



Utrecht University

UCU
university college utrecht

B.A. Thesis



Deborah, Tim and Cherish Too

Temptation Island 2018 and the enticement of hyperreality

Lotte Schuengel

5978858

Supervisor

Spring/Summer 2019

Dr. Simon Cook
Department of Humanities
Utrecht University

Abstract

This thesis investigates how *Temptation Island* 2018 participant Tim Wauters became the media phenomenon ‘Timation’: the loyal boyfriend who traded his upcoming marriage with Deborah for a short-lived, open affair with seducer Cherish. This is done through a multimodal discourse analysis of the show’s complete tenth season using the framework of Baudrillard’s theory on simulations and hyperreality, and placed within critical literature on reality TV and the immediacy of unequal power relations.

The analysis points out that the show generates its reality through a feedback-loop and becomes a representation without origin. As a consequence, a new moral order informed by only the information the island provides overwrites the participants’ understanding of good and evil and legitimises deceit on the seducer’s side. Ultimately, individuals on the island are transformed by this mechanism. But the premise of the ‘ultimate relationship test,’ which has the privileged ability to reveal one’s true self, makes the island-reality seem realer than real and disguises this transformation as revelation.

While other participants perceive ‘Timation’ as the underlying truth of Tim, it is in fact the product of a hybrid media-reality formed once Tim has embraced the simulation as realer than real, which eliminates the possibility that Cherish’s feelings are acted. For its lack of consequence and its offer of freedom in exchange for privacy, the hyperreality of *Temptation Island* itself is as enticing as the seducers on it.

Table of contents

Introduction	5
Relevance	7
Theoretical Framework	9
1.1 Theorising hyperreality	9
Hyperreality TV: The obscenity of nothingness	11
1.2 Defining reality TV: the paradox of artificial reality	13
1.3 Power dynamics on <i>Temptation Island</i>	16
Conservative morality	19
Reality TV as the pornography of the real	21
Media rituals	23
S(t)imulating intimacy	24
1.4 Creating new people	26
Introducing the Case	30
Methodology	32
Limitations: what is not there is what matters most	34
Analysis	35
4.1 <i>Temptation Island</i> as a third-order simulation	35
Beyond good and evil	36
This island, this non-place	37
4.2 The logic of the ultimate relationship test	38
4.3 Enhanced and true selves	44
Reflection and dissolution: Mezdi's reverse switch	45
The question of sincerity	46
4.4 The final money shot (sacrifice)	49
4.5 Aftermath: being 'Tintation'	53
Conclusion	55
Bibliography	60

“How could I know that it was real, unless someone else was watching?”

(Georgina, in Peter Greenway’s *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, 1989)

Introduction

In 2018, the thirty year-old Belgian Tim Wauters and his girlfriend of four years, Deborah Leemans, participated as a couple in RTL's reality show *Temptation Island*. On the beach before departure, the two expressed profound sadness at the prospect of spending time in separate resorts for fourteen days. But what awaited beyond was more promising. Inside Tim's pocket was an engagement ring, which, upon reunion on the fifteenth day, Tim would offer to Deborah to seal their wedding plans on television. The couple's mantra "house, garden, baby" (more poetically phrased as "*huisje, tuintje, kindje*") was spoken one last time, before the Tim and Deborah were shipped off to their designated accommodations on either side of Koh Samui, Thailand.

Temptation Island advertises itself as the 'ultimate relationship test.' The setup is as follows: four couples in heterosexual monogamous relationships are separated into groups of four women and four men. Under 24-hour ubiquitous surveillance, these partners have to spend fourteen days in a tropical resort, accompanied by ten 'seducers': conventionally attractive men and women with the sole duty of trying to make the participants commit adultery. Alcohol on the island is free, and each night an open bar is organised with music, dancing and drinks. Every now and then, the participants have to go on a date with a seducer of their choice. Footage of these dates, and of general interactions between the participant and certain seducers in and around the resort, is then shown to their partners during a 'campfire'. At the very last campfire, the partners are reunited and have to confess their lapses to each other.

To the seducers in both resorts, to their fellow participants, and even to presenters Rick Brandsteder and Annelien Coorevits, there was no doubt that Tim and Deborah

would survive the programme's malicious intent to tear their relationship apart. But what looked like a 'clean sheet' - in the programme's jargon - turned into a tragedy of Aeschylean dimensions. On day eight, Tim confessed his love to seducer Cherish. On day nine, she dubbed him 'Timtation'. On day ten, he was still making wedding plans, but no longer with Deborah, whose deafening screech upon watching her lover's ostensive newfound affection blasted through over half a million television sets.

This thesis endeavours to delve deeper into the media mechanisms that enabled this event. At its core lies an interpretation of *Temptation Island* as a third-order simulation, or 'hyperreality', informed by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard's theory on simulations and Simulacra. I adopted this framework because it allows for an analysis that takes into account not only the individual actions of Tim and Cherish, but the newly established realm that generates and shapes their actions through playing on the participant's perception of what is real, and the value they ascribe to that. At the same time, the simulation they are in is generated through an unequal power relation between the participant and the producer, who obscures his power by placing emphasis on individual autonomy. For this part of the framework, I draw from a variety of critical sources in the field of reality TV studies, such as Misha Kavka's work on affect and intimacy in reality TV, Mark Andrejevic's critical perspective of surveillance-based reality TV as exploitative labour, Nico Carpentier's application of Michel Foucault to *Temptation Island*, and Nick Couldry's assessment of reality TV as transforming reality. The case I am making, is that Tim is not solely accountable for his decisionmaking within the confinements of the show, because the show's hyperreal nature detaches him from his original world and presents its own reality as superior. Hence, I ask how a reading of *Temptation Island* as a third-order simulation can explain 'Timtation' in 2018.

Since there is no other documentation of the changes Tim went through than the show that inflicted these changes upon him, only a deep reading of all fifteen episodes of the show offers any insight into the origins and crises of ‘Timation’. I will use the method of multimodal discourse analysis informed by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, which acknowledges the plurality of semiotic dimensions in an audiovisual piece of culture such as *Temptation Island*. Beyond what is spoken, I look at camera placement and presence, to see how the very state of *being mediated* contributed to the becoming of ‘Timation’. At the end of the analysis, I draw information from a feature by *NRC Handelsblad* that investigated the monetised post-production ‘afterlife’ of the participants, who earn money by being hired for parties.

Relevance

With nearly one million viewers each season, *Temptation Island* is an important cultural phenomenon in The Netherlands and Belgium at a time that television as a traditional medium is losing viewership, and transitioning into other media such as YouTube and streaming platforms. Assuming that each cultural phenomenon projects a larger structure, the program sparks the question of what it represents. In the popular talk show *RTL Late Night*, Utrecht University professor of Media and Society Dan Hassler-Forest speculated that essentially, *Temptation Island* gives shape to the unreality of constantly being watched and judged in an age of ubiquitous media that revolve around physical appearance, such as Tinder and Instagram.¹

¹ *RTL Late Night*, episode 23, “Waarom kijken we met z'n allen naar Temptation Island?,” featuring Twan Huys, Olcay Gulsen and Dan Hassler-Forest, aired 13 February, 2019, on RTL 4, <https://www.rtl.nl/video/eb8688d0-8536-47e1-bafa-72f0afb840fd/>

In scholarly literature, many connections have been made between reality TV and the normalisation of Foucault's panopticon, which is exactly why I tried to refrain from that comparison. In the case of the panopticon, there is a clear division between those watching and those that are watched. Moreover, it is a prison. But *Temptation Island* is a world in which surveillance has no hard consequences, for it is realer than real. Ecstasy in this setup comes not from being watched or knowing that one is being watched, but from not minding being watched, which is the ticket to freedom in exactly the kind of unreality Hassler-Forest describes an entire generation to have grown up inside of - one in which the image dominates, as Baudrillard already saw in the 1980's.

The case study of 'Temptation' allows for a focussed assessment of how Baudrillard's theory perpetuates in a contemporary Western context, almost forty years after the publication of *Simulacra and Simulations*. This thorough analysis also provides insight into the internal mechanics of reality TV in a way that has not been done before. Exposing those mechanics against the background of hyperreality, reveals how reality TV constructs worlds, establishes and deconstructs human connection, manufactures reality, overwrites morality, and ultimately transforms individuals.

Theoretical Framework

“We inhabit a second-hand world, one already mediated by cinema, television and the other apparatuses of the postmodern society.”

(Norman K. Denzin, “The cinematic society and the reflexive interview,” 2012)

1.1 Theorising hyperreality

In his 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) distinguishes three orders of simulation. The first order is an obvious representation of the real, such as a painting or a map, whose purpose is to do nothing but represent. In the second order, the boundaries between reality and representation are ‘blurred’, so the representation becomes as real as the real. As an example, Baudrillard uses the Borges fable in which cartographers draw a map of the Empire that is so accurate, that it exactly covers the territory. But if in this fable, the territory precedes the map, a third-order simulation is a kind of reversal. The model generates “a real without origin of reality: a hyperreal.”² The representation comes to *precede* the real, but it does not blur the boundaries between reality and representation, because there are no longer any. The model is detached from its function of representation.³ Such is the *Simulacrum* - a copy of an original that turns into its own reality, abandoning its original - a product and condition of the hyperreal.

² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser and Ann Arbor (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.

³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2.

The hyperreal substitutes signs of the real for the real itself. Signs have no reference in real phenomena, but in other signs, creating an endless loop of recirculating Simulacra.

Thus, the 'real' ceases to exist as part of the equation. The subject will not experience this as 'fake', but simply as yet another reality. Because this new reality has no foundation in experience, it leaves us with "a society of surfaces, performativity and a fracturing of rationality" - better known as the 'postmodern'.⁴ In this postmodern process, the Enlightenment narratives of progress, technology and rationalism are replaced by "the hyperreal world of third-order simulation: an excessive world of expenditure and psychedelic spectacle."⁵ The worry Baudrillard expresses, is that hyperreality becomes *dominant*. In the first and second order, the real still exists, and the value of the simulation is measured against the quality of its representative performance. But hyperreality presents a world without origin that does not exist in the world of good and evil. "It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational."⁶

In his analysis of Disneyland, Baudrillard calls the American theme park "a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real."⁷ By presenting Disneyland as imaginary, childish and irrational, it suggests that everything outside of it is real and rational, when in fact, according to Baudrillard, the entirety of America is no different from Disneyland. The hyperreal makes visible a difference that is actually not there, and thereby proves that the system works. This is similar to a prison,

⁴ Richard J. Lane, *Jean Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 2009), 89.

⁵ Lane, *Jean Baudrillard*, 92.

⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

which exists as a way to show freedom by contrasting it against captivity, thereby concealing the resemblances of modern society to a prison.⁸

Hyperreality TV: The obscenity of nothingness

Baudrillard has written on the genre of reality TV since its earliest emergence: *An American Family*, a fly-on-the-wall documentary series about the Loud family in 1971. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard points out the documentary's immediacy: it had to seem as if the cameras were not there, "an absurd, paradoxical formula"⁹ which Baudrillard equates to 'as if you were there'. To him, the documentary signals a utopian ideal in which the distance or opposition between spectacle and spectator - the perspectival space - collapses and the viewer becomes part of the observed scene. "The viewers are absent and present, at a distance and up close; they enjoy the thrill of this hyperreal situation: hyperreal because they cannot say that one position is real and another false."¹⁰

Moreover, the Loud family was already hyperreal in itself, through it being a typical American family. To Baudrillard, this "statistical perfection" doomed it to death by the camera lens.¹¹ He writes in *Simulacra and Simulation* that the family had delivered itself to the hands of television in order to offer a "sacrificial spectacle (...) the liturgical drama of a mass society."¹² He wonders what becomes of the truth for this family, concluding that in hyperreality's irrelevance of reversal "it is TV that is the truth of the Louds, it is TV

⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 25.

⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰ Lane, *Baudrillard*, 96.

¹¹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 28.

¹² Ibid.

that is true, it is TV that renders true.”¹³ In everyone’s homes TV has dissolved in life, and life has dissolved in TV. In this era of hyperreality, the medium has been diffused in the real.¹⁴ Later, in his 2001 essay ‘Dust Breeding’ (a reference to Duchamp), Baudrillard takes on the French show *Loft Story*, a kind of *Big Brother*. He calls the programme a “media illusion of live reality”:

In this space, where everything is meant to be seen (...), we realize that there is nothing left to see. It becomes a mirror of dullness, of nothingness, on which the disappearance of the other is blatantly reflected (...). This space becomes the equivalent of a ‘ready-made’ just-as-is (*telle quelle*) transposition of an ‘everyday life’ that has already been trumped by all dominant models. It is a synthetic banality, fabricated in closed circuits and supervised by a monitoring screen.¹⁵

The ‘nothingness’ Baudrillard mentions, is what he calls ‘the spectacle of banality’: “the obscene spectacle of nullity (nullité), insignificance, and platitude.”¹⁶ This spectacle is today’s pornography and obscenity. Obscenity is a key term here, also found in his *Ecstasy of Communication*. Once again referring to the Loud family, Baudrillard explains that obscenity is not about the spectacle or action. It begins where the scene ends, when “the most intimate of our life become the virtual feeding ground of the media.”¹⁷ The separation between the public and the private implodes, and in return we can receive all

¹³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 29.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, “Dust Breeding,” *CTheory* (2001).

<https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14593/5444>

¹⁶ Baudrillard, “Dust Breeding.”

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (The New Press, 2002), 130.

existing information “like a microscopic pornography of the universe, useless, excessive, just like the sexual close-up in a porno film.”¹⁸

1.2 Defining reality TV: the paradox of artificial reality

Categorised under ‘RTL Reality’, it is evident that *Temptation Island* advertises itself as being reality TV. However, this genre has been subject to a series of definitions, some of which it has eluded. Dubrofsky defines reality TV as “the filming of real people over time with the aim of developing a narrative about their activities segmented into serial episodes.”¹⁹ This is quite a straightforward definition, limited to the production practices rather than the meanings and implications of the genre. For Annette Hill, reality TV is “located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama.”²⁰ In their introduction to *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette provide a broader definition that includes the genre’s economic nature, namely “an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real.”²¹ Similarly, Couldry recognises in reality game shows not the abandonment, but the transformation of reality claims.²² Rather than document

¹⁸ Baudrillard, “Ecstasy of Communication”, 130.

¹⁹ Rachel E. Dubrofsky, “Fallen Women in Reality TV: A Pornography of Emotion,” *Feminist Media Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 354.

²⁰ Annette Hill, “Reality TV: Performance, Authenticity, and Television Audiences,” in *A Companion to Television*, ed. Janet Wasko (Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 449.

²¹ Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, “Introduction,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 2.

²² Nick Couldry, “Teaching us to fake it: the ritualized norms of television’s ‘reality’ games,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, eds. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 58.

factual information, reality TV aims to entertain. This distinguishes the genre from documentary and news, whose truth claims serve the public, and makes it “an acknowledgement of the manufactured artifice that coexists with truth claims.”²³ What is missing from these definitions, is the acknowledgement of the importance of emotion, and specifically ‘affect’. In her 2008 *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy*, Misha Kavka unites Baudrillard’s notion of banality with reality TV’s emphasis on emotional experience in the following formula:

$$\text{RTV} = \text{ordinariness} + \text{affect}^{24}$$

Shows such as *Big Brother* capture everyday relationalities into a narrative, but instead of focussing on the cognitive aspects of the televised encounters, they are framed to cater towards affective recognition.²⁵

To exclude specific programme types such as daytime game shows, the news or real crime-investigation programmes like *Cops* (on which a surprisingly large body of scholarship exists), Mark Andrejevic focuses on “genres that rely on comprehensive surveillance of the daily lives and unscripted interactions of people who agree to participate in making their private lives public.”²⁶ Reality TV is a format that “offers not an escape from reality but an escape *into* reality (...)”²⁷ Hill makes a helpful distinction between ‘popular factual television’ and ‘reality game shows’. Some texts refer to the latter

²³ Murray and Ouellette, *Remaking Television Culture*, 2.

²⁴ Misha Kavka, *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 79.

²⁵ Kavka, *Affect and Intimacy*, 79.

²⁶ Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 64.

²⁷ Andrejevic, *Reality TV*, 8.

setup of ordinary people competing under televised surveillance as ‘gamedoc’. With its predetermined setup, actors, rules and rituals *Temptation Island* is a typical gamedoc, just like *Big Brother*. Couldry sees this genre as signalling a shift from “documentation to transformation of reality.”²⁸ For Pecora, too, the gamedoc merges fiction and reality and invites us to “become participant-observers of our own lives.”²⁹

The rise in popularity of these types of reality shows, kickstarted by the massively successful *Big Brother* (or arguably earlier with MTV’s 1991 *The Real World*³⁰), Andrejevic explains as a cultural “rediscovery of reality.”³¹ Reality counters mass-produced formulated fiction. But, like fictional works of art, Madsen and Brinkmann write that reality shows “mimic the dominating ideas of the present.”³² It can be regarded as handing over air time back to “real people.”³³ In that way, reality TV is empowering for audiences. Murray and Ouellette affirm this, pointing out how reality programming has been contributing to the diversification of television culture through its use of ‘real’ people (or ‘nonactors’).³⁴ But when assessed critically, this is easily turned around, once it is recognised that inherent to the appeal of reality TV is its claim to “make celebrities out of real ordinary people.”³⁵ The condition is that what is represented on screen is in fact *reality*. However, Murray and Ouellette write that indeed reality TV promises a “revelatory insight into the lives of others,” but at the same time it “withholds and subverts

²⁸ Couldry, “Teaching us to fake it.”

²⁹ Pecora, “The Culture of Surveillance,” 353.

³⁰ Murray and Ouellette, *Remaking Television Culture*, 3.

³¹ Andrejevic, *Reality TV*, 61.

³² Ole Jacob Madsen and Svend Brinkmann, “Lost in Paradise: *Paradise Hotel* and the Showcase of Shamelessness,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 12, no. 5 (2012): 460.

³³ Andrejevic, *Reality TV*, 62.

³⁴ Murray and Ouellette, *Remaking Television Culture*, 8.

³⁵ Couldry, “Teaching us to Fake it,” 63.

full access to it.”³⁶ Similarly, June Deery writes in ‘Reality TV as Advertainment’ that the genre invokes the “fantasy of absolute vision, of having complete access to all that is hidden” without fulfilling it.³⁷

Kavka presents a slightly different explanation for the genre’s success with viewers. She argues that the appeal derives not its reflection of reality, but from the genre’s appropriation to “television as a technology of intimacy.”³⁸ The medium of television expands on this type of technology because of its effect of ‘liveness’ that reduces the temporal difference between the action and the viewing to zero.³⁹ Where in Baudrillard’s analysis, this exact deletion of separation - he called it a ‘window’ - elevates television to a state of referenceless hyperreality, for Kavka the diminished distance grounds television in the experiential world, increasing its affective potential. It is in reality TV that the relation between reality, mediation and intimacy is its most prevalent.⁴⁰

1.3 Power dynamics on *Temptation Island*

Nico Carpentier in 2006 wrote one of the few texts particularly specifically addressing *Temptation Island*. His analysis focuses firstly on the exercise of power by the media professionals - or producers - over the participants, and secondly on the power of popular culture over society. Applying Michel Foucault’s analytics of power to the production sphere of *Temptation Island*, Carpentier distinguishes two different actors in an unequal,

³⁶ Murray and Ouellette, *Remaking Television Culture*, 6.

³⁷ June Deery, “Reality TV as Advertainment,” *Popular Communication* 2, no. 1 (2004), 6.

³⁸ Kavka, *Affect and Intimacy*, 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

yet therefore productive, power relation: media professionals and participants. Media professionals develop the format, make the rules, choose the participants and set up their contracts, ask the interview questions, “select the footage and edit it into a cohesive narrative which is broadcast on their respective stations.”⁴¹ Since the participants are not allowed to leave during the production process, Sam Brenton and Reuben Cohen write that a “self-contained pocket world” is established, which becomes the sole reality the contestants experience.⁴² Baudrillard called this same phenomenon of a space constructed for television an ‘artificial microcosm’.⁴³

Even though these professionals control the entire island context, the participants are not powerless: “the entire format of [*Temptation Island*] depends on their willingness to commit themselves to the interaction with the other participants, to answer the interview questions, to live with microphones attached to their bodies, and to try and forget the ubiquitous cameras and cameramen, and behave as ‘normally’ as possible.”⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu wrote that “television can hide things by showing.”⁴⁵ A major contributing factor is the immediacy of production interventions. ‘Immediacy’ in the definition of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin is achieved through “ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation.”⁴⁶ This immediacy creates the illusion of participants’ autonomy which emphasises their individual responsibility -

⁴¹ Nico Carpentier, “Participation and power in the television program *Temptation Island*: ‘Tits’ and ‘Melons’ on ‘Slut Camp’,” in *Researching Media, Democracy and Participation*, eds. Nico Carpentier, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Kaarle Nordenstreng, Maren Hartmann, Peeter Vihalemm, and Bart Cammaerts (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2006), 138.

