

The Myth of the Perfect Place: Creating a Voyeuristic Utopia in *House Hunters International*

EMILY SAUTER AND KEVIN SAUTER

A single, African American woman living in Brooklyn New York and teaching at a local college, regrets that she did not study abroad while in college, so she applies for a position in the United Arab Emirates and flies off to start her new life. Her friends gather to reminisce about her time in New York and scenes of her in a late-night musical jam session are shown under the talk and the laughter. The scene changes, and Maisha Perkins is in Dubai with her friend Arthur Rogiers, who flew in from Spain to help her get settled. The two of them meet an English-speaking real estate agent, Andrea Theoni Karidis, to look for an apartment. The requirements for the apartment are reviewed: two bedrooms, two baths, a sea-view, and hopefully something close to the nightlife of Dubai; the budget is announced at \$2000 a month. Three properties are shown to the American expats, two in a high-rise building in Ajman, one of the 7 principalities, we learn, that make up the UAB. One has a city view but is well below the budget, one is more expensive, but has a panoramic view of the Arabian Sea. The third apartment is a one-bedroom in Dubai that is also slightly over the anticipated housing budget for “Mai.” The apartments are shown in similar ways: entrance, living room, bedrooms, kitchen, baths and then the view from the balcony that comes with each furnished unit. At the end of the tours, Mai and Rogier walk along the beachfront and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each apartment, eliminate one from consideration, and then choose the place where Mai will live. Three months later she is shown in her new place enjoying an evening with people who “are becoming good friends,” as well as several shots of her leaving her building and walking across the street to

Emily Sauter is an Assistant Professor at Minnesota State University—Mankato where she teaches classes in rhetoric, communication theory, and argumentation. She is an avid traveler and watcher of all things HGTV. She can be reached at emily.sauter@mnsu.edu.

Kevin Sauter is a Professor of Communication at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul Minnesota where he teaches classes in the criticism of Television, Film, and Rhetoric. He has particular interests in culture and wrote a book titled *A Month of Sundays: Going to Mass While Traveling the World*.

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 7, No. 2
Copyright © 2019

the beach. Her move from Brooklyn to the UAB is complete, her housing is perfect, and her experience of living abroad is successful.

The story of Mai and her search for a place to live in the UAE is shown on a program titled *House Hunters International (HHI)*, produced by Pie Town Productions (Leopard Films USA) and carried on the basic cable channel Home and Garden Television (HGTV). Discovery, Inc., a global leader in real life entertainment, owns HGTV as well as Discovery Channel, Food Network, TLC, Investigation Discovery, and OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network. This particular program is an offshoot of the original *House Hunters*, where prospective buyers or renters of properties in the United States are shown going through the selection process. *HHI* premiered in February 2006, and has the same form as *House Hunters*, only the search is carried on by an individual, couple, or family looking for a place to live in an international location, and the people showcased are no longer limited to Americans. There have been over 1,700 episodes produced and aired on HGTV (*thetvdb.com*). Its viewership is about 25 million people per episode and it is “consistently ranked in Nielsen’s Top 20 US Cable programs” (*Leopardusa.com*). Leopard Films, the producers of *HHI*, reports that they have had over 11,000 applications from potential participants on the show, have visited 118 countries, and generally have four film crews traveling to 45 countries and 131 locations during any given year.

The premise of the program—following the purchase or rental of a property for people moving to an international location—serves as a unique narrative on television that invites viewers to consider moving abroad. While other programs review international locations and give travel advice, like Anthony Bourdain’s *Parts Unknown*, Michael Palin’s *Travels*, or any of the travel shows with Rick Steves, *HHI* is unique in its representation of people who are actually planning to live in another country rather than just taking an international vacation. In this essay we argue that *HHI* utilizes a rigid, repeating structure to present the process of moving abroad as a utopic vision and an adventure that always has a happy ending. The people always find a house or apartment that suits their needs, the living choice always works within their finances, and it becomes part of their always successful move abroad. Importantly, the show places the viewer in a position of an observer of the searching process and makes them privy to the private deliberations of the individuals, couples, and families seek living quarters while also creating a space

for viewers to participate vicariously in the house selection.¹ Thus, *HHI* invites the viewer to consider moving abroad, creating a voyeuristic utopia of perfect people, perfect places, and perfect living.

