

## REALITY TV

## Five SFF Takes on Reality TV

Randee Dawn

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Reality TV is a horror show. Except when it's hilarious. Few genres can walk that fine line between sublimely terrifying and divinely ridiculous, which makes reality TV a particularly special kind of programming. It's no surprise that *Squid Game*, last year's must-watch series and this year's Emmy Award darling, became such a big hit with the idea of a reality TV show aired to a tiny, elite audience that paired children's games (and glorious sets that reminded us of the playground or nursery) with bloodshed. Now Netflix (which aired the series) is even creating an actual *Squid Game: The Challenge* reality competition series. No bloodshed, of course, but 456 contestants will be able to scramble for \$4.56 million, the biggest cash prize a competition show has ever offered.

When reality TV goes to the movies, however, there tends to be approximately 90 percent less fun and games and 100 percent more totalitarianism. Here are five instances of reality TV reimagined for the big screen, and there's a commonality to nearly all of these movies: The shows live in lurid colors (often crimson) and their ubiquity is trumpeted in

exclamation points: They're the *Most Watched TV Shows Ever!!!* in their dystopian near futures... a phrase that implicates all of us in the audience along with the warped minds who came up with the concepts in the first place.

But by going into full bread-and-circuses mode—using gory entertainment to appease and distract the masses—these movies may be making a sharper, more subtle point. After all, if we're meant to believe that reality TV continues to be wildly popular when so much of the world is struggling or in a state of collapse, it's hard not to feel like these fictions are reflecting a deeper reality back at us, as viewers and consumers. We're forced to ask... what do these films say about us?

## ***The Running Man* (1987)**

Now, if you've only read the novel by Richard Bachman (ahem, Stephen King), you're going to be rather surprised to learn that Arnold Schwarzenegger is the everyman schmoie tapped to play the game show called *The Running Man* in the film. In fact, you'll be surprised by most of this adaptation, which turns the story into an unnecessary by-the-numbers action movie.

Ahnold plays a former cop, Ben Richards, who doesn't think it's cool to fire on civilians rioting for food in the totalitarian society of 2017(!), which earns him a first-class ticket to a penal colony. When he breaks out, he attracts the attention of *Running Man* host Damon Killian (played by actual game show host/serial guest kisser/*Hogan's Heroes* actor Richard Dawson), who coerces him into a starring role on the show. And what is the show? Basically, Richards has to run for his life, fending off weird killers and mercenaries, who could be anyone, anywhere, in the hopes of earning a pardon. Mostly, it's a showcase for Schwarzenegger quips, including his classic "[I'll be back](#)." The book's better—and bleaker.

## *The Truman Show* (1988)

"Good morning! And in case I don't see ya, good afternoon, good evening and good night." Thus speaks Truman Burbank, a man who's grown up in a bubble, or rather, on the set of the largest studio ever built. He's never been out and doesn't know there's a world beyond his prefabricated existence—or that he's been on TV, watched by millions, since he was a baby.

At first glance, *The Truman Show* seemed like it would be yet another opportunity for

rubber-faced comedian Jim Carrey to strut his over-the-top mannerisms, but in fact he comes across as earnest, warm, and totally sympathetic. When he starts to twig to the fact that all may not be right in the land of Seahaven Island (where everybody *but* Truman is a paid actor, including his wife), it becomes a classic coming-of-age story that finds the protagonist facing his greatest fears and defying God—or at least, the controlling executive producer Christof. The film is charming, and might even bring a tear to your eye. What reality show's done that for you lately?

### ***Series 7: The Contenders (2001)***

There's the classic short story "The Most Dangerous Game," in which a hunter becomes the hunted... and then there's the idea of creating an entire game show centered around a group of armed contestants forced to kill or be killed. That's where we are in this alternate version of an America, now sunk into dictatorship following a civil war in the 1990s, in which *The Contenders* is an ongoing reality TV game show (and it's filmed like one, too).

Five contestants are picked from a random lottery of citizens (no need to enter! Everyone is required to participate!) who then go up against the last season's winner. Everyone gets a

pistol, and after that it's last man (or woman) standing. Win three seasons and you're free from being included again. If the current champion Dawn can survive one more season, she'll win her freedom, but surprise—she gives birth during the season, and her newborn is taken away. Things get messier, and more confusing from there, as “footage” goes missing and the producers offer a “dramatic reenactment” to explain what happened after the show went off the rails. But you can decide which conclusion you prefer—the DVD offers an alternate ending in which fans, denied their climax in the finale, turn on the players in a savage way.

### ***American Dreamz* (2006)**

When the newly-elected American president (Dennis Quaid) decides to read a paper for the first time in four years, he gets quite an eye-opener: turns out not everything's as black-and white as he'd assumed. He shuts down, refuses to go out, and begins reading obsessively. His advisors are desperate to get him back in the spotlight, to show voters the president still has the common touch. So they book him as a guest judge on the biggest reality competition show ever, *American Dreamz*, an obvious *American Idol* rip-off whose bored host is played by Hugh Grant.

The stage is set for satire, but things take a very strange turn when the show brings on an aspiring terrorist as a contestant (no one *knows* he's a jihadist on the show), and once his handlers learn that he'll be in the room with the U.S. president, they start planning to smuggle in a bomb. It's a turn that hasn't dated well, though bear in mind this film came out just four years after 9/11, and it was intended to be a satirical comedy. Things don't go as you might expect, which is good, but in the end, it's a film that has some serious problems—ones it can't sing its way out of.

### ***The Hunger Games* series (2012–Present)**

You know your country's in trouble when the entire society seems to revolve around a life-or-death game show—in this case, a mandatory battle royale designed to crush the spirits of any potential rebels against the wealthy Capitol. In the world of Panem, districts must supply “tributes” to participate in the annual Hunger Games, a contest of survival in a domed wilderness filled with hidden dangers, while the rest of the country watches, cheers, and sometimes sends care packages. The winner—there's supposed to only be one survivor at the end of each Games—gets to live in luxury for the rest of his or her days, while much

of the rest of the country struggles on in relative poverty. Hope is a powerful galvanizing force.

In the main trilogy of the series, Katniss Everdeen, the most capable and stubborn tribute ever, volunteers to take the place of her younger, gentler sister and triumphs again and again. The “prize” that she (and her faux-beloved Peeta, who is also permitted to survive) receives is ultimately hollow, however: A big mansion that sets her above everyone else in the District is no compensation for all the things she’s lost along the way. It’s a powerful and haunting realization, one that helps set the stage for further disillusionment even as Katniss becomes the face of a revolution. A prequel to the trilogy is [due out in 2023](#), and will focus on the young Coriolanus Snow, the future president of Panem.

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Randee Dawn is a Brooklyn-based entertainment journalist who scribbles about the glam world of entertainment by day, then spends her nights crafting wild worlds of fiction. Her debut novel, [Tune in Tomorrow](#), about a fantastical TV reality show packed with soap opera-style twists, will publish on August 23 (Solaris). Dawn has written for *Variety*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Emmy Magazine* and Today.com and is the co-author of *The Law & Order: Unofficial Companion*. Find out more on [Twitter](#), and

**RandeeDawn.com**