⁴² Sam Brenton and Reuben Cohen, *Shooting People: Adventures in Reality TV* (New York: Verso, 2003.) 50.

⁴³ Baudrillard, “Dust Breeding”.

⁴⁴ Carpentier, “Participation and power,” 138.

⁴⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, “Television,” *European Review* 19, no. 3 (2001): 247.

⁴⁶ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999): 11.

hiding the absence of it in the process.⁴⁷ The control of the media professionals over the entire situation is expressed in the system of rules that the participants adhere to the moment they are part of the show. What the audience sees, then, is never directly the media professionals exerting their power, but merely the results of the power imbalance.⁴⁸ Exactly this power play, similar to Foucault's analysed hegemony and resistance, makes television into a discursive machine turning human interaction into television texts.⁴⁹ The paradox here is perhaps best expressed by John Corner in his 2002 article 'Performing the Real':

[the gamedoc] operates its claims to the real within a fully managed artificiality, in which almost everything that might be deemed to be true about what people do and say is necessarily and obviously predicated on the larger contrivance of them being there in front of the camera in the first place.⁵⁰

So, reality TV - and especially the gamedoc - creates the situations it documents under the label of 'authentic'. But these truths it claims to broadcast are entirely artificial. The genre provides the viewer with a documentation of its own manufactured reality, but hides this by showing the participants' 'real' emotional responses to the tensions created around them in a moment of climax. This agency over what constitutes reality puts the media professionals behind *Temptation Island* not only in a position of power over the

⁴⁷ Carpentier, "Participation and power," 139.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ John Corner, "Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions," *Television & New Media* 3, no. 3 (2002): 256.

participants, but also over the audience since in its illusion of reality they embed unquestioned assumptions of media's hegemony over truth.

Conservative morality

The suggested autonomy places the participant in a morally inferior position to the viewer, which discourages identification “so that pleasure can be derived from seeing their problems displayed on screen.”⁵¹ Under the pretense of ‘reality’, the superimposed rules, editing choices, and the constant urging of participants to confess and testify, fall into oblivion as major structuring determinants for the events, interactions and the way they are constructed into a narrative - often of a “race into decline.”⁵² The premise that each participant voluntarily subjects themselves to a ‘relationship test’, according to Carpentier, legitimises the often extreme interventions by the production team.⁵³ In ‘The Culture of Surveillance’, Vincent Pecora mentions *Temptation Island* as a specific example of a programme in which the participants are doomed from the outset. His reflection is similar to Baudrillard’s remark on how the Loud family was ‘doomed to death’.

The communities formed within these television programs are in a sense cursed from the start. They must slowly dissolve through the continuous expulsion of one of their own, and the camera lingers time and again on the delicious mixture of sadness and guilty joy - *Schadenfreude* par excellence - on the faces of those who

⁵¹ Corner, “Performing the Real”, 143.

⁵² Ibid., 143.

⁵³ Ibid., 140.

remain. The seemingly paradoxical community-destroying motif was made explicit in (...) *Temptation Island*, in which single seducers are assigned the task of breaking up already troubled couples - a plot device that enables (for the first time, I think) legal, nonfiction prostitution in the guise of a television program, the seducers in effect being paid to provide sex to strangers. (...) The collective's dissolution becomes the surest way of demonstrating the social magic that was holding it together in the first place.⁵⁴

In the case of *Temptation Island*, 'giving in to temptation' constitutes the transgression of norms within the show, as well as the premise of the show itself. This transgression, to Andrejevic, is so outrageous that it is actually "paradigmatic of the moral order it ostensibly subverts."⁵⁵

The moral order Andrejevic refers to is a conservative one. In her article 'Love 'n the Real; or, How I Learned to Love Reality TV', Kavka writes that many Real Love shows such as *Temptation Island* and *The Bachelor*, contain a moral imperative about whom and how one should love. Through practises of polygamy and cheating, these programmes push forward an ideology of monogamy and trust.⁵⁶ In other words, by presenting a narrative of excessive seduction and adultery, *Temptation Island* in fact condemns this behaviour and keeps in place conservative standards of marriage. In this sense, *Temptation Island* can be compared to Baudrillard's Disneyland as a 'deterrence machine' contrasting a confined set of values to an illusory 'real world' in which people

⁵⁴ Vincent Pecora, "The Culture of Surveillance," *Qualitative Sociology* 25, no. 3 (2002): 352.

⁵⁵ Andrejevic, *Reality TV*, 176.

⁵⁶ Misha Kavka, 'Love 'n the Real; or, How I Learned to Love Reality TV' in *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to 'Reality' TV and beyond*, eds. Geoff King (Bristol: Intellect Ltd., 2005): 101-102.

are resilient to seduction. The question is whether the programme is indeed also hiding the fact that all of the Netherlands is already inside *Temptation Island*.

Reality TV as the pornography of the real

Foucault identified ‘confessional power’ as another management tool. Carpentier writes that “(...) through interviews the participants are continually urged to describe their activities and emotional state, and confess even the slightest ‘infringement’ to the presenters and thus also to the viewers.”⁵⁷ In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault pinpointed the Freudian ethical ideal of bringing everything out in the open, and criticised the dream of a transparent society. *Temptation Island* enforces this by integrating self-disclosure into the format. Scattered between the recorded events are the comments of ‘talking heads’, responding to questions that the audience never hears. As Carpentier remarks: “The entire configuration (and power dynamic) of [*Temptation Island*] is in any case based on truth speaking.”⁵⁸

The parallel of these revelations with the conventions of pornography was pointed out earlier by Baudrillard, in relation to the mundane as the spectacle of banality. Similarly, Madsen and Brinkmann refer to Denzin’s 1995 analysis of postmodernity as the “pornography of the visible”⁵⁹, to argue that gamedocs represent an equivalent to hard core pornography, “which, after decades of close-ups, is running out of ideas on how ‘to

⁵⁷ Carpentier, “Participation and power,” 141.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 139.

⁵⁹ Norman K. Denzin, *The Cinematic Society: The Voyeur’s Gaze* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995): 191.

bring it to the next level.”⁶⁰ When everything can be seen, gamedocs attempt to take us beyond the pornography of the visible.⁶¹

With this in mind, pornography is a usable analogy when it comes to the visual connection between climaxes and close-ups. Where in pornography the climax is generally the “visual spectacle of penile ejaculation”⁶², in reality TV it would be the release of real emotions that have been building up and can no longer be oppressed in front of the camera. At the campfires in *Temptation Island*, the participants are exposed to their partner’s (mis)conduct shown on screen, and have to answer the presenter’s questions, often asking to confess how they feel about the footage. The viewing of this footage and the subsequent interrogation are catalysts for a ‘cathartic’ emotional outburst similar to what Rachel Dubrofsky dubbed ‘the pornography of emotion.’ The visual recording of this ‘intense bodily experience’ primed by confession, she compares to a softcore ‘money shot’, a term from Linda Williams, to verify the authenticity of the moment.⁶³ In Williams’ definition, the money shot is “the perceptual visual evidence of the mechanical ‘truth’ of body pleasure caught in involuntary spasm; the ultimate and uncontrollable - ultimate *because* uncontrollable - confession of the body’s pleasure in the climax of orgasm.”⁶⁴ The involuntary nature of the climax makes the act of watching reality TV, in Couldry’s 2008 analysis, a habit of “watching for how participants maintain their authenticity in spite of the cameras’ presence.”⁶⁵ Especially with regards to gamedocs and their manipulation of

⁶⁰ Madsen and Brinkmann, “Lost in Paradise,” 464.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Linda Williams, “Fetishism and Hard Core: Marx, Freud, and ‘The Money Shot’,” in *For Adult Users Only: The Dilemma of Violent Pornography*, eds. Susan Gubar and Joan Hoff (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), 198.

⁶³ Dubrofsky, “A Pornography of Emotion,” 356.

⁶⁴ Williams, “Fetishism and Hard Core,” 200.

⁶⁵ Nick Couldry, “Reality TV, or The Secret Theater of Neoliberalism,” *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 30, no. 3 (2008): 9.

the situation that spirals the events into decline, as I laid out earlier, causes the prevailing logic among audience, producers, and among participants to be that one cannot act forever, and eventually “people ‘must’ reveal their underlying selves.”⁶⁶ Truth, then, is the money shot.

Media rituals

Besides a demonstration of confessional power, the campfires serve as an interesting example of a media ritual. Rituals in reality TV, and especially in those with a ‘game’ element such as *Temptation Island*, have many sociological and religious connotations. For Catherine Bell, among others, ritual contains the “orchestrated construction of power and authority”⁶⁷ because it naturalises the unnatural. Drawing from Durkheim’s sociology of religion, Nick Couldry marks the rituals in reality game shows as more than the commonsense definition of habitual actions: these media rituals are formalised actions associated with transcendent values and “reproduce the building blocks of belief without involving any explicit content that is believed.”⁶⁸ Not only do these rituals comply in the constitution of a credible fictional world for the contestants, they also allow certain values to bypass being questioned, as media rituals “reproduce the myth that media are our privileged access point to social reality (...).”⁶⁹ In the case of the campfire, the confrontation of the participant with heavily edited surveillance footage suggesting their

⁶⁶ Couldry, “The Secret Theater of Neoliberalism,” 9.

⁶⁷ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992): 215.

⁶⁸ Nick Couldry, “Teaching us to fake it: the ritualized norms of television’s ‘reality’ games,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, eds. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 59.

⁶⁹ Couldry, “Teaching us to fake it,” 60.

partner is engaging in unverified acts of promiscuity is a ritual conveying the same 'basic media value' as Couldry reads in *Big Brother*'s eviction process: "(...) mediated reality is somehow 'higher' or more significant than nonmediated reality."⁷⁰ It is this particular message, resembling Baudrillard's hyperreality thesis, that to Couldry underlies the legitimisation of "media institutions' general concentration of symbolic power."⁷¹

Another ritual that Kavka points out, is that of 'choice' - an element that she considers determining to *Temptation Island*'s statues as "the first real-love show."⁷² Choice-making in the show is ritualised, for instance by the participant having to choose dates from a line-up of seducers, which the partner, on their turn, can 'choose' to watch. By placing emphasis on every choice the participants make as the result of 'open choice', the programme hides the fact that the *options* are limited. Ritual demands that every episode, a series of choices is made, according to Kavka "practice runs to the ultimate choice: is the person you came with the one you'll be with forever?"⁷³ She calls this the 'epistemology of love', which to her underlies the reality quotient of this show. The show suggests that romantic choice is 'proof' of real love, but the choices it presents are arbitrary and have the sole purpose "to turn affect into the spectacle of tears and rage."⁷⁴

S(t)imulating intimacy

For Kavka, there is no doubt that the setting in most, if not all, reality TV shows is artificial, and built or chosen to stimulate intimacy among participants. But this does not

⁷⁰ Couldry, "Teaching us to fake it," 61.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Kavka, *Affect and Intimacy*, 111.

