3.3 Aware Media in John Jeremiah Sullivan's "Getting Down to What is Really Real" (2011)

John Jeremiah Sullivan's playful "Getting Down to What Is Really Real" (2011)[1] treats the mediated self-awareness of another human being as its central topic. The text, like "Upon This Rock," was first published in *GQ*. It appeared in 2005 under the title "Leaving Reality." Sullivan then included an amended version of it, entitled "Getting Down to What is Really Real" in the 2011 essay collection *Pulphead*. In this piece, Sullivan meets with former cast members of the reality TV show *The Real World: Back to New York* (2001) and describes how their self-awareness of their status as media affects their behavior. The format, whose first season was broadcast in 1992, has arguably contributed to the popularization of self-disclosure and self-branding in Millennial youth culture.[2] Particularly in later seasons like the one written about by Sullivan, its formula shifts to a more consciously self-reflexive play with the fourth wall as producers more actively and transparently influenced the plot and characters.[3] In his piece, Sullivan contrasts the cast members' performances in reality and on TV with his own performing for readers. Having explicitly situated the cast members in a communicative relationship, Sullivan himself forms a similarly complex subjectivity. He characterizes his experience as being shaped by an inner tension between his fandom and his professional role as a writer, blurring the line between the physical experience mediated by his body and the experience of watching TV. He, thus, explicitly places the former *Real World* cast members' behavior in the context of a mediatized society and culture. At the same time, he locates within himself the urge for acknowledgment and acceptance that

1 Sullivan, "Getting Down To What Is Really Real."

2 Klein, "'This Is the True Story . . .': The Real World and MTV's Turn to Identity (1992 –)," 59.

3 Klein, 84–85.

he observes in cast members. In this mélange of performed identities, then, Sullivan identifies a critical potential for self-emancipation.

Technical Media and Human Plasticity

Sullivan's perspective is backed by findings in media and communications studies. Importantly, the inventions of media technologies, such as the videocamera or the computer, have contributed to the idea of a kind of plasticity of human subjectivity because, in mediated interpersonal exchange, subjectivities are performed rather than explored. The idea that human subjects develop their identities in social contexts that are akin to the performer-audience relationship in theatre goes back to American sociologist Erving Goffman's book *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959).[4] Goffman argued that humans play different roles depending on the social context, and distinguishes between public and private selves that are performed in order to negotiate identities. Nick Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst have extended the key distinction between audience and performer to include performances that are mediated by technological mass media. Unlike simple performances, where audience and performer are physically present, mediated performances are: "elongated in time and space and fragmented" and are marked by a different performative aesthetic based on construction.[5]

The possibilities for such mediatized performances to shape identities depend, in part, on the media technologies used. In 1995, sociologist Sherry Turkle, for instance, argued that the computer brought about the culture of simulation that Fredric Jameson had associated with postmodernism because—among other things—it created spaces for the construction and reconstruction of human identity. "In simulation", she wrote, " identity can be fluid and multiple, a signifier no longer clearly points to a thing that is signified, and understanding is less likely to proceed through analysis than by navigation through virtual space."[6] More specifically, this culture of simulation

4 Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everday Life*.

5 Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*, 62–63.

6 Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, 49.

manifested itself in the possibility that humans could play different roles as virtual personae while online.[7]

Reality TV is a specific example of how technological media illuminates the performative character of identity construction as an: "extreme form of this everyday role-playing".[8] Annette Hill has argued that, more specifically, in reality TV: "producers, participants and audiences co-create cultural experiences, events and trends."[9] Hill bases her approach on sociologist Viviana Zelizer's work on connected lives and understands this co-creation not as co-operation, but as a: "mingling of economic activity and social relations."[10] This mingling is marked by people's constantly on-going acts of testing, challenging, maintaining, or reinforcing relations to each other.[11]

As performances, participants' acts in reality TV formats are mediated via camera and transmitted to viewers whose reactions are anticipated.[12] Abercrombie and Longhurst have argued that this pervading performativity has created a modern society of narcissism that treats the self as spectacle. However, these performances can also illuminate the contingencies and ambiguities of contemporary subjectivity and spark change. For instance, Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood have argued that: "reality television makes conscious the unconscious iteration that holds the inequalities of class and gender in place"[13] because performances of personhood let audiences take on the roles of judges and critics. This "invitation to the viewer to unpack person performance" creates "moments for critical attention" and consequently "enables audiences to see how utterly incoherent, contradictory and unstable the production of subjectivity and normativity is".[14] In short, it is precisely performativity made particularly palpable by mediatization that potentially raises the awareness of postmodern subjectivity's contingent character.

