made gifts, diary books and photo frames adorned with pictures of the dream chasers as well as the fans are among the most popular choices. The act of gift-giving clarifies what Baudrillard labels as "symbolic exchange" in which gifts are given to the recipient on the basis of "meaning" rather than the use value of the item. In return, the dream chasers do their best in every performance and also take some time to greet their fans when their schedule permits. The meaningful relationship between the stars and their fans is, arguably, the key to unlock this show's success as reality television in Thai society.

The example of Baudrillard's four logics of consumption in the reality show is the origins of how his concept of simulation transforms the status of the show's audiences from a mere silent majority into active participants by entering into the world of "hyper-reality." This can be explained through the viewpoints of the show's production team, the audience's participation and the serious fans.

For the producers, it is essential to create the show's environment as though the teenagers are living in the comfort of a modern home, fully equipped with kitchen, dining area, bedrooms and bathrooms, even though the Academy is actually a virtually modified club-house. Moreover, these young adults are ordinary teens, as opposed to famous stars, living under real-time television broadcasting. Not only does this give the audience the opportunity to get a clear view of the dream chasers all day and all night, it also creates the sense of family ties between those within the confined screen and those outside. This is partly because the daily routine of the dream chasers is structured to resemble the daily lives of the majority of the audience: waking up early, having breakfast, taking different classes and practicing, having lunch, taking more classes, having dinner, doing more training and going to bed. This allows the audience and the dream chasers to spend their lives in the same time cycles. In a way, this show makes itself become a part of the audience's lives. The 3-month run of AF is long enough to make the audience feel as if they are watching the day to day activities of their "relatives" in the comfort of their very own homes. All these elements allow for Baudrillard's simulation to work, as the line between the show and the real world seems to virtually disappear.

Looking at AF from the aspect of audience participation, SMS voting, real-time chatting on the television screen and communicating via websites are what make the audience shift from being on the passive, receiving end to being active and able to express their opinions at all times. Moreover, the winner is judged by the number of votes from the audience, which makes them the sole decision-makers with absolute power to send someone home after the weekly concert or, conversely, to give them the chance of their lifetime to become a shining star. All of these are easily possible, thanks to the convergence marketing of True Corporation.

Apart from watching the show on television, fans can also obtain tickets to directly experience the weekly concerts. This is what makes AF very different from Baudrillard's case of the Gulf War.[6] While AF fans can attend the weekly concerts every Saturday night, it is virtually impossible for ordinary citizens to take a trip to the Persian Gulf to experience for themselves the horrific reality of war. Different channels of participation, together with the ability to directly experience AF concerts, make the whole AF experience that of the hyper-real, one in which the audience has become part of the dream chasers' marvelous journey to become the next superstar.

Last but not least, let us consider the practice of simulation from the aspect of the serious fans. One of the most commonly visible entities of Academy Fantasia are the groups of serious fans. Their activities include excessive voting, continued watching of the show, the purchase of all goods and services related to AF regardless of the price and fan group activities. Many serious AF fans have formed themselves into various social groups according to which dream chaser they support. Social fan groups have created their own unique identities, through, for example, group names, costumes and accessories, and cheer items including sign boards with light bulbs of different shapes and sizes. These items must perfectly match the color code of the supported dream chaser. Groups with greater financial support certainly have more lavish cheer items and are therefore more highly visible both from the stage and on the television screen. There is even competition among groups of fans, although they share the same goal of supporting their favorites. These are all clear examples of how AF fans have crossed the border from the real into the realm of the hyper-real.

Conclusion: "Politics" in Thai Media

The Academy Fantasia fan phenomenon is a concrete example of how the media can assert influence over its audience, especially when the show is available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for a period of three months. Various elements of the show have been strategically structured to create what Baudrillard calls "simulation", where social relations are replaced by models crafted by the media. The consumption patterns of AF fans can be clearly defined through the four logics of consumption, the starting point of Baudrillard's theoretical journey to understand contemporary consumer society in the age of capitalism.

The most interesting aspect of the AF fan phenomenon is the harmony between the dream chasers living in the Academy and the audience watching the show in the comfort of their own private homes. Together with various channels of real-time participation, it is fair to say that this show has the power to manipulate its audience to cast more votes than any other shows of the same genre, rendering it the most successful one. This is another example of how Baudrillard's simulation can be concretized in a contemporary capitalist society.

Whilst not only applying Baudrillard's theories to reality television for the first time, this research also shows that fans are not merely a faceless, silent mass or black hole, but actually an active

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6   Baudrillard (1995) asserts that the Gulf War can only be observed through CNN news broadcasts backed by the United States, one of the
     leaders at war. Therefore, CNN's simulation can control the essence of war shown to viewers around the world as if it is the whole truth.

and sociable group of people who share the same interests and support for their favorites. This major challenge to Baudrillard's thought is obviously true for the case of AF fans as they can actually take action, both individually and in groups, to cast their votes, be seen on television and give support to the dream chasers during and after the show. Not only can they keep up with the constant influx of information, they make use of it as well. They also master the use of media to enhance their group activities by putting themselves on the screen and being seen on national television on various occasions. These fans are, therefore, a major contribution to the success of this particular genre of television entertainment.

At the ontological level, real-time participation is ontology of the real in which the audience and fans can directly experience AF simulation for themselves. The AF fan phenomenon is therefore proof of the operation of power in the realm of the media, where everything seems to be solely dedicated to entertainment, and not politics.

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