⁷³ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 113.

mean that this intimacy is *simulated*. Although the television setting is an ‘amplified situation’, reality stripped to merely a performative space, it is real for the participants. “The affective ‘truth’ of intimacy is not restricted by the artificial conditions of the habitat.”⁷⁵ In other words, the intimacy that arises from a stimulating environment such as the fourteen-day seclusion in a tropical resort in *Temptation Island*, is just as real as real. Feelings are not ‘acted’, but ‘acted out’. “The performance of reality generates reality effects, just as the performance of intimacy generates intimacy effects. (...) reality television, as an extension of the televisual technology of intimacy, involves a performance of reality which generates intimacy as its affect.”⁷⁶ Thus, although *Temptation Island*, largely stimulates intimacy artificially and arbitrarily through ritualised choice (by making participants choose dates from a line-up and watch their partner with someone else), it is from these choices that genuine affect arises.⁷⁷

But Baudrillard’s thesis poses a fundamental problem to this theory. In *Simulations*, he describes the difference between feigning and simulating using illness as an example. When someone feigns illness, they pretend to suffer the symptoms of a disease. But a person who simulates, actually produces some of the symptoms, such as a higher body temperature. Where feigning leaves the principle of reality intact, because the difference can be detected, “simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’, the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’.”⁷⁸ In relation to *Temptation Island*, the seducers may pretend to be attracted or even be in love with the participant, but they may also actually be. The problem is not that affect is not genuine, but that *it no longer matters*

⁷⁵ Kavka, *Affect and Intimacy*, xiii.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 111-113.

⁷⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3.

whether a seducer's love or attraction is genuine or simulated, because the participant, like the medic in Baudrillard's analogy, no longer has the tools to unravel the truth.

1.4 Creating new people

(...) one distraught participant on *Temptation Island* (Fox) needed reminding that he was less of a person than a commodity under contract. When his relationship, the topic of the show, was under great stress, he tried to get the camera to stop filming: "this is not about the show, this is about my life," he pleaded. To which a laconic cameraman accurately replied, "actually, your life is the show," and kept on filming.⁷⁹

If reality TV transforms reality rather than documents it, as Couldry argues, what does it do to the *self* of the participant? Does reality TV, and the gamedoc in particular, document the self or transform it? Gareth Palmer recognises in gamedocs the development of a 'media self'. In his analysis of *Big Brother*, he witnessed how the programme endeavours to facilitate a 'pure' environment supposed to stimulate the emergence of the 'real person' in the 'ordinary' participants, for instance by stripping them of mobile phones, watches, or logos.⁸⁰ But instead, this led to the participants developing into media personalities, objectifying themselves for the camera with the ambition to continue post-production as

⁷⁹ Deery, "Reality TV as Advertainment," 6.

⁸⁰ Gareth Palmer, "Big Brother: An Experiment in Governance," *Television & New Media* 3, no. 3 (2002): 305.

a celebrity.⁸¹ Chris Rojek in his 2001 book *Celebrity* identified this type of participant-turned-celebrity as *celetoid*. Their fame is concentrated, attributed and generally short-lived, like Andy Warhol's famous prediction of everyone receiving their "fifteen seconds of fame." It is in the nature of celetoids to disappear from the public consciousness quite rapidly, because they are easily replaced by the next.⁸²

The desire to develop into a media personality or celebrity connects to mediated reality's superiority over unmediated reality that Couldry identified as a basic media value. In her 2008 article 'Media-bodies and screen-births: Cosmetic surgery reality television', Meredith Jones encounters this value in participant's assessments of their own bodies:

Media-bodies come into being when our bodies interact with media (...) ordinary people *enter* the television and come out transformed into real, living, 'TV people'. Participants declare 'I'm my true self now' and 'this is the real me'. Such pronouncements seem absurd in the context of such a repressive set of aesthetics, but Weber suggests that in an 'image-centered culture, such as ours, perhaps [no statements are] more valid'. Thus, these people become featured extras, or perhaps even stars, in a hybrid media-reality that includes their own lives.⁸³

Once their newly formed media-bodies are revealed to the contestants, Jones notes that many declare they share features with Hollywood movie stars. Like with many other

⁸¹ Palmer, "Big Brother," 306.

⁸² Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001), 20-23.

⁸³ Meredith Jones, "Media-bodies and screen-births: Cosmetic surgery reality television," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22, no. 4 (2008): 522.

reality shows, success on the programme grants some participants a continued suitability for life as a television personality. They never truly leave the screen. Others do step out into the world, but, in line with Baudrillard's thesis of hyperreality, their half-real media-bodies perpetually tie them to the screen.⁸⁴

This is purely physical. In their analysis of the Scandinavian reality show *Paradise Hotel*, Madsen and Brinkmann draw from Judith Butler's work when discussing the importance of the program's constructed norms and constant coaxing (through talking heads) for the participant's reflective self to come about. Having some relation to external norms is the condition for being an individual self, for the social dimension of normativity governs the scene of recognition. By transgressing norms, the community that exists in relation to the self emerges from abstraction into a "concretely felt reality with basic norms (...)." ⁸⁵ Returning to Couldry, the rituals embedded in the show are complicit in constructing what the participant perceives as 'normal' reality, against which their self emerges. Carpentier describes how the dichotomy between the seducers and the couples serves the hegemonic discourse of heterosexual monogamy, and the commentary frowns upon transgressive behaviour, while at the same time the entire programme setup pushes its participants into transgression.⁸⁶ By demanding the participants to give an account of themselves within this context, *Temptation Island* helps them construct their new identity within a new normative reality. Only certain responses guarantee a post-show afterlife, as Madsen and Brinkmann write that success in this format "does not require any particular skills, but the demonstration of a certain way of being."⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Jones, "Media-bodies and screen-births," 518.

⁸⁵ Madsen and Brinkmann, "Lost in Paradise," 462.

⁸⁶ Carpentier, "Participation and power," 139-140.

⁸⁷ Madsen and Brinkmann, "Lost in Paradise," 465.

A programme such as *Temptation Island* with its focus on physical appearance breeds celestoids. When discussing *The Bachelor*, Kavka points out that participants are selected when they are already attractive by media standards - the “basic requirement of television-worthiness.”⁸⁸ Here we find the same statistical perfection that Baudrillard mentioned in relation to the Louds, who became a simulacrum of a typical American family. Singles and couples on *Temptation Island* are in the same sense simulacra of young, attractive singles and young, attractive couples. If we are to draw on Baudrillard any further, one could argue that ‘being attractive by media standards’ implies that there are people walking around *waiting to be mediated*, already existing as Simulacra before they appear on television. Unlike Jones’ notion of a screen-transformation, in which people attain the status of television-worthiness through mediation, this selection based on attraction reverses the process of screen-transformation.

⁸⁸ Kavka, *Affect and Intimacy*, 115.

Introducing the Case

The concept behind *Temptation Island* was based on the 2001 Endemol production *Blind Vertrouwen*. This format was exported to the USA, where it was released under the name *Temptation Island*, which was then again adopted in the Netherlands and Belgium. Between 2002 and 2009 Veronica and VT4 broadcasted the show.⁸⁹ After a seven year hiatus, RTL 5 has been broadcasting it together with the Flemish channel VIJF with presenters Rick Brandsteder and Annelien Coorevits. The 2018 finale was shown on a large screen in the Beurs van Berlage in front of a live audience. Throughout the season, the viewing figures had been consistently historical: 700,000 per episode. According to *Stichting Kijkonderzoek*, half of these viewers has had a higher education and deviates from the regular viewership of RTL 5.⁹⁰

In the show, which presents itself as ‘the ultimate relationship test’, two Flemish and two Dutch couples are divided over two resorts, each containing ten ‘seducers’ of the opposite gender. Participation for both couples and seducers is based on open applications. For fourteen days, partners can have no contact with each other or with the outside world. All participants are equipped with a microphone around their necks, and cameras are ubiquitous, except in the bathrooms. Meanwhile, the seducers have the task of tempting the partners into committing adultery. The programme facilitates this by

⁸⁹ Carpentier, “Participation and power,” 135.

⁹⁰ Loes Reijmer, “Wat maakte dit seizoen van *Temptation Island* zo slecht?” *De Volkskrant*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/wat-maakte-dit-seizoen-van-temptation-island-zo-slecht~b552c513/>

organising romantic dates, and providing everyone in the resort with free alcohol. During the ‘campfires’ that are organised every two to four days, partners are confronted with footage of their girlfriend or boyfriend’s behaviour in the other resort. The footage is edited by the producers to create suspicion with the purpose of evoking a response, preferably revenge. The final night, the participants have to choose a seducer to take on a ‘dream date’ outside the resort, where they undertake an adventurous or romantic activity. At the final campfire the next day, the couples are reunited.

In the 2018 season, the participating couples were Jeremy and Vanessa, Mezdi and Danielle, Kevin and Megan, and Tim and Deborah. After the show, only Jeremy and Vanessa’s relationship remained intact. Despite the two other break-ups in the show, the case of Tim and Deborah was especially taken up by many entertainment media (such as *RTL Boulevard*, *Shownieuws*, *De Telegraaf*, etc.) for the level of certainty with which the two perceived the stability of their relationship at the very beginning, and their plans for their life ahead. After the fourteen days had passed, Tim would propose to Deborah at the final campfire reunion, and the two would move in together and have a child. However, after eight days, Tim fell in love with seducer Cherish van der Sluis, and talked about marrying her instead of Deborah. They formed a couple for the rest of the season. Afterwards, Cherish admitted that to her it had always been a game, and she had never had true feelings for Tim.⁹¹ On his turn, Tim stated that even though he had lost his future fiancée, he did not regret participating.⁹²

⁹¹ “Temptation-Cherish doet schokkende onthulling,” *RTL Boulevard*, last modified May 1, 2018, <https://www.rtlboulevard.nl/entertainment/tv/artikel/4131011/temptation-cherish-doet-schokkende-onthulling>

⁹² *RTL Late Night*, “Waarom kijken we met z’n allen naar *Temptation Island*?”

Methodology

In this thesis I perform a multimodal discourse analysis of all fifteen episodes of the tenth season of *Temptation Island*, informed by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen's 2001 book *Multimodal Discourse*. In this work, the authors consider meaning to be made "in many different ways, in the many different modes and media which are co-present in a communicational ensemble."⁹³ The method they introduce allows for a reading of the show that moves beyond semiotic modes of language, such as spoken text or narrative (monomodality), but includes observations on shot composition, music, and editing. Hence the term 'multimodality'.

