

**MTV's *The Hills*:
A Leading American Docussoap**

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A thesis:
Submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of Masters of Arts in Media Studies.
Victoria University of Wellington
November 2010

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relatively uncharted academic territory of the American docusoap, and case studies *The Hills* as a pertinent example of this burgeoning television genre. Docusoap is a 'mixed-genre' that enhances factual material with the story-telling techniques of fictional drama. Whilst many academics have studied the origins of British docusoap and have registered the influence upon it of 'public service' objectives in programming, less attention has been paid to the emergence of the docusoap in the commercially-driven American television context. It is in this context that the docusoap has entailed a more overt blending of the attributes of 'documentary' and 'soap opera' for purely entertainment purposes. Testifying to the need to reconcile risk with conservatism in a commercially-driven schedule context, the generic mix within *The Hills* draws from the genres of soap opera and 'reality' TV, both of which bring the advantages and assurances of a well-demonstrated audience popularity.

Having recently completed its sixth and final season, *The Hills* exemplifies current developments within the American docusoap form. This docusoap details the lives of a group of attractive, affluent young people in their early twenties who work and socialise within the entertainment and fashion industries of Los Angeles. Significantly, *The Hills* maintains the voyeuristic allure of a 'reality' TV premise and enhances this by adapting the melodramatic aesthetics and distinctive narrative strategies of soap opera to a degree that is more overt than other docusoaps, aside, of course, from that which characterised its forerunner, *Laguna Beach*.

This thesis undertakes a close examination of the generic and institutional positioning of *The Hills* in four distinct chapters. Chapter One examines the generic position of docusoap as a 'mixed-genre' and the institutional role *The Hills* performs for the youth-oriented MTV network. Chapter Two analyses the specific fictional narrative techniques *The Hills* uses to enhance its documented footage whilst Chapter Three addresses the controversies that have emerged due to this docusoap's blending of the fictional and the factual. Finally, Chapter Four details how the docusoap's ability to appeal to lucrative young viewers positions *The Hills* as a powerful promotional tool for MTV's consumerist messages.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this thesis is indebted to the support and encouragement of my friends and family. I am particularly grateful for the unwavering assistance from my thesis supervisor, Dr. Trisha Dunleavy. Trisha's enthusiasm for my project has provided inspiration, especially at challenging times at which my own passion for the project has waned. I credit Trisha with stimulating my interest in, and cultivating my understanding of, television studies from my early undergraduate years at Victoria University through to my more recent postgraduate studies. I consider the access I have had to both Trisha's extensive academic knowledge and her remarkably compassionate nature to be an invaluable privilege, and to her I am eternally thankful.

I also want to extend my thanks to other members of the Media Studies staff and my fellow SEFTMS postgraduate students. The fun and supportive academic environment of Victoria University's postgrad community has been a highlight of my Masters experience. I have particularly enjoyed the way in which our academic debates about Media Studies can segue into discussions of our favourite television programmes (we picked the right degree).

Finally, I am tremendously appreciative of my other friends and family for keeping my sanity in check during this process, for helping me with basic cognitive tasks, and for your patience and understanding whenever I have used this Masters thesis as an excuse.

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INTRODUCTION

Aims

The docusoap is one of the most prominent genres on television today. Its characteristic blending of conventions from factual and fictional television forms, specifically from those of 'reality' television and serial melodrama, has proven popular with audiences worldwide. It is because of its blending of generic conventions from previously separate and distinctive television forms that the docusoap can accurately be described as a 'mixed genre'. Agreeing with this categorisation, Keith Beattie pinpoints the key facets of this generic mix by describing docusoaps as "character-centred works which develop multiple storylines based on factual material in ways which, as the term itself suggests, are comparable to fictional soap operas" (2004: 190). Although the range of conceptual, aesthetic, and narrative components that docusoaps use is rather more complex than Beattie's assertion suggests, important to the appeals of docusoap is the innovation of its generic mix. It is partly because 'reality' and serial melodrama TV programmes have both been so successful individually, that the convergence of their key conventions and appeals within the newer docusoap form has worked to maximise its popularity and success.

Whilst many academics, including Jon Dovey (2000) and Annette Hill (2005), have examined the rise of the British docusoap genre, little academic attention has been paid to the emergence of and approaches to the docusoap in the American context, a market that entails very different origins and practices to those established for docusoap in the United Kingdom. The American docusoap has developed in a more commercially-driven television context, as one virtually untouched by the influence of 'public service' objectives as compared to its British counterpart. In an industry that has been profoundly changed by increased competition and the fragmentation of audience markets, the American docusoap form also exemplifies the increased tendency toward creating niche-oriented programming designed to meet the entertainment demands of groups that advertisers regard as 'quality audiences' because of their considerable purchasing power.

Recognising that the American docusoap is a rising television form that warrants more attention than it has received, this thesis examines *The Hills* as a leading individual example, aiming to interrogate its distinctive characteristics and appeals. *The Hills* exemplifies the latest style of docusoap to emerge from the youth-oriented MTV Network. The programme voyeuristically documents the lives of a group of attractive, seemingly affluent young professionals in their early twenties as they navigate the personal and professional pressures of living in Los Angeles, California. However, rather than presenting this footage in a lower-budget documentary style, *The Hills* utilises the slick visual conventions of a more expensively produced 'high production value' drama serial. Over the course of its six seasons *The Hills* garnered high viewer ratings for the MTV network due to this alluring blend of actuality footage and fictional narrative conventions.

Within the study of television, this thesis makes contributions to the analysis of television genre and culture. Its investigation of *The Hills* is structured into four main chapters, which explore the institutional development of *The Hills* as a docusoap, the specific narrative conventions it adopts from TV fiction, the complex realist position the docusoap navigates due to its blending of factual and fictional elements, and the appeals of *The Hills*' mixed-genre form for viewers and, subsequently, for the MTV Network. These four distinct chapters address different elements of the generic innovation that *The Hills* represents, with broader implications for the docusoap form as a relatively new television phenomenon that has achieved considerable popularity. In its thorough examination of the generic and institutional position of *The Hills*, this thesis will address the following questions:

- What is the generic mixing that occurs on *The Hills*?
- To what extent has this generic experimentation been influenced by the commercial objectives of the MTV Network?
- In what ways does *The Hills* borrow fictional conventions in its construction of narrative?
- What is *The Hills*' relationship to factual TV programming, and how does evidence of the docusoap's constructions complicate the programme's claims about its 'realism' and authenticity?
- How does *The Hills*, as an American docusoap, act as a 'flagship' programme for the MTV Network?

- For what reasons does *The Hills* maintain its precarious position between the factual and the fictional?

Context

It is important to consider the context in which this phenomenon of generic mutation has occurred. John Corner underscores the institutional framework within which television production occurs. He argues (1999: 12) that,

Television, unlike poetry, say, cannot exist *non*-institutionally since even its minimal resource, production, and distribution requirements are such as to require high levels of organisation in terms of funding, labour, and manufacturing process.

The creation of television texts involves a complex network of influences that Corner refers to as an institutional “matrix” (1999: 12). The consideration of television in such institutional terms condenses “the various constituents of television” (ibid.), from production through to reception, into an inter-connected framework that transcends the singular television text. From the viewpoint of network executives, television programmes are valued primarily for their performance of certain institutional functions, especially for their capacity to deliver desirable audiences. With *The Hills* providing an effective example for the youth-oriented MTV, this thesis explores the functions performed by television programmes in the commercial environment of American cable television. Although the American television industry is today financed in a broader range of ways than it was in the past, it remains largely sustained by advertising revenue. This commercial approach to television production has significant implications for the programme content that appears in television schedules in the United States, with an imperative to deliver content that entertains sizeable yet also lucrative audiences. By drawing in such audiences, commercial networks subsequently attract advertisers who are intent on buying screen-time in order to market their commercial products to their targeted consumers.

The intrinsic institutionality of television highlights the importance of thinking about television programming in generic terms. That is, the grouping of television texts into ‘genres’ or categories based on shared attributes in the areas of “characters, setting, iconography, narrative and style” (Lacey, 2000: 133). Generic

classification proves to be especially important within the television industry because of its inherent institutional framework. As John Fiske argues, the shared conventions between television programmes “form links not only with other texts in the genre, but also between texts and audiences, texts and producers, and producers and audiences” (1987: 110). The importance of generic conventions in “both understanding and constructing this triangular relationship between producer, text and audience” (ibid.) facilitates an ease of identification, amongst both industry professionals and audiences, of the institutional functions a particular programme is going to perform, the narrative structure it will follow, the stories the programme will tell, and the type of audience to which it is likely to appeal.

Generic classification clarifies the contributions an individual programme makes to the television channel on which it screens. Genre performs vital functions within the wider context of the television schedule, particularly for broadcast networks. Generic expectations can see certain programmes employed within particular timeslots, such as the scheduling of a traditional sitcom with potential for mass-popularity in the highly competitive ‘primetime’ hours of 6 to 10 pm in an attempt to secure the largest audience share possible. The distinctions between generic categories hold further purpose within the commercial context of primetime TV schedules. This is because the juxtaposition of genres within a given channel’s schedule is designed to provide a degree of variety through which to sustain audience interest not only through an individual programme but throughout the succession of programmes that comprise an evening’s viewing. Whilst the conventions of genre provide ways for producers to communicate and for viewers to understand such variation, these can also provide consistency and can eschew commercial risk for newer cable channels that seek lucrative niche audiences. For instance, a channel can solidify its ‘brand’ by having a particular genre dominate its schedules. This can be seen with ‘premium cable’ network HBO’s devotion to ‘high-end’ alternative approaches to drama, a strategy that has helped to establish its reputation as a provider of innovative and challenging ‘Not TV’ programming that is noticeably different from the risk averse tendencies of programming produced for broadcast networks.

Thinking of television generically thus provides a valuable sense of reliability in

the volatile and competitive industry of commercial American television. Within this context, networks are intent on safeguarding themselves from commercial failure, and generic classification aids in this by equipping a television programme with a set of familiar functions and expectations that is mutually understood by both producer and viewer. Nevertheless, with an imperative to keep audiences entertained in the commercially competitive American television market, there is a necessity to consistently adapt and develop existing television forms. Such 'innovation' in television production prevents programming from getting stale and allows networks to continually lure audiences to their channels with exciting new content. Innovation is often achieved through 'genre mixing', a term coined, and discussed extensively, by Jason Mittell (2004). Genre mixing often occurs in response to audience viewing practices (Mittell, 2004: 9) and involves conventions previously associated with separate, distinct genres being blended into a new form in order to appeal to audiences with a fresh, yet familiar television concept (2004: 154-155).

As with any form of innovation within television programming, genre mixing involves an element of risk in potentially failing to appeal to an audience. As such, generic experimentation is often initiated by television channels that are either under less pressure to succeed in purely commercial terms or are pursuing particular 'branding' strategies that are likely to justify the risk. That said, this risk is somewhat reduced through the blending of established and commercially 'proven' conventions that genre mixing involves. An example of successful innovation through the use of genre mixing is the critically acclaimed *The Office* (2001-2003), a programme which blended the workplace sitcom with the aesthetics of docusoap to yield an innovative new form, comedy verité (see Walters, 2005). The generic mixing exhibited by *The Office* is attributable to its origination on BBC2, a non-commercial British channel with a minority audience and a remit that requires innovation. The consequent success of *The Office* – with audiences as well as with critics – is testament to genre-mixing's ability to satiate audience demands for interesting new television forms, whose evident 'novelty' is tempered through their incorporation of elements of the forms, styles and appeals of programming with established popularity.

Genre mixing can occur at the level of a single episode as a one-off televisual event, as exemplified with *The X Files* episode 'X-Cops' (7:12), in which the programme's existing sci-fi drama aesthetic was blended with the signature style of the 'reality'-based police programme *COPS*. However, genre mixing can also occur at the level of a relatively unprecedented, innovative programme that can inspire imitation and spawn the establishment, given the appeals of the juxtaposition of elements that it has involved, of ostensibly 'new' genres. For example, the demonstrated popularity of the comedy verité form that was largely pioneered by the BBC's *The Office*, encouraged relatively conservative American broadcast networks to themselves commission examples of this approach to live action sitcom, as evidenced in particular by NBC's adaptation of *The Office*. When the risk of genre-mixing is successfully undertaken by innovative television channels, this can reveal the wider commercial potentials of blending conventions with proven popularity to create refreshing new forms.

The docusoap is the mixed-genre profiled in this thesis, the specific programme vehicle for which is the successful American cable television example, *The Hills*. Within this exploration, particular attention is paid first to the distinct combination of generic, narrative and aesthetic conventions that this programme incorporates, and second, to the institutional role that this programme performs for the youth-oriented cable network MTV. *The Hills* borrows conventions from fictional television forms at a level previously unseen in the docusoap genre. This particular mix of generic conventions, which heavily adopts the cinematography of 'high-end' forms of primetime TV drama and the narrative structure of soap opera, requires evaluation in order to then interrogate the institutional intentions behind, and the implications of, this docusoap's generic blend. The convergence of such fictional conventions with the alluring factual status of 'reality' TV signals the ability of *The Hills* to appeal to lucrative young television viewers.

The Hills exemplifies the fact that television programmes are conceived for the potentials they bring to develop a specific set of audience objectives that are considered able to progress a given TV network's commercial aims. The resemblance of this docusoap to 'high production value' TV dramas allows *The Hills* to perform a vital 'flagship' role for MTV. A 'flagship' programme refers to one screened during

primetime hours that is designed to foster audience loyalty and reinforce a channel's 'brand' (Dunleavy, 2005: 8-9). *The Hills* achieves this for MTV due to its reflection of the network's youthful 'cool' identity and its subsequent ability to attract MTV's target youth demographic. This 'branding' strategy is important in television's current age of multi-platform and multi-channel competition, as one in which networks must offer distinctive programmes to stake their claim in a commercial marketplace. MTV is a key example of a network carving out its market niche, an effort that involves the attempt to 'brand' and distinguish itself through its flagship programmes.

In MTV's case this began with its network debut in 1981, when it initially appealed to a youthful demographic by devoting its schedules to pop music videos. This was a pioneering decision that established MTV as the pervasive entertainment choice for young television viewers and secured the network's emblematic position within youth culture. MTV sustained its innovative reputation by experimenting with 'reality' television forms soon after, and it is this experimentation that has secured MTV's reputation as a key innovator in the development of the American docusoap. MTV's *The Real World* (1992-current) innovated by providing viewers with an unprecedented opportunity to voyeuristically observe the interactions of young adults. Testifying to the creative significance of this programme and MTV's foresight in pioneering it, *The Real World* debuted seven years before the *Big Brother* format debuted with a similar premise on Dutch television in 1999. Moreover, in screening *The Osbournes* (2002-2005) MTV was instrumental in launching the immensely popular celebrity docusoap, a mixed-genre form that is currently dominating cable television schedules and acts as further proof of this network's ability to offer commercially successful docusoaps through an inventive mixing of existing, generic elements.

MTV's historical involvement in innovative programming continues with *The Hills*, which within the mixed genre of docusoap provides a new alluring generic combination of fictional glamour and factual accessibility. For MTV, *The Hills* represents a new form of entertainment and acts as the newest emblem of 'cool' for the network's target youth audience, in turn presenting MTV with lucrative marketing opportunities in keeping with the network's commercial focus.

Wider Considerations

A case study of *The Hills* is an indicative reminder that television texts are now produced and consumed in a context wider than the television industry itself. As John Corner (1999: 16) argues, technology is increasingly becoming an integral component of television's institutional identity. The development of satellite and cable technology in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a proliferation of television channels increasing network competition for audience attention and subsequently causing adjustments in the methods employed within programmed content to target viewers. The more recent rise of the internet signals further adjustments within the television industry in response to technological advancements. In addition to providing new delivery platforms for the viewing of TV programmes, the internet has increased the potentials for audience interactivity and reception, and an institutional awareness of the internet's communicative power has begun to influence the creation of television texts.

MTV has a particular incentive to embrace the potential role of the internet, given the technological competency of the network's young demographic. There are various avenues through which viewers are encouraged to consume *The Hills* extra-diegetically (beyond its narrative world), examples of which are their participation in internet discussion boards and their purchasing of affiliated consumer items online. MTV's own awareness of these extra-diegetic possibilities for *The Hills*, which is sometimes reflected in the content of the programme, occasionally underlines its acknowledgement that the internet is a major occupier of its imagined viewer's attention. MTV's accommodation of the internet allows a viewer's enjoyment of *The Hills* to extend well beyond the half-hour timeslot the docusoap occupies on the network's schedule. This increased level of audience engagement in *The Hills* benefits MTV's commercially-driven efforts to secure loyal viewers. Moreover, the network's utilisation of the internet greatly enhances the commercial function of the docusoap by relying on the internet's network potentials to create the "multiplatform consumer franchise" (Greenfeld, 2009: 56) that is considered to surround the programme. The institutional accommodation of the internet has influenced the multi-diegetic textual construction of *The Hills* and is supportive of an

active form of viewership. The 'real life' status of the docusoap plays a key role in encouraging the viewer to develop a keen interest in the sordid personal lives of its cast, and this docusoap's extensive allowances for internet interaction have encouraged the development of an active online *Hills* fan community.

It is this communication network around *The Hills* that has led to interrogations of the docusoap's form. Secondary texts surrounding the docusoap, including internet gossip blogs and television talk shows, have uncovered evidence of editorial manipulation on *The Hills* that contradicts pre-conceived expectations of how a purportedly 'factual' programme should operate. These revelations have pinpointed disconnections between the 'reality' claimed by the docusoap's narrative and the cast's actual lived experiences. These exposures are indicative of Jason Mittell's assertion that genre mixing can ignite "controversies through the juxtaposition of conflicting clusters of generic assumptions" (2004: 163). *The Hills* is particularly prone to interrogation due to the docusoap's deliberate abandonment of documentary's "codes of 'authenticity'" (Walters, 2005: 63) in order to emulate the cinematic aesthetic of 'high production value' drama. Controversy surrounding *The Hills* is a reminder that in combining conventions from previously distinguishable generic categories, mixed genres like docusoap also challenge entrenched perceptions of 'realism' in ostensibly 'factual' TV programming.

Beyond being a source for controversy, the blending of generic conventions on *The Hills* has proven very popular with MTV's young audience, and the programme's extra-diegetic and online potentials allow for a commercially-beneficial level of engagement from devoted viewers. The complexity and intrigue surrounding the innovative generic make-up of *The Hills*, particularly its blending of fictional and factual elements, is responsible for the docusoap's particular popularity with audiences and its glamorisation of the 'ordinary' encourages impassioned fandom. The 'real-world' grounding of the docusoap, combined with the 'aspirational' qualities of the docusoap's participant-characters and milieu, allow for an embedded form of advertising surrounding the lifestyles and activities of *The Hills* cast members. This equips MTV with sophisticated marketing strategies with which to extend and profit from its network brand of youthful 'cool'.

Contents

It is its innovative generic form, and the ensuing institutional implications of these, that warrant an in-depth analysis of *The Hills*. This thesis undertakes an examination of this American docusoap in four distinct chapters:

Chapter One, 'Genre, Institution and the Docusoap', begins with a broad discussion of the relationship between 'genre' and 'television' in order to establish the importance of thinking about television in generic terms. It is emphasised that institutional structures and motivations are key sources of influence on the production of television programming. This initial discussion helps to explain how the emergence of the docusoap is an example of generic evolution and adaptation as a response to industry demands. The docusoap's generic blend of observational documentary and fictional narrative techniques is addressed, before distinctions can then be made between the development of the docusoap genre in the differing institutional contexts of British and American television. It is argued that much academic literature on British docusoap emphasises the mixed-genre's relationship to 'public service' objectives in British television, whilst the commercially-driven environment within which the American docusoap was established, important to which has been competition between broadcast and cable networks, has been under-examined. The chapter then narrows its focus to investigate the development of the American docusoap, with particular emphasis on the pioneering role the MTV Network has performed in offering some innovative and varied manifestations of this mixed-genre. *Laguna Beach* (2004–2006) and *The Hills* (2006–2010) are then introduced as MTV's latest developments within docusoap, with particular importance placed on *The Hills*' radical adoption of fictional narrative techniques whilst still maintaining the 'factual' grounding and 'reality' claims of docusoap.

