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## How Nathan Fielder's 'The Rehearsal' dissects ethical quandary of reality TV



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"These can't possibly be real people, right?"

It's a natural reaction to seeing a woman who thinks pretending to eat poop while joking with a child is ritualistic satanic behavior, along with a man who believes he crashed his Scion tC at 100 mph not because he was street racing while drunk and high, but because of the car's faulty mechanics.

Whether they are real or not, the most important subject of Nathan Fielder's "The Rehearsal" is us, the viewer. This bizarre show is presented as an experimental docu-series from the mind of one socially awkward man who wants to help people rehearse important life decisions ahead of time. As each episode becomes progressively weirder, comedy arises from Fielder's futile attempts to play God by carefully orchestrating life's unpredictability.

By the end, though, it's clear that Fielder intends to examine the exploitative nature of reality TV, pointing the finger at audiences to question why we enjoy laughing at real people on a screen and yet would still do anything for a chance to be on that screen ourselves. "The Rehearsal" isn't so much a direct parody of reality TV as it is a deconstruction of its entire premise.

It isn't entirely clear the extent to which Fielder is playing the character of "Nathan," an exaggerated version of himself. But with his earnest delivery and benign approach, Fielder prompts his subjects to reveal their most shocking and ridiculous beliefs, fanaticism to casual antisemitism.

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Journalist Joan Didion famously wrote that her subjects tend to forget that her presence runs counter to their best interests: “Writers are always selling somebody out.” So, too, are reality TV producers. At its worst, reality TV is designed to ridicule vulnerable people just to satisfy a perverse desire from audiences to watch other people suffer. Shows such as “My Strange Addiction,” “My 600-Lb. Life” and “Toddlers in Tiaras” are such perfectly grotesque examples.

At the same time, the subjects of reality shows are so desperate for a minute of fame that they’re often willing to sacrifice their own self-respect. “The Rehearsal” shows the lengths people will go just to get on TV. Multiple people featured in the show are now on Cameo, an app that allows fans to pay celebrities for personalized videos. Their willingness to set aside the way that the show obviously pokes fun at them just for more time in the public eye only proves Fielder right.

Unsurprisingly, Fielder’s approach to the show has been criticized as cruel, arrogant and detached. His personal quest to find empathy by obsessively analyzing human behavior and literally stepping into another person’s shoes has real consequences for the show’s participants. At one point, Fielder questions the motivations and commitment of his subject, Angela. But before confronting her about it, per the show’s philosophy, he must rehearse the conversation with an actor playing the role of Angela in a full-scale model of her home.

The fake Angela doesn’t hold back. She flips the script, interrogating why Fielder is really here. “Is my life the joke?” she yells, before smashing a lamp in the fake living room set. “You’re a liar, because if this were real, you would have some sort of emotion instead of just standing there like a rock.” Fielder, and the audience, are left speechless.

No one is more aware of the show’s ethical quandary than Fielder himself. In blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, Fielder exposes the simulation of on-screen drama and faces its real repercussions. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard asserted that “the very definition of the real has become that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction.” After a certain number of permutations, Fielder’s meta-analysis reaches a point of hyperreality, where the audience can no longer tell if a situation is real or fake, and if Fielder is a genius or a villain.

The show was such a success that HBO decided to renew it for a second season. But after the gut-wrenching finale, in which Fielder must explain to a fatherless six-year-old actor that he’s not actually his real dad, season two seems impossible to fathom. The series came to a natural philosophical end, it seems, when Fielder wonders aloud if he’s simply “solving a puzzle of (his) own design.” To venture further into the dizzying simulation might have viewers questioning the reality of their own life, looking for hidden cameras at every turn.

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