In this paper we argue that through the creation of a voyeuristic utopia *House Hunters International* silences the complex social, political, and cultural contexts of the locations on the show and promotes an unproblematic view of Western privilege inherent in the ease with which Western bodies move transnationally. Our examination of *HHI* is based on a review of a representative sample of roughly 500 episodes of the show. Episodes selected for review represent the different seasons in the show's existence, the wide range of race, gender, socio-economic and familial status of the guests on the program, as well as the geographic distribution of the program's locations. To begin we will first analyze the narrative structure, paying particular attention to how the rigid nature of the show is part of the appeal of the show and allows viewers to participate in the program. Next, we will examine the three dimensions of creating a utopic vision: viewer identification, positive representation, and voyeuristic participation. We will then discuss the implications of the creation of a voyeuristic utopia for viewers of *HHI*.

Narrative Structure of *House Hunters International*

In Aristotle's "The Poetics" he observed that drama consisted of plot, characters, and themes that have, quite simply, a beginning, a middle, and an end, a prescient anticipation of the regimented structure of current television production (Fyfe). In the ensuing 2000 years, the development of narrative theory has examined structure in a variety of ways, leading to an understanding of television as perhaps the most repetitious of artistic forms. In the early days of television, the use of similar sets, actors and narrative construction was an economic necessity for the newly formed genres of sitcoms, dramas, quiz shows, etc. borrowed from radio and film, but adapted for the voracious appetite of television for weekly or even daily production. Even as television has expanded its forms, the need for repetition and structural consistency has led to tightly controlled narratives in game shows, reality programs, cop shows, family comedies and so on. As Victoria O'Donnell writes in her book *Television Criticism*:

¹ For more on the relationship between the viewer and reality TV, see Dauncey; Kaminer; Mendelson and Papacharissi; Reiss and Wiltz.

Narrative structure provides a tendency for stories to fall into predictable patterns or formulas. Some formulas are unique to certain television genres and particular shows. The crime show will have a crime solved at the end; harmony will be restored in the family situation comedy; a life will be saved in the hospital, a case will be decided in court, and so on. (86)

As a result, television has very little suspense. In almost any genre on any given show, O'Donnell argues, "the narrative presents the disturbance, followed by a crisis, ending in a resolution" (3).

House Hunters International (HHI) has taken this expected narrative structure and developed a "hyper-structured" program. The plot is simple and repeated in every single episode, the "characters," while not recurring, are given a minimal back story, their "personality" is displayed in brief moments of exposition, and the discourse of the story is told in virtual lockstep at every location and with every set of participants. The only surprise to the show is which home the participants will choose. This hyper-structured predictability serves two important functions: first, it creates a tightly structured narrative that provides the viewer with an ease of recognition even when setting and characters change in every episode. This in turn provides a clear and safe entrance for viewer participation wherein they can experience the pleasure of playing along with the selection process and feel the joy of reaching the same utopic ending as experienced by the renters and buyers on the program. As Fiske notes about television narratives:

[It] is exploited by the reader who "plays" the text as a musician plays a score: s/he interprets it, activates it, gives it a living presence. In doing this, the reader plays a text as one plays a game: s/he voluntarily accepts the rules of the text in order to participate in the practice that those rules make possible and pleasurable. (296)

The hyper-structured narratives of *HHI* inspire pleasure in viewers as they respond to the repetitious narrative structure with just enough "play" in the storyline (unique characters and new settings) to enjoy the program with minimal investment, but still with individual meanings associated with their watching (choosing the best house or apartment, liking or not liking the people, wishing they could visit the location or rejecting it, etc.). Second, the hyper-structured narratives allow for easy

access to the show. Unlike other types of television programming, viewers of hyper-structured reality programs like *HHI* (e.g. *House Hunters*, *Four Weddings*, *Say Yes to the Dress*, *Love It or List It*), are never lost when watching the show—not only are there frequent recaps, but no mystery exists in how the plot plays out. A viewer could tune in at any moment and understand where in the plot the show is, could quickly catch up on anything they might have missed earlier, and easily immerse themselves into the flow of the program.

As we have discussed, the structure of program genres is repetitious and the outcomes, in general, are predictable, thus the viewer finds suspense, curiosity, and satisfaction in the details and characters of a narrative. In *HHI*, the structure of the program is so intensely repetitious that the reaction to the program must be found in the participatory nature of the show and the fantasy that is created (Dauncey 83; Wong 33).