Chapter Two, titled 'Fictional Narrative Techniques on *The Hills*', takes an in-depth look at the many conventions this docusoap borrows from fictional television forms. It is explained how the docusoap subjects its captured footage to an extensive post-production editing process in order to construct a plausible self-contained world. The 'central narrative' of this *Hills* world is carefully told through a number of

interlinking narrative threads. These establish the central character position of Lauren Conrad and help to naturalise the docusoap's construction by emulating the complexity and interconnectedness of real-life interactions. The open-ended nature of these narrative threads situates *The Hills* as a 'continuing serial', establishing some direct linkages between this docusoap and soap opera. This chapter draws extensively on work by Christine Geraghty (1991) to illustrate how the use of specific soap opera conventions on *The Hills* strongly aligns this docusoap with the fictional genre. Soap conventions discussed by Geraghty that are applied to *The Hills* here, include the construction of a community, the narrative functions of the wedding, and the characterisation of the docusoap's cast members which allows them to perform some soap-like and vital narrative functions. The final third of the chapter explores the elements of melodrama evident within *The Hills* – a dramatic style that foregrounds emotion and exaggeration – and explains how this form complements this docusoap's emphasis on personal relationships.

Chapter Three, 'Intertextuality, Authenticity, and *The Hills*', explores the complicated relationship between *The Hills* and 'reality'. As a genre that mixes elements of the fictional and the factual, docusoap can generate confusion over where it should be placed due to audience perceptions of what is 'real' and what is 'fake'. *The Hills* proves to be especially problematic due to its strong alignment with fictional television forms whilst still claiming 'factuality' and, by association, authenticity. Chapter Three addresses these complications by first differentiating between 'the real' and 'realism', then argues that there are different, competing forms of realism, some of which are perceived to be closer to 'the real' than others. It is *The Hills*' blending of hitherto distinct genres, to which quite different 'realist' assumptions are also attached, that causes confusion and controversy (see Mittell, 2004: 163). Importantly, this chapter addresses the way in which texts surrounding the programme perform the conflicting roles of both authenticating and interrogating the docusoap's claims to 'reality'. Particular instances of controversy regarding *The Hills* include the discovery of continuity errors and revelations of fabricated narrative events, which challenge the levels of authenticity claimed by the makers of the docusoap. An analysis of these instances helps to clarify *The Hills*' relationship to 'the real' and offers suggestions on how the cast of this docusoap should be considered, due to their conflicting representations as both fictional characters and real people.

Chapter Four, 'The Appeals of *The Hills* for both Producer and Consumer', returns to an institutional focus by examining the commercial benefits of this docusoap for the MTV Network. It establishes MTV's position as both a basic cable network and a global television brand. It is argued that the channel's ability to market itself as the televisual home for a younger demographic is key to the network's success in a post-Fordist era of television that requires the calculated targeting of lucrative niche demographics. This chapter argues that *The Hills* sustains and builds upon MTV's promotion of a commodified youth culture by presenting a desirable and seemingly attainable lifestyle as lived by the docusoap's cast. *The Hills* specifically attempts to foster a loyal female fan base through its adoption of soap opera conventions and the calculated portrayal of protagonist Lauren Conrad as both aspirational and accessible. The 'real-world' status maintained by *The Hills* is integral to the docusoap's ability to market a glamorous consumer lifestyle to young, predominantly female, viewers. MTV uses both the allure of the activities documented onscreen and a "multiplatform consumer franchise" (Greenfeld, 2009: 56) to sell commodities, the attainability and consumption of which signal a proximity to, and even an initiation into, *The Hills* lifestyle.

CHAPTER ONE

Genre, Institution and the Docusoap

Introduction

This chapter begins by outlining the establishment of genre in television in order to explain the context in which the mixed genre 'docusoap' has emerged. It then discusses docusoap's generic blend of observational documentary and fictional narrative techniques in relation to the genre's emergence in both British and American television markets. The chapter then focuses on the development of docusoap in the USA, and the pioneering role of cable network MTV in presenting the genre as an alluring form through which to draw youth audiences. This discussion leads to a consideration of MTV's particular individual style of docusoap, which is demonstrated by *The Hills* (2006–2010) and its predecessor *Laguna Beach* (2004–2006). Underwritten by MTV's inventive approach, *The Hills* proves to be an interesting case study within the more diverse docusoap form due to the programme's close alignment with fictional television approaches coupled with its deliberate abandonment of some of the conventions traditionally characteristic of factual programming. Distinguishing *The Hills* within the diverse and successive examples of American and British docusoap produced to date is the extent to which it appropriates various conventions from high-end television fiction in order to enhance its dramatic content and related appeals.

Television Genre

Historically, the term 'genre' has been used to group texts together based on shared attributes. As Steve Neale (2001a: 1) observes, 'genre' has played an important role in categorising texts within a range of art and media forms including literature, theatre, film and television, creating sub-categories based upon shared conventions. These 'conventions', by which texts are grouped into generic categories can be difficult to define in some instances because they vary so greatly between media forms and also evolve over time.

Whilst acknowledging the influence of intertextuality on the creation of TV programmes, John Fiske asserts the importance of genre in television. He states that television is a “highly “generic” medium” (1987: 109) in the sense that generic categories are clearly defined and TV programmes exhibit a number of characteristics that allow them to “obviously” be placed within specific genres (ibid). In screen texts, academics pinpoint a number of elements by which programmes can be classified in generic terms. As Lacey argues, these include “characters, setting, iconography, narrative and style” (2000: 133), as well as aesthetics and *mise en scène*. By identifying similarities and differences within these elements, television shows can be grouped together as an identifiable ‘genre’ or ‘type’ of programme, these classifications also informing how television texts are placed in schedules and are ‘read’ by audiences. For example, a programme can be identified as a traditional situation comedy (sitcom) if it exhibits the following specificities: it is recorded by three to four stationary cameras in a limited number of three-walled studio sets; it is accompanied by a laugh-track; and its humour is derived from the incorrigibility of its reoccurring characters and the situational entrapment within which they remain during each narratively-circular episode (see Dunleavy, 2009: 164-197). This generic classification is determined on the basis of the programme’s relationships with preceding television texts that share common attributes in terms of its concept, narrative approaches, characterisations, settings and its visual style.

It can be argued that genres in television are more susceptible to adaptation and evolution than many non-televisual genres, those of theatre and literature, for example. As Graeme Turner explains, the generic structures of theatre and literature have authentic, historical groundings that have contributed to perceptions of them as somewhat “timeless and universal” (2001: 4). Additionally, generic classification in theatre and literature can be “traced back to classical models” (ibid), as Turner explains, “so that it is deemed possible to determine if a contemporary play is properly a ‘tragedy’, for instance, by referring back to Aristotle’s definition” (Turner, 2001: 4–5). As a far more recent medium than either theatre or literature, television does not have a ‘timeless and universal’ generic tradition and structure. Instead, television genres are more changeable forms, which continually build upon themselves by appropriating conventions from other, usually related, genres and by responding to trends arising from the evolution of their medium, television.

Many of the genres that are still prevalent in TV schedules originated in radio, theatre and cinema before being adapted for television. The tendency of television to involve the borrowing and adaptation of generic forms partly accounts for the absence of historically established, generic categories within this medium. The generic examples pioneered by radio had a large influence on television's initial practices and generic formation (Hendy, 2003a: 4). For example, television adapted its initial daytime soap opera format from existing models in radio. The serialised nature of the genre lent itself to the "unceasing demands of broadcasting" (Hendy, 2003b: 8), in the sense that the continuing narrative of a soap could fill the radio schedule in daily instalments and could also build loyal audiences over time. Television shared these "unceasing demands of broadcasting" with radio and successfully adapted the original radio form to television (ibid). Other television genres, such as the television Westerns of the late 1950s, originated in film (Mittell, 2003: 48). The adaptation potential of novels and comic books provided additional sources of influence on television forms, as is evident in programmes like *Wonder Woman* (ABC/CBS, 1976–9) and *The Incredible Hulk* (CBS, 1977–82) (ibid). This adaptability of television genres indicates an awareness of genre and a potential to incorporate conventions from other non-television forms that is arguably more acute in television than it is in most other media. This adaptability also supports Mittell's contention (2004: xiv) that, although it may be possible to define a set of their conventions at any one time, television genres are constantly in flux and continually changing.

Generic differences between television programmes are an important aspect of the larger television schedule. Points of difference between genres are important in contributing to a sense of the juxtaposition of different programme forms within a given channel's schedule. This juxtaposition aims to maintain the interest of the audience over an extended period of time. Consequentially, individual programmes are broadcast within the wider context of, for example, 'an evening's viewing'. Upon a visit to the USA in 1972, Welsh academic Raymond Williams made some influential observations about the nature of American broadcast television. Observing an American television schedule for the first time, Williams concluded that the planning of an evening's viewing was intended to hold a viewer's interest throughout the night, discouraging him or her from changing television channels (1974: 93–94).

Unaccustomed to the structure and style of advertiser-funded American broadcast schedules, Williams determined that the way in which commercials and trailers were inserted into the narrative of a television film created a “single irresponsible flow of images and feelings” (Williams, 1974: 91–92). Coining the term “flow” to describe this viewing experience, Williams explained it in these terms:

One night in Miami, still dazed from a week on an Atlantic liner, I began watching a film and at first had some difficulty in adjusting to a much greater frequency of commercial ‘breaks’. Yet this was a minor problem compared to what eventually happened. Two other films, which were due to be shown on the same channel on other nights, began to be inserted as trailers. A crime in San Francisco (the subject of the original film) began to operate in extraordinary counterpoint not only with the deodorant and cereal commercials but with a romance in Paris and the eruption of a prehistoric monster who laid waste in New York (ibid.).

Although Williams first found this experience of flow within the commercial American schedule to be disorientating and surreal (ibid.), upon returning to Britain he noted a similar element of flow existed within the BBC’s ‘public service’, advertisement-free model of television (Williams, 1974: 93). Rather than this flow being ‘irresponsible’, Williams came to understand the institutional purpose for this constant juxtaposition of differing television forms. He deduced that each programme or advertisement is an individual unit, but they are all unified by their place within the larger narrative of the evening schedule. In television therefore, the conventions of genre provide important points of difference between scheduled programmes. For example, the ‘soap opera’ and the ‘crime drama’ adhere to different conventions, which clearly differentiate them from each other. Moreover, generic differences between programmes provide an important means through which to maintain the interest of the audience throughout the ‘flow’ of the evening schedule.

The importance of genres in television is further proven in the conceptualisation of new television programmes. Networks rely on established and successful generic formulas when creating new programmes, in order to lessen the risk of failure in a notably volatile and risky market (Mittell, 2003: 48). This adaptation commonly occurs in one of two ways: one of *imitation*, whereby a generic formula is directly copied; or of *recombination*, which involves a “conceptual ‘marriage’ between previous hits” (Dunleavy, 2009: 134; Gitlin, 1994: 63). This continual evolution

ensures that newer generic forms offer something different yet also maintain an air of familiarity, improving the chances of a new genre being accepted by audiences.

This appropriation and adaptation of existing genres to form new ones can be further examined with reference to what Mittell describes as a “*genre cycle*” (2003: 48), which has been prevalent in television production since the classic network era (ibid.). In describing this cycle Mittell refers to Michael Curtin’s three stages of “innovation, imitation, and saturation” (ibid.). These stages underline that a new programme is keyed to offer elements drawn from previously successful programmes or genres. One of several examples Mittell provides is the blending of sitcom and the supernatural to create the ‘fantasy sitcom’ genre pioneered by *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–72) (ibid.). The popularity of such shows invites imitations of their successful formulas by other networks, as can be seen in NBC’s *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70) which replaced the witch of *Bewitched* with a genie (ibid.). ‘Imitation’ eventually leads to ‘saturation’, when there are so many programmes sharing the same formula that the television audience loses interest in that particular genre (ibid.). Accordingly, the cycle begins again with new bouts of innovation producing new variations on established generic forms in order to sustain audience interest.

This way in which genres are continually built upon to create new burgeoning forms aligns with Fiske’s opinion that genres “should be defined as a shifting provisional set of characteristics which is modified as each new example is produced” (Fiske, 1987: 111). This assertion underlines Fiske’s argument that genres are not stagnant forms but instead categories which adapt and change in accordance with the variable nature of television production. Fiske suggests that the “shifting provisional set of characteristics” (1987: 111) ensures that television genres do not have clearly defined boundaries, but that instead “there is an intergeneric network of conventions with various points of convergence that form the foci” of various genres (1987: 112). This is a particularly helpful way of considering the fluid nature of current television genres. Many television programmes share a cluster of conventions that align them with a particular television genre. However, individual programmes will often depart from the previously defined generic conventions and boundaries. An important marker of

such deviation from conventions is seen in the appropriation within programmes from an established genre, with elements from other, previously unrelated, genres.

These points where television programmes combine conventions from various television genres can best be described by Jason Mittell's term 'genre mixing'. 'Genre mixing' effectively explains the interaction that occurs when conventions formerly ascribed to different genres are combined. This combination can occur within one experimental episode, one television programme, or in developing genres (2004: 155). As Mittell argues, the term 'genre mixing' is a more appropriate description than generic 'hybridity' (2004: 154). He notes that the biological origins of the term 'hybridity' suggests a static coupling or crossbreeding of two distinct species, and this does not accurately reflect the 'fluid' nature of television, as described above. Therefore, 'genre mixing' will be the term used here to describe the way in which conventions of television genres intermingle to form new generic forms, because this term, as Mittell argues, "is more indicative of an ongoing process of generic combinations and interplay" (ibid.).

Mittell explains that generic mixing does not actually weaken, but instead reasserts the role of 'genre' in television. He explains that all those involved in the production and reception processes of television – from industry personnel, to critics, to audiences – will spend more effort linking a mixed-genre programme to various generic categories than they would to a programme that rests comfortably within the agreed conventions of one particular genre (2004: 156–157). This helps to explain the tendency of competing, commercially-focused networks to avert risk by preferring to operate within existing and known genre conventions. Despite this, the evolution and inter-mixing of genres has been a marked feature of television, influenced by both the juxtaposition of different forms within schedules and by the additional opportunities for genre development that have been afforded by advances in TV production technologies. Mittell argues that genres should be considered a cultural process, rather than as a categorisation that is solely limited to textual elements. There are many factors that influence how television programmes are formed, and, as such, the nature of television production ensures that "the complex interrelations between texts, industries, audiences and historical contexts" (Mittell, 2004: 110) determine the textual aspects of generic conventions. Therefore, genre

mixing is a point of much interest in terms of analysing the “complex interrelations” between both textual and external elements that have constituted the specific combination of generic conventions evident in any given mixed genre.

The Docusoap: A Mixed Genre

Docusoap provides a very overt example of a relatively new TV genre that has been established as the result of the blending of conventions from existing TV genres. Docusoap is a mixed genre that commonly blends the ‘captured footage’ and visual conventions of popular factual programming, themselves adapted from TV documentary, with the editorial potentials and narrative appeals of ‘character-driven drama’ (Hill, 2005: 27). Keith Beattie (2004: 190) provides a concise definition:

Docusoaps are character-centred works which develop multiple storylines based on factual material in ways which, as the term itself suggests, are comparable to fictional soap operas.

The ‘factual material’ of docusoap is understood by many writers as an adaptation of an observational documentary ‘fly-on-the-wall’ shooting style (see, for example Walters, 2005: 62–63, and Hill, 2005: 19–20). In other words, the footage of docusoaps is often presented with minimal direct reference to or acknowledgement of the makers of the programme. It is as if the makers themselves do not know the outcome of the events unfolding on camera (Bruzzi, 2004: 130). This creates the impression that the audience is watching ‘real’ events as they unfold, and that such events might continue even if the cameras were not present. It is important to note that observational documentary is committed to an objective representation of ‘the real’. While docusoap often adopts an observational aesthetic, this mixed genre is instead committed to using unlimited prospects for intervention by the makers to produce entertainment. Docusoap, as a genre, therefore maintains most elements of the *realism* ascribed to the documentary genre through its similar focus on factual as opposed to fictional material and events. However, as Beattie argues (2004: 190), the factual material of docusoap is developed in ways that are comparable to fictional programming. Docusoap’s use of fictional conventions to create a story out of factual footage suggests that this mixed genre provides something that conventional documentary does not.

Docusoap was an emerging and distinct genre by the mid-1990s. Individual programmes began to appear that (partially) aligned themselves with observational documentary, but offered a more personal focus on their documentary subjects. In the UK, *The Ark* (BBC2, 1993), *Airport* (BBC1, 1996), and *Driving School* (BBC1, 1997), began the practise of documenting events within an institutional setting, akin to the BBC's observational documentary tradition – a zoo, an airport and a driving school respectively – but focused on the individual personalities of those situated within these institutions. *Airport*, for example, foregrounded the personal pressures, triumphs and frustrations of Heathrow Airport's ground staff as they tackled the day-to-day tasks involved in successfully managing the airport's large clientele. One staff member, Jeremy Spake – a Ground Services Manager for *Aeroflot* Russian Airlines – became a prime focus of the show due to his friendly upbeat nature and the light-hearted humour he would share with the camera when faced with difficult work situations (see Dovey, 2000: 135). This emphasis on the individual within the institution is a key element of the docusoap's deviation from traditional documentary. Docusoap shifted the focus from a wider consideration of the operation of institutions in society, to the entertaining potentials of human subjects. Ben Walters argues that this change in focus resulted in a move away from the traditional tendencies to organise factual footage for information-oriented purposes, suggesting that this entailed a “shift from argument engaging the brain to entertainment engaging the emotions” (2005: 64). Docusoap's foregrounding of the individual in order to engage with the audience on an entertaining, emotional level is one of the ways that this genre most overtly distances itself from traditional documentary and instead moves toward the character-focused attributes of popular television fiction.

Certain aesthetics and narrative techniques are used in docusoap to structure events from real life into an entertaining normally serialised story akin to television fiction. Docusoap's inherent focus on 'the individual' ensures that dialogue is central to the genre's narrative and results in its becoming what Jon Dovey describes as “a deeply conversationalised documentary form” (2000: 138). The centrality of docusoap cast members, who verbalise their actions and feelings to each other, or directly to camera, ensures that 'the personal' is the focus of the docusoap narrative. In this sense, docusoap stories are just like the multiple plotlines of soap operas as

they are “primarily concerned with the small dramas of life” (Bethell, 1999: 14 cited in Kilborn, 2000: 113). Thus, the focus on individual personalities in the docusoap ensures that the personal dramas that these subjects experience form the basis of this genre’s entertainment value.