7 Turkle, 260.
8 Hill, *Reality TV*, 52.
9 Hill, 7.
10 Hill, 8.
11 Hill, 8.
12 Hill, 52–79.
13 Skeggs and Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value*, 222.
14 Skeggs and Wood, 222.

The Viewer Versus the Writer

In this piece, Sullivan appears as an intra-diegetic narrator who actively produces the experience with a very particular subjectivity. Sullivan acts both as a writer with his own intentions and as an uncritical viewer, thereby locating one of the narrative's main tensions within himself. As a writer, Sullivan explicitly states that his intention is to write about a particular social and cultural sphere that is shaped by media technology and the laws of capitalism: [T]his thing I'd heard rumors of, what I'd come to get a peep at: this little bubble economy that *The Real World* and its less-entertaining mutant twin, *Road Rules* (essentially *Real World* in an RV), have made around themselves."[15] Apart from his thematic focus, Sullivan also mentions that he actively gathers material as he concedes that his being present during his main subject's club appearance: "wasn't enough, reporting-wise."[16] As a writer moving about within a particular economic system, Sullivan also follows its rules in order to gather the material that he needs. He asks his subjects out to dinner, in order to interview them, and reports that he bought tickets for a cruise with other *Real World* personalities, although it was ultimately canceled.[17]

Apart from Sullivan's role as writer, it is also his self-characterization as a fan that is described as affecting the experience. In other words, Sullivan situates himself explicitly as viewer/voyeur and, thus, as part of the audience for whom reality TV is produced and performed. Importantly, as this kind of observer, he takes part in the validation of cast members' subjectivities.[18] For instance, Sullivan recounts that the text's main subject, a *Real World* cast member nicknamed the Miz:

> would write in his online diary that he'd been nervous, for the simple reason that I [Sullivan] was there, with my notepad and my judgments and my dubious but sincere claim of being a 'hard-core fan' of MTV's *The Real World* and its various spin-off reality series.[19]

Here, Sullivan indicates that he is not only present as a writer, but also because he is a dedicated viewer of the TV shows in which the Miz appears. Sullivan

15 Sullivan, "Getting Down To What Is Really Real," 91.
16 Sullivan, 100.
17 Sullivan, 100–101.
18 Hill, *Reality TV*, 64–66.
19 Sullivan, "Getting Down To What Is Really Real," 90.

even emphasizes his fan knowledge and, thus, his self-characterization as a dedicated viewer, when he recounts how he knows the name of an unpopular female *Real World* cast member, whom not even the Miz could recall.[20] Furthermore, when Sullivan takes the reality TV stars out to dinner, he tells them about his favorite moments from the show, some of which they do not even remember themselves.[21] Sullivan consequently integrates two aspects of his character that appear contradictory at first glance. On the one hand, he is a writer who needs to come up with something interesting to say about reality TV. On the other hand, Sullivan is a fan of the shows and he has watched them avidly down through the years, which makes him appear uncritical and hence unprofessional.