First, the structure of *HHI* episodes is particularly tight and inflexible. The programs start with a voiceover of the enigma for each story, such as this one from the “Honduras Home Hunt,” as reported on the *hgtv.com* description of the episode:

Gary Howorka and his girlfriend, Rebecca Anderson, love the laid-back lakefront home they live in on Minnesota's Lake Minnetonka. But with cold temperatures half the year and crowded tourist-filled waterways the other half, they are ready to escape to a true water-lovers paradise—a secluded tropical island. After hearing about Roatan, Honduras, from a friend, the couple went for a visit and were hooked by the friendly locals and beautiful water spots. They are ready to pack up and move there permanently. Local real estate agent Jeff J. Thekan is ready to show these Minnesotans how to invest their money wisely in a piece of island paradise.

The question then becomes simple: how will Gary and Rebecca manage their move to Honduras? The search for an answer to this question is literally the same in every episode. The guests, always new characters, are introduced and identified by their home location, often with video of them in their original surroundings. The images then shift to a montage of the location to which they are moving with a stylized map inserted to show the general starting and ending points of their journey. In short order a real estate agent is introduced, the requirements for the property the guests want to buy or rent are enumerated, the budget is set, and they begin their search for a new home. This introduction is then cut and replayed after every

commercial break, which helps keep watching audiences on track with the narrative and allows other viewers to begin watching the show at any point in the program without missing any foundational information. This structural predictability provides the viewer a sense of comfort and pleasure in their ability to participate in the selection process no matter at what point they start watching the show and enter the narrative themselves.

During conversations with the real estate agent the language is often repeated (e.g., how many bedrooms, location of the home or apartment, the range of remodel options, and the anticipated budget). Often, binary conflicts arise during these discussions (e.g., two vs. three bedrooms, urban vs. rural, turn key vs. rehab, and minimum vs. maximum budgets), creating a sense of tension and adding to the limited suspense the show may develop. Exactly three properties are then shown, with a video tour of the home or apartment while the guests and real estate agent comment on the strengths and weaknesses of each property. The tours of each property are also repeated in every episode, with shots of bedrooms, kitchens, bathrooms, closets and views of the location regularly included. After the third housing option is shown, the guests—almost always a pair—are left alone to summarize the decision-making elements and then make their choice. A denouement of sorts is then presented where the guests are shown some time after they have moved into their chosen property, and they describe how happy they are, how much they enjoy living in the new location and, often, how successful the move has been to their new country. This repetitive structure diminishes traditional elements of suspense—how will equilibrium be restored?—and supplants it with what seems like a simple participatory role for the viewer: whether to like or not like the participants' arguments for their choice, and agree or disagree with their selection of their new home or apartment. The “play along” component of the show is not unique and is a part of a variety of reality TV genres: game shows, performance programs, relationship and competition shows, and the like, but the repetitious nature of the tightly structured *HHI* series, provides viewers with a predictable and comfortable narrative.

Creating a Utopic Vision

The idea of a utopian world, a world of perfection, is hinted at in Plato's *Republic* and given a name in Thomas More's 16th century book, *Utopia*. Since then, the idea of a “utopic vision” has found its way into a variety of academic fields—economics,

politics, religion, environmentalism, feminism and so on. However, “what is characteristic of virtually every definition of utopia is desire—for a better way of being and living,” argues Barbara Klonowska (13). “Construed broadly,” she continues, “utopia is primarily a method of thinking about reality and the way it should or could be organized to make life better” (Klonowska 13). In the case of *House Hunters International (HHI)*, participants search for that better life, by moving to a new place, with new people, and a new culture. For the show itself, it is imperative that viewers are given a sense that this utopia—this better way of living—is indeed available to them through the relocation of home. The power of the home and the drive to find perfection is, as James Mitchell theorizes, multi-faceted and intimately personal. “Home,” he writes, “molds creation of personal and family history and plans, as well as permits the activities that define family life. While never perfect, it provides a personal utopia in each member's organization of memory and vision of the future” (Mitchell 109). In the quest to find their personal perfect home, it is critical that the show creates a belief that the utopic vision is always realized. Anyone who participates will always find their utopia—and so can you, the viewer.