The method emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century, at the same time as reality TV was becoming more popular. In their 2013 book *Real Talk: Reality Television and Discourse Analysis in Action*, Nuria Lorenzo-Dus and Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich write that applying multimodal discourse analysis to reality TV conforms to television being an intrinsically multimodal medium, and it is therefore an appropriate method. Especially in highly edited reality shows, the method is capable of revealing production choices that otherwise would remain invisible. From filming weeks of footage, the images and sounds have to be reconstructed into a coherent plot that can be compressed into and divided over separate episodes that carry the narrative forward.⁹⁴

⁹³ Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001): 111.

⁹⁴ Nuria Lorenzo-Dus and Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, *Real Talk: Reality Television and Discourse Analysis in Action* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 29-30.

But on a smaller scale, there is also a production teleology that only multimodality can point out, which is that of the previously mentioned emotional ‘money shot’. Lorenzo-Dus and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich write that typically these type of shots record ‘raw’ emotions or moments of confession by ordinary people filmed in close-up or medium close-up. The editing, narration, and presentation strengthen the impact of these scenes:

Whilst initially performed as private moments of self-evaluation, post-production editing techniques in many of these shows ensure that the thus constructed identities of ordinary people become public and accountable through the discourse of a range of shows’ experts and/or presenters.⁹⁵

A focus on the overall production not as much *of* the show, but *within* the show underlies my reading of *Temptation Island* as a third-order simulation. In other words, I aim to decode what being in *Temptation Island* did to Tim *in reality*. Camera aesthetics are less important than camera placement and type. Thus, I utilise knowledge of aesthetic and type of mediacy (hypermediacy or immediacy) to determine from Tim’s perspective where the camera is placed and what that does, moving beyond an analysis of the visible, to an analysis of the invisible. As laid out in the theoretical framework, it is in immediacy where the exercise of power takes place, the illusion of reality is created, the situation is steered ‘into decline’, and eventually the outcome is produced as well as the transformation of Tim into Timtation, while the emphasis on autonomy remains, even further exacerbating the unequal power relations. In this regard, I use multimodality to take note of the fact

⁹⁵ Lorenzo-Dus and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, *Real Talk*, 30.

that the very presence of cameras influences the events on screen, that the 'island' is a limited world, as well as the fact that the programme feeds its participants the footage it produces, and therewith establishes itself as an artificial microcosm on both a physical and moral level.

Limitations: what is not there is what matters most

Returning to Bourdieu, television can hide by showing. Looking at what is not shown reveals another layer of how manufactured reality is and is not documented. Dates that, according to the setup, took place are never shown or even acknowledged. Nor is there much focus on any of Tim or Jeremy's interactions at the beginning, when both maintained a distance from the seducers. Ultimately, as Baudrillard suggested when talking of the spectacle of banality, reality is *mundane*. It is impossible to say with certainty, but considering the many recaps and repetitions filling screen time in each episode, not that much was happening aside from the participants likely enjoying a free holiday. Because the program's premise is temptation, any narrative needs to follow the structure of a narrative of seduction. Anything outside of that is less likely to be included in the final cut. This is obvious, but when looking at how 'reality TV' has been defined, it should be noted that the ordering of the narrative is hegemonic to the actual events that have taken place in an unchangeable order.

Analysis

4.1 *Temptation Island* as a third-order simulation

As Couldry saw, the genre of the gamedoc signals a shift from documentation to the manipulation of reality. Other than a documentary which aims to represent existing reality, *Temptation Island* manufactures the reality it documents. As a recurring format with interchangeable participants, *Temptation Island* exists first as the blueprint for a reality that has yet to take place - a reality which unfolds at the same time as it is being recorded, and taking place on the condition of its being recorded. Centered around surveillance, the representation of reality in *Temptation Island* is superior to the actual reality that takes place in the resorts. It is generating the very reality it represents, thus not actually displaying anything that has a referent in 'real life'. Moreover, the reality within the programme is generated through a feedback-loop. During the 'campfires', participants watch footage from the programme itself that the audience has already seen before (in a previous episode, or even earlier in the same episode). The footage is selected by the producers to contain a perfect equilibrium of information and disinformation to generate action induced by the participants' emotional response to seeing their partner mediated to them. All that happens in *Temptation Island* originates from producing *Temptation Island* itself, without external influence. It has no real-life origin. Therefore, it is in Baudrillard's terms hyperreal.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2.

Beyond good and evil

The implications of a hyperreal are, for Baudrillard, that when the real disappears as part of the equation, so does the moral order. The hyperreal is a world beyond good and evil, where 'good' is measured in terms of its performance. *Temptation Island* being in essence a relationship test, a trial, the understanding of good and evil it conveys is presented in terms of the rules of this test. Participants within the programme measure their own success and failure first in terms of their own resilience to seduction, their partner's resilience, and the seducers' capacity to do what they are there to do: seduce. The starting assumption is that a relationship is solid when it 'passes' this test, meaning that both partners have managed to resist temptation while separated from one another. As the programme progresses and encloses around them, the participants more and more justify their deeds with arguments that refer to their partners' actions in the other resort, which they are shown during the campfire, often without full context. For instance, when Megan sees grainy footage of an intoxicated Kevin becoming physically intimate with one of the seducers, her fatalist analysis drives her to take revenge on him by sleeping with Joshua before Kevin actually goes as far as cheating on her, even though at the beginning of the programme she strongly condemned any form of adultery. At this point, she was still referring to Kevin's actions from before the show. But on the island, with nothing but the island itself as the only reference, she adapts her behaviour to the standards set within the confinements of the show's reality. Thus, the reference for the moral justification of one's actions in *Temptation Island*, is what has been established within *Temptation Island* itself, rather than the moral order of the world beyond.

This island, this non-place

This emergence of a new moral order is further enabled by the stripping of the show from geological or temporary dimensions. It is mentioned sparingly that the resort is located in Thailand, but nothing inside the resort contains a reference to Thai culture, history, or politics. Aside from Tim and Cherish's participation in a traditional Thai friendship ceremony, none of the trips outside the resort indicate a presence in Thailand. Furthermore, the inhabitants of the resort are never shown discussing topics unrelated to *Temptation Island*, such as politics or current events. The only reference to the real world, is the partners' discussing their relationship before participating. Madsen and Brinkmann in their article analysed *Paradise Hotel* as a non-place (*non-lieu*), a term from Marc Augé that describes an anthropological space of transience, where "everything is at hand, and nothing is lacking",⁹⁷ but where individual identity dissolves. A similar case could be made for *Temptation Island*: it could take place anywhere. Although 'island' implies a geographic and cultural constraint, *Temptation Island* is not an actual island, but first and foremost a simulation built around the idea of a test or trial, ontologically detached from time and space, only realised on the physical location of a Thai island, which is incidental.

To resist the interchangeable nature of the rooms upon arrival, Tim decorates his with Deborah-related objects, projecting his identity onto this faceless environment with an impoverished Simulacrum of a living situation with Deborah. In episode two, upon

⁹⁷ Madsen and Brinkmann, "Lost in Paradise," 463.

first entering the resort, Tim is filmed by the handheld camera, ripping pages from his diary and creating notes saying ‘no girls allowed, unless Deborah Leemans’ and sticking them onto his window. Next to him in the bed, he has placed a pillow wearing a t-shirt with Deborah’s name on it. On his nightstand sits a picture of him and Deborah. He tells Mezdi: “I won’t be needing anything else the coming fourteen days.”⁹⁸ He breaks the rules he set with his girlfriend, that they would not let anyone else into their rooms, “this time only” to show two curious seducers around, before he chases them out again.

4.2 The logic of the ultimate relationship test

The understanding of their existence on the island as a way of being tested for fidelity is shared among participants, but in the beginning the interpretations of how to behave according to this are fragmented among participants and seducers. Multiple times, it is stated that people have to ‘play the game’ and ‘open up to temptation’. There are complaints about Jeremy, who is said to deliberately distance himself from the seducers to avoid being tested in the first place. It is not forbidden to circumvent temptation in this manner, but it is socially frowned upon, and used in the campfires to evoke suspicion in Vanessa. The logic behind it is that if full submergence in the island indeed leads to temptation, the initial relationship was not ‘meant to be’. If one *avoids* temptation they can never know whether they and their partner are meant to be. In many ways, the programme minimises the possibility of avoidance, for instance through ritualised choice. Once every two or three episodes, the participants have to choose a seducer to go on a

⁹⁸ Since the original series is in Dutch, this and all the quotes that follow are translated from Dutch to English by the author.

date with. However, in one instance the presenter chooses the dates. In episode seven, Tim goes on his first date with Cherish, whom Rick Brandsteder chose for him. Afterwards, she states: "He's not really biting, just eating the crumbs." But that same evening, during a party at the bar, Tim and Cherish can be seen flirting a lot more. In this setting, Tim tells Mezdi that he is "going on a date with Cherish five more times." Mezdi says: "I wouldn't do it," to which Tim responds: "Yes, I will. I will seek out temptation and prove that I am stronger."

As it turns out in episode eight, Tim is not stronger. Towards the end of the episode, the voice-over remarks that "Tim seems to have completely forgotten about his Deborah." Grainy footage shows Tim and Cherish at night, sitting side by side on the shore, watching the waves. "I have a girlfriend," says Tim, "but I have a difficult feeling towards you." He then turns around and yells directly at the camera: "We're not doing anything secretly!" He turns back to Cherish, and confesses. "In all honesty? Honestly, in this moment, I am in love with you." Cherish then mentions in an interview shot that she thought it would be a boring *Temptation Island*, "but now I'm finding it pretty tense, and especially because I'm in it." Back on the beach, Tim says "I'm not doing anything that I'll regret. If I do something, I do it with a purpose." The two kiss. Cherish whispers "we're being filmed." To which Tim responds: "so what?" The programme cuts to footage of that same night. From behind a bush, a night vision camera films Tim and Cherish lying on the bench on the porch of his room. "I'm really sorry that I developed feelings for you," Tim whispers. "At the next campfire, it's over. If my girlfriend sees how I'm lying here with you right now..." "You're truly not going to regret this?" Cherish asks. "No." The surveillance camera films Tim pushing Cherish into his room. The Deborah pillow is still there. Cherish asks what to do with it. "Just move that out of the bed," he commands.

Flashback footage is shown of Tim showing Mezdi around in his room, saying how he would need nothing but the pillow and the picture of Deborah. Now, he closes the photograph and puts it down, before the two dive into bed together.

When in episode nine, Mezid coaxes Tim's explanation for his actions from the previous night, Tim adopts the logic that has been established about how to behave in the resort. The following dialogue takes place on the porch before Tim's room. Tim sits on the left within the frame, in close-up. Mezdi sits on the right in medium close-up. Dramatic piano music plays in the background.