Indeed, these two roles are at odds in the text. On several occasions, Sullivan describes himself as being unable to perform the actions that his role as a writer demands from him, precisely because he is also a viewer. When Sullivan meets the Miz, Coral, and Melissa for dinner, for example, he describes how his excitement about actually having the opportunity to meet them in person gets in the way of his professional duties:

> I was curious to see if they were real. If all those years spent being themselves for a living had left them with selves to be, or if they'd maybe begun to phase out of existence, like on a *Star Trek* episode. But then I got distracted.[22]

The distraction, Sullivan later admits, has emotional roots:

> It took me about twenty minutes to put together what was off about our interview: I was enjoying it. Ordinarily, one is tense interrogating strangers, worried about freezing or forgetting to ask what'll turn out to be the only important question. But since we'd all sat down, I'd been totally, totally at ease.[23]

As he notes here, Sullivan feels more comfortable in his role as a fan viewer than as a professional reporter getting the material that he needs for his writing. He uses the access to the more natural or human side of his subjects as grounds for

20 Sullivan, 96.
21 Sullivan, 100–101.
22 Sullivan, 100.
23 Sullivan, 101.

abandoning his original intention of finding out whether the reality TV stars were still real.

Sullivan's preference for a more human role manifests itself in his refraining from actions that might otherwise be deemed as belonging to his professional duties. During the same dinner scene, for instance, when the Miz complains about viewers' lack of restraint when they approach him, even when he is eating in a restaurant, Sullivan holds himself back:

> I was about to point out to the Miz that he might seem less approachable to folks like me if he'd quit taking money to party with us at places like the Avalon Nightclub, but that seemed like a real dick thing to say to a guy who's given me so much joy over the years.[24]

Once again, Sullivan justifies his lack of professionalism by appealing to the positive feelings the Miz has produced in him. Sullivan appears even more unprofessional when he concedes that he did not conduct any further research even though it would have helped to shed further light on his subject. After being told that MTV has a psychologist on staff, who contributes to fomenting drama on set, he remains passive:

> I'd suspected there were puppeteers involved in *The Real World*, invisibly instigating 'drama,' but to think that the network had gone for it and hired a shrink? … Turns out Dr. Laura is a psychologist, not a psychiatrist, which is better, when you think about it, because psychologists don't have to take the Hippocratic oath, and she's definitely, definitely done some harm. No chance I was going to call her.[25]

Here, Sullivan willfully ignores the fact that the self-conscious fakeness that so fascinates him about *The Real World* might have negative consequences worthy of further investigation.

Hence, it is Sullivan's own subjectivity that reveals the article's stance with respect to *The Real World*. As the joy produced by fake reality interferes with Sullivan's own reality, namely his job as writer, he willingly sides with the fake over the real, which at the same time, suggests that they might ultimately be two

24 Sullivan, 101–102.

25 Sullivan, 107.

sides of the same coin. In other words, in a mediatized culture the rather basic enjoyment of relatability and mere connection appear more humane than existential investigation.

The Reality of Emotion

The blending of reality with fiction is also manifested in Sullivan's depiction of experience as both primarily visual and mediated by the mind. As a viewer, Sullivan sees reality, rather than perceiving it with different sensory organs. However, it is the human body that ultimately functions as the mediator of experience as it processes perceptions through the mind and undergoes emotional responses. When Sullivan first encounters the Miz, for instance, he describes how his own perception of him was likely wrong:

> It was maybe an hour before midnight at the Avalon Nightclub in Chapel Hill and the Miz was feeling nervous. I didn't pick up on this at the time – I mean, I couldn't tell. To me he looked like he's always looked, like he's looked since his debut season, back when I first fell in love with his antics.[26]

Here, in his article's opening passage, Sullivan observes the person standing next to him in a nightclub as if he were watching him on television. Furthermore, he associates television with a kind of permanence of impression and superficiality. Sullivan describes how the Miz: "looked so utterly guileless and unselfconscious as to seem incapable of nervousness,"[27] which indirectly suggests that TV communicates a lack of self-awareness and might produce the impression of confidence. However, as hinted at above, Sullivan is contradicted by the Miz, who later writes in an online diary that Sullivan's presence made him nervous. In any case, Sullivan chastises neither TV for affecting reality negatively nor the Miz for acting. Instead, he blames himself for having drawn a conclusion about the Miz' feelings from how he looked. Experience exclusively based on visual impressions, Sullivan seems to suggest, is prone to misconceptions. Similar to the situation with Saunders in "Buddha Boy," then, Sullivan's mind acts as the main mediator of experience.