The utopic vision is created through a multi-step process that invites the viewer to experience identification, representation, and participation. The first step is identification, the process of creating a relationship between the viewer and the places and people on the show. The international sites featured on *HHI* tend to tilt toward traditional areas where expats can be found—the UK, Australia, Western Europe, Central America, and the Caribbean—but there is a wide range of locations that allows the viewer to experience all of the continents and a variety of urban, suburban, and rural settings. This is key to connecting with a viewer's fantasy vision of moving abroad—at any time a viewer should be able to find an episode (or episodes) featuring a country to which they fantasize traveling. For example, the representation of more common locations can be seen in the 12 episodes of season 33 (March 12, 2012 to February 17, 2013), where guests are shown in Nicaragua (twice), France (thrice), Columbia, Taiwan (twice), Belgium, Belize, Roatan, Portugal, Amsterdam, England, Naples and Anguilla. In other episodes, however, *HHI* visits locations in Bali, Tokyo, Slovenia, Shanghai, Tanzania, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Reykjavik, Mauritius, and Cambodia. The wide array of nations and locations provides the viewer with a fantasy of places where they might move, and the house, apartments, and flats examined, with finances

clearly identified, encourages the viewer to imagine their own life in these likely, or far-flung, locations.

In addition to the variety of places, the people on the show represent a remarkable difference in family circumstance, social-economic status, sexual orientation, and motivations for their move, and provide multiple opportunities for viewers to identify with the featured guests. The people looking for housing in a new location are diverse: couples with and without children; some people are single, some married or engaged, and some unmarried; friends, business partners, or colleagues; gay or straight; men or women; Caucasian, African American, Asian, Indian, and so on. The range of socio-economic status can also be seen in the budgets they offer to rent a home or apartment. In London, Charles and Jon, dubbed the “two Dads” are a couple married for 20 years and raising three children, and have an upper level of \$16,000 a month for a city flat; Adam and Rebecca look in Bahktapur, Nepal look for an apartment costing less than \$500 a month. When purchasing a home or condo, guests like Harith and Grace budget as much as \$3 million for a home in St. John’s, US Virgin Islands while Lydia and Brian look for a condo or apartment to buy in Didim Turkey at a cost of \$95,000 or less. The spectrum of motivation for moving is also expansive, from retirees looking for relaxation and security, to young people looking for adventure; from business owners seeking a new venture, to vacation homes for hardworking expats. The variety of people featured on the program provides the viewer with many choices from which to find a role model for their own possible move, both real and fantasy.

The second step in creating a utopic vision as presented in *HHI* is the positive presentation of the cultures in the various locations. The montage during the introduction is supplemented by images of the local city or town after the commercial breaks (always between the tours of the properties). The beaches of Australia are either pristine or crowded with beautiful people, the winding streets of Cork Ireland are quaint and charming, or the undeveloped and crowded streets of Kathmandu are shown as filled with cultural color and texture. Again, the show presents a “cultural taste” to viewers to find the kind of place and lifestyle that suits their fantasies of moving abroad. Snippets of historical, architectural, economic, and cultural information are embedded in the program that stirs curiosity and appeals to viewers as they observe the activity from in front of their TV sets or computers. However, Manoucheka Celeste argues that *HHI* “does not acknowledge any racialized differences within those spaces. As such, racialized bodies in this genre of television become a part of the audience’s ‘international’ experience,

entities to be consumed rather than as actors” (530). Rarely do the participants interact with anyone local, even the realtors are frequently expats themselves. The divorce between locals and the potential buyers (and thus the viewers) presents a potential then for moving to a country without the complicated racial politics present in the viewers’ home countries. Yet particularly in places formerly colonized by European states, racialized caste systems were set in place in which the local people of color worked while white immigrants or tourists lived privileged lives (Sheller 2003). Oftentimes then the places featured on the show elide those power clashes, or as Gloria Anzaldúa writes, where “the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (3). These spaces are thus attractive to viewers “precisely because [they are] apolitical and devoid of political consequences” (Celeste 530).

The lack of context for local people and culture in the show is essential in creating a perfect utopic vision of a country, one in which any viewer could move to seamlessly. Stuart Hall argues that representation is constitutive, that is, a place “doesn’t exist meaningfully *until* it has been represented” (*Representation and the Media*, emphasis added). Representation not only accounts for that which is represented, but as in this example, what is *not* represented. The silences and absences in *HHI* are an important aspect of how the utopic vision is created. Viewers see possibilities within this lack. As Ron Becker summarizes, “*House Hunters International* gives viewers an aspirational glimpse of what that life could be” ignoring though, the realities that could trouble that aspiration (131).