TIM: I cannot help my own feelings.

MEZDI: You can guide them, you can close yourself off to Cherish.

T: Yes, but that's not why I'm here.

[*Silence*]

T: Look, I don't want to hurt Deborah. I want to - [*he stares at the floor*]

M: You definitely will, dude. And how. You're going to fuck her up big time, dude. Really. You're truly showing childish behaviour.

T [*in an interview shot*]: I really don't want to hurt Deborah. I really, really don't want to hurt her. Because she doesn't deserve that. [*He begins to tear up*] But here, feelings have emerged. Feelings that I haven't been able to help. But I truly don't want to - [*he sobs*] I don't want to hurt Deborah.

[*Close-up of Tim back on the porch. An acoustic song with female vocals about apologies begins to play*]

M: Don't do this again. Really.

T: I just want to be who I am, and -

M: Yeah, but you're talking about 'I want this', 'I want to be who I am.' Then who is Deborah? Is she nothing? Does she mean nothing?

T: Deborah is everything.

M: Okay. Then treat her like everything, man.

T: Yes, but then I have to be honest towards her -

M: Then you explain to her -

T: And not suddenly - [*he crosses his arms, signifying the act of emotionally closing himself off*]

M: You are going to do that. She would do the same for you.

[*Silence. Only music plays.*]

M: You were a man with a mission. Mission has failed.

Choosing to commit adultery on *Temptation Island* is different from the same decision when made outside of the programme in multiple ways. Firstly, the decision is public, for it is recorded, and the committer *knows* that. Thus, their partner also knows not only that their girlfriend or boyfriend has cheated on them, but also that they have done this while knowing that their partner would see it. When talking about 'hurting Deborah', Tim and Mezdi not only mean hurting her with the disclosure of the misstep, but with the *deliberacy* of the disclosure itself.

Secondly, because in the surveilled world of *Temptation Island* the truth will always come to light, the moral value of loyalty is easily interchanged with that of honesty and certainty. As a consequence of the documentation and inevitable presentation of his actions, Tim no longer has a choice but to embrace his affection for Cherish, because it is epistemologically irreversible: *everyone knows*. There is no point in lying and no point in

regret. “Nothing bothers me anymore,” he tells Cherish when again, she points out the presence of a camera. Now that his relationship with Deborah is a sunk cost, secrecy is no longer an option, and Tim is forced to completely stand behind his choice. Where others justify their choice by referring to their partner’s own misheaps, such as Danielle, Megan and Kevin, Tim cannot do this because everybody agrees that Deborah has not done anything that could catalyze or justify this action. Thus, Tim seeks justification not in hating Deborah, but in loving her. In episode ten, Tim explains his actions:

Look, this is *Temptation Island*, and then you have to open up to temptation. And so I did. And I honestly think that if this can pierce through a four year relationship with a girl whom I love so much, whom I was about to propose to, then I think I have to be honest with her and with myself.

With this justification and the knowledge of irreversibility, Tim takes his romance with Cherish so far that other participants and seducers are constantly filmed commenting or otherwise reacting to it. When the two kiss in plain public, one seducer yells out “what the fuck is happening.” From this point on, Tim and Cherish consistently behave like a couple in front of the camera. The same level of intensity of his love for Deborah at the beginning, Tim has transferred directly to Cherish. In episode nine, Tim weeps into Cherish’s neck: “How can I be so in love with you?” In episode ten, Cherish moves into Tim’s room, where a domestic scene plays out in which he calls her ‘honey’. This continues for the rest of the season.

Thirdly, because the entirety of *Temptation Island* is designed to seduce someone into adultery, cheating is not the result of decision making among a plurality of choices,

but rather of the *inability to resist* the one force that is pulling from all sides. In other words, especially on *Temptation Island*, adultery is posited as a passive choice rather than an active one. Tim emphasises this by saying that he cannot help his feelings, that they have taken over. In episode eight, he uses a botanical metaphor in an attempt to explain how he fell for Cherish:

I don't know if you know poison ivy. The ivy is a plant, which grows in between the cracks of everything. And I don't understand how this ivy - I won't assign it the wrong word, it's been love that has grown, but that it - has managed to find its way in between things.

Tim sees himself as the victim of his love. Throughout the rest of the season, he keeps emphasising how his feelings overcame him, how he could not help it. In episode ten he says "I feel bad about it, but it's not something that I chose myself. It just happened by itself and... maybe it was meant to be." But the programme disagrees. By contrasting Tim to Mezdi, Vanessa and Jeremy, the latter two having not a single error on the show, the programme suggests that the outcome for its participants is determined by their individual conduct. Jeremy and Vanessa passing the test legitimises it, because they prove that failure is not inevitable. By having some pass the test, the programme manages to establish itself as an objective test that can be passed.

4.3 Enhanced and true selves

The programme implies what Couldry identified as the ‘basic media value’ of mediated reality as superior over unmediated reality. Partners go in with the purpose of ‘proving’ themselves to one another. Participants declare that they feel ‘more real’ and ‘more alive’ than they ever have. After her deed, Megan states that she is now finally beginning to see clearly after all this time that she was ‘trapped’ in Belgium with Kevin. For her, being on *Temptation Island* opened her eyes and enable her to reinvent herself as a person. Once entangled in his affair with Cherish, Tim states: “Living with Deborah and living with Cherish are different things. Here, I can be a 110% myself.” The hyperreal has produced ‘enhanced’ versions of the participants, who experience their current reality as a superior version of the reality they have momentarily left behind. Tim ceremonially seals this realisation in episode ten by stripping the notes from his window he had initially placed there as references to the moral order from the world he knew before *Temptation Island*. Now, he embraces *Temptation Island* as a new, true home.

Moreover, partners perceive each other’s behaviour on *Temptation Island* as more indicative of their ‘true self’ than their behaviour at home - which is why they participate. For them, seeing their partner on a screen is the closest they can come to a true image of their significant other, because their eyes are *not there*, but have been replaced by cameras. Seeing Tim flirt with Cherish at the second campfire, Deborah declares: “I don’t know him this way.” In the third campfire, she is shown the events from episode eight. “Do you think he is in love?” the presenter asks. “I cannot answer that,” a tearful Deborah replies, “because I thought he was also in love with me. Now you can see how fast someone’s everything, which I was, can be replaced.” She is surprisingly contained, and

only starts to weep at Tim's "so what" in response to Cherish pointing out the camera as the two are kissing in the dark. But the moment the women have returned, it is clear that the cathartic screaming "I hate him so much!" that the programme used at almost every promotion montage, is Deborah's. Her emotional release comes only at the moment when she is not directly filmed, but only surveillance cameras can get a hold of her. She hides in her room, inconsolably sobbing. "Who was I?" she asks the next morning, still heartbroken. When she is confronted at the fourth campfire in episode twelve with footage of Tim decorating his bed with rosebuds to surprise Cherish, she responds with "I'm just asking myself: who is Tim?" Upon her return to the resort, she runs to the bathroom to cry in Vanessa's arms. "I just cannot understand," she says, "I was his everything, his world, blah blah blah. Was it all fake?" Instead of perceiving the current situation as fake, Deborah appears to have begun to question the reality of the world outside *Temptation Island*.

Reflection and dissolution: Mezdi's reverse switch

The strong influence of the simulation on Tim has the reverse effect on other participants. When confronted with Tim's newfound obsession over Cherish, Mezdi changes his behaviour drastically. At the start of the show, he enraged his girlfriend Danielle by letting seducer Laethitia suck on his earlobe, and going into the sea at night with a topless seducer. But while the show now focuses on Tim and Cherish, Mezdi can be seen judging the situation from the sidelines, reluctant to join parties and keeping his distance from the seducers. In episode nine, Mezdi reminds Tim, Cherish, and the audience of Tim's marriage plans by handing Tim a fake ring made out of candy to give to Cherish. Tim

happily puts it around Cherish's finger, after which he states in an interview shot: "I think that everyone is genuinely happy for us." A few minutes later, sitting hunched over a drink at the bar, Mezdi tells one of the seducers: "I love Danielle, and if I lost her to *Temptation Island* I'd be the biggest fucking idiot ever." For Mezdi, Tim has become a reflective surface in which he sees himself, granting him an ability to recognise the power of the simulation and thereby developing an 'immunity' to it. At the end of the episode, Mezdi is seen in a surveillance shot standing in Tim's room, watching the couple asleep in bed. He removes Deborah's shirt from the pillow next to the bed and stores it in a drawer. He does the same with the photograph on the nightstand. Not only Tim's actions, but the disclosure of those actions, is disturbing to him. "Seeing your boyfriend in bed with another lady is bad enough," he says in an interview shot, "but seeing your shirt next to it, that will break you. I wish Tim and Cherish all the luck in the world, but step out of your fantasy world and face reality, because it's going to be a completely different world."

The question of sincerity

What Mezdi comes to realise here, is the very problem *Temptation Island* poses on its participants as an implication of its setup, rather than the core of the test itself: the sincerity of the seducers, and their (in)ability to reciprocate. This question of sincerity arises from the partners' knowledge that the seducers are both actors and nonactors at the same time. They participate under their own name and without a script, but are equipped with the task of doing everything it takes to make the participants cheat on their partner. However, this does not exclude the possibility that seducers develop feelings too, as seen in the case of seducer Chloe's desire to continue dating Kevin after the show. Both

the seducers and the partners occasionally reflect on their role within the program. They do this among each other as well as to the camera. When Danielle isolates herself because she misses her boyfriend, Fabrizio admits he feels guilty about fulfilling his task of having to seduce her. Although he wishes to console her as a possible way of getting closer to her, he decides to keep his distance.

Danielle and her fellow participants have similar debates on the extent to which the seducers' expressed sentiments are genuine. She remarks: "You simply don't know whether [the guys] are real. They participated as seducers. They *are* seducers, however sweet they may be." Reflected in these instances is an awareness of the level of simulation the participants exist in. The authenticity of their own emotion is fully evident to them, but that of the seducers can only be known from an inquiry, the answers to which are fundamentally unreliable. It is impossible to know whether seducers tell the truth, because within the new moral order of the programme they are not ethically obliged to do so. Occasionally, honesty interferes with their main objective of seduction, which drives the simulation. In an attempt to pierce through this and find out whether Joshua *truly* likes her, Megan asks: "If we had met outside of *Temptation Island*, would you still have noticed me?" His positive answer further convinces her to sleep with him, although it later turns out he does not actually reciprocate her feelings. Lying together in a hammock in episode eight, Tim asks Cherish: "I'm going to ask you one thing, and I want you to be honest with me: sincere or *temptation*?" She answers: "Sincere, because I don't like playing games. Really, I swear it."