26 Sullivan, 89.

27 Sullivan, 90.

This agency of the mind is repeatedly emphasized—particularly with regard to the interpretation of mediated experience. It is Sullivan's mind that determines whether it is important that reality and TV be kept apart. During the dinner interview scene, for instance, it is precisely the blending of TV and reality that made him feel at ease:

> Then I saw that this light, this tremulous, bluish light playing over their faces, was the very light by which I knew them best. I'd instinctively brought them to this place in Beverly Hills, Blue on Blue, that has open cabanas around a pool, and we were lounging in one, and the light was shining on their amazing, poreless skin. How many times had I sat with them like this, by pools and Jacuzzis? How often had we chilled like this, just drinking and making points? Thousands of times. My nervous system had convinced itself we were on the show.[28]

It is Sullivan's perception of the light—once again an exclusively visual perception—that is described as making him think that he is on the actual TV show. As he makes clear in the final sentence, TV and reality blur because his nervous system—not his eyes—cannot keep the two apart.

In the text's final scene, Sullivan similarly portrays the blurring of TV and reality as being primarily visually mediated and emotionally positive. Following his rejection of the idea of calling the TV show's psychologist, Sullivan shifts his focus:

> No, I'll picture the Miz instead, and see him as he was when I was walking out of Avalon, when we said goodbye. He was dancing with that girl whose breast he had signed. They were grinding. The night had gone well. He saw that I was leaving and gave me a wave and a look, like, 'You're takin' off?' And I shouted, 'Yeah, gotta go!' And he shouted, 'Cool, bro!' and then he went back to dancing. The colored lights were on his face. People were watching.[29]

Here, too, Sullivan mainly describes the scene in visual terms and compares the dance floor to a TV set, where the actors are turned into watched objects. As in the earlier restaurant scene, however, this state of being the object of attention and special lighting is accompanied by a positive feeling. Whereas there Sullivan had described himself as feeling at ease, here he sees the Miz as being

28 Sullivan, 101.

29 Sullivan, 107.

in a certain state of joyful connection. Furthermore, the reality of the dance floor, as Sullivan suggests, is at least in part pleasurable for the Miz because it is TV-like. Once again, Sullivan links the processing of visual perceptions by the mind—this time merely the imagined experiences of the Miz—with a positive emotional response.

In sum, Sullivan investigates the connections between mainly visual experience with positive, emotional senses of connection and acknowledgment. In these processes, his human body functions as the master mediator, producing thoughts and emotional responses to the visual impressions. It is the quality of these responses that Sullivan uses to measure and to judge experience. Again, the questions of whether this highly mediated experience is authentic or whether reality itself might even be fake are of little interest to him.

The Fiction Within

In depicting the processing mind as the master mediator of experience, Sullivan occasionally also elaborates on its workings as a sense-maker. In these instances, he describes his mind as employing fiction either to make sense of or to communicate reality. He locates the source of the meaning of his experience in the particular consciousness of his subjectivity as a writer. In this text, this state of affairs is manifested in the different ways in which Sullivan uses imagination to round off a certain narrative or provide closure to himself. For instance, Sullivan uses it to fill in the gaps in his journalistic research as he invents quotes to capture the critical debate surrounding reality TV that serves to contextualize the argument of his text:

> There was a time when people liked to point out that reality TV isn't really real. 'They're just acting up for the cameras.' 'That's staged.' 'The producers are telling them what to do!' 'I hate those motherfuckers!' and so forth. Then there was a sort of *deuxième naïveté* when people thought, Maybe there's something real about it. 'Because you know, we can be narcissistic like that.' 'It's our culture.' 'It gives us a window onto certain…' And such things. But I would argue that *all* these different straw people I've invented are missing the single most interesting thing about reality TV, which is the way it has successfully *appropriated reality*.[30]

30 Sullivan, 96–97.

By admitting that he has merely invented "straw people," Sullivan mockingly draws attention to a certain formal requirement for the story to feature real people who are able to provide context for a debate. Technically, then, this invention is a means of avoiding research that Sullivan simply does not view as being necessary. As he positions himself in this imagined conversation, he downplays the need to make a clear reference to reality. In this narrow aspect, he outsources the production of a connection between text and reality to his readers, implying that they are familiar with arguments like these made by real people. Using the fictional voices of his "straw people," Sullivan's mind imaginatively—and at least partly ironically—fills in an evidentiary gap in the meta-argument about the meaning of his experience.