The third step of the program’s appeal is in the position of spectatorship created by the voyeuristic nature of the camera. Television is by nature voyeuristic, as it perches the viewer in a position of the watcher, occasionally addressed but for the most part ignored and not acknowledged. In this paper we understand voyeurism as “characterized by the pleasure derived from seeing what one is not supposed to see...[and] is a common personal trait enjoyed by all ‘normal’ individuals to different degrees” (Baruh 203). In this sense the common voyeur is interested in seeing that which is not normally accessible, but will only do so through legally sanctioned, safe, and easily available avenues of consumption, what Baruh calls “trait voyeurism” (Baruh 2010). Research conducted by a number of scholars (Hill 2002, 2005; Johnson-Woods 2002; Baruh 2010) suggest that viewers of reality TV understand this genre as voyeuristic and that the sense of voyeurism is, at least in part, what appeals to them. However, academic research on the topic of voyeurism and reality TV is less conclusive. Early research by Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt found voyeurism as a significant predictor of reality television consumption,

whereas later work (Nabi, Stitt, Halford and Finnerty; Papacharissi and Mendelson) found that voyeurism was only a small part of why people watch reality programming. More recent work argues that “voyeurism had a significant relationship with consumption of reality programming” and that there is “strong evidence supporting the oft-repeated hypothesis regarding the voyeuristic appeal of reality programming” (Baruh 216-7).

Furthermore, it is not just the simple act of voyeurism that appeals to viewers, but the participatory nature of the voyeuristic gaze. Both Dauncey and Wong have addressed the possibility that reality TV could empower audiences through participation which in turn could significantly impact the media content. While newer reality shows like *HHI* do not allow for direct participation—viewers do not call in and vote for a house for example—people watching at home do engage in a voyeuristic participation in that they are present throughout the process of buying and renting a home and can make judgments about the participants’ choices (e.g, did they choose the right house or apartment, is the wallpaper ugly or vintage, would they like a home in the city or country, etc.)

An unseen narrator exists on *HHI* who takes us through the history, motivation, and finances of the guests, gives us a flavor for the location, and then discusses the fundamentals of the properties as the guests and real estate agents tour them. The viewer can visit and observe the guests in their original locations, see them in their homes, in conversations with friends and family, at work and at play, listening as they tell of the excitement and anxiety they feel about their impending adventure. Once on location the camera is present during their meeting with the real estate agent where the guests supply their “dreams” and “must haves” for their home, it takes us on the tours of the properties where the candid assessments of each property are heard, and the viewer “sees” the property, often moving ahead of the guests and inviting them to see rooms, closets, landscaping, and views. This allows viewers to form their own opinions before the potential renters or buyers do so they can compare opinions and arguments both against and in favor of a property.

Then, most importantly, the viewer is present during the intimate moments of decision-making where no one other than the participating couple make their final choice. As Fiske tell us, “much of the pleasure of television realism comes from this sense of omniscience that it gives us” (70). The voyeuristic pleasure is in the unseen observation of the process of “house hunting” and is reinforced by the inevitably successful end to the search. The final segment of each program is a visit to the new home, now occupied by the guests the viewer has gotten to know, that

reinforces the happiness of the move and housing choice, and makes the move abroad seem easy, attainable, and fulfilling. It is important to note that the program never shows a participant who is unhappy with their decision about the housing or the location: jobs are great, housing is wonderful, children adapt, finances work out, etc. The “happily ever after” to the program both reinforces the success of the quest on the show and serves to reinforce the utopic nature of moving abroad. Viewers are not exposed to issues of intercultural conflict, the emotional and financial toll of moving abroad, or the challenges inherent in changing jobs, schools, communities, and housing.

Starting as early as 2008 there have been a number of online rumors about the authenticity of the show. A popular fan blog, *Hooked on Houses*, posted that “For quicker turn-around, producers sometimes choose buyers who are already in escrow with one of the three locations shown. The other two choices that are filmed, are only shown to allow viewers the option of making the choice themselves” (Gerber). The blog also offers testimony from a woman named Bobi Jensen who described:

how the show faked every single aspect of their story, drafting them to appear only after they'd already closed on a new house, forcing them through multiple takes of fake conversations, and—in one of the most revealing instances of how much the show can often be completely staged—taking them to houses that “weren't even for sale...they were just our two friends' houses who were nice enough to madly clean for days in preparation for the cameras.” (Jensen)

Studies conducted however have shown that audiences are indeed aware of the constructed nature of reality television (Jones, 2003; Engstrom and Semic, 2003) and yet see the show as containing important elements of reality, and the popularity of the shows have not suffered as a result. In fact, it has been argued that the “hunt for reality” in reality TV that provides viewers with enjoyment. Baruh argues:

Viewers of reality programming [are] willing to wait for those few moments when they can scrutinize the tiny bits of information that reveal participants' true selves...As such, the voyeuristic appeal of reality programs would be due to [viewers engagement] in careful scrutiny of participants' behavior to identify glimpses of “authentic” scattered in between the “contrived.” (205)

This voyeuristic utopia of affordable and comfortable adventure in beautiful and exotic locales has created a solid following of fans and has made *HHI* one of the most successful programs on HGTV. However, the show not only promotes a “fake” reality, it emphasizes Western privilege, and through the “happy ever after” structure to the episodes, silences the problems of moving to a foreign country and ignores the challenge of Western cultural imperialism. Throughout this section we refer to “the West” not as a geographic location but employ Wendy Hesford’s definition of the West as a “locus of power from which nations have imposed values, norms, and narratives on other parts of the world” (4).

The show also promotes problematic norms of Western culture. For instance, the entire show is conducted in English, and all the participants, consisting mainly of Americans, Canadians, Australians, and British citizens, are rarely shown speaking a local language. In addition, the real estate agent also always speaks English no matter the context and is in fact a requirement for both agents and buyers. In a general recruitment letter sent by Associate Producer Michelle James, it states:

We are basically looking for interesting and engaging expats who speak fluent English, are under 50 years old and have bought a property abroad within the last 2 years. We are also looking for Realtors who speak fluent English and have great outgoing personalities with a good portfolio of properties that we can profile. (*GoSouthExpats.com*)

A consequence of this focus on English as the sole language is the promotion of the common idea that “everyone speaks English.” According to a study published in *The Economist* it holds true that in small, wealthy, Western nations almost everyone has some English-speaking ability, however, in larger, or poorer nations, such as Colombia, Thailand, or Turkey, only a small percentage will speak English at all, much less fluently (Johnson). This whitewashing of language hides the challenges of moving to a country where a non-English language is spoken and viewers are not encouraged to learn the native language.

Culture is another aspect of the show that is glossed over. Viewers are encouraged to see themselves as making the move abroad, settling into a unique and exciting new place in the world that ultimately mimics their current, Western lifestyles. James writes in her recruitment letter that:

At its core, *House Hunters International* is a travel show concentrating on the idiosyncrasies of the locales and what makes them special and different. A great deal of effort will be made to capture rich visuals and to provide sequences where viewers will be exposed to local vistas, traditions, lifestyles and architecture. (*GoSouthExpats.com*)

So, while the premise of the show is international, in each case the local culture is so sterilized as to become a-cultural. For example, in every episode the new homeowners are seen enjoying time with their new “local friends,” most of whom look like them, dress in Western clothing, and presumably enjoy the same type of lifestyle they do. These local friends are never interviewed, so the viewers must base their assumptions on the visual cues present in the ending social scenes.

In addition, the show rarely discusses the problems faced by the locals in terms of poverty, crime, poor infrastructure, or political oppression. For example, a family from the Netherlands settles in Hoedspruit South Africa. At the end of the episode the family is shown at a local school, which is completely modern and appears Western in style and architecture. Students are shown in school uniforms common in Western Europe, classrooms appear well equipped, and the teacher shown is wearing what might be considered “traditional” teaching clothes—khaki pants, collared shirt, and a sweater vest. However, the region shown is an unusually wealthy town in the country, thanks in large part to its location near to major eco-tourism sites such as Kruger National Park and the Drakensberg Mountains, and is populated primarily by wealthy white families. This effectively allows the show to ignore the more difficult problems in South Africa that might impact expats who move there, particularly issues of poverty, violence, and racism. South Africa’s unemployment hovers around 25%, the majority of whom are black, and almost 50% of the population lives below the poverty line (de Witteet et. al. 235). A study released by the CIA World Factbook also indicated a major difference in the poverty rate according to gender: 45% of all female-headed households lived below the “lower-bound” poverty line, compared to only 25% of male-headed households. Similarly, a strong geographical dimension exists in the incidence of poverty. Based on the same data set, 72% of those below the poverty line reside in rural areas, and 71% of all rural people are poor. With regard to education, 22.3% of black Africans have received no schooling, only 16.8% have finished high school, and only 5.2% of the black population has an education higher than the high school level. By

silencing the reality of a country, viewers are encouraged to think of each new place as a potentially “perfect” place to move, free from the problems that may plague their home countries.