The small group of subjects that commonly make up the ‘cast’ of docusoaps are chosen with their performance potential and their ability to create dramatic conflict firmly in mind. As if casting for a fictional drama, docusoap participants are selected in consideration of the entertainment value and appeal they bring to the narrative (Walters, 2005: 65). Additionally the real-life stories that transpire are subject to narrative emphasis, depending upon their potential for conflict and drama (ibid.). The environments in which docusoaps are filmed are carefully selected for their capacity to create the kinds of compelling, ongoing narratives required by the ‘serial’ demands of their primetime schedule roles. Such environments include high-pressure working and living situations where tensions between individuals are expected to develop. As Beattie explains, docusoaps “build tension through a focus on conflict” (2004: 191) and “generate suspense through cliffhanger endings” (ibid.). Usefully, the interpersonal tensions of docusoap allow for the creation of suspenseful cliffhangers both before commercial breaks and at the end of episodes, in order to sustain and build audience interest in the unfolding drama. This technique ensures audiences will tune in each week to see the next instalment of the ‘real-life’ drama affecting the cast members they have become attached to or have invested in due to the dramatic documentation of the personal lives of these individuals. In using factual material in this way, there is a notable departure from documentary’s commitment to providing information and arguments in favour of combining factual material with fictional character and narrative techniques to achieve entertainment.

It is the combination of the above techniques from popular TV fiction with the aesthetics of documentary that makes docusoap a compelling television genre. Docusoap’s factual elements are enhanced in entertainment terms by the engaging nature of the genre’s highly constructed narrative. Additionally, the docusoap’s focus on ‘real people’ and ‘real drama’ allows for a powerful level of engagement and identification that because of its ‘reality’ credentials is unattainable by fictional programmes. This engagement is intensified by docusoap’s “wholesale embrace of

the camera” (Beattie, 2004: 198), in which cast members acknowledge the presence of the camera and sometimes talk directly into the lens. Whilst this technique, as Beattie (ibid.) suggests, further distances docusoap from documentary, interestingly, it is one that is distinctive to ‘reality TV’ and is generally not a feature of fictional programming. This ‘confessional’ approach, which is used in many, but not all docusoap forms, further enhances the connection between cast and audience as viewers can feel they are being spoken to directly. Docusoaps are also characterised by what Walters describes as their “codes of ‘authenticity’” (2005: 63). These codes include natural lighting, hand-held camerawork, and cast members’ genuine surprise by action as it unfolds (ibid.). As they do in ‘reality TV’ more broadly, these codes act as markers of ‘the real’ in docusoaps. They allow audiences to believe that docusoaps are situated within ‘the real’, despite the entertainment value of this reality being enhanced by soap-like fictional conventions.

The Docusoap in British and American Contexts

The docusoap genre is not confined solely to the British television context. However, existing academic literature does focus on the genre’s British traditions and conventions. Academics have highlighted three main concerns about docusoap within the British television industry. The first is that the entertainment-focus of docusoap is undermining the ‘public service’ values of documentary. Second, there is concern that the prevalence of docusoaps in schedules is weakening the audience’s ability to recognise the documentary form. And third, it is considered that docusoap presents a questionable level of authenticity in the reality it depicts (see for example Kilborn, 2000; Beattie, 2004). Historically in the UK, documentary has been seen as a genre that can vitally inform and educate British citizens, in line not only with the role of the nation’s public broadcaster, the BBC, but also with the ‘public service objectives’ pursued by commercial broadcasters, such as ITV. However docusoap, as argued above, appears to use documentary conventions for mainly, if not purely, entertainment purposes. Hence, the rise in popularity of docusoaps has also brought contentions that documentary is losing its vital qualities of “argumentation, analysis and exposition” (Beattie, 2004: 193) and is essentially being ‘dumbed down’ (Kilborn, 2000: 111). Further, docusoap’s focus on individual personalities rather than institutions is seen to undermine the serious social commentary that traditional documentaries have offered. As Beattie explains, the “private reflections, gossip and

confession” (2004: 199) of docusoap subjects are seen to replace “public and ‘official’ knowledge as credible and authoritative interpretations of reality” (ibid.). This focus on imparting knowledge, born from and sustained by the British ‘public service’ documentary tradition, can incite potential criticism of docusoap for its apparent failure to include wider societal considerations and a more paternal narrative voice (see Kilborn, 2000, and Hill, 2005). Removing the expectations of traditional documentary from the entertainment-oriented docusoap allows the mixed-genre’s use of documentary conventions to be seen more clearly. This entertainment function of docusoap can perhaps better exemplified in the television culture of the United States, within which ‘public service’ aims in television have always been overwhelmed by the objectives of commercialism.

Docusoap did not proliferate in the United States in the 1990s as much as it did in the United Kingdom. However, one programme in particular – MTV’s *The Real World* – did signal the beginning of the American docusoap tradition. Described as a “precursor of docusoap” (Walters, 2005: 65), *The Real World* debuted in 1992 and follows the interpersonal relationships of a group of carefully chosen young adults who are brought together – initially as strangers – to live in the same house in a city carefully selected for its allure. The first season was located in Manhattan, New York, and subsequent seasons have been based in both national and international centres including Seattle, Las Vegas, Paris, and Sydney. Still in production, completing its 24th season in 2010, *The Real World* is MTV’s longest running programme.

The Real World’s longevity can be attributed to the show’s popularity with MTV’s young target audience. Akin to docusoap, the programme presents factual footage of the interactions between *The Real World* cast and structures this footage with narrative devices common in fiction. Emotional drama is placed at the crux of the show’s story, as emotional connections and conflicts form the basis of the programme’s narrative strands. Budding romances and personality clashes between cast members are common threads that interweave through entire seasons. While personalities and city locations change for each season, the show’s focus on the dramatic conflict that inevitably unfolds remains the staple of *The Real World*’s entertaining narrative.

Testament to its conceptual innovation within 'reality' TV, *The Real World's* compelling 'social experiment' premise was the first to involve the imperative for carefully chosen compatible and incompatible personalities to interact in a household setting. Interestingly, *The Real World* debuted seven years before the internationally successful 'reality' game show, *Big Brother*, and in doing so pioneered a similar kind of basic premise. However emulating only some of *The Real World's* conceptual features, *Big Brother* involves contestants being voted out of the household each week by both their fellow housemates and the viewing public, in accordance with their behaviour inside the house. *The Real World* was one of the first American 'reality' programmes to demonstrate the voyeuristic appeal of watching real interpersonal relationships play out on screen. Such raw, factual footage encourages a compelling level of emotional engagement by the viewer. This engagement is enhanced with segments that position the cast members as 'talking heads', when they confess to the camera their true emotions as the real-life dramas unfold. This 'camera confessional' technique gives the audiences unbridled access to the thoughts and feelings of *The Real World's* youth subjects; a form of intimate access that even the show's voyeuristic documentation of their every move does not really allow.

This way in which *The Real World* captures the dramatic elements of its 'real' footage pinpoints how factual material can be utilised and manipulated for its entertainment potential. The allure of watching other people in the process of living their lives is enhanced by the way the programme constructs this reality into a compelling narrative. As Keith Beattie explains, *The Real World* uses "three writers to construct a plot for each week's episode from hours of videotaped footage" (2004: 194). Additionally, the show's producer, Mary-Ellis Bunim, comments that each scene of the programme is story-boarded just like a primetime fictional series (ibid.). The dramatic story of *The Real World* therefore does not merely unfold, but is instead carefully set up, constructed, and edited together to form ongoing narrative strands that are so steeped in emotional intensity that they are able to sustain a viewer's engagement throughout the season. This combination of real footage and fictional narrative construction illustrates how *The Real World* can be considered a pioneering and highly influential American docusoap.

Ben Walters draws attention to the fact that *The Real World's* focus on emotional drama can be contrasted with the British docusoap's emphasis on light entertainment (2005: 66). In general, early British docusoaps centred on "humorous banter and good-natured, long-suffering professionalism" (ibid.). *The Real World* presented a model based less on humour and more on dramatic seriousness. These different approaches perhaps signalled a difference in cultural preference between the USA and the UK, at least in terms of the content needed to succeed in a primetime schedule. Moreover, the light entertainment style of British docusoap did not initially translate well into American television in the late 1990s. As American documentary producer, Nancy Walzog noted, "someone here [in the USA] has to take a risk in scheduling, if this genre is to become anything like the commercial craze it is in Britain" (Biddiscomb cited in Hill, 2005: 29). Instead of adopting the light-hearted approach of profiling humorous and endearing characters in a workplace setting, as typified by *Airport* and other British docusoaps, American television schedules favoured the kind of emotionally-charged premise exemplified by *The Real World*. This early American docusoap largely presented its captured footage in ways that enhanced the gravity of the conflicts depicted on-screen, this creating a sense of compelling drama. Their relative 'seriousness' provided a necessary contrast to the flourishing American sitcom genre, and was successfully remodelled within the 'gamedoc' genre (*Big Brother, Survivor*) which became important within American broadcast schedules. Gamedocs placed contestants in a controlled setting and foregrounded their interpersonal relationships while they competed to win the overall 'game', often in the form of a large monetary prize. Early American docusoaps and gamedocs both focused on elements of dramatic conflict that were capable of providing an appealing alternative to the thriving American sitcom.

Walters suggests that American television's initial rejection of the light-hearted British docusoap model was due to the genre's commonalities with the genre of fictional situation comedy, as both sitcom and British docusoap relied on "humour, emotional engagement and simplistic narrative" (2005: 67). The shared attribute of humour between sitcom and British docusoap is perhaps the most important aspect to note when assessing the success rate of the populist approach to docusoap in various national markets. Walters notes that British sitcom was in decline when the docusoap entered primetime, and the entertainment-oriented approach that

characterised this mixed-genre had the capacity to fill this emerging schedule gap. This context contributed to the British docusoap's national success (2005: 67). American sitcom, in contrast, was thriving in the late 1990s (*ibid.*), which suggests that the humorous light-hearted nature of the British docusoap form was too similar to the already successful US sitcom genre for it to do well in the American market. Given these market differences, in the context of late 1990s American television, it emerged that 'reality' game-docs rather than docusoaps were best positioned to supply the needed point of difference to sitcom in primetime broadcast schedules.

In the early 2000s, American television did, however, begin to produce docusoaps that aligned closely with traditional sitcom. With their domestic settings and use of light-hearted humour, this new batch of American docusoaps attempted to emulate the success of the US sitcom whilst providing a fresh take on a well-established genre that had finally passed its peak. The point of difference from other docusoaps that these American examples provide is their focus on established real-life celebrity figures. The same cable channel responsible for *The Real World*, MTV, was a forerunner in broadcasting such programmes, which include prominent successes *The Osbournes* (2002–2005) and *Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica* (2003–2005). *The Osbournes* documents the private lives of aging rocker, Ozzy Osbourne, his wife Sharon, and two of their three children Kelly and Jack. The other example, *Newlyweds*, focuses on the new marital life of pop stars Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey as they settle into marriage and living together for the first time. These shows hark back to a very early sitcom tradition with their focus on familial domestic life. Episodic narratives centre on household issues like renovating homes (*Newlyweds*) and feuding with neighbours (*The Osbournes*), which play out humorously with light-hearted interactions between the celebrity cast members. These American docusoaps continue the concept, successfully pioneered by *The Real World*; a decision that signals a key difference in approach and interest between traditional American and British docusoap forms. This is the American docusoap's greater interest in the personal relationships that develop in *domestic* settings as opposed to those that emerge within the institutional settings of their British counterparts.

Moreover, making the household interactions of established celebrities the subject of docusoaps proved to be a particularly popular concept within a culture infatuated with the lives of celebrities. Shows such as *The Osbournes* and *Newlyweds* give viewers access to the private lives of celebrities at a level unattainable for tabloid magazines. The viewer is invited, voyeuristically, into their homes and allowed to witness these 'stars' performing relatively mundane activities. Consequentially, this portrayal of celebrated figures as 'real' people doing 'common' things provided a level of fascination for the viewer. Specifically, it offers ways to cut through the hyperbolic status awarded to celebrity figures in tabloid magazines by presenting them in the kind of 'ordinary' household setting that the viewers themselves have experienced. An interesting consequence is that this kind of exposure amplifies the celebrity of the docusoap subjects because a more personal level of their lives is now being made public. This style of docusoap, which humanises celebrity figures through an intimate yet light-hearted portrayal, has been a demonstrable ratings success and similar programmes continue to be prevalent on network schedules – notably those of E! and MTV.

The MTV Network and Innovation for the American Docusoap

Youth-oriented cable television network MTV has been a key producer and broadcaster of docusoaps. Owned by Viacom, MTV launched in 1981 and quickly established itself as the televisual 'home' for the younger generation. The target audience of MTV is 12 to 34 year-olds, which is a coveted demographic in the commercial media industry. Like other commercial cable television networks, MTV's primary goal is to deliver audiences to advertisers in order to generate advertising revenue and turn a profit (Jones, 2005: 87). The 12 to 34 year-old audience is a popular group amongst advertisers, as it makes up a third of the United States population and holds an estimated 'purchasing power' of US\$250 billion, a figure that is ever-increasing (Smith, 2005: 89). MTV has a firm hold on this highly sought-after demographic since it is considered to be "the world's most widely distributed television network" (ibid.) that "reaches more than 394 million subscribers in 166 countries and territories" (ibid.). MTV's widespread international availability has resulted in a degree of unification amongst the network's youth audience based on a shared consumption of MTV's content and its underlying consumerist messages. As

Edna Gunderson explains, “the way this age group looks, talks, acts and consumes is moulded by the clothes, music and attitudes aired on MTV’s programming and youth-slanted commercials” (2001: 1). In essence, MTV aims to sell a style of youthful ‘cool’ to its audience through its television schedule.

MTV’s programming was originally heavily based on music videos. The channel, the name of which stands for ‘Music Television’, was the first network to devote its schedules entirely to music. This led to the mainstreaming and proliferation of the music video as a means of promoting musical artists. Music videos, in which a film or video accompanies an artist’s music single, provides an appealing visual element to the music and is essentially a marketing tool for the music industry. Music videos not only help to sell the artist’s music, but, as Gunderson observes, they also sell the clothes, the style, and the attitude that are glorified within these videos by popular musicians (2001: 1). MTV was, and still is, an outlet for marketing the tangible consumer products of popular culture to 12 to 34 year-olds. This young audience was originally drawn to the channel due to its devotion to popular music videos: a form of media deeply associated with a younger generation, as is also a feature of the popular media industry itself. MTV therefore became known as the youth network, an association that appealed to its youth-skewed target audience as MTV’s programming attempted to cater solely to their interests. Not surprisingly, this association was equally attractive to advertisers as MTV became the avenue through which the lucrative 12 to 34 year-old consumers could be most effectively reached.

Over the past decade there has been a marked shift in MTV’s programming. The channel’s schedule currently contains far less music videos in favour of a large array of 30- to 60-minute ‘reality’-based programmes. An assessment of MTV’s programming reveals that ‘reality’ TV programmes comprise 62.5 per cent (15 hours) of the channel’s schedule over a 24-hour period. Programmes devoted to the screening of music videos account for the remaining 37.5 per cent (9 hours). More significantly, ‘reality’ television is typically the only type of programming that screens between 4pm and 1am on MTV. This large timeslot, which eclipses and includes traditional primetime hours, has seen music videos increasingly relegated to the role of providing a 5-minute ‘filler’ between scheduled programmes. Primetime is considered the period in which the largest number of available viewers

is watching the channel and during this time MTV's evening schedule features 'reality'-based shows such as *Jackass*, in which a number of stunts and pranks are performed by a male cast; *My Super Sweet 16*, which each week documents the planning and execution of a wealthy teenager's elaborate birthday party; and *Bad Girls' Club*, a show based on *The Real World*'s premise that forces seven women with behavioural issues to live together as cameras capture the inevitable conflict that arises. The current prioritisation of 'reality'-based programmes on MTV's schedule signals a significant departure from the network's initial dedication to music videos¹.

Steve Jones (2005: 87) offers some reasons behind MTV's shift in programming content. In consideration of audience tastes, the current young MTV audience are perhaps less interested in music videos than previous MTV generations were. After all, it has been over 29 years since MTV first presented music videos, which because of the additional potentials of advances in production technologies, were a dynamic and 'cutting edge' media form. It is possible that the appeal of music videos is losing resonance with current MTV viewers, who instead seek entertainment from newer television genres as well as from other forms of media.

From a purely commercial perspective, the rationale for MTV's reduced reliance on music videos becomes clearer. As Jones suggests, programmers saw a need to "capture audiences for longer periods of time than music videos would permit" (2005: 87). Due to the nature of three-minute pop songs, a viewer could watch a music video that appealed to their interests, then change the channel three minutes later if they disliked the next song. Because of this, music video programming has not been conducive to capturing a viewer's attention and holding it throughout a nightly schedule, which is the aim of programmers in order to secure a large audience size for advertisers. 'Reality' programmes that run for 30 to 60 minutes have a better chance of securing prolonged audience interest due to their narrative structure and this kind of thinking could account for their current proliferation within the MTV schedule.

¹ The above data was calculated and assessed by the author and based on the MTV programming schedules for Tuesday 7 July – Thursday 9 July 2009, according to the schedule printed in the July 2009 edition of TelstraClear InHomeTV.

Another issue regarding MTV's change in programming emphasis is the questionable commercial power of the music video. While Jones acknowledges the power of music videos to sell music, he registers that music videos have proven to be "less well suited" to selling other commodities to the same audience (2005: 87). In other words, music videos seem to have a diminishing ability to sell the clothes, styles and attitudes that surround popular music. For MTV, this could signal a worrying loss of advertising revenue, as its profit requires the successful merchandising of the MTV 'brand'. Vital to the commercial value of this brand is the selling of tangible commodities along with the notion that by purchasing and consuming these products, young viewers can enjoy and embody the desirable youth culture being promoted by the network. MTV's changing programme schedule signals a realisation among its programmers and executives that 'reality'-based programmes provide better avenues for selling commercial products than music videos.

It starts to become clear why 'reality'-based television, and docusoap in particular, is currently the preferred style of programming for MTV and for other networks. If current MTV viewers are seeking entertainment in newer television genres, docusoap provides this. As a genre that blends appealing factual footage with fictional narrative techniques, docusoap allows MTV to present a compelling new generic mix to its target audience. Yet, the mixed-genre nature of docusoap entails that it draws upon already established conventions, a facet which helps to maximise its chances of success. The factual elements of American docusoap capitalise on the popularity of 'reality' TV forms in the American and other national television markets from the mid-1990s. The fictional elements of this generic mix are inspired by the related conventions of soap operas and serialised teen dramas, both being forms to which MTV's youth audiences are accustomed. Consequentially, for MTV audiences the docusoap combines the attractions of the familiar with the allure of 'the new'.

The appealing mix of factual footage and fictional narrative that characterises docusoap can sustain audience interest throughout a 30- or 60-minute programme, unlike a 3-minute music video. This sustained interest can likely continue

throughout the nightly schedule as one docusoap is followed by another docusoap during primetime on MTV. This prolonged audience engagement suits the commercial interest of MTV, as advertisers will pay the network a lot of money in order to advertise to what they regard as young adult viewers with increasing levels of disposable income, yet whose brand loyalties are still in the process of being defined.