Elsewhere, Sullivan uses imagination in a similar way in order to ironically provide closure for an imagined story of unity. This occurs after having established the various ways in which former cast members of *The Real World* series still profit from their experience, both economically and socially. Since they seem to never leave *The Real World*, even after they have already left, Sullivan literally imagines them all together in a picture:

> A whole little picture bloomed in the mind, of all those former cast members out there, a Manson family with perfect teeth, still hanging out, still feuding, still drunkenly hittin' that (a bunch of them even lived on the same block in Los Angeles, I'd been told), all of them just going around being somebody who'd been on *The Real World*, which is, of course, a show where you just be yourself. I mean, my god, the purity of that…[31]

In this paragraph, Sullivan pokes fun at his own "whole little picture" in at least two ways by ironically claiming purity for his act of imagination. On the one hand, he critically comments on the idea of a unified body of former cast members, all just continuing their lives as if they were still on the show, doing the exact same things. On the other hand, he mocks the general idea of the "whole" image that he himself came up with, in order to get a clear, rounded sense of the story. It is significant that Sullivan, as a writer, refers to his imagination as a: "whole little picture," thereby characterizing it as closed-off, visual, and faintly ridiculous. He implies the existence of parallels between his own mental production of an image, as a reaction to the desire to find closure, and the production of images by other media, such as TV producers. However, as he

31 Sullivan, 93.

gently ridicules the products of his imagination, he suggests that discerning different qualities of fiction is more appealing to him than merely acknowledging their existence.

In a third case, Sullivan uses his imagination for two ends: to provide closure to an episode that almost occurred and to illustrate the strangeness of his admiration for Big Ran, a former cast member of *The Real World*. After telling the Miz, Melissa, and Coral over dinner that a cruise with other former *Real World* stars had been canceled, Sullivan imagines the possibility of a different outcome:

> They canceled the cruise. I don't know if it was for the lack of ticket sales or what, but for a brief period, I wondered if maybe I'd been the only person to purchase a ticket. And then I imagined a scenario in which, for some nitpicky contractual reason, the cruise line had been forced to go through with the package anyway, and it was just me, Big Ran, and Trishelle out there on the seas, drifting around on our ghost ship, eating foam from the chaise cushions. Sure, there'd have been some tears, some wrestling and whatnot, but in the end…[32]

Here, too, Sullivan imaginatively completes a story that, in reality, was left incomplete. Moreover, by gently ridiculing his own vision of this completion, he shifts the focus to a larger issue. Of course, the scenario of him and two former *Real World*-ers being the only people on the cruise, even having to eat cushion foam, is overly surreal. Consequently, Sullivan makes fun of his own desire to spend time with the two under any circumstances. Sullivan's imaginary scenario also ridicules his own prediction that they would all have a good time, because it is shown to be based on the assumption that he could determine the quality of his social interactions with another real human being based solely on the latter's performance on a TV show. Sullivan depicts himself as unrealistically naïve and asserts the existence of an inevitable difference between reality and reality TV, without clearly stating what this difference consists of.

To conclude, Sullivan's descriptions of the workings of imagination present a kind of closure, precisely by making fun of the idea of closure. While revealing a self-conscious desire on Sullivan's part to fill the gaps in his narratives, they also comment on their own psychological function as processes of assigning meaning to reality. Marked out as inevitably human, these reflexive func-

32 Sullivan, 100–101.

tions of fiction, which comment upon the workings of the medium itself, are then positioned as reflecting a core difference between human media, such as a writer, and technical media, such as a video camera. Moreover, despite all of the power that Sullivan ascribes to reality TV, they also position human consciousness as something possessing decisive and powerful agency when it comes to the representation of reality. Drawing on the powers of fiction, Sullivan's mind is described as capable of occasionally illuminating what is real, by also adducing precisely what is not.