While this is a somewhat pointed example, even the episodes set in countries like France, Australia, Canada, or Italy where local politics and economics are more familiar to audiences, viewers are not encouraged to view these places as nuanced or complicated international spaces in which local culture will impact their day-to-day lifestyles. Instead the lives shown, both in the house hunting process and afterwards, are sterilized, and local culture is limited to balcony views or strolls down colorful streets with friendly and accommodating local merchants. This not only misleads viewers on the realities of living abroad, it emphasizes the Western subject as privileged and cosmopolitan; “we” can go anywhere and live, and besides our own budgets and the restrictions of the local real estate market, there are no limits. For instance, for Western audience’s passport issues rarely complicate moving abroad. In the last few years global consulting firm Henley and Partners created a ranking of the best and worst passports with which to travel. For best passports, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea top the list, and are allowed access to 189 countries in the world without any need to apply for a visa. The U.S. is tied for 6th place, with access to 184 countries in the world without a visa (Henley and Partners). These numbers stand in stark opposition to the number of countries citizens at the bottom of the list can visit. Sudanese, for example, can only enter 38 countries in the world without being approved for a visa before crossing the border. Pakistanis fare even worse, having access to only 33 countries without a visa. Since that ranking was published the United States has attempted to place even stricter rules on gaining entry to the county for people from Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Iran and Yemen.

The show does not completely censor local images as discussed previously—after all, that is what viewers hope, in part, to see. Therefore, what little culture is shown on the program runs the risk of stereotyping a place and a people, giving viewers a sense that culture is consumable. Pretty views, brightly garbed locals in crowded markets, exotic food, fauna, or animals—these are all sights to be enjoyed by the viewer, but not nuanced. This is not surprising given the framing of the show. As James writes, “*House Hunters International* is about [the buyers’] personal journey of discovery and the making of life-long dreams,” which, through the function of “reality” television extends to fulfilling the fantasies of viewers as well (*GoSouthExpats.com*).

Conclusion

House Hunters International provides viewers with a voyeuristic utopic vision of the world, inviting them to consider moving abroad, finding a place to live and fitting into the local culture in an easy and relatively stress-free process. The viewer's pleasure in watching the show is found in the highly rigid structure of the show, the limited participatory element, an identification with the characters and the locations featured, and with the omniscient and voyeuristic mode in which the audience watches the show. However, the program ignores the challenges inherent in a move to another culture, undermining the difficulties faced by local populations and replacing authentic culture with a westernized, accessible, and manageable world of fun, friendly "natives" and financial success in an English-speaking world.

However, we cannot limit our understanding of how *HHI* influences viewers to the show itself, but must consider, if only briefly, how it has influenced the larger TV landscape. In addition to affecting the viewer, *HHI*, and its television predecessor, *House Hunters* has also impacted the way that similar programs are structured. The macro-structure of a program that invites audiences to participate in the selection of a home has become the norm, from *Caribbean Life* to *Bargain Hunters Beach Homes* to *My Lottery Dream Home*, (and many others) on HGTV, as well as other "lifestyle" cable channels. But other series have adopted the same approach as *HHI*: having us meet a person or group who are engaged in a "product seeking" activity, such as searching for wedding attire in *Say Yes to the Dress* or looking at houses in *Love it or List it*; developing a pseudo-relationship with people or a product; seeing three items featured, tried on or reviewed like cooking three meals in *The Great British Bake Off* or taking three photos on *America's Next Top Model*; and then a decision made about the purchase or winner chosen that always bring happiness and satisfaction. The pleasure of watching tightly regimented television shows with nominally suspenseful outcomes is now a staple televisual experience for viewers and perhaps gives them the solace of predictability in the chaos of an increasingly ambiguous world.

Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

- Baruh, Lemi. "Publicized Intimacies on Reality Television: An Analysis of Voyeuristic Content and its Contribution to the Appeal of Reality Programming." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, no. 53, 2010, pp. 190-210.
- . "Mediated Voyeurism and the Guilty Pleasure of Consuming Reality Television." *Media Psychology*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2010, pp. 201-21.
- Becker, Ron. "Glee/House Hunters International: Gay Narratives." *How to Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, New York UP, 2013, pp.130-8.
- Celeste, Manoucheka. "Entertaining Mobility: The Racialized and Gendered Nation in House Hunters International." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2014, pp. 527-42.
- Dauncey, Hugh. "French 'Reality Television': More Than A Matter of Taste?" *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1996, pp. 83-106.
- De Witte, Hans; Rothmann, Sebastiaan; and Jackson, Leon T. "The Psychological Consequences of Unemployment in South Africa." *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2012, pp. 235-52.
- Engstrom, Erika, and Beth Semic. "Portrayal of Religion in Reality TV Programming: Hegemony and the Contemporary American Wedding." *Journal of Media and Religion*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2003, pp. 145-63.
- Fiske, John. *Television Culture*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2011.
- Fyfe, Roberts; Longinus, Demetrius; Fyfe, W. Hamilton, and Roberts, W. Rhys. *The poetics / Aristotle. On the sublime / "Longinus." On style / Demetrius. Revised ed.*, Harvard UP 1995.
- Gerber, Tobias. "The Top 5 HGTV Shows." *Associated Content: Home Improvement*, 5 Nov. 2008,