Docusoap also has the ability to cater to the needs to MTV's young target audience. MTV does have a legacy of being a television channel devoted to the celebration and promotion of Western middle-class youth culture. Docusoaps are arguably taking over this role of celebration and promotion that music videos helped to initiate. The plethora of MTV docusoaps caters to a range of teenage and young adult interests. As previously mentioned, MTV pioneered the integration of celebrity culture into American docusoap with programmes like *The Osbournes* and *Newlyweds*. This celebrity focus continues with docusoaps like *Meet the Barkers* (2005–2006), which, like *Newlyweds*, is based on two celebrities settling in to married life, in this case former Miss USA and Playboy model, Shanna Moakler and Blink 182 drummer, Travis Barker. There is also *Run's House* (2005–present), which, like *The Osbournes*, documents the domestic lives of aging musician Joseph Simmons or 'Rev. Run' of hip hop group Run DMC, and his large family. MTV docusoaps also focus on the fashion industry, evident with *8th and Ocean* (2006) which follows the lives of male and female models living together as they are cast for modelling jobs in Miami; as well as the music industry, which is shown in *I'm from Rolling Stone* (2007) which documents the internships of six aspiring music journalists at music magazine *Rolling Stone*. The attempt to appeal directly to a youthful demographic is evident in the number of MTV docusoaps that focus on high school life such as the long-running *MADE* (2002–present). Other examples include teenagers facing monumental life events in *16 and Pregnant* (2009), *Engaged and Underage* (2007–2008) and *Teen Mom* (2009–present). By broadcasting docusoaps that are so carefully keyed to serve teenage interests, MTV continues to situate itself as the television channel for the younger generation. Popular music, which is used in these programmes by way of their soundtracks, and the elements of youth culture that surround music, evidentially still dominate the MTV schedule, but in a notably different form from the original approach of music video.

The ability of docusoaps to engage directly with the interests of a young adult audience, as indicated by the above examples, assists MTV's commercial objectives in respect of this core audience. Through this 'reality'-based programming, the 'MTV brand' can be constructed and pursued in a more successful and entertaining way than MTV's earlier confinement to music videos allowed. Presenting 'real people' living out the aspirations of its core audience can be a strong avenue for the fostering of consumerism. Consumer products can be advertised by way of product placement, such as when docusoap subjects eat and party at certain restaurants and nightclubs, as well as through the products advertised during commercial breaks, which often include clothing and make-up brands. This integrated advertising of consumer products delivers a powerful marketing message: that the desirable lifestyle of MTV's docusoap subjects – aspiring models, music journalists, popular teenagers, fashion industry workers, established celebrities – is achievable by purchasing and consuming the commodities shown on screen. It is this powerful marketing potential, combined with the ability to maintain prolonged audience interest through a blend of factual and fictional elements, that makes docusoap an advantageous genre for a youth-oriented commercial television network.

Laguna Beach and The Hills: Leading American Docusoaps.

MTV docusoap *The Hills*, and its predecessor *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County*, are strong and particularly successful examples of the American docusoap genre. The original series of *Laguna Beach* (2004–2006) documents the lives of a group of affluent, attractive teenagers in the seaside town of Laguna Beach, Orange County, California. The docusoap focuses almost exclusively on the friendships and romantic relationships among the young cast and highlights the gossip and emotional drama that ensues. The success of the show spawned several other series such as *Newport Harbour: The Real Orange County* (2007–2008), which used the same concept in a different yet equally idyllic Orange County coastal town; *Living on the Edge* (2007–ongoing), the British equivalent of *Laguna Beach*; and, most importantly, *The Hills* (2006–2010), which has proven to be the most successful and popular programme to emerge from the *Laguna Beach* franchise.

The Hills follows Lauren Conrad, original cast member of *Laguna Beach*, once she moves from Laguna to Los Angeles to pursue a career in the fashion industry. Lauren is the main protagonist of the show, but *The Hills* also follows Lauren's close friends Heidi, Audrina and Whitney. Like *Laguna Beach*, and consistent with docusoap tradition, *The Hills* focuses on the interpersonal relationships of its cast members: the friendships between these four girls, their relationships with other, less prominent, female cast members, and their romantic relationships with men. The action of *The Hills* is largely dialogue-driven, as Lauren and her friends talk about the events of a party the previous night, the state of their romantic relationships, and life decisions such as living arrangements and career choices. In this sense, *The Hills* aligns with Jon Dovey's description of docusoap as a "deeply conversationalised documentary form" (2000: 138). These conversations take place in cast members' apartments, their places of employment, and in Los Angeles eateries and nightclubs.

The Hills has a more 'mature' feel to it than *Laguna Beach*, its 'characters' have completed a transition from the teenagers they undoubtedly were in Laguna, to being full-fledged adults, a transition which parallels that of the core audience being targeted by each programme. The context has moved from high school gossip being discussed in the homes of the casts' parents, to Lauren and her friends branching out on their own and navigating life and love as young twenty-somethings in L.A. A key theme on *The Hills* is that of learning who to trust in the self-serving, bustling centre of Hollywood: a setting that contrasts starkly with the sleepy innocence of their lives in Laguna. The show's setting of the glamorous Hollywood social scene is enhanced by the cast members' jobs. Lauren and Whitney intern at fashion magazine *Teen Vogue*, and later public relations firm People's Revolution. Audrina has worked at photo studio Quixote Studios and music label Epic Records. Heidi works at Bolthouse Productions, a firm that promotes and operates nightlife venues in Los Angeles. These jobs firmly ground the programme within the Hollywood fashion and social industries, and allow the docusoap's action to occur during fashion shoots, band showcases, nightclub openings, runway shows and industry parties. At these events, it is again the emotional drama between cast members that is foregrounded, yet this industry backdrop provides a combination of entertainment and promotion specifically designed to appeal to the MTV audience. This will be analysed more closely in Chapter Four.

Both *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* align with the docusoap tradition in the way that they blend factual footage with fictional editing techniques. The personal conflict between cast members underscores the narratives of both programmes, and the footage is presented in such a way that it builds tension and creates cliffhanger endings, attributes that Beattie (2004: 191) has ascribed to docusoap. The fictional editing techniques that enhance the 'real-life' drama of *The Hills* will be analysed in Chapter Two.

One aspect that separates *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* from earlier docusoaps is that both programmes eschew the cinema vérité style that is characteristic of so much 'reality' TV programming. Whilst most docusoaps contain "codes of 'authenticity'" (Walters, 2005: 63) in order to situate programmes within 'the real', the footage of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* is presented in a cinematic, classic realist style that closely resembles that of TV drama. Unusual in 'reality'-based programming, this visual style was a deliberate decision by the shows' creators to forge a distance between the programmes' constructed reality and 'the real' as 'reality' programmes have preferred to construct it. As director of photography for both *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*, Hisham Abed explains that, "at the outset, our goal was to separate the look of *Laguna Beach* from other reality shows and make it look like a scripted, episodic program. It needed to be cinematic" (*Videography*, 2006: 8). Helping to achieve the 'look' of a scripted fictional programme, the cast members of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* do not acknowledge the presence of the cameras. There is no interaction between cast and crew on screen and, unlike *The Real World*, the young adults of *The Hills* do not appear as 'talking heads' and divulge their feelings directly into the camera lens. In this regard, *The Hills* differs from many 'reality' forms in the way that the 'fourth wall' of this docusoap remains firmly intact and maintains a clear distance between the cast and the viewing audience. Moments of gossip and confession that are so crucial to the narrative of *The Hills* are instead expressed 'diegetically', within the interior narrative world of the programme, in the form of discussions between cast members. In order to further facilitate an emphasis on the emotional drama, *The Hills* relies on other fictional techniques, which Alessandra Stanley pinpoints as "evocative shots of skylines or highway traffic at dusk, lingering close-ups and moody pop music to underscore emotional highs and lows" (2007: 2.1).

The Hills also does away with the natural lighting and shaky hand-held camerawork that operate as the aesthetic markers of 'reality' TV. The creators of the show decided that the large Panasonic SDX-900 camcorder, with its film-like gamma settings, was the camera best suited to achieving a cinematic look for the programme (*Videography*, 2006: 8). Abed explains that three of these cameras are used on *The Hills*, rather than the two used on *Laguna Beach*, as three cameras improves the filmmakers' coverage and "helps any time there are more than two people in a given scene" (ibid.). *The Hills* also uses Panasonic AG-DVX100A 24p Mini DV cameras to film the evocative time-lapse footage of the Los Angeles cityscape that is used frequently throughout the programme to signal changes from day-to-evening or night-to-day for narrative continuity purposes (ibid.). These cameras film the programme in a soft lighting and allow for slick, controlled changes between established camera angles in a way that is more reminiscent of a three-camera studio setting of continuing soap operas than it is of the 'on-the-wing' style of filming that dominates 'reality' TV programming. The way in which *The Hills* distances itself from 'reality' television by employing filmic techniques commonly used in 'high production value' drama means that the docusoap not only aligns with fiction in terms of its narrative devices, but also in its visual style.

It is important to note that both the visual style and premise of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* is clearly influenced by recent fictional programming that has proven popular with a younger television audience. In particular, *Laguna Beach* is largely reminiscent of the fictional teen drama series *The O.C.* (2003–2007). *The O.C.* aired on American television network FOX and depicted the lives of a group of teenagers living in the wealthy city of Newport Beach, Orange County, California. The first season of the show proved to be immensely popular with young viewers, becoming the top-rated drama among the lucrative young adult demographic, with a total viewership of nearly 10 million (*The Ledger*, Jan 9 2007). These ratings dropped over subsequent seasons, which resulted in the cancelation of the show in 2007 (ibid.). MTV producers appear to have attempted to reproduce the initial popularity of FOX's fictional drama with the docusoap *Laguna Beach*. Debuting just over one year after *The O.C.*'s premiere, *Laguna Beach* situated itself as a 'reality' TV version of the popular FOX drama, as explicit in the docusoap's tagline: '*The real O.C.*'. *Laguna*

Beach similarly portrayed attractive, affluent teenagers in the idyllic Orange County. Though the docusoap lacked the dramatic impact that is more easily achieved with fictional drama narratives, *Laguna Beach* made up for this with the heightened appeal of watching 'real people' on screen. *The Hills* also hints of influence from fictional dramas. Executive producer Tony DiSanto likens the show to a "reality version of *That Girl* or *Mary Tyler Moore*" (cited in Armstrong, 2007: 36) in the way that *The Hills* centres on Lauren as an independent young woman managing her career and personal life. Moreover, the show's focus on fashion and the relationships surrounding the four girls Lauren, Heidi, Audrina and Whitney situates *The Hills* as a younger, 'reality'-based, West-coast equivalent of *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004). With both *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*, MTV has attempted to profit from the proven appeal of fictional drama. By adapting a concept whose appeal in fiction has already been tested, MTV can eschew some of the normal commercial risk involved in the inception of untested flagship prime-time programmes. Its docusoaps can even bring some new appeals arising from the 'reality' credentials of this mixed-genre. For example, *Laguna Beach's* reinvention of *The O.C.'s* premise holds the additional voyeuristic appeal of watching 'real' people experience 'real' drama.

The discussions above offer some reasons why *The Hills* has proven to be such a popular programme within the MTV schedule. The programme draws on popular fictional drama conventions in terms of its visual style, its narrative and editing techniques, and the use of a premise that is strongly connected with fictional drama programmes. Arguably, the only documentary aspect of *The Hills* is the 'subjects' or 'cast members' of this docusoap. Lauren and her friends are real people, rather than actors. This provides a sense of additional tension and jeopardy, in that the dramatic narratives conveyed on the programme are the cast members' reality². This injection of reality – in the form of real-life characters – into an otherwise predominantly fictionalised narrative form, positions *The Hills* to achieve appeals that are unattainable for fictional TV programmes. This entertaining mix of the factual and fictional is the key element of the docusoap genre: the factual nature of *The Hills'* cast enhances audience engagement in the narrative about their lives. The fact that the friendship fallouts and relationship break-ups that occur on *The Hills* are 'really happening' to 'real people' allows for a heightened level of gossip to surround the

² The extent of the 'reality' of *The Hills*, and the programme's relationship with 'the real', will be discussed in depth in Chapter Three.

programme and its viewership. This element of realism surrounding *The Hills* cast also contributes to a more pronounced sense of accessibility for the viewer towards them. Working together with the allure of a compelling serialised narrative, this is beneficial for MTV in terms of securing a large, engaged audience for a prolonged period. It also helps the network to advertise consumer products through the promotion of 'the MTV lifestyle'. Chapter Four contains a more detailed discussion on the appeal of *The Hills* as an American docusoap, and how the programme acts as a vehicle for brand promotion.

As Jason Mittell has argued, generic mixing can ignite "controversies through the juxtaposition of conflicting clusters of generic assumptions" (2004: 163). The docusoap genre lends itself to such controversies due to its mix of the factual and fictional. The mixed-genre nature of docusoap programmes can lead to confusion and uncertainty regarding the realism of their 'documentary' element. When portrayed with fictional conventions, the authenticity of factual footage can be questioned due to assumptions on how factual programmes should 'look'. Such controversy is amplified in the case of *The Hills* due the programme's deliberate abandonment of 'codes of authenticity' in order to emulate the visual style of 'high-end' drama programming. *The Hills* does not resemble the tradition of documentary-style programmes, therefore the viewer can legitimately begin to question whether the MTV docusoap contains *any* facet of reality. An analysis of the fictional narrative techniques implemented to tell the ongoing story of *The Hills* further illustrates how the line between fact and fiction is blurred with this MTV docusoap.

Conclusion

Having initially discussed the establishment of 'genre' in the context of television, this chapter has explored the concept of 'mixed genres' in order to explain the generic construction of the docusoap. Key reasons have been identified as to why docusoap, as a mixed genre, has been important not only to contemporary television culture in general but also in progressing the institutional objectives of the youth-oriented MTV Network in particular. One notable reason is the reliance on proven and familiar generic conventions when creating new programmes, in order to improve a programme's chances of popularity with its intended audiences and

safeguard it from commercial failure. This institutional consideration is responsible for the emergence of mixed genres, which combine conventions commonly accustomed with separate genres to create new, yet also familiar generic forms. Docusoap, with its blend of observational documentary and character-driven drama (Hill, 2005: 27), is one such mixed genre that has been prominent on television schedules since it emerged in the 1990s. The genre combines the allure of real-life with the appeal of dramatically-enhanced storylines which has seen docusoap become a popular genre for networks aiming to secure audiences to sell to advertisers. American cable network MTV has arguably led the way in embracing docusoap as a means through which to appeal to the lucrative youth demographic. The latest style of docusoap to emerge from the network, as typified by *The Hills*, deliberately distances itself from a traditional 'reality' TV aesthetic in favour of aligning with the cinematic visual style of 'high production value' drama. *The Hills'* alignment with 'high-end' drama further extends to its use of fictional narrative techniques, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

Fictional Narrative Techniques on *The Hills*

Introduction

This chapter examines the fictional narrative techniques that *The Hills* uses to enhance its factual footage. This chapter first analyses the ways in which this docusoap constructs a plausible diegetic world by manufacturing a unification of time and place and by using a voiceover to enhance and clarify narrative progression. The docusoap's serial narrative structure and strategies are discussed, before looking more specifically at how *The Hills* can be likened to a soap opera due to its community construct and the characterisation of its cast members. The chapter then digs deeper into this docusoap's appropriation of techniques more characteristic of soap opera, by examining how the melodramatic conventions of earlier American primetime soaps have been reconfigured in *The Hills*. Conventions such as melodramatic spectacle and exaggeration, overt villainy, female rivalry, and evocative camera angles and music, further assist in giving *The Hills* the elements of theatricality and melodramatic excess that its creators desired in order to deliberately distance this docusoap from other 'reality TV' programmes. *The Hills'* wholesale embrace of fictional narrative and aesthetic techniques, notably those of serial melodrama, has been important in enhancing the docusoap's entertainment value, greatly contributing to its success as a primetime, flagship programme for MTV.

The Hills: A Constructed World

Like other docusoaps, *The Hills* captures footage over a prolonged period and then subjects this footage to intense post-production editing in order to develop a narrative (Beattie, 2004: 197). This editing process involves the implementation of a number of narrative structural devices, all of which are designed to enhance the entertainment potential of the docusoap footage. Such editorial techniques result in the construction of a compelling, multi-faceted serialised structure that makes *The Hills* relatively indistinguishable, in narrative terms at least, from fictional drama serials. Upon examining the editorial construction of *The Hills*, it is evident that there

is a conspicuous departure from the attempt to document footage as naturally and realistically as possible (as was the philosophy underpinning the 'observational' documentary's approach), in favour of creating an entertaining programme with the potential for 'serial' allure.

The first five seasons of *The Hills* follow Lauren Conrad and her friends as they work and socialise in Los Angeles, California. In 2006 Lauren had left Laguna Beach, both the town and the TV programme, and was studying at the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising (FIDM) when MTV approached her with the concept of *The Hills* (Rosman, 2008: W1). The network proposed to secure Lauren an internship at *Teen Vogue* magazine and film her for four days a week while she navigated the professional and social milieux of L.A. (ibid.).

The programme that has resulted from this captured footage tells a story of a group of attractive, affluent people in their early twenties who work in the fashion and entertainment industries and socialise in the clubs and restaurants of Los Angeles. The cast interact through a series of professional, romantic and platonic relationships as they strive to form loyal bonds in a city that is renowned for its high proportion of self-serving individuals. Lauren herself has stated, "A lot of times when you go into Hollywood, it brings out a side of people that isn't necessarily good" (3:2). As observed in Chapter One, *The Hills* strongly exemplifies Jon Dovey's description of docusoap as a "deeply conversationalised documentary form" (2000: 138) in the sense that its narrative unfolds mainly through conversations between cast members. In a typical episode, viewers witness Lauren and her friends planning social functions and discussing relationship statuses, solving workplace crises, partying in nightclubs, and gossiping the next morning about the events of the night before. Accordingly, viewers of the programme are invited to observe and track the gossip-filled lives of these Los Angeles socialites.

Through post-production editing, this docusoap illustrates an overarching progression of time and a unification of place (L.A.) through which its human subjects experience and develop. This unification of time and place gives the impression that viewers are granted omnipresent access to the particular world of

The Hills. Jon Dovey uses the term “panotopic authority” when describing the unbridled access that viewers have to the subjects and events contained within a docusoap (2000: 142). This term recognises that viewers are essentially placed *above* the world depicted in the programme, and are free to zoom in on a particular interaction, before leaving to observe another, as the episode progresses. For example, viewers of *The Hills* can watch an upset Heidi enter Audrina’s apartment and be consoled over her troubled relationship with her boyfriend, Jordan. The viewer can then ‘swoop’ across the city to the *Teen Vogue* office where Lauren tells Whitney about the birthday celebrations Jason planned for her, before the viewer is taken back across town once again, as evening falls, to see that Jordan has arrived at Heidi’s apartment to discuss the problems with their relationship (1:9).

Underlining this sense of omnipresence for the viewer is the use of editing techniques to represent a temporal ellipsis frequently within each episode. The seamless way that time progresses in an episode of *The Hills* is assisted by the iconographic establishing shots of the Los Angeles cityscape that appear between narrative segments or ‘scenes’ to indicate a change in location. For example, a shot of the L.A. skyline at dusk signals a narrative transition from day to night, and its placement between scenes assists the smooth transition from a workplace conversation to a dinner date that temporally occurred ‘later that night’. This construction of time progression allows real-time events to be heavily compressed into the roughly two-day narrative time frame covered in each episodic instalment of *The Hills*. These establishing shots of the L.A. skyline and surrounds, which are also repeated over successive episodes, solidify a unification of place, also emphasising that the city of Los Angeles is the hub of the documented footage.

Dovey suggests that these ‘between sequence’ establishing shots, such as the images of L.A that appear on *The Hills*, contribute much to the sensation that viewers of docusoap are given “an outsider’s peek into a closed world” (2000: 142). As described above, the ‘closed world’ of *The Hills* appears to be a fully functioning entity that a group of attractive, affluent twenty-somethings live in: a ‘closed world’ that seems realistic and natural due to the way that viewers can observe these cast members living their day-to-day lives. However, as Dovey argues, this appearance that docusoaps have of offering a transparent ‘window on the world’ viewpoint to audiences is a “naturalistic illusion” (ibid.). It is illusory in the sense that careful

construction and editing is undertaken in order to give the docusoap a naturalistic appearance. The use of establishing shots to manufacture time progression is just one of the fictional editing techniques *The Hills* uses in order to construct a world within a docusoap that is both realistic and compelling.