Text As Reality Show

Sullivan's self-characterization as a self-conscious medium goes beyond mapping the workings of his inner mind; it also includes a particular concern with the performativity inherent in the communicative relationship with readers—or his own audience—that he is engaged in as writer. This concern is illustrated by his playfully colloquial voice, which seeks to communicate various senses of community between writer and readers, akin to those that exist between viewers and stars of reality TV shows. Sullivan inhabits various roles that can be situated on a spectrum stretching from a rather serious writer to someone on the brink of being smarmy with another human being. His narrative voice contributes to Sullivan's styling of the text as a performative reality show that is aware of the communicative similarities with reality TV.

At his most distant, Sullivan plays the role of a writer who mainly emphasizes that he shares a cultural background with his readers. For instance, having claimed with regard to reality TV that: "the increased awareness of complicity in the falseness of it all"[33] has made characters more real, Sullivan simply asserts: "This is where we are, as a people."[34] Here, he imagines a bigger cultural community with readers—"a people"—based on the shared experience of a reality changed by reality TV. As Sullivan goes on to observe, however, this larger community extends to include a certain communal behavior. Having described the behavior of the shows' stars—their fighting, their crying—he once again refers to the "people" he sees himself as a part of:

33 Sullivan, 98.

34 Sullivan, 98.

> Are we so raw? It must be so. There are simply too many of them – too many shows and too many people on the shows – for them not to be revealing something endemic. This is us, a people of savage sentimentality, weeping and lifting weights.[35]

In contrast to the passage above referring to consciousness, Sullivan includes himself—only reluctantly and because of its sheer size—in the same community of "people" as the cast members of reality TV shows. Nevertheless, it is a community that he imagines both himself and his readers to be a part of. For Sullivan, the distanced writer, the community not only shares a consciousness and certain behaviors, but is also rooted in the shared experience of watching reality TV. Having claimed that the demographic of the cast has changed, for instance, Sullivan asks his readers: "But now – have you watched television recently? From what can be gathered, they're essentially emptying group homes into the studio. It has all gotten so very real. Nobody's acting anymore."[36] By addressing readers directly, Sullivan rhetorically asks for reassurance that readers share the same experiential basis—having watched particular TV programs. This communal experience is even presupposed in a later passage, when Sullivan introduces a former cast member, Melissa, whom he meets for dinner with the Miz and Coral: "Melissa was on the New Orleans Season. She's the one we all saw go off on Julie that time, for the speaking-engagement shadiness."[37] Once again, the community Sullivan points to and includes himself in is a community of watchers who cannot help but identify with the people they watch and thereby have their awareness transformed.

In another, more playful role, Sullivan communicates a narrower sense of community between writer and reader that more explicitly revolves around the shared cultural experience of writing and reading the text at hand. Here, as a writer, Sullivan plays with anticipated reader response and, hence, communicates an awareness of how the roles of reader and writer are themselves performed. When Sullivan introduces the concept of *The Real World/Road Rules Challenge* shows, for instance, he starts his account with by addressing the reader in the following way: "I don't know how ready you are to admit your familiarity with the show and everything about it, so let me go through the

35 Sullivan, 99.
36 Sullivan, 99.
37 Sullivan, 102.

motions of pretending to explain how it operates."[38] The behavioral dynamic that he confronts here as a writer is the same one that he sees at play in reality TV. It is not that the reader might not have had the experience that Sullivan expects; it is rather that the possession of this experience in any form can be viewed as a performative act of self-fashioning. This also holds for Sullivan's interjection towards the end of his presentation of the show's overarching concept. Instead of naming the things that the candidates compete for, he simply interrupts himself with the exclamation: "oh, fuck it! You know how it works."[39] Once again, Sullivan imagines that readers might judge him for explaining himself, possibly deeming it a pedantic performance by a self-absorbed expert. In a third instance, Sullivan explicitly makes fun of readers for potentially having an expectation he does not fulfill. When Sullivan asks the Miz whether his clubbing has taken a toll on him, and the Miz merely answers that he tried not to mix drinks, Sullivan pretends to dig deeper:

> 'But what about your soul?' I said. 'Does it take a toll on your soul?' He looked down at his drink.
> Psych! I didn't ask him that.[40]

Sullivan even teases his readers here, by referring to the performativity of their role. While insinuating that they might potentially be interested in the well-being of a cast member's soul, he openly admits that he himself is not, thereby raising the possibility that the readers might not really care about the question either. In all of these instances, Sullivan establishes a parallel between the communicative relationship of writer and reader and of reality TV star and viewer, thereby communicating an awareness of the possibility of complicity in the performances of all of these roles.