In these interactions, a space is created where reality and simulation meet, and become indistinguishable. The existential dialogue, then, serves as a way for the participants to make sense of their current existence, and gain awareness of the

hyperreality of the situation. If the production team exerts its hegemony over the participants by obscuring its interventions and disguising obligatory ritualised choice-making as autonomous conduct, talking among one another on a meta level is resistance, because it redefines the seducers as mere actors and reminds of the possibility that their emotions as displayed are insincere.

Despite Mezdi's efforts to convince Tim that he should hold on to Deborah, because after the show Cherish will disappoint him and he will end up with nothing, Tim strongly believes in Cherish's sincerity. Meanwhile, to the camera and to her fellow seducers, Cherish admits that her feelings for Tim are minimal. No longer having the conflict of Tim's potentiality as a cheater, the programme uses the fundamental asymmetry of their feelings for each other to create dramatic irony during the last seven episodes. In episode fourteen, Cherish tells the camera: "I don't yet believe [Tim] is the one. Personality wise, he's a super sweet, loyal guy, which I value in a relationship. But he is too sweet, and that is what I'm afraid of. It restrains me. If you're too sweet, I'll get bored." The programme then shows a conversation between Tim and Cherish, where Tim tells her: "I'm happy that I can be certain you're not playing a game. (...) That I asked you about your feelings, and that you swore on everything, on your mother, your horse, you swore... That convinced me that it wasn't a game for you, that there was more behind it."

While Tim perceives himself in a relationship with Cherish as more real, Cherish does the opposite. Her role as part of the simulation provides her with a greater capacity to distinguish between acted and sincere. In episode fourteen, right before the finale, she says: "I think it's just a summer love and that [Tim] fails to see that for himself. But the realisation will come when he returns home, and he will miss Deborah. Because that is real love and all of this is not real. It's a bit... acted." Although at the beginning, she was

honest about wanting to succeed in seducing Tim, at this point she is forced to pretend to have feelings that she does not have. Having ecstatically embraced his situation as real as can be, Tim does not recognise her behaviour as feigned. Both Cherish and the voice-over describe Tim as having “his head in the clouds.” Due to her inability to conceal the fact of her simulation to the others on the island, Cherish contributes to Tim dissolving the simulation for other participants as a reflective surface. Her admitting to act strengthens the general perception of Tim’s behaviour as irrational, which makes Mezdi aware of the dangers of him losing his own rationality.

4.4 The final money shot (sacrifice)

Baudrillard wrote that the Loud family sacrificed itself for the liturgical drama of a family that is statistically perfect. I argue that Tim and Deborah have done the same for young couples with marriage plans. At the time of the production, Tim was thirty - about three years away from the average age at which men in Belgium get married.⁹⁹ Before Tim fell for Cherish, he is filmed constantly discussing his marriage plans with Deborah. Vice versa, Deborah only talks about her plans with Tim during the first week. After, the programme constantly reminds the audience of these promises through flashbacks, voice-overs, and through other participants and seducers in the resort commenting on it. Especially the mantra “*huisje, tuintje, kindje*” is used in almost every single episode.

In the season finale, the couples are reunited. Tim and Deborah are saved for last. Before they can see each other, they are interviewed by the presenters. Rick asks what

⁹⁹ StatBel, “Belg trouwt steeds later en scheidt steeds minder,” November 6, 2018. <https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/themas/bevolking/partnerschap/huwelijken>

Tim has done to the ring he brought to the island. Tim pats on his pocket. “What will you do with it?” Rick asks. “I bought it for Deborah,” Tim answers, “so it’s for Deborah.” Meanwhile, Deborah states to Annelien that she will never forgive Tim. When finally Rick walks Tim to the space where Deborah is waiting, Tim appears teary-eyed. Deborah does not look at him, she stares ahead. “*Ca va?*” asks Tim. “What do you think?” she responds. For fifteen seconds, nobody says anything, while crickets chirp in the background and the camera pans around the couple side by side on the bench. Tim lowers his head.

TIM: Where do I start? At the beginning, I suppose? At the first day? Everyone knows why I came here.

DEBORAH: So do I.

T: Yeah. I was here to propose to you. I played *Temptation* the way it is expected. I challenged the temptation, so to say. There are... feelings have really emerged for someone.

[*Silence. Close-up of Deborah staring at Tim.*]

D: Okay.

T: Sorry it had to be this way. I didn’t have sex or anything. But it is what it is. I want to know... I don’t know if you want it, but I always want to be there for you. I never said a bad word about you. I keep telling people what a beautiful girl you are.

She stares at him without a word. Tim stares into the camera. The background music has slowly been building up, and now sounds menacing. Annelien breaks the silence, asking Deborah what she blames Tim for the most. She answers that she thinks he should have shown respect and waited until they picked up their lives in Belgium. “If he would break

up then and said ‘okay, my feelings for Deborah are no longer sincere’ and then acts on it, I would be more capable of understanding what happened here.” Then Annelien turns to Tim, and asks: “And do you think it’s a bit naive that this will be the love of your life?” referring to Cherish.

T: No, I don’t think so, and I’m not going to say this will be the love of my life, but the chances are there.

ANNELIEN: Really?

T: Yeah, I think so.

RICK: Even now that you’re seeing her [*gestures at Deborah*] after two weeks?

T: It definitely touches me to see her again. Somewhere I know I’m throwing away a beautiful girl right now. And I mean that sincerely.

[*Silence*]

T: I brought your ring. Whether you want it or not. It might not be your engagement ring anymore, but I bought it for you. Do with it whatever you want. I hope you accept it, and that you do know somewhere that I always want to be there for you. Whatever happens.

Deborah does not respond. Tim takes the ring from his pocket and offers it to her. After looking at it for a long while, she hesitantly accepts it. Tim sits hunched over, as Deborah sits up straight, talking down at him.

D: I won’t hide the fact that it was very disrespectful towards me. The way you behaved. I did not deserve that. I’ve always behaved well in the resort. I never did anything

wrong, up until the last day. Even on the dream date. I didn't kiss or anything. I even didn't sleep in the same bed. I've always treated you with respect even if you don't deserve it. And being there for me... I think it's too late.

[*Silence. They look at each other.*]

D: You had to be there for me during these weeks. Not after.

[*Silence*]

D: And the ring... to be honest, I would like to burn it and leave everything behind here. Because it's of use to neither of us.

[*Silence*]

D: And this is a final goodbye.

T: No friends or anything?

D: No. It ends here.

Deborah tosses the ring into the fire. Dramatic music plays over the close-up of the ring in the flames, which is the final shot of the entire season. This money shot summarises the odyssey into Timtation. The ring was a promise, an expectation, a reference for Tim and Deborah's personal teleology: the fantasy of a televised proposal. But instead, the simulation's counter-teleology of seduction turned the spectacle into a sacrificial one. Tim and Deborah have sacrificed their future wedding for television. In the words of Baudrillard: "Because heavenly fire no longer falls on corrupted cities, it is the camera lens that, like a laser, comes to pierce lived reality in order to put it to death."¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 28.

4.5 Aftermath: being ‘Timation’

On 13 April 2018, Tim posted a photograph on his Instagram account @Timation_2018 of a new tattoo on his lower arm. Seducer Fabrizio and his girlfriend Pommeline, a seducer from the previous season, livestreamed and vlogged the application process for Instagram and YouTube respectively. The tattoo resembles the logo of *Temptation Island*, but ‘Temptation’ has been replaced with ‘Timation’, accompanied by a diamond and two cherries, as references to the engagement ring and to Cherish.¹⁰¹

The season finale of *Temptation Island* 2018 aired on 3 May and was immediately followed by a two-hour special of *Temptation Talk*, the spin-off talk show, in which all participants and seducers returned half a year after the production. Through interviews and short documentaries, the special provided updates on the lives of its stars. This was the first time Tim and Deborah saw one another again. A brief documentary was shown about the present life of Tim. He had returned to living with his mother. Upon his return to Belgium, Tim had been rejected by Cherish and the documentary showed him and his new girlfriend (whose face was blurred out) walking past a jewelry store looking at rings and making wedding plans. After the fragment ended, Tim admitted that he no longer had a relationship with the girl the audience had just been shown on the screen, because he had been too occupied with bookings.

In a feature on life after *Temptation Island*, Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* writes that these bookings are managed through the company Star Entertainment, which manages all *Temptation Island* couples and seducers. Before production takes place,

¹⁰¹ Maxime Segers, “‘Timation’ laat bizarre tattoo zetten als aandenken aan *Temptation Island*,” *AD*, April 13, 2018. <https://www.ad.nl/show/timation-laet-bizarre-tattoo-zetten-als-aandenken-aan-temptation-island~a5069591/>

participants must sign a contract that puts producer Warner Brothers in charge of the requests and reimbursements for their future public appearances. In practice, this means the participants and seducers can be booked for parties in clubs and bars as an *act-de-presence* so that people attending the party can take a picture with them. They earn 475 euros per hour and a half, including free drinks. The participant receives half the share, the other half goes to Star Entertainment and Warner Bros. During the time before the last episode, the participants are prohibited to disclose any information.¹⁰²

Physically branded with the show's logo and having become its commodity by contract, 'Timation', formerly known as Tim, blurs the boundaries between reality and the hyperreal *Temptation Island* by materialising into the world under the label of his media self. But from the start it had been the production company that orchestrated his becoming a celetoïd. Preceding their on-screen representation, each participant has already been secured a future celebrity status through a contract, extending the work of being watched beyond the screen. If in Baudrillard's analysis reality TV collapses the window between spectator and spectacle, what is happening here? Are these 'returnees' from *Temptation Island* really back in the world, or are they still actually in *Temptation Island*? Neither: they are proving that there is no actual distinction between the realms.

¹⁰² Romy van der Poel, "Het leven na Temptation Island: langs de clubs met je ex," *NRC Handelsblad*, March 5, 2018, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2018/03/05/wat-op-televisie-werkt-werkt-ook-in-een-club-a1594471>

Conclusion

“I felt as if I were both freer than ever before and more constrained (...) I felt as if I could do anything as long as *I did not mind being watched.*”

(Jeff Vandermeer, *Annihilation*, 2014)

Temptation Island is a programme of a paradoxical nature. It endeavours to expose truth by the means of a situation that is inherently artificial. Through combining elements of seclusion, surveillance, ritual, choice, confession, obscured interventions, intimacy, and asymmetric information, the show's producers create an 'artificial microcosm' that enables what Carpentier calls a 'race into decline'. This race in itself offers the conditions for a climactic 'money shot' that reveals true, raw, emotion experienced by an ordinary, yet by selection television-worthy, person, who may or may not briefly continue media-existence as aceletoid. Through the emphasis on individual conduct and the illusion of free choice while offering limited options, *Temptation Island* legitimises itself as an objective test that can be passed if a relationship is 'meant to be', according to the conservative moral standards which Andrejevic argued the program holds in place by subverting them.