Narrative Threads: Constructing the Overarching Story of *The Hills*.

Another fictional narrative technique used to enhance the footage of a docusoap is the “juxtaposition of a number of narratives variable in tone, with a range of diverse characters” (Nelson, 1997: 31) throughout an episode. This is a structure which Robin Nelson describes as a ‘flexi-narrative’, which in soap opera involves “a number of stories involving familiar characters in familiar settings [being] broken down into narrative bytes and rapidly intercut” (1997: 32–33). By cutting back and forth between small sections of various storylines, *The Hills* cast is unified in time and place, and this also implies that the documented events are happening simultaneously. Intercutting between various narrative strands places the captured footage of *The Hills* into a multi-faceted teleological sequence where events logically follow each other in order for the narrative to progress.

The overarching story of *The Hills* – that being Lauren and her friends experiencing life and love in L.A. – is told through the culmination of these intercutting narrative threads. The centrality of Lauren as a cast member during the first five seasons of *The Hills* is evident with her dominance over the programme’s various narrative strands. Lauren’s life – as depicted on *The Hills* – is essentially told in three different storylines: Lauren’s romantic relationships; her fashion career; and her female friendships. A ‘flexi-narrative’ approach is used to maintain audience interest by alternating between storylines, which also promotes coherency amongst multiple developing stories (Nelson, 1997: 33). Rapid intercutting also adds and regulates narrative pace, which can then intensify in moments of crisis (ibid.). This persistent ‘flexiad’ (Nelson, 1997) pattern utilised by *The Hills* comes from drama and soap narratives, allowing the docusoap to develop stories in the compelling style of fictional genres.

The first narrative thread to consider is that of 'Lauren's romantic relationships'. Early in the first season of *The Hills* Lauren reconnects with Jason Wahler, an old boyfriend she had during her last season on *Laguna Beach*. Lauren and Jason have a somewhat tumultuous relationship until they break up during a gap in filming the first and second seasons of *The Hills*. Throughout the second and third seasons Lauren develops a close friendship with Brody Jenner. Their relationship occasionally becomes romantic but this is neither serious nor long-term. Lauren continues to have a series of first dates and brief relationships, none of which develop. At one point Lauren declares to her workmate Whitney that she has a "one date curse" since her breakup with Jason (3:6). The narrative thread of Lauren's love life fades in the fourth season.

As one with aspirational appeal potential for the teenage female demographic especially, 'Lauren's fashion career' is a second narrative thread. From the beginning of the series, Lauren studies at FIDM while interning at *Teen Vogue*. Lauren forms a strong friendship with fellow intern, Whitney Port, as they work closely together at the magazine. Lauren faces a number of professional challenges during her *Teen Vogue* internship. These are underscored by the decision she has made (at the end of season one) to turn down the opportunity to intern at *French Vogue* in Paris in order to spend the summer in L.A. with her boyfriend Jason. Despite the professional setbacks she experiences during her internship Lauren works on successive fashion shoots, industry parties and 'runway' shows from which she gains valuable experience and is commended by her bosses for her hard work. She is even granted a 'second chance', of which she accepts, to go to Paris with Whitney to work at a Debutante Ball (3:19). At the end of the third season, Lauren leaves *Teen Vogue* and joins Whitney at her new job in L.A. as an intern for PR firm People's Revolution. Here, although Lauren faces more challenges (without which there would be no drama) she extends her fashion industry experience and connections. At the end of season five Lauren leaves People's Revolution, and *The Hills*, to pursue endeavours beyond interning, the specificities of which are left ambiguous.

The third, dominant narrative strand in the serialised central narrative of *The Hills* is that of 'Lauren's female friendships'. Lauren's main interpersonal relationship

at the start of the series is her friendship with “best friend” and roommate Heidi Montag. Lauren and Heidi share a strong bond and counsel each other over personal and professional issues. The roommates quickly befriend Audrina Patridge, who lives in their apartment complex and also enjoys the LA club scene. Together with Whitney, Heidi and Audrina form the core of Lauren’s friendships at the beginning of the series, yet she also interacts with old high school friends *Laguna Beach*’s Lo Bosworth and Jen Bunney. Although Lauren has several arguments with her female friends as *The Hills* progresses, the most significant of these in narrative terms is the dissolution of her friendship with Heidi. Beginning in season two of *The Hills*, this friendship becomes strained due to the vehement dislike that emerges, almost instantly following their first meeting, between Lauren and Heidi’s new boyfriend, Spencer Pratt. The strain on the friendship is exacerbated when Heidi chooses to leave the apartment she shares with Lauren and move in with Spencer. This catalyst for the friendship break-up functions like in a drama, providing the key narrative climax of the last episode of season two.

Lauren’s ill-feelings toward Spencer and Heidi escalate in the third season when she accuses the pair of spreading rumours that Lauren and her ex-boyfriend Jason made a sex tape. From this point the close bond once shared by Lauren and Heidi turns into a bitter feud, and the two divided camps (Lauren versus Heidi and Spencer) spend the third, fourth and fifth seasons alternatively discussing the terse situation with friends and negotiating the awkward and sometimes confrontational exchanges occurring when they happen upon each other at social functions. This narrative strand reaches some level of closure and reconciliation in the final episode of the fifth season, when Lauren attends Heidi’s wedding to Spencer and wishes her well. Lauren then discretely leaves the ceremony through a side door and is driven away, this signalling her departure from the show after five seasons.

Though the appearances of Heidi, Audrina and Whitney largely serve a supporting role in Lauren’s central trilogy of stories, these real-life characters do have their own (secondary) narrative strands. After the breakdown of her friendship, for example, Heidi’s narrative develops quite independently of Lauren’s as she balances the demands of her turbulent relationship with Spencer with her efforts to climb the promotional ladder at Bolthouse Productions, her workplace.

Audrina's narrative focuses on her on-again/off-again relationship with Justin "Bobby" Brescia, as well as her work commitments at Quixote Studios and Epic Records. Whitney's narrative concentrates on her professional endeavours. Her hard work is seen to earn her promotions at both *Teen Vogue* and *People's Revolution*, precipitating a career-based move to New York City whereupon she leaves *The Hills* and appears as the central character in a spin-off series *The City* (MTV, 2008-present).

It is important to reiterate that the narrative strands described above are not wholly 'organic' or 'natural'. Instead they are the result of captured footage of interactions between cast members being carefully selected and edited together in order to create compelling stories. The frequent and relatively seamless way in which *The Hills* intercuts between various narrative threads connects the individual stories to the overarching narrative of the lives of this community of characters. This fictional editing technique of intercutting allows *The Hills* to construct a narrative world that is both compelling and seemingly real.

The constructed 'naturalness' of these narrative threads is further assisted by the way in which they interlink. Rather than develop independently from each other, the storylines described above often converge, usually at the 'scenes' of pivotal narrative events, relying on these points of convergence for narrative progression. For example, Lauren's decision to spend the summer with Jason rather than interning in Paris has ongoing implications for both her romantic relationships and her career. In another example, Audrina's belief in a rumour that Lauren 'hooked up' with Justin Bobby causes problems in her relationships with both Justin and Lauren, impacting on the narrative threads of both Audrina and Lauren. This interlinking nature of *The Hills'* parallel stories further unifies the programme's narrative threads into a coherent, compelling probe into the cast members' lives. This technique of interweaving and interlinking the different narrative threads gives the docusoap's overarching narrative the complexity and interconnectedness of real-life interactions. Yet, again, this complex realism is a "naturalistic illusion" (Dovey, 2000: 142) because it is fictional editing techniques that construct the diegetic world of *The Hills*.

The editing techniques used in *The Hills* align its narrative style to those of fictional genres. In particular, as Richard Kilborn suggests the use of multiple interweaving storylines in docusoap closely emulates the narrative structure of soap opera (2000: 113). He argues that the strategy of interweaving storylines, which give docusoap narratives pace, variety, and the impression that separate events are occurring simultaneously, is 'borrowed' from soap opera. In docusoap, as in soap opera, this method works to maintain audience interest over time (ibid.). Whereas soap opera takes *fictional* footage and edits it into a compelling, serialised narrative, docusoap uses *factual* footage. Although there are many differences in the ways in which each of these forms generates this footage, the narratives of both are similarly driven by dialogue. Whereas soap opera constructs a 'fictional' world through its interlinking, serial storylines, *The Hills*, as a docusoap, constructs its own plausible world through the manipulation and use of 'real-world' and 'real-life' footage. It is *The Hills'* appropriation of narrative and editing techniques directly from soap opera, which align it more closely than other 'reality TV' forms to this fictional genre.

The Narrative Function of Lauren's Voiceover

The Hills' relationship with soap opera in particular is further emphasised by Lauren's voice-over narration. Lauren's status as the show's protagonist is cemented in the programme's intent interest in her personal life. Yet, Lauren's narration grants her additional control over the viewer's interpretation of narrative events. At the beginning of each episode Lauren recaps previous events and sets the mood for how the episode's events will contribute to and progress the ongoing narrative. Her introductory voice-over for Season One, Episode Nine offers an indicative example (1:9):

Heidi and Jordan's relationship had its ups and downs, and they never saw eye to eye on anything. [Footage of Heidi and Jordan arguing].

Jason surprised me with a romantic dinner for my birthday, but the evening didn't go exactly as planned. [Footage of Lauren and Jason arguing during her birthday dinner].

Now summer is around the corner. I'm so ready for work and school to be over. But, I still don't know what will happen with me and Jason [sic].

And Heidi was questioning if her relationship with Jordan was meant to be.

Firstly, this voiceover illustrates Lauren's control over the diegetic (interior narrative) world of *The Hills*. Despite also being a character within the show's narrative, Lauren's position as narrator awards her a level of omnipresence that is generally only available to those placed outside the diegetic realm. As such, Lauren is able to inform the viewer of narrative events that do not directly involve her. The impact of this omnipresence is foregrounded following the dissolution of Lauren and Heidi's friendship. Continuing through season three, Lauren offers ongoing insights into Heidi's life and feelings even though the former friends only rarely interact within the diegesis of the show (Leppert and Wilson, 2008). As Leppert and Wilson have noted (2008), Lauren's narrative authority provides a *frame* "through which the viewer is to understand conflicts and events" (ibid.). Although the viewer does not access the world of *The Hills* directly through Lauren's eyes, his or her understanding of narrative developments is strongly shaped by Lauren's introductory voiceovers.

The use of Lauren's voiceover in *The Hills* as a means to lead the viewer through its overarching narrative underscores Kilborn's assertion that the docusoap voiceover prefers the narrational techniques of fiction over the informative role of the documentary's voiceover (2000: 113–114). Kilborn argues that, "the actual *function* of the voiceover is more a narrative audience-orientating device than it is an explanatory information provider" (ibid.). Lauren's voiceover at the beginning of each episode certainly functions as such a device. Its role is not to describe or explain the factual material as it unfolds on camera but rather to interpret and support the progression of the complex interweaving narrative that has been constructed. Lauren's voiceover orientates the viewer by detailing recent narrative events, such as the status of her and her friends' relationships, and also enhances the story being told by offering insights into her personal thoughts and feelings, such as her uncertainty over the future of her relationship with Jason. The viewer's access to Lauren's thoughts, insights and feelings – which fulfils a significant role in driving the story forward – has been a particularly central and successful narrative strategy in *The Hills*.

Within the narrative world (diegesis) of *The Hills*, Lauren is not only the central character but is also the narrator. Lauren's voiceover reflections and first-person

narration are comparable to the function of the protagonist in a novel. She is the character around whom the narrative world revolves and whose thoughts and feelings are most strongly understood by the audience. This similarity is not lost on the creators of *The Hills*, as Executive Producer Tony DiSanto has acknowledged that the programme has become “like a novel” (cited in Stack, Armstrong and Soll, 2008) and has referred to *The Hills* as “this generation’s *A Tale of Two Cities* or *Oliver Twist*” (ibid.). Lauren’s introductory narration at the beginning of every episode is the only moment in which a cast member acknowledges the presence of an audience. Lauren’s narratorial position also allows her to be placed outside the diegesis, a position from which she can provide an overview of narrative development for the viewer. Once her 45-second recap is over and the opening credits have screened, Lauren resumes her central character role that operates strictly within the show’s diegesis, involving no further acknowledgement of the viewing audience being made for the rest of the episode. Lauren’s versatile diegetic position, in which she interacts with other cast members and is then placed outside these interactions so as to explain how events are transpiring in a teleological sequence, serves as an indication that an interior narrative world has been subject to fastidious editorial construction.

***The Hills* as a Dramatic Serial**

As the narrative threads of *The Hills* extend across episodes, Lauren’s introductory narration is an important means of establishing the current status of the overarching story. Given its narrative organisation as an overarching serialised story, *The Hills* conforms to serial narrative form, which as Robert C. Allen explains, is one “organised around institutionally imposed gaps in the text” (1995: 17). Like other serials, the story of Lauren and her friends, as the central narrative in this programme, develops over several seasons of episodes, persistently evading closure. This central narrative, as with other soap operas, is sustained by its characters’ pursuit of the unachievable ideal of a stable, happy community (Geraghty, 1991: 85–90). This overarching aim is reflected in every *Hills* episode, with Lauren and her friends striving for success in their personal lives and careers, but being constantly thwarted due to interpersonal conflicts.

The open-ended potential of serial narrative lends itself well to the commercially-driven nature of American television. Serials require loyal viewing in order to keep track of the progressing narrative, and this assists programmers in securing audiences during the commercial breaks that regularly interrupt the story. In order to accommodate “institutionally imposed gaps” such as commercial breaks and the intervals between episodic instalments, serials commonly break narratives down into short segments. *The Hills*, as a docusoap, uses segmentalisation to help facilitate its intercutting between various narrative strands (Beattie, 2004: 197). Following one short ‘byte’ or segment of a narrative with a segment from another strand, and another, before returning to the original strand increases the pace of action of the overarching narrative (ibid.), and also naturalises the inclusion of commercials, which are incorporated into the segmentalised structure (Nelson, 1997: 24–25). It is the extent to which *The Hills* adopts a continuing serial approach and evades narrative closure that aligns it more closely than other docusoaps with the continuing form of soap opera.

As is conventional in soap opera, *The Hills* deploys additional devices to maintain audience interest across narrative breaks. Frequent examples are the cliffhangers and plot twists that are placed directly before commercial breaks and at the end of season finales as incentives for audiences to return for the next instalment of the serialised narrative. Underlying its function as a primetime ‘flagship’ for MTV, *The Hills’* appropriation of soap opera narrative devices has been integral to its commercial success and ability to foster ongoing audience loyalty.

As suggested, the strategy of multiple, interweaving storylines has been characteristic of *The Hills*, providing an important means to prolong each narrative strand as well as evading its potential for resolution (McCarthy, 2001: 47). Beattie argues that the technique of frequently intercutting between storylines in docusoap is designed to “multiply narrative interest” and to “in part compensate ... for the low level of incident in each week’s episode” (Beattie, 2004: 194). Maintaining dramatic conflicts through an overarching narrative is an important aspect of serialisation, as it maintains a level of audience anticipation for future narrative developments. The purpose of this approach is to foster and reward audience loyalty. In *The Hills*, as is true of soap opera, only habitual viewers “are able to read the more subtle nuances

of a character's current predicament and responses, from which they gain additional viewing pleasure and an ability to speculate with greater precision than other viewers" (Dunleavy, 2009: 156). For example, only *Hills* loyalists will know of Spencer's previous indiscretions and be aware of Heidi's ill-judgement in continually trusting him. Garnered through the cumulative plots and interweaving storylines contained within the serialised narrative of *The Hills*, this awareness is only fully available to the regular viewers who have observed Spencer's actions since he arrived.

Community Construct

The construction of a community is an important convention of soap opera narratives. As explained, a soap narrative is sustained by the characters' ongoing pursuit of a stable, happy community (Geraghty, 1991: 85-90), an ideal that can never be more than momentarily achieved. Explaining how this works in continuing soap operas, Geraghty (1991: 85) argues that "the ideal of community which is presented depends on shared values of support for each other and stresses the importance of acting with the interests of the community at heart". Although concerned with soap operas in mind, Geraghty's definition of 'community' in soaps is highly applicable to the 'factual' context of *The Hills*. Even though they are ostensibly 'real' people rather than fictional characters, *The Hills* cast operates similarly to a soap opera community. Contributing strongly to this is their shared desire to succeed in Hollywood, both professionally and personally. This gives them "a sense of unified experience" (Geraghty, 1991: 90) which creates a "minimum of homogeneity" (ibid.) among cast members, no matter how tenuous are their links to each other.

Much like soap opera communities, harmony within *The Hills* community is "only occasionally achieved" (1991: 85) and is constantly under threat. Lauren and her friends only rarely express contentment in their careers, romances and friendships. Whilst a cast member of *The Hills* will be supported by other members of the 'community' in their pursuit of happiness, conflicts with revengeful co-workers, two-timing boyfriends, disloyal family members and backstabbing girlfriends routinely

prevent the achievement of this. It is this succession of dramatic conflicts that prevents the cast of *The Hills* from ever attaining the ideal of community harmony allowing the docusoap's serialised story to continue indefinitely in the hope that a stable, happy community may eventually be achieved.

Through the first five seasons of *The Hills* community disequilibrium hinged largely on the unravelling of Lauren and Heidi's friendship. Whilst conflicts between other cast members were also a constant fixture, Lauren and Heidi's bitter separation plunged the programme's community into disarray. *The Hills* begins as an exciting new chapter in Lauren and Heidi's lives as they move to Los Angeles together and establish themselves at the centre of a network of shared friends and acquaintances. However, when the friendship between Heidi and Lauren breaks down due to their disagreement over Spencer, this network of friendships is itself problematised. Mutual friends are forced to choose sides (either Lauren on one side or Heidi and Spencer on the other) and are accused of betrayal if they attempt to maintain friendships with both rival camps. Accordingly, the imperative to restore Heidi and Lauren's friendship, and thus to restore stability to a divided community, becomes the unattainable goal which drives *The Hills* narrative forward and sustains it across each new season.

An important indicator of membership in the community of 'characters' that *The Hills* affectively constructs is the extent to which this central conflict – Lauren versus Heidi – impacts upon other individuals. Audrina, as Lauren and Heidi's neighbour and 'first LA friend' is forced to compromise her friendships with these two now separated former friends. Brody is caught in the feud by being Lauren's love interest as well as Spencer's best friend. Similarly, Stephanie Pratt is forced to reconcile the sibling loyalty she feels as Spencer's sister with the friendship she forms with Lauren during their studies at FIDM. The extreme interconnectedness of this cast, another narrative feature that likens *The Hills* to soap opera, brings vital cohesion to the multiple interweaving storylines that characterise its narrative (see Buckingham, 1987: 91).

Aligning itself with soap opera in yet other ways, *The Hills* employs narrative spectacle in bringing together docusoap's unstable community. The season five finale of *The Hills* acutely reflects the observations Geraghty makes (1991: 88–89) about the narrative function of the wedding ceremony in fictional soap operas. Geraghty argues that the “community defines its existence particularly in moments of celebration” (1991: 87). While parties are the most frequent form of celebration in *The Hills*, Spencer and Heidi's wedding provides the most conspicuous moment of spectacle in the first five seasons, as well as an appropriately significant event through which to escalate the crisis with which the fifth season ‘breaks’ (5:10). Geraghty argues that American primetime soaps like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* “relish the spectacle so that it becomes the object of comment” (1991: 27) and that “[t]he pleasure in lavishness and extravagance leads to an emphasis on glamour” (ibid.). Similarly, the wedding ceremony on *The Hills* pursues and achieves its spectacle through its elements of lavishness and extravagance. The bride's Monique Lhullier gown and Neil Lane jewellery became a point of conversation both in the programme (Heidi: “I am bedazzled. Do you think it's too much?”) and amongst the viewing audience (see Lomrantz, 2009). As well as providing a moment of extreme exhibitionism, Heidi and Spencer's wedding is keyed to perform important narrative tasks for the docusoap as a whole.