In a third role, Sullivan associates himself a bit more closely with the role of the viewer, a role that he potentially shares with his readers. In this role, he mainly emphasizes their shared desire to have fun together that he also observes in the cast members. This desire is mainly expressed in casual asides to the reader that communicate a sense of intimacy. On one occasion, for instance, he urges the reader to imagine how the cast members' awareness of

38 Sullivan, 92.
39 Sullivan, 92.
40 Sullivan, 95.

their income, as stemming from the simple act of being watched, affects their behavior:

> What if my job were to be on a reality show, being filmed, having you watching me, interior auto-mediation, and so forth? What if it were my reality, bros? Are your faces melting yet?[41]

Here, Sullivan addresses readers, as a community of reality TV watchers, in the second person plural as "bros," thereby indicating a certain familiarity that is exaggerated by his, ultimately joking, rhetorical question. Elsewhere, Sullivan positions himself more clearly in this community as a fellow fan. Having been told that a bar staffed by former cast members would open in Myrtle Beach, Sullivan jokingly states that: "I might just drop in here the little facty-facty that I live an hour from Myrtle Beach, so you all can sit on that."[42] Here, he teases readers as if he were part of a rival group of fans competing for the attention of *Real World* cast members.

In the text's final episode, Sullivan's three roles or personas merge, revealing the complex subjectivity of a medium inhabiting different perspectives. After seeing the Miz dancing with a girl and admitting that he found it hard to think critically of the Miz, Sullivan addresses his readers:

> Remember your senior year in college, what that was like? Partying was the only thing you had to worry about, and when you went out, you could feel people thinking you were cool. The whole idea of being a young American seemed fun. Remember that? Me neither. But the Miz remembers. He figured out a way never to leave that place.
> Bless him, bros.[43]

In this passage, Sullivan styles himself as a detached analyst conveying a thesis about the Miz's behavior. He again jokingly plays with reader expectation and ultimately addresses the readers as "bros" to signal their shared appreciation for the Miz. Here, a composite persona emerges between cast member and readers/viewers; Sullivan has become a conscious writer/fan, acknowledging the Miz's desire for the simple fun he gets from others' attention and the

41 Sullivan, 98.
42 Sullivan, 103.
43 Sullivan, 108.

community thus created. Like the Miz, he also primarily enjoys his freedom to shape his own identities.

Awareness of Self-Awareness

As his personas ultimately converge, in an accepting blend of a critic/writer/fan, Sullivan also resolves the tensions between the writer and fan within himself. After all, his ultimately accepting stance toward the Miz suggests that he deems it possible to play all of these roles at once. The solution appears to reside in his awareness that his self-awareness is a conflicted medium that signals the end of the story. In accordance with the theoretical findings of Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood,[44] Sullivan claims with regard to reality TV that a: "shift toward greater self-consciousness, this increased awareness of complicity in the falseness of it all … made things more real."[45] In fact, Sullivan performs a similar shift toward greater self-consciousness within himself that not only makes way for the acceptance of his inner conflicts, but also works as the basis for the playful performance of different roles and for engagement in various forms of communication. Just like reality TV characters who are aware of the fact that they are performing for TV viewers, Sullivan knows himself to be a writer performing for readers. In order to be real in his corner of mediatized society, however, Sullivan turns his own self-awareness over to readers. The readers, in turn, are forced to reconsider their own awareness of the various ways in which they construct meaning themselves. This shared objectification of self-awareness then, like a common language, forms a common base for a shared understanding of mediatized reality.

44 Skeggs and Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value*.

45 Sullivan, "Getting Down To What Is Really Real," 98.