The artificiality of the situation reaches a level where what happens in *Temptation Island* is not representing any original anymore, but elevates it to the realm of what Baudrillard coined a third-order simulation: the hyperreal. In all fifteen episodes there is only one direct reference to the geographical location of the resorts, which are interchangeable *non-lieux*. Due to the camera surveillance that is both immediate and hypermediate, documentation equals creation, because of the friction between the

participants who think they know when they are being watched and the production team that has full knowledge of the surveillance's limitations. Continuously exposed to the programme itself in what I called a feedback-loop, normalised through the ritual of the campfire, the referent for the participants that makes up the moral framework underlying their choice-making shifts from the 'real' world to the universe of *Temptation Island*. But this world measures its value not in terms of good and evil, but in terms of the couple's resilience to the seduction attempted by people whose performative value is measured in terms of their ability to seduce the resilient. Although participants are aware that the seducer's sincerity is a wager, which they discuss in what I called existential dialogues, the new moral framework's legitimacy of deceit causes unresolvable epistemological insecurity for the participants, providing the show with an extra layer of dramatic irony by intercepting the general narrative with medium close-up confession shots of the seducers.

The entirety of this setup I conclude to be the fertile ground that bred 'Timation' in the 2018 season of *Temptation Island*, referring to Tim's abandonment of his wedding plans with Deborah accompanied by a leap into adultery with Cherish, who then became his on-island girlfriend. At the very beginning Tim set up a shield of references to the old order, in an attempt to resist the blankness of the non-place. But once materialised inside hyperreality, these objects lost their meaning because they began to refer to the Deborah that Tim only saw on the screen - the Deborah that was also in *Temptation Island*. The final object stripped of its meaning was the ring, after being first mockingly imitated by a toy ring at the courtesy of Mezdi, then reduced to its retail value when Tim offers it back to Deborah at the final reunion, and then to nothing when she tosses it in the fire.

With nothing to hold on to but abstract representations of Deborah that become increasingly meaningless, she is easily substituted. Persuaded to ‘open himself up to temptation’ and adopting the hegemonic logic that a healthy future relationship must be predicated upon mutual trust, Tim falls straight into the arms of Cherish and decides to replace Deborah with her, strongly believing he has found true, better love. What makes this situation hyperreal is not that Cherish has to pretend to have feelings for Tim, but that it simply *does not matter* whether her feelings are real or not. For Tim, when he compares them to Deborah’s, they are more real than real. *Temptation Island* is a realm beyond reality where truth and lie are so entwined that it produces a complete blurring of any boundary between simulation and non-simulation.

Tim becoming ‘Timation’ is a transformation not primarily defined by Tim’s acquired preference of Cherish over Deborah. As early as episode seven, Tim can be seen covering his microphone and whispering to Mezdi that he likes “that blonde.” At the beginning, truth came about only in the unmediated moments. The real ‘switch’ was Tim first concealing his feelings from the camera, to developing the insatiable desire to expose himself to the world. This started the moment Cherish pointed out the cameras, to which Tim responded with “so what.” It is therefore no surprise that it were these words rather than Tim’s act of adultery that brought Deborah to lose control over her tears, providing the viewer with a ‘money shot’ that revealed not only Tim’s true self, but the self Deborah was trying to conceal all at the same time.

As a cultural phenomenon, *Temptation Island* is a show about truth, acquired through a God-like perspective facilitated by the media of surveillance. The campfires provide a prophetic insight into who a significant other *really* is - or rather, who they always were. But this premise hides the fact that the ‘true’ self shown on-screen is not

actually an oppressed ego pushed to the surface, but a newly created product of the artificial environment of *Temptation Island* that is *shaped* by the presence of media. What partners assume to be *revelation*, is in fact *transformation*. The show is not revealing the truth nor hiding it. As a Baudrillardian deterrence machine, it is concealing the fact that there is no such thing as a ‘true self’ by disguising transformation as revelation. Here lies the fundamental paradox of reality TV that many scholars, from Couldry to Andrejevic, have touched upon: it annihilates reality in the process of trying to capture it.

The show suggests that ‘Timation’ was always an inherent part of Tim, that the Tim who wants to marry Cherish is the ‘real’ Tim. But there never was a realer Tim than the Tim who went into the simulation. ‘Timation’ emerged from the contact zone between reality and simulation, modelled after a fourteen-day holiday in a tropical resort, as an enhanced model of Tim Wauters. He has become a product of hyperreality, who claims he feels realer than real once he has surrendered to temptation inside the simulation. Why? Stripping Tim of all the mechanical elements that come with being a hybrid model of media-reality, the essence of his switch is perhaps one that is deeply tragic and, more importantly, inevitably universal. Tim is thirty years old and in a key moment in his life. Abandoning the freedom of being in his twenties, time has come for him to settle. But such a definitive decision comes with existential fear. Like Baudrillard’s American family and Kavka’s television-worthy participants, Tim and Deborah are showcases of statistical perfection. Like the Louds, they are sacrificed for the sake of spectacle. The prospect of *huisje, tuintje, kindje* literally goes up in flames with the final shot of the ring in the fire.

In all its excess, potential, and devoid of any responsibility or consequence, *Temptation Island* offers him a way out as if it were Neverland: the perfect escape from

adulthood. I am not offering this reading as the explanation for ‘Timtation’, but as an underlying force that made him more receptive to not only falling for Cherish, but for *the simulation itself*. In return for its promise of absolute freedom, Tim has to pay the price of not minding being watched, and of losing everything he had in the world outside *Temptation Island*. But this is a low price to pay once this realm is no longer recognised as ‘not real’, but as something ‘realer than real’. Thus, Cherish becomes realer than Deborah, ‘Timtation’ realer than Tim, and the Thai resort becomes realer than the Belgian home, garden, and child.

Bibliography

Andrejevic, Mark. *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004.

Baudrillard, Jean. "Dust Breeding." *CTheory* (2001).

<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=293>

Baudrillard, Jean. "The Ecstasy of Communication." In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster. The New Press, 2002.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser and Ann Arbor. Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1983.

Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "Television." *European Review* 19, no. 3 (2001): 245-256.

Carpentier, Nico. "Participation and power in the television program *Temptation Island*:

'Tits' and 'Melons' on 'Slut Camp'." In *Researching Media, Democracy and*

Participation, edited by Nico Carpentier, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Kaarle

Nordenstreng, Maren Hartmann, Peeter Vihalemm, and Bart Cammaerts, 135-147.

Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2006.

Brenton, Sam and Reuben Cohen. *Shooting People: Adventures in Reality TV*. New York: Verso, 2003.

Corner, John. "Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions." *Television & New Media* 3, no. 3 (2002): 255-269.

Couldry, Nick. "Reality TV, or The Secret Theater of Neoliberalism." *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 30, no. 3 (2008): 3-13.

Couldry, Nick. "Teaching us to fake it: the ritualized norms of television's 'reality' games." In *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, edited by Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

- Denzin, Norman K. "The cinematic society and the reflexive interview." *Society* 49, no. 4 (2012): 339-348.
- Dubrofsky, Rachel E. "Fallen Women in Reality TV: A Pornography of Emotion." *Feminist Media Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 354-368.
- Hill, Annette. "Reality TV: Performance, Authenticity, and Television Audiences." In *A Companion to Television*, edited by Janet Wasko. Blackwell Publishing, 2010.
- Jones, Meredith. "Media-bodies and screen-births: Cosmetic surgery reality television." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22, no. 4 (2008): 515-524.
- Kavka, Misha. "Love 'n the Real; or, How I Learned to Love Reality TV." In *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to 'Reality' TV and Beyond*, edited by Geoff King. Bristol: Intellect Ltd., 2005.
- Kavka, Misha. *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Kress, Gunther and Theo Van Leeuwen. *Multimodal Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001.
- Lorenzo-Dus, Nuria and Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich. *Real Talk: Reality Television and Discourse Analysis in Action*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Madsen, Ole Jacob and Svend Brinkmann. "Lost in Paradise: *Paradise Hotel* and the Showcase of Shamelessness." *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 12, no. 5 (2012): 459-467.
- Murray, Susan and Laurie Ouellette. "Introduction." In *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2004.
- Palmer, Gareth. "Big Brother: An Experiment in Governance." *Television & New Media* 3, no. 3 (2002): 395-310.
- Pecora, Vincent. "The Culture of Surveillance." *Qualitative Sociology* 25, no. 3 (2002): 345-359.
- Reijmer, Loes. "Wat maakte dit seizoen van *Temptation Island* zo slecht?" *De Volkskrant*, May 14, 2019. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/wat-maakte-dit-seizoen-van-temptation-island-zo-slecht~b552c513/>

Rojek, Chris. *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion, 2001.

RTL Boulevard. "Temptation-Cherish doet schokkende onthulling." Last modified May 1, 2018.

<https://www.rtlboulevard.nl/entertainment/tv/artikel/4131011/temptation-cherish-doet-schokkende-onthulling>

RTL Late Night. Episode 23. "Waarom kijken we met z'n allen naar Temptation Island?"

Featuring Twan Huys, Olcay Gulsen and Dan Hassler-Forest. Aired 13 February, 2019,

on RTL 4. <https://www.rtl.nl/video/eb8688do-8536-47e1-bafa-72foafb84ofd/>

Segers, Maxime. "'Timation' laat bizarre tattoo zetten als aandenken aan *Temptation Island*."

AD, April 13, 2018. <https://www.ad.nl/show/timation-laet-bizarre-tattoo-zetten-als-aandenken-aan-temptation-island~a5069591/>

StatBel. "Belg trouwt steeds later en scheidt steeds minder." Last modified November 6, 2018.

<https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/themas/bevolking/partnerschap/huwelijken>

Temptation Island. The complete tenth season. Warner Brothers. Aired between February 1 and

May 3, 2018, on RTL 5. <https://www.videoland.com/series/948/temptation-island/2149>

Van der Poel, Romy. "Het leven na *Temptation Island*: langs de clubs met je ex." *NRC*

Handelsblad, March 5, 2018. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2018/03/05/wat-op-televisie-werkt-werkt-ook-in-een-club-a1594471>

Williams, Linda. "Fetishism and Hard Core: Marx, Freud, and 'The Money Shot'." In *For Adult*

Users Only: The Dilemma of Violent Pornography, edited by Susan Gubar and Joan

Hoff. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989.