The Wedding

A whole community of characters, which the audience has seen interact through a complex web of interpersonal relationships, gathers in a church to witness the nuptials of this conspicuously difficult couple. As Geraghty explains, the wedding motif is used for much the same purpose in soap opera (1991: 88). In particular, it “brings together disparate members of the community” (ibid.), and this is certainly true of Heidi and Spencer's wedding. The event assembles cast members who obviously dislike and purposefully avoid each other in an attempt to minimise or prevent additional confrontations. Both Audrina and Justin, for example, who have not seen each other since ending their relationship, attend the wedding separately. Similarly, Stacie, a cast member whose previous flirtations with Spencer damaged his relationship with Heidi, is seen entering the church to witness the ceremony. In this way, the wedding brings together a range of people in Spencer and Heidi's lives,

some of whom share tempestuous and charged relationship histories, together with others who have scant knowledge of each other. The wedding of Heidi and Spencer acts as a point of unification within the otherwise fragmented diegetic world of *The Hills*, allowing its entire character community to converge upon a single, climactic event.

Spencer and Heidi's wedding, which on the surface appears to offer opportunities for the resolution of long-running conflicts, makes a pivotal contribution to the melodramatic intensity of the programme as a whole. The wedding between this controversial pair serves the same narrative purpose as weddings in fictional soap operas, that it is used "to demonstrate the way in which difficulties within the community can be overcome" (Geraghty, 1991: 89). However, the biggest threat to the stability of the *Hills* community has up to this point been the tempestuous nature of Heidi and Spencer's relationship. The community of supportive characters, of which Heidi was an integral member, was plunged into disarray once she took up with Spencer, a man so disliked by others due to his constant flirting with other women, his open rudeness to Heidi's family and his cruelty in attempting to destroy Lauren's reputation. As stated above, Heidi and Spencer's unstable relationship is the primary agent for division within the community, this, in turn, generating a succession of ongoing conflicts. That their union has ruined Lauren and Heidi's idyllic friendship is especially crucial to the prolonged state of disequilibrium that results. By attending the wedding – a symbolic gesture of approval for Heidi and Spencer's marriage – the community is able to reach a moment of resolution to the conflict that has, up to this point, plagued the narrative world of *The Hills*. Most important, however, is Lauren's own decision to attend this controversial wedding.

In the episodes leading up to this crucial season finale, Lauren is adamant in her refusal to attend the wedding because she simply cannot condone it. As Lauren commented: "I don't think my attendance is appropriate. Why would you want someone at your wedding who does not agree with your relationship? That's silly." (5:10). At Heidi's request, Spencer even called Lauren days before the wedding to apologise for his behaviour in an attempt to ensure that Lauren would attend. Despite this effort, Lauren still refused to do so (5:9). It is precisely because of this background that Lauren's arrival at the church constitutes an unexpected turning

point in the narrative, culminating in the first amicable conversation between Lauren and Heidi since the break-up of their friendship. Occurring moments before the ceremony takes place, Lauren tells Heidi that, regardless of everything that has happened, she really is happy for her, and this happiness is more important than the conflicts of the recent past (5:10). After a warm embrace, Lauren leaves Heidi to prepare herself for the ritual to come. This conversation marks an important moment of resolution to the prolonged conflict that has existed between these former best friends. This moment of resolution is additionally important due to the imperative to provide closure with which to end the season, one element of which is the culmination, after five seasons, of Lauren's own participation in the programme. With Lauren's blessing of the relationship that had previously caused her so much hurt, the tension between her and Heidi is permitted to dissipate.

Spencer and Heidi's wedding facilitates sufficient narrative closure not only to end the season fittingly, but also to provide an appropriate vehicle for Lauren's departure from the programme. However, just like weddings in fictional drama serials, Heidi and Spencer's wedding does not act solely as a point of narrative closure but as a point from which further conflicts and tensions are generated. As Jane Feuer observes, a "happy marriage does not make for interesting plot complications" (1995: 123). Although the community accepts Heidi and Spencer's marriage, the couple do not resolve their argumentative tendencies by making their relationship legally binding. Instead, their marriage incites new opportunities for disagreement and conflict. Heidi's desire to have a child and Spencer's stern refusal to become a father provide a new tension between the couple as the fifth season continues after a mid-season break in filming (5:11).

The wedding's ability to martial the community is further important in this episode, as it allows for the introduction to *The Hills* of Lauren's 'replacement' in narrative terms, Kristin Cavallari, formerly a fellow cast member from *Laguna Beach*. Although she has not previously appeared on *The Hills*, Kristin has maintained ties with other cast members, this providing the narrative rationale for her invitation to the wedding. Kristin's attendance at the ceremony signals her admission into the community of *The Hills* and, as the 'character' who will replace Lauren, her position within this community becomes vital to narrative progression for the remainder of

seasons five and six. Precisely as Lauren's departure signals the resolution of the docusoap's primary conflict in earlier seasons, Kristin's entry provides the catalyst for new relationship conflicts to come. From the moment she is introduced on *The Hills*, most other female cast members dislike her. They describe Kristin as a "man eater", a "complete psycho bitch", and as "the girl that's going to stab us all in the back and she doesn't care" (5:11). The feuds between Kristin and these other female cast members (Audrina, Stephanie, and Lo) escalate to provide a new source of underlying tension to sustain the serial. Spencer and Heidi's wedding itself acts as the catalytic event, which introduces this new source of disequilibrium into *The Hills* community. The promise of ongoing tension that Kristin brings with her will continue to be played out in a series of interweaving storylines involving this interconnected cast of characters.

Although *The Hills* employs a number of soap opera narrative techniques, it is important to note that this docusoap does not align fully with the narrative strategies and structure of continuing soap opera. Unlike continuing soaps, *The Hills* is not designed to play for up to 52 weeks a year with no seasonal breaks. In this respect, *The Hills* retains the seasonal narrative structures that are instead characteristic of hour-long primetime drama. The docusoap is produced as a season of episodes to accommodate lengthy breaks in filming among other factors. Also, *The Hills* community is smaller than its soap opera counterparts, an important consequence of this reduced size being the availability of fewer storylines. The docusoap's construction of Lauren as a central character also differs from the approach of continuing soap opera, in which, because of the demands of its high, sustained episode output, focuses more evenly on all members of the community. Because they help to align *The Hills* with the hour-long drama forms more common in American primetime schedules, these deviations from continuing soap strategies have assisted the success of *The Hills* in its 'flagship' role for MTV. That said, the constructed community of *The Hills* – one of many conventions it has borrowed from soap opera – makes a vital contribution to its ability to foster audience loyalty over a prolonged period of time.

Characterisation of Docusoap Cast Members

The depiction of docusoap cast members falls within this genre's blend of factual material and fictional narrative techniques. Rather than being portrayed in an in-depth, multifaceted way, the human subjects of docusoap become characterised in a semi-fictional way for the purpose of an entertaining narrative. Hence despite this genre's range of 'reality' credentials, little separates *characters* in a docusoap from characters in a fictional drama or comedy. Cast members of *The Hills* are constructed as characters through stereotyping; a process which reduces them to a set of distinct, though readily identifiable character traits that allow them to perform particular narrative roles. Whitney's narrative function as Lauren's wise, workplace confidant reflects this, as does Kristin's characterisation as "the bitch" from her very first appearance on *The Hills*.

This attempt to construct characters from real people is neither a new tendency nor is it specific to docusoap programmes. Contestants in leading 'reality' gamedocs, notably *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, have always been cast for a desired set of personality traits with the potential for clashes with others and the generation of narrative conflict. A strong example of creative casting is that of Jade Goody on UK's *Celebrity Big Brother* 2007. Known for her outspokenness and brazen ignorance as exhibited in an earlier *Big Brother* programme, Goody caused controversy and international outrage with her racist bullying towards Indian film actress Shilpa Shetty³. Goody's behaviour led to her typecasting as the programme's "villain" (ibid.). Her clash with Shetty resulted in soaring audience ratings (ibid.) and Goody's eventual eviction where she received 86 per cent of the public vote when nominated for eviction alongside Shetty⁴; a move that arguably reflected the audience's desire for 'good' (Shetty) to triumph over the 'evil' that Goody had come to represent, a desire underscored by Shetty's becoming the show's overall winner. Although the scale of the controversy caused may have exceeded network expectations, the ability for such conflict to emerge was carefully orchestrated through creative casting and selective editing. Particular traits of gamedoc cast members are foregrounded through selected footage, and because of his or her continual role in the conflicts that

³ See: From Tabloid Darling to Big Brother Race Villain. (2007, Jan 20, 2007). *Europe Intelligence Wire*.

⁴ See: Jaded: Reality Television and Racism. (2007, Jan 27, 2007). *The Economist*.

transpire contestants can gain a reputation for being the “bad boy”, “bitch”, or “peacemaker” of the group. Such typecasting allows for particular roles to be performed during narrative conflicts. A similar process of constructing characters through selective editing takes place in docusoaps.

The creation of characters from real-life docusoap participants provides another indication of this genre’s prioritisation of entertaining plot development over an authentic depiction of its human subjects. In this regard, docusoap characters operate very much like those of fictional narratives in which, as Fiske has argued, “character acts primarily as a function of the plot” (1987: 130). As Fiske suggests, the personality traits of fictional characters are best understood “in terms of the overall structure of social values that are embodied in the structure of characters” (ibid.). By this, Fiske means that the personality traits of fictional characters are generally not considered for their uniqueness but rather for the way they compare and contrast with other characters (ibid.).

This approach of constructing complementary typed characters, an important aspect of the community construct in soap opera narratives, is evident in *The Hills*. Soap opera relies on certain characters to establish the boundaries of a community. Geraghty refers to these as ‘outsiders’, whose attempts to challenge the shared values of a community help to clarify the distinction between its sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (1991: 100–101). The presence of ‘outsiders’ causes unease amongst community ‘insiders’ because their values of “mutual support and acceptance” (1991: 100) are threatened. This dynamic between ‘outsiders’ and the community creates the dramatic conflict that fuels soap narratives and keeps them interesting.

The Hills cast are characterised in line with this same community construct that Geraghty has observed in soaps. The depiction of individual cast members has been carefully considered for the role they play within the overall structure of the community. As the original protagonist and central focus of the show, Lauren can be considered an important ‘insider’ on *The Hills*, in that she forms the moral as well as the narrative centre for the community’s shared values. She strives to be a good employee, friend, and girlfriend, and her involvement in conflict is usually due to the

fault of others. Although she is not perfect, Lauren's work ethic, friendly demeanour and loyalty to those she loves are presented as qualities to be admired and emulated by other community members in the narcissistic environment of Los Angeles. Even though Lauren has been dubbed boring by some viewers, her wholesomeness is a necessary indicator of the particular ideal of community being pursued in *The Hills*.

Within the narrative of *The Hills*, Lauren is structurally contrasted against Spencer who, from his very first appearance on the programme, is characterised as an 'outsider'. Spencer is introduced as Heidi's new boyfriend in the first episode of the second season. In this episode, Spencer is seen to be two-timing Heidi by pursuing Audrina on a series of flirtatious dates. The audience is aware of Spencer's lying when he denies the allegations when confronted by Heidi. Interestingly, this technique mirrors the way soap operas privilege the audience's awareness of diegetic details over the awareness of the characters. Heidi and Spencer's initial argument is the first in a string of fights between the couple throughout the course of their relationship. These fights tend to be caused by Spencer's flirtations, his overreactions, his obnoxious behaviour and complete disregard for the feelings of others. The most important aspect of Spencer's 'outsider' position, however, is his intense hatred for Lauren, whom he refers to as his "enemy" (3:5). Underscored by Lauren's centrality in both the community and narrative, Spencer's hatred for her immediately appears unjustified and is keyed to put him offside with the audience. Spencer's disdain for Lauren is matched by Lauren's deep dislike of him, as evident when she declares to Heidi, in a heated conversation, that she hates Spencer because he is a "sucky person" (2:7). Lauren is aware that Spencer is acting against the interests of the community and is the source of its growing unease. As she remarks to Heidi, "You know that it's not going to be okay until you and Spencer have broken up, because he is the problem" (2:7). Lauren is correct in this assertion, as it is Heidi's decision to stay with Spencer that prolongs the ongoing state of community disequilibrium and interpersonal tension. The intense division between Lauren and Spencer serves to highlight the binary opposition between *Hills* community 'insiders' who strive to uphold its values and the 'outsiders' who disregard these. Accordingly the depiction of these real-life cast members involves the juxtaposition of contrasting insider/outsider characterisations, an important source of ongoing narrative conflict.

Spencer's villainous 'outsider' characterisation reflects the common soap character that Geraghty refers to as the *bastard* (1991: 102–104). Geraghty discusses the dominance of female characters in soaps. While she is referring mainly to British soaps, similarities can be drawn to the female-centric cast of *The Hills*, as one that bonds over shopping, fashion, gossip, and the opposite sex. Lauren: "Why do we always compare guys to accessories?" Heidi: "Because they're disposable like that" (2:3). Geraghty (1991: 103) suggests that 'the bastard' within soap opera signifies a threat to the female power within these communities. As Geraghty sees it:

The bastard figures thus represent in British soaps an attempt to establish a strong male figure in the face of female dominance. They express an unease about the weakness of most of the male characters and a challenge to the values of the community so strongly held by the women. Nevertheless, although they provide an opposing voice, their challenge is rarely successful.

Spencer embodies this role of 'the bastard' with his brazen self-confidence. He challenges the community's shared values of harmony and happiness by deliberately attempting to separate Heidi from her supportive group of friends. Spencer makes it clear that he does not like Heidi's female friends, especially his 'enemy' Lauren. He continually encourages Heidi to spend less time with 'the girls' and suggests they do not have Heidi's best interests at heart. Spencer is one case in which the 'bastard's' challenge to the female community is successful, as he is able to extract Heidi from the female community and convince her to side with him. Spencer's success in challenging *The Hills* community is arguably due to the fact that *The Hills* characters still maintain an element of unpredictability as they are not wholly fictional beings. The ongoing narrative of *The Hills*, as a docusoap, is partly determined by the actions of the 'real people' on screen. Heidi and Spencer's decision to marry is one such example.

It is Spencer's unpredictability that allows the tension within *The Hills'* narrative to escalate to soap-like proportions. Spencer unexpectedly became the vital source of the docusoap's narrative conflict and soaring ratings from the second season onward. As the show's executive producer Tony DiSanto remarked, "I thought he was going to be a quiet, secondary guy ... The big surprise was what a really dynamic character he is" (cited in Armstrong, 2007: 36). Spencer's own unapologetic hubris

allows him to fit so well into the narrative role of the 'bastard' and to become the primary case for the state of unease within *The Hills* community that sustains its central narrative between seasons two and five.

Despite *The Hills* being an American docusoap, Spencer aligns more closely with 'the bastard' figure of British soaps, as described by Geraghty, than he does with the patriarchal males that hold central familial roles in American soaps like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* (Geraghty, 1991: 62–74). This is because Spencer is undeniably an 'outsider' within the community. He blatantly embodies the type of man that the more astute female characters – and the imagined audience – wish to avoid. Through his undesirability Spencer attacks the shared values of the female community with a vitriolic evilness that clashes with the traits of 'insider' characters. Although *The Hills* may align with British soaps in terms of this particular characterisation, it still emulates American soap operas through its similar use of melodramatic conventions.

Melodramatic Tendencies of *The Hills*

As used in screen narratives, melodrama refers to a style of drama that foregrounds heightened emotion and the exaggerated focus of personal relationships (see Feuer, 1995; Thorburn, 2000; Geraghty, 1991). Jane Feuer remarks on the frequent use of melodrama in soap opera. She argues that the elements of melodrama that Peter Brooks identifies as, "the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarisation and schematisation; extreme states of being, situations, action; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breath-taking peripety" (Brooks cited in Feuer, 1995: 114), directly correlate to the form and conventions of the American primetime soap operas produced during the Reagan era (Feuer, 1995: 114). Feuer examines the examples of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* as American primetime soaps which not only typify the use of melodramatic conventions but are also characterised by the use of melodramatic excess (1995: 118).

Given the emphasis its narrative gives to melodrama, *The Hills* can almost be considered to be a newer, 'reality'-based, incarnation of the American primetime soap opera. Many links can be drawn between American primetime soap operas and *The Hills*. This docusoap shares with fictional soap opera the quality of a "centrality of emotional response and interpersonal relationships" (Mittell, 2004: 174). The problems arising from Lauren's relationships with other cast members, and the ensuing reactions to these, form the basis of *The Hills'* ongoing narrative. However, because this narrative is largely confined to events occurring in the lives of its real-life characters, *The Hills* cannot construct quite the same "exaggerated plots" (Ang, 1985: 62) as its fictional counterparts. However, making "sensational appeals to the emotions of its audience" (Ang, 1985: 61-62) is an important melodramatic convention, and *The Hills* could be said to offer a greater intensity in this respect precisely because of docusoap's ties to 'the real'. Because they believe it is real, the empathy viewers are encouraged to feel towards Lauren following her break-up with Jason is keyed to be stronger than their empathy for *Dallas'* Sue Ellen in the face of J.R. Ewing's infidelity. This is because viewers understand that Lauren is a real person who actually experiences her heartbreak in real life.

Docusoap's ties to 'the real' require *The Hills* to maintain a level of plausibility in its plot. The resulting "low level of incident" (Beattie, 2004: 194) in each episode of *The Hills* contrasts starkly against the convoluted, far-fetched plots of American soap operas. Finding its own way to respond to the narrative challenges of its factuality, *The Hills* achieves melodrama through emotional exaggeration and spectacle. This docusoap compensates for its lack of incident by constructing storylines that are based on oversimplified differences. The characterisation of *The Hills* cast assists with this. One narrative vehicle for melodrama is the foregrounding in *The Hills* of female rivalry within its community. Conflict between female cast characters occurs frequently, often due to competition over love interests or to acts of disloyalty within the female community. Simmering resentment is shown to escalate when the feuding characters encounter each other at social events. The drama of these confrontations is intensified by the melodramatic way in which these private moments occur in public spaces (Geraghty, 1991: 54). Whilst these arguments may not result in the "mud slinging, pond tossing and clothes ripping" (Feuer, 1995: 119) scenes so notorious in *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, the image of glamorous women engaging in public

catfights similarly elevates the drama of this docusoap to the extremes of melodramatic spectacle.

Spencer's overt villainy not only exemplifies *The Hills*' melodramatic potentials but also precipitates the most excessively melodramatic scenes. Spencer's 'outsider' position in the community is underscored by the way his behaviour is invariably represented as "shocking [and] threatening to prevailing moral codes" (Thorburn, 2000: 596). Spencer and Lauren's opposing positions are able to generate conflicts between oversimplified notions of good versus evil, which can easily be escalated in the direction of what Feuer (1995: 199) described as hysteria, the extreme end of melodramatic excess.