- web.archive.org/web/20100513075616/http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/1167564/the_top_five_hgtv_shows.html?cat=6.
- Greene, Robert Lane. "Who Speaks English?" *The Economist*, 5 Apr. 2011, www.economist.com/johnson/2011/04/05/who-speaks-english.
- Hall, Stuart. *Stuart Hall: Media and Representation*. Directed by Sut Jhally, Media Education Foundation, 1997.
- Henley and Partners. "The 2019 Passport Index: Global Rankings." *Henley and Partners Passport Index*, www.henleypassportindex.com/passport-index.
- Hesford, Wendy S. *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms*. Duke UP, 2011.
- Hill, Annette. "Big Brother: The Real Audience." *Television and New Media*, no. 3, 2002, pp. 323-40.
- . *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*. Routledge, 2005.
- House Hunters International*, Pie Town Productions, Home and Garden Television, 2006-Present.
- "House Hunters International." *The TVDB*, 5 Jun. 2019, www.thetvdb.com/series/house-hunters-international.
- "Honduras Home Hunt." *Home and Garden Network*, 2019, www.hgtv.com/shows/house-hunters-international/episodes/honduras-home-hunt.
- "How does Leopard USA make HHI?" *Leopard USA*, 28 Mar. 2018, www.leopardusa.com/how-does-leopard-usa-make-hhi.
- James, Michelle. "House Hunters International—Seeking Expats for TV Show." *GoSouthExpats.com*, 24 Oct. 2010, www.gosouthexpat.com/house-hunters-international-seeking-expats-for-tv-show.html.

Jensen, Bobi. "House Hunters: What It Was Like to Be on the Show." *Hooked on Houses*, 7 Feb. 2019, www.hookedonhouses.net/2012/06/11/house-hunters-what-it-was-like-to-be-on-the-show.

Jones, Janet Megan. "Show Your Real Face: A Fan Study of the UK Big Brother Transmissions (2000, 2001, 2002). Investigating the Boundaries between Notions of Consumers and Producers of Factual Television." *New Media and Society*, vol. 5, no. 3, Sept. 2003, pp. 400-21.

Johnson-Woods, Toni. "Big Brother: Why Did That Reality-TV Show Become Such a Phenomenon?" U of Queensland Press, 2002.

Kaminer, Wendy. "I Spy." *The American Prospect*, 5 Dec. 2001, www.prospect.org/article/i-spy.

Mendelson, Andrew L. and Zizi Papacharissi. "An Exploratory Study of Reality Appeal: Uses and Gratifications of Reality TV Shows." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2007, pp. 355-70.

More, Miller and Clarence H. Miller. *Utopia / Thomas More: New translation With an Introduction by Clarence Miller*, Yale UP 2014.

Murfin, Ross and Ray, Supriya. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, Bedford Books, 2009.

Nabi, Robin; Biely, Erica; Morgan, Sara; and Stitt, Carmen. "Reality-Based Television Programming and the Psychology of its Appeal." *Media Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2003, pp. 303-30.

Nabi, Robin; Stitt, Carmen; Halford, Jeff; and Finnerty, Keli. "Emotional and Cognitive Predictors of the Enjoyment of Reality-Based and Fictional Television Programming: An Elaboration of the Uses and Gratifications Perspective." *Media Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2006, pp. 421-47.

Porter, Michael J.; Larson, Deborah; Harthcock, Allison; and Nellis, Kelly Berg. "Re(de)fining narrative events: Examining Television Narrative Structure", *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2002, pp. 23-30.

Reiss, Steven, and James Wiltz. "Why People Watch Reality TV." *Media Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2004, pp. 363-78.

"The World Factbook: South Africa." *Central Intelligence Agency*, 1 Feb. 2018, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sf.html.

Wong, James. "Here's Looking at You: Reality TV, Big Brother, and Foucault." *Canadian Journal of Communication*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2001, pp. 33-46.