Neale (cited in Geraghty 1991: 31) discusses the "excess of meaning over motivation" that is characteristic of melodrama. By this, Neale means that the incident that precipitates a particular response hardly justifies the exaggerated reaction of a melodrama character (ibid.). The dramatic depiction of face-to-face confrontations between rival characters exemplifies this. *The Hills* further conveys this "excess of meaning over motivation" in terms of both the amount of time devoted to discussing incidents and the dramatic intensity in which the characters' reactions are portrayed during these discussions. As a result, dramatic conflicts in *The Hills* are only occasionally realised through face-to-face confrontations between sparring characters. Because such incidents are rare, debriefing conversations between characters are used to emphasise the significance of these confrontations and drive the narrative forward by conveying how these incidents have affected the participant characters.

The Melodramatic Close-Up

The Hills enhances the dramatic intensity of its vital conversations through the use of further conventions associated with melodrama. Among these, the dramatic close-up is particularly important in conveying emotion on *The Hills*. Scenes commonly end with a lingering close-up camera shot of a character's face for dramatic impact. This

technique is a well-established convention of soap opera. Underlining the melodramatic impact of its use in *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, Jane Feuer (1995: 120) observed that:

Following and exaggerating a convention of daytime soaps, *Dallas* and *Dynasty* typically hold a shot on the screen for at least a “beat” after the dialogue has ended, usually in combination with shot-reverse shot cuts between the actors’ locked gazes. This conventional manner of closing a scene (usually accompanied by a dramatic burst of music) leaves a residue of emotional intensity just prior to a scene change or commercial break. It serves as a form of punctuation, signifying momentary closure, but it also carries meaning within the scene, a meaning connected to the intense interpersonal involvements each scene depicts.

Particularly when used as ‘punctuation’ in Feuer’s terms, the melodramatic close-up facilitates segmentalisation in soap operas (Thorburn, 2000: 599), an organisational facet that helps to rationalise the frequent advertisement breaks in this highly commercial genre. David Thorburn argues that the segmentalised narrative bytes or “separate units” (ibid.) characteristic of TV melodrama have “substantial independent weight and interest” (ibid.) and are usually “enacting in miniature the larger patterns and emotional rhythms of the whole drama” (ibid.). As a programme that has borrowed conventions from soap opera *The Hills* uses the melodramatic close-up in very similar ways. These are used to end scenes and provide temporary narrative closure. However there is one additional function for this melodramatic close-up in the different context of a reality-based programme, which is as a form of punctuation, which can separate the narrative elements of gathered footage and emotional responses. Yet, perhaps the most significant function for the melodramatic close-up in *The Hills* is its capacity to convey the feelings of its characters as overtly as possible.

The ability to directly communicate the inner thoughts of its characters is vital to *The Hills* as a docusoap that aims to emulate the serial appeals of soap opera. This close-up is also a marker of this docusoap’s proximity to soap and distance from other ‘reality’ TV programmes. The producers’ intention to separate the look of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* from other reality shows and make them look like scripted, episodic programmes (Abed, cited in *Videography*, 2006: 8), required the abandonment of ‘reality’ TV’s staple ‘camera confessional’ device, in which cast

members express their feelings directly to viewers through the camera lens. As *The Hills* producer Tony DiSanto explains (cited in Taylor, 2007: R9),

With these shows [*Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*], the challenge is to show motivation through faces and eyes. It's part of the reason Lauren was so attractive to us as a character. ... She was so expressive in her eyes and body language. When you are trying to tell a story without the exposition you have in a script, or the confessional interview of a documentary, someone like Lauren is very useful.

In a programme so focused on the feelings of its characters, the lingering close-ups of the expressions of cast members offer important insights into their state of mind.

The sequence of shot and reverse-shot intercutting between Lauren and Audrina in episode six of season two provides an indicative example. Composed entirely of close-ups this scene depicts Lauren and Audrina's intimate, concerned conversation about Heidi's increasing infatuation with the villainous Spencer. Their relatively expressionless gazes are given dramatic emphasis by the (fictionally constructed) conversational silence. The impact is to emphasise the pair's concerns over Heidi. This technique of highlighting facial expressions allows the inner feelings of *The Hills* cast to be communicated to the audience, at the same time operating to increase the docusoap's melodramatic appeals.

These close-up shots are steeped in meaning, the accurate reading of which is vital to audience understandings. The influence that transforms Lauren's expressionless gaze into a pensive stare (the latter depicted in the image above), needs to be ascertained by the viewer. In discussing the use of melodramatic close-ups in fictional soap operas, Geraghty argues that the blank faces of characters are "given a reason through the viewer's knowledge of the programme's past and a recreation of the feelings which the character must therefore be experiencing" (1991: 31). This is precisely how the emotional significance of dramatic close-ups on *The Hills* is established. The loyal viewer learns through this scene of the steady deterioration of Lauren and Heidi's once idyllic friendship due to Heidi's involvement with Spencer. Aware of the impact on the close friendship that had previously characterised Lauren and Heidi's relationship, loyal viewers are well-equipped to read in Lauren's dramatic, scene-ending gaze the inner turmoil she is

feeling. The viewer's ability to 'fill in the space' created by the lingering close-ups and the "excessive expressiveness" (Geraghty, 1991: 31) of the character's feelings, allows her to identify with the heightened emotion being displayed on *The Hills*. Geraghty credits this identification with emotions as "the most important element in soap opera's melodramatic aesthetic" (ibid.). By facilitating audience identification with character emotions through exaggerated expression, *The Hills* achieves a strong melodramatic quality and look that is far removed from the more mundane realism of many other 'reality' TV programmes.

Additional Melodramatic Underscoring: Music and Camerawork

The Hills' melodramatic narrative is further assisted by the docusoap's use of musical underscoring. As it does in other docusoaps, music performs particular narrative tasks on *The Hills*. As Keith Beattie explains, "the docusoap uses music to enhance mood and reinforce specific aspects of the narrative ... in ways reminiscent of the operations of musical soundtracks in fictional filmic and televisual forms" (2004: 195). To a greater extent than many other docusoaps, however, *The Hills* relies on a non-diegetic musical score, along with dramatic close-ups and other evocative camera shots, to emphasise its characters' emotions. Music in *The Hills* enhances the docusoap's fictional appearance and in part offers a substitute for the reality TV 'camera confessional' as a way to both convey and foreground the emotional impact of the narrative events being depicted.

This combination of evocative camera shots and musical underscoring endows the captured footage in *The Hills* with additional narrative significance. This is evident in the final episode of the second season when Heidi finally moves out of the apartment she has shared with Lauren to live with Spencer (2:12). On entering their apartment Lauren unexpectedly discovers Heidi sealing boxes. To Heidi's admission of the move, Lauren's response is: "You're moving *today*? I didn't know you were moving *today*... Oh." Although Heidi emphasises that she does not want her leaving to mean the end of their friendship, Lauren replies,

It might be though, Heidi. You're with someone you really love and I'm really glad that you're happy but you're not gonna be able to have both when you move in with him [due to Lauren

and Spencer's ill feelings toward each other]. And I mean, it sucks, and it makes me sad because you *were* my best friend that I moved here with.

As Heidi repeats her intention to keep in touch with Lauren (whose reaction to this is one of scepticism), the opening bars of Avril Lavigne's "When You're Gone" start up, with this stirring piano melody welling up as the action cuts first to the footpath outside the girls' apartment, then to Spencer closing up the back of a U-HAUL truck and jumping into the driver's seat. The piano gives way to the warmer sound of acoustic guitar strumming as Heidi and Lauren exchange awkward goodbyes on the side of the road. Their embrace is followed by a brief montage that is keyed to complete the departure scene. A long shot of the U-HAUL van dwarfs Lauren as she stands behind it and watches Heidi walk to the passenger's side. A mid-shot through the driver's window shows Spencer watching Heidi as she enters the truck, whereupon the music returns to the tense piano tune. A series of shot-reverse shot cuts between the couple captures Spencer reassuring an apprehensive looking Heidi that she is making the right choice by moving in with him. As soon as Spencer motions to pull the truck away from the curb, the camera changes to show the side of the U-HAUL truck. As the vehicle exits the frame it reveals a mid-shot of Lauren standing alone on the curb, this image underscored by the welling up of the song's chorus, "When you're gone...". The action then cross-cuts between a mid-shot of Lauren as she stares at the departing truck, and a shot of the passenger's rear-view mirror that captures Heidi's face as she stares back at Lauren. The remainder of the chorus plays over this sequence, "...the face I came to know is missing too / When you're gone / the words I need to hear to always get me through the day and make it okay...". As the truck turns the corner and disappears from Lauren's view the final line of the chorus, "I miss you", plays over a long-angle shot of Lauren returning inside to her apartment alone.

The combination of music and camera angles in this scene works to both enhance the dramatic impact, and emphasise the narrative significance, of Heidi moving out of the apartment she shares with Lauren. The way in which the music anxiously builds to a climax at the very moment Lauren is left alone on the footpath conveys Lauren's feelings of abandonment with far greater dramatic intensity than if she were to verbalise these feelings in a 'reality'-styled confession. Moreover, the exaggerated way that this abandonment is depicted works to support Lauren's

earlier sentiment that Heidi's departure from their apartment signals the end of their friendship. Accordingly the emotive sequence in which Heidi 'looks back' at Lauren through the rear-view mirror whilst she is driven away by Spencer is heavily symbolic of Heidi's departure from Lauren's life. In fact, this scene is the last amicable interaction between Lauren and Heidi before the sex tape rumour causes hostility between them at the beginning of the third season. The fictional appearance of *The Hills* is aided by the metaphorical symbolism of scenes such as this, and the melodramatic aesthetic it exhibits is far removed from the 'observational' style of so many 'reality' TV scenes. Both the song's lyrics and musical tone help convey feelings of tension and sadness. The song's lyrics operate to narrate Lauren's feelings, making it obvious to viewers that she will "miss" Heidi "when [she's] gone". The dejected tone of the chosen song further conveys the emotions felt by Lauren and this scene's attempts to elicit the emotional engagement of the viewer.

In these ways, *The Hills* takes the often mundane events of its subjects' lives and transforms them into melodrama with the aid of visual and aural conventions. Melodramatic close-ups and evocative music, as two important examples, continue to help viewers engage with the heightened emotion of this docusoap. It is this engagement, which is so important in understanding the ongoing plot of *The Hills*, which aligns this docusoap with the conventions of TV soap opera, to which melodramatic aesthetics and appeals are so vital. The hyperbolic degree to which music and close-ups emphasise the feelings of characters results in a sense of overt theatricality for *The Hills*, which separates it, aesthetically and narratively, from other 'reality' programmes.

Conclusion

The Hills has created a compelling diegetic world through the use of fictional narrative techniques. The use of multiple, interweaving storylines to construct a serialised, overarching story contributes to the illusion that this docusoap offers its viewers an unmediated, voyeuristic access to the lives of its subjects. The serialised narrative structure of this highly constructed and self-contained world grants *The Hills* a TV drama-like status, with a central protagonist and cast of characters who are keyed to ensure the presence of dramatic conflict. As this chapter has argued, the

entertainment value of this docusoap is greatly enhanced by the use of narrative conventions more characteristic of soap opera than of any factual TV form. The community construct of *The Hills* cast operates the same way as fictional soap communities. In order to assume a set of complementary roles in *The Hills*' community, its real-life cast members are constructed as characters through the emphasis of strategically important qualities, dispositions and values. Spencer's 'outsider' position as an archetypal soap opera "bastard" (Geraghty, 1991: 102–104) exemplifies the extent and impact of character constructs in *The Hills*. His ability to cause disruption to the supportive female community provides a source of ongoing unease and conflict to sustain the overarching narrative of this serial programme.

Further evidence of this docusoap's alignment with fiction is the way in which Heidi's real-life wedding performs a number of vital narrative tasks. Their lavish ceremony brings the disparate *Hills* community together, provides a resolution of conflict and partial narrative closure whilst also introducing new sources of conflict for the entire community. It is events such as these that bring attention to the intricate narrative construction that this docusoap has carved out of factual footage. The entertainment value of *The Hills* is further enhanced by its soap-like melodramatic tendencies. The show makes sensational appeals to the emotions of its audience (Ang, 1985: 61–62) through its exaggerated portrayal of cast members' emotions. *The Hills* overtly conveys narrative meaning through "the lingering of a camera on a face at the end of a scene [and] the exchange of meaningful glances" (Geraghty, 1991: 30), with music and evocative camera angles further underscoring emotion. These melodramatic techniques are incredibly significant in *The Hills* which relies on these heavily coded filmic moments to necessarily convey characters' internal feelings, the understanding of which is crucial to narrative development.

The way in which *The Hills* deploys the conventions of melodrama complements other key elements of this docusoap, notably those of its cinematic visual style and dramatic seriousness. It is these factors that position *The Hills* as a reincarnation, albeit in 'reality'-based form, of the American primetime soaps of the 1980s. The fact that *The Hills* couples its own approach to melodramatic excess with the context of reconstructed factual – as opposed to fictional – footage enhances the audience appeal of the dramatic conflicts concerning female rivalry and overtly villainous

characters that are offered. However such a factual/fictional blend also raises questions about the authenticity of *The Hills* and its relationship to 'the real', which will be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Intertextuality, Authenticity and *The Hills*

Introduction

As a programme that combines a factual premise with the cinematic aesthetics and narrative construction of fictional drama, questions emerge over the 'authenticity' of *The Hills*. There is an understandable urge to determine to what extent *The Hills* is 'real', given its claims to documentary realism, or is 'fake' due to the cinematic visual style and the narrative conventions it has borrowed from TV drama, in particular soap opera. This concern is arguably misdirected, as it stems from an oversimplified belief that the observational realism of factual programming exists in binary opposition to the overt constructedness of TV fiction. This chapter explores the problems with such simplistic assumptions, exploring how and to what extent these have both encouraged confusion and generated controversy about the blend of fictional and factual elements in *The Hills*.

Authenticity and 'the Real'

There are differing theoretical approaches to 'the real' and realism. As James Friedman (2002: 1) explains, "discussions of mediated reality have ranged from the modernist position that reality existed yet could not be represented, to the claims of some postmodernists that simulation has replaced the real". Even within the television studies field alone, it is problematic to rely on one single theory to explain television's relationship with reality (Friedman, 2002: 1). Despite the varying discourses, there is a widespread acknowledgement amongst realist theorists that no text can accurately portray actuality or 'the real'. A 'text' – be it a novel, a television documentary, or a photograph – is, by its very nature, a construction. Any elements of 'the real' that are presented by the text are subject to manipulation and mediation through this process of construction. One of many different sets of realities can be interpreted from a text depending on the way in which the text frames actuality (Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 32). Therefore, a text does not simply record reality but instead reproduces it through an ideological framework (Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis: 1992: 187). As a result, texts can convey a sense of *realism*, but this aesthetic of realism is located at some distance from 'the real'.

Realism is a textual construction that represents, but is necessarily separate from, 'the real'. The term realism is used in a number of disciplines for a variety of purposes. In the context of this discussion the term is used generally to refer to artistic attempts to observe and accurately represent the contemporary world (Nochlin, 1971: 130). More specifically, television genres employ different types of realism to convey a sense of a given lived experience. These forms of realism, as filtered through the varying aesthetics, formal conventions and content of television genres, articulate what Friedman refers to as "a representational real" (2002: 5).

Documentary has long held a reputation for presenting a more authentic form of realism. Documentary forms on television are commonly considered to be closer to 'the real' than fictional television texts. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight explain how documentary maintains this privileged position within society by virtue of its claim to be able to "present the most accurate and truthful portrayal of the socio-historical world" (2001: 6). They assert that this claim is dependent on the assumption that there is "a direct relationship between the documentary image and the referent (social world)" (ibid.). This widespread assumption that documentary entails a faithful reflection of actuality grew from the broad acceptance of the camera as a "scientific apparatus" (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 9) during the Enlightenment period. Much like other scientific tools such as the barometer and thermometer, the camera was considered to give "objective and truthful readings of the natural world" (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 9). It is this perceived objectivity that awarded the camera the credible status of faithfully and purely capturing 'the real'.

This perception that the camera objectively presents the real has continued to inform the documentary tradition. The Direct Cinema movement of the 1960s maintained the notion that the camera could document reality without a subjective slant (see Winston, 1995: 148–158). This acceptance that documentary connotes an unmediated representation of actuality is seen to authenticate more recent reality TV forms. However, this idea that documentary can present 'the real' as fact is proven problematic by realism theory, which argues that a text – no matter how 'pure' – cannot portray reality 'truthfully' or objectively. Therefore, documentary

does not re-present the real but instead constructs and conveys a convincing form of realism.

Documentary's reputation for being closer to 'the real' is arguably due to generic verisimilitude. Generic verisimilitude concerns "our tendency to refer to other texts from the same genre when we consider the realism of a film or a programme" (Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 34). It is the shared use of particular generic conventions by documentary programmes that has generated a documentary aesthetic that is widely accepted as signifying a close and authentic connection to actuality. One of its recognisable conventions is the shaky, hand-held or shoulder-mounted camera footage that often results from attempting to capture unpredictable action 'on-the-wing' (Goodwin, 1986: 22-3). The sense of direct witness to unfolding events that is generated by this footage is further reinforced through the naturalistic sound and lighting that is characteristic of the low-budget, multi-location technique of documentary making (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 16; Goodwin, 1986: 22-3). As Nichols argues, the realist style that results from these conventions "is a mark of authenticity, testifying to the camera, and hence the filmmaker, having 'been there' and thus providing the warrant for our own 'being there', viewing the historical world through the transparent amber of indexical images and realist style" (1991: 181). The realist style of documentary thus connotes an element of transparency between 'the real' and the text that is attempting to represent it.

The perception that documentary accurately reflects 'the real' is due to the genre's adherence to the above aesthetic conventions. The widespread use of these aesthetics within the documentary genre has caused such conventions to signify a proximity to and authentic depiction of reality. The perceived authenticity of documentary realism therefore relies on accepted "systems of credibility" (Neale, 1981: 19) rather than an actual "fidelity to the real" (ibid.). In other words, the privileged status that documentary holds in society is dependent on the *generic assumption* that the conventions of documentary automatically connote a pure portrayal of reality. Hence, rather than there being a verifiable correlation between documentary and truth, this is largely produced by generic assumptions.

As discussed above, the correlation between documentary and a 'factual' reflection of actuality is unachievable due to documentary's construction as a text. The process of textual construction distorts the source material being 'captured' by documentary. John Corner (2001: 126) explains how actuality footage goes through a number of transformations during the planning, shooting, editing and viewing processes involved in documentary making. These transformations occur through the way footage is planned and crafted from "various kinds of settings, circumstances, events, actions and speech" (ibid.), and then by the way such footage is edited to achieve narrative coherence, to set various moods and to add emphases (ibid.). Finally, Corner argues that further transformations occur during the viewing process, when viewers "take the screened material and turn it into sense and significance" (ibid.): a process that can produce quite variant and personal interpretations.

Corner claims that it is across these transformations that "the art of record" (Corner 2001: 126, see Corner 1996) is found: that is, the text that results from this documentation of reality. Importantly, Corner also suggests that this transformation generates controversy due to "the apparent fusion of index (recorded image and sound) and rhetorical and aesthetical ambition" (Corner, 2001: 126). In other words, the documentation of actuality can be controversial due to the way in which editorial interference, even at a consciously limited level, moulds 'reality' into a text. These transformations prove that documentary differs from 'actuality' or 'reality' due to its constructedness, and therefore is not synonymous with the actual, original experience. Importantly, given the potential within these transformations for distortion, documentary cannot be considered to approximate truth.

The transformations that take place during the construction of documentary texts illustrate how the genre's verisimilitude is not due to its "fidelity to the real" (Neale, 1981: 19), as the process involves a separation from, and reconstruction of, 'reality'. A text can contain high levels of editorial construction but deceptively claim close ties to 'the real' due to its deployment of realism conventions. It is the use of the particular conventions described earlier that evoke a sense of *documentary realism* that has resulted in these conventions becoming widely accepted indicators of authenticity.

Realism Assumptions and their Problems

To achieve documentary realism, texts are required to adhere to those conventions that have become indicative of a proximity to 'the real'. The onscreen indicators of a documentary's construction – the shaky hand-held camera footage, the flat, natural lighting, the authoritative voiceover that clarifies the narrative significance of the captured footage – instantly authenticates the documentary's realist claims, as a consequence of generic verisimilitude and audience assumptions. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight explain that these conventions are documentary's "visual and verbal shorthand" (2001: 17), and their role as indicators of authenticity relies on the audience's continual belief in and acceptance of them (ibid.). It is this acceptance and belief that allows documentary to maintain a position – despite its inaccuracy – as an untainted "recorder of the real, rather than actively constructing ideological accounts of the social world" (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 17).

The established and accepted conventions of documentary realism have also created a false dichotomy between the generic assumptions of documentary and drama. Television documentaries and fictional programmes are expected to assume and be immediately recognisable for their respective visual styles. Kilborn and Izod (1997: 36) argue that we, as viewers, accept the conventions of documentary as the appropriate and most effective way of presenting actuality footage. The established documentary aesthetic described above highlights the genre's close ties to 'the real', whilst the alternative aesthetics of television drama achieve a system of construction – and representation – that is associated with fiction.

Thus, there is a clear distinction between the perceived approaches and aesthetics of television documentary and drama. Documentary is seen to offer viewers "access to *the* world" (Nichols, 1991: 109, original emphasis) while fictional television forms, such as drama programmes, offer viewers access to "*a* world" (ibid., original emphasis). Within this dichotomy the (alleged) exposition of our 'actual' lived-in world in documentary forms is perceived as more credible and authentic than the creation of imaginary worlds in forms of television drama. It is important to

reiterate once again that this realist distinction between documentary and drama is established through generic assumptions and widely circulated perceptions. Yet, this perceived realist binary is powerful in influencing audience perceptions about a text's relationship to 'the real'. For example, when a documentary maker deliberately employs the aesthetics attributable to television drama (non-diegetic music, for example) the documentary's status as a portrayal of actuality, and its claims to realism, will be weakened (Kilborn and Izod 1997: 41). The perceived notion that a fact/fiction dichotomy exists between documentary and drama forms is widely circulated and holds much cultural weight with our assessment of a television text's realist claims. There is a widespread understanding that documentary portrays our world, and is therefore more realistic than the created, imaginary worlds portrayed in fictional forms.

However, the reliance on a fact/fiction dichotomy to establish documentary's realist claims over those of fiction is problematic. The distinction between documentary's 'fact' and drama's 'fiction' is too simplistic, and evidentially this distinction is continually blurred. This distinction is problematic for several reasons. First, the conventions associated with these two – supposedly distinguishable – meta-genres are continually intermingled and borrowed. Shaky hand-held camera work can no longer instantly signify a factual depiction of actual events, since this kind of aesthetic is now commonly appropriated by fictional programmes and, in some cases, whole genres. 'Comedy verité' uses the codes and conventions of documentary to represent a fictional subject (see Mills, 2004). The BBC's *The Office* (2001-2003) is one example of a fictional television series in the comedy verité style. This series adopts a documentary aesthetic in its portrayal of the (fictitious) paper company Wernham Hogg and its (fictional) employees in Slough, England (see Walters, 2005). This series derives much of its humour from the way it parodies the British docusoap tradition of profiling the interactions between individuals within an institution. This deliberate and overt blurring of documentary and drama conventions makes it difficult to tell some factual and fictional television programmes apart.

As the previous two chapters have argued, the docusoap is one example of a 'factual' television genre that employs fictional conventions to enhance its

entertainment value. Although some blending of documentary and fictional conventions is common across all contemporary 'reality TV' forms, these forms rely on documentary's historic reputation of credibility to authenticate their depictions of 'supposed actuality'. However, fictional television forms, such as soap operas and high-end dramas, can often portray more convincing forms of realism than reality television. The most common aesthetic in television fictions is *classic realism*, which uses the "conventions (of narrative, genre, and style) to create a plausible, coherent narrative world" (Dunleavy, 2009: 79). These conventions are keyed to conceal the signs of constructedness in a fictional text, and encourage the viewer to become immersed in the world of the fiction.

Classic realism's reproduction of reality is one of mimesis; the aim being a plausible imitation of reality. This form of realism creates its resemblance to actuality through such conventions as "the depiction of space and time through continuity editing, psychological characterization, [and] a conventionally transparent linear causal development leading to resolution in plotting" (Nelson, 1997: 103). It is rather ironic that realism can be conveyed through such different 'fictional' conventions. Yet, these slick conventions have come to denote a fictional illusion of reality, one that is quite distinguishable from the approach to realism taken by reality TV forms. It is through these recognised conventions of classic realism that fictions create worlds in which the viewer can become immersed. Although these 'imaginary' worlds may be perceived to be more removed from 'the real' than reality TV forms, they can portray quite compelling realisms of their own.

One form of realism often found in television fictions is *social realism*. Fictional texts can depict common, believable situations and topical events that can resonate with viewers given their resemblance or reflection of real-life social realities. Kilborn and Izod argue that "[t]he mark of social realism is its interest in showing ordinary people in their usual *milieux* – working men and women are seen as appropriate subjects for the writer, painter and film maker" (1997: 45, original emphasis). Social problems of the working-class have been portrayed realistically through fictional television programmes. Trisha Dunleavy (2009: 74–77) explains how the BBC docudramas *Up the Junction* (1965) and *Cathy Come Home* (1966) exposed the very real issues of illegal abortions and homelessness respectively. She argues that these

two docudramas, which generated much public discourse, “not only *followed* the news but also *brought* the news, directly into middle-class British living rooms, of social ills that desperately needed acknowledgement and resolution” (Dunleavy, 2009: 76, original emphasis). Soap operas, too, can be great conveyers of topical social issues within the working class, particularly those produced in the British tradition. Marion Jordan (1981: 27–39) discusses how *Coronation Street* has adopted conventions of social realism in its portrayal of Northern working-class life. For instance, Jordan explains how the soap’s characters are working-class and their ‘ordinariness’ is exemplified by the locations they are seen to operate within: the pub, the street, the factory, and their own kitchens (1981: 28). Moreover, soap operas explore wider societal issues through fictional narratives that focus on the personal struggles of individual characters. In early 2000 for example, the pregnancy of *Coronation Street*’s 13 year-old Sarah Platt precipitated a new public sphere debate about teenage pregnancy in Britain.⁵ In another British example, *EastEnders*’ focus on a gritty urban British milieu allowed it, against the backdrop of 1980s Britain under Thatcher, to examine some impacts of unemployment.

Aspects of social realism in soap operas often go hand in hand with *psychological realism*, which is another form of realism common in fictional genres. Psychological realism, in simplified terms, can refer to “the attempt to give a persuasive account of an individual, or even of a group of people” (Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 48). Psychological realism is often achieved in soap operas and other fictional genres, when the situations depicted within a narrative can resonate with viewers’ real-life experiences. A viewer can feel empathetic towards a fictional character because they share similar experiences. The ability of television drama to connect with the experiences and emotions of the audience indicates the capacity of fiction to contain certain truths. Robin Nelson (1997: 114) claims that the truth of a drama is determined by the viewer’s own experiences and whether, due to these, she is convinced by the plausibility of the world of the text. The ways in which fictional texts convincingly portray social and psychological realisms demonstrates how drama can make plausible truth claims.

⁵ See, for example, Families Helped by Soap Stories; Topical Plots Help Tackle Taboo Issues (2002). *South Wales Echo*, p. 17.

It is often assumed that whereas TV documentary offers an authentic depiction of reality, fictional TV programmes are located further away from 'the real'. A more accurate perception, however, is that there are different, competing forms of realism, of which documentary realism is largely perceived as more 'authentic'. The evidential construction of documentary texts indicates that these 'factual' forms are as prone to editorial manipulation as fictional forms, and present a realism that is similarly detached from lived experience. Furthermore, fictional TV forms can present a more persuasive depiction of a particular experience through social and psychological realism. The contemporary social issues of unemployment and teen pregnancy explored on a soap opera like *Coronation Street* are likely to be more reflective of the audience's reality than the insect-eating rewards challenges depicted on the 'reality' gamedoc *Survivor*, for example. This underlines that assumptions about documentary's greater proximity to 'the real' than TV's fictional forms are too simplistic. Nevertheless, documentary realism still holds a lot of cultural weight when it comes to presenting a seemingly authentic depiction of reality on television.

Realism and Intertextuality

As discussed above, documentary's reputation as a conveyer of a more 'authentic' realism than fiction is reliant on generic verisimilitude. Moreover, the documentary aesthetic that is widely used within television documentaries has come to connote an authentic representation of 'the real'. As the above discussion has examined why such a perception is inaccurate, it is important to now consider why such beliefs concerning textual meanings can be so influential and widespread. This can be explained in terms of *intertextuality*. According to John Fiske (1987: 108), "[t]he theory of intertextuality proposes that any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and that a range of textual knowledges is brought to bear upon it". In other words, a viewer's knowledge and experience of other texts will influence his or her reading of an individual text.

Fiske contends that any one text is polysemic (contains multiple meanings) and that intertextuality causes a viewer to "mobilize its polysemy" (1987: 117) or to activate "one set of meanings rather than any of the others" (ibid.). Fiske proposes

that these meanings are generated through two intertextual dimensions, the *horizontal* and the *vertical*. As he explains, horizontal intertextuality refers to “primary texts that are more or less explicitly linked, usually along the axes of genre, character, or content” (1987: 108). If a television programme contains a similar visual style, characterisation, setting and narrative structure to that of other programmes the viewer has seen within a given generic category, she is likely to interpret the programme within that existing, familiar generic frame and activate the meanings she associates with that categorisation.

In his assertion that “thinking of television generically requires us to prioritize the similarities between programs rather than their individual differences” (1987: 110), Fiske hints at the limitations of generic thinking about television programmes. This kind of categorical thinking within the complex, ever-evolving nature of television production can engender misinterpretations and, in extreme cases, can ignite controversies (see Mittell, 2004: 163). It explains, for example, how a comedy *verité* programme that exhibits all of documentary’s “codes of authenticity” (Walters, 2005: 63) can be mistaken for a factual text, as a viewer can instinctively categorise the text within the factual documentary genre purely on the basis of its stylistic resemblance. It also explains how ‘reality’ TV forms, which can contain high levels of editorial manipulation for the sake of entertainment, can be perceived as authentic depictions of reality given their utilisation of documentary codes.

Many ‘reality’ TV forms share the following elements of documentary’s aesthetic: a naturally-lit, “flat image quality” prone to the movement of a “hand-held or shoulder-mounted camera”, a style arising due to the limitations, settings and unpredictability involved in documentary filmmaking (Goodwin, 1986: 22–3). Docusoaps like *The Real World* rely on the audience’s familiarity with these documentary “codes of ‘authenticity’” (Walters, 2005: 63) to determine that such shows are similarly depicting reality. By incorporating elements of a documentary aesthetic, reality TV shows are able to literally maintain the appearance of credibly documenting actuality when instead these shows are manipulating and reconstructing captured footage using the conventions of fictional entertainment genres.

Fiske also explains how certain meanings of a text can be further prioritised through *vertical intertextuality*. Different from horizontal intertextuality, Fiske clarifies that vertical intertextuality “consists of a primary text’s relations with other texts which refer specifically to it. These secondary texts work to promote the circulation of selected meanings of the primary text” (1987: 117). For example, a primary text can be a television programme, and the secondary texts that refer to this programme can include “studio publicity, journalistic features, or criticism, or tertiary texts produced by the viewers themselves in the form of letters to the press or, more importantly, of gossip and conversation” (Fiske, 1987: 108). Fiske argues that these secondary texts play an important role in circulating textual meanings and influencing which ones are activated by viewers at the point of reception (1987: 118).

Significantly, secondary texts can also make contributions to extending or emphasising the authenticity of ‘reality’ TV forms. For example, seeing the cast members of *Survivor* appear on the cover of tabloid magazines situates them as ‘real’ people rather than actors performing the roles of fictional characters on screen. Coupled with the perception of authenticity granted to reality TV through its aesthetic alignment with documentary, it becomes apparent how intertextual relations, both horizontal and vertical, can influence the viewer’s perception of what a text is and how it operates generically. Intertextuality helps to explain how ‘reality’ TV programmes such as *Survivor* and *The Real World* are granted authenticity. At the same time it becomes apparent how these two intertextual dimensions cause challenges in quantifying the realism of *The Hills*.

***The Hills* and the Aesthetics of Fiction**

The Hills presents conflicting messages through separate intertextual dimensions. We can first focus on the messages circulated about *The Hills* through horizontal intertextuality. Specifically, *The Hills*’ claims to realism are weakened due to this docusoap’s deliberate subordination of documentary’s “codes of ‘authenticity’” (Walters, 2005: 63) to the cinematic look of high-end drama. As Kilborn and Izod have argued (1997: 41), the perceived binary between fact and fiction is so

influential that a documentary text's claim to realism is weakened if it exhibits aesthetics more commonly attributable to drama. *The Hills*, as a self-described reality show, is a clear example of how the borrowing of conventions that are widely considered to belong to a fictional genre can complicate its perceived position as a factual text.

In achieving their goal to “separate the look of *Laguna Beach* [and *The Hills*] from other reality shows and make [them] look like scripted, episodic [programmes]” (*Videography*, 2006), the creators of *The Hills* ensure that the docusoap shares fictional drama's coding. In contrast to traditional documentary, these codes include controlled, soft lighting, slick editing, and multiple stationary cameras that are set up to capture the planned conversations between cast members. *The Hills* thus exhibits the classic realism aesthetic of drama. This ‘fictional’ coding complicates the audience's ability to decode *The Hills* as a ‘reality’ TV programme. Consequently, it can be argued that *The Hills* aligns itself with fictional drama through *horizontal intertextuality*. In accordance with Fiske's definition of horizontal intertextuality (1987: 108), *The Hills* is primarily linked to fictional television drama along the axes of genre, character, and content. Firstly, the docusoap's deliberately cinematic appearance demarcates it from a traditional documentary aesthetic. The visual style of *The Hills* is arguably the most obvious code to signify this docusoap's horizontal alignment with fictional drama. However, *The Hills* moves further towards fiction through other aspects.

Chapter Two has explored the ways in which *The Hills* aligns with fictional narrative. Kilborn and Izod (1997: 127) further describe the differences between documentary and fiction in terms of narrative structuring. Narrative fictions, Kilborn and Izod argue, draw the audience in with “daring twists and turns on a semi-concealed route to reaching a satisfying conclusion” (1997: 127) and the audience takes pleasure in “being teased and hoodwinked by the confusing turns that the story may take while remaining sure in the knowledge that everything will ultimately be resolved” (ibid.). In contrast, “narrative in documentary is generally aimed at enhancing the sense of developing argument, of presenting the documentary account in such a way that it will be rendered more memorable and persuasive for a viewing audience” (1997: 127). *The Hills* has proven to align with

fictional narrative in this regard. As examined in Chapter Two, this docusoap employs fictional narrative techniques such as cliffhangers and plot twists for the sake of pleasure and entertainment. Although *The Hills* involves a soap-like capacity to evade narrative closure, as with other fictional narratives the promise of narrative closure is important to its serial allure. Ultimately *The Hills* delivers narrative closure at the fifth season's mid-season break with Heidi and Spencer's wedding. This wedding performed a number of important narrative functions including the resolution of conflict that facilitated Lauren's departure from the programme. Accordingly *The Hills* is more overtly aligned with narrative fiction than narrative documentary as described by Kilborn and Izod. This is because it does not use narrative to render more convincing the argument or authenticity of its selected footage, but rather to enhance its entertainment value.

The Hills further links to fictional television drama along the axis of character. Chapter Two has detailed how the cast members of *The Hills* emulate the characterisation of soap opera community members, and their certain character roles help to facilitate narrative progression. The similarities between *The Hills* cast and fictional characters are further strengthened given Kilborn and Izod's account of the differences between fictional characters and documentary subjects. They state that "fictions invariably have characters, who usually act as if unobserved" (1997: 129). *The Hills*' 'characters' exemplify this in the way the docusoap deliberately abandons the 'camera confessional' technique of conveying cast members' inner feelings to the audience. Unlike the character participants in many other docusoaps, *The Hills* characters do not acknowledge the presence of an audience by speaking directly into the camera lens, and instead act as if they are unobserved. The characters express their emotions solely within the show's diegesis, and their "subjective responses" (1997: 130) and "emotional stirrings" (ibid.) are conveyed through fictional narrative tools like suggestive music and evocative camera shots. In this way, *The Hills* cast operate like characters in a conventional TV drama serial or soap opera.

The expression of characterisation on *The Hills* distances this docusoap from documentary. Kilborn and Izod state that it is rare for a documentary subject to have the "fully revealed personality of the fictional character" (1997: 130), and that "other

things which we never see are going on in their off-screen lives, and they have long personal histories which we seldom even glimpse” (ibid.). In contrast, having knowledge of the inner workings of *The Hills*’ cast’s lives is vital for the docusoap’s narrative that focuses on their personal and professional pursuits in Hollywood. The narrative of *The Hills* gives the impression that the audience is privy to an encompassing view of the lives of its core cast members, which Kilborn and Izod argue is atypical of documentary. Instead, *The Hills* is more like a feature film in the way it gives the audience “insights into the public and private aspects of the lives of its main characters” (ibid.). The reduction of *The Hills*’ cast to characters or personas who perform vital narrative tasks further illustrates the docusoap’s emulation of classic realism, and its departure from the documentary’s attempts to portray its subjects as ‘authentically’ as possible. Characterisation in *The Hills* emulates fiction even further through the diegetic techniques it employs to convey these insights.

The Hills proves that it is explicitly linked to fictional television drama through its genre, character and content. Its employment of conventions typical of popular TV drama ensures that it embodies the classic realist style of fictional television forms. The desire of its creators to make *The Hills* look like a scripted, episodic drama allows it to pursue and achieve an “invisibility of form” (Caughie, 1981: 343), which involves removing the evidence of a documentary construction so as to encourage audience immersion in the diegetic world the show creates. The ability for a viewer to “forget the camera” (Caughie, 1981: 343) when watching *The Hills* and ‘believe in’ the world presented on screen is assisted through film techniques such as the ‘shot-reverse shot’, ‘eyeline match’, ‘180 degree rule’ and ‘cut on action’ (Dunleavy, 2009: 80). These techniques are common to television drama, and by using them *The Hills* aligns itself with the generic verisimilitude of classic realism. The cinematic visual style and slick editing of *The Hills* is a clear departure from the way that most other ‘factual’ TV forms approach realism. The way in which this docusoap looks and acts like a television drama explains how a viewer can experience and enjoy *The Hills* just as she would a primetime soap opera. As *The Hills* can be ‘read’ so convincingly as a fictional TV programme due to horizontal intertextuality, it is valid to question how *The Hills* is able to maintain its reputation as a ‘reality’ TV show.

The Contribution of Secondary Texts

The conflicting realist messages of *The Hills* are beginning to emerge. *The Hills* is proven to align with fictional drama through horizontal intertextuality. As a stand-alone text, there is little to distinguish *The Hills* from the fictional dramas it so strongly resembles. There are few on-screen codes to signify that *The Hills* is a 'factual' text which therefore can be perceived as closer to 'the real' than fiction, as this docusoap deliberately abandons documentary's perceived codes of authenticity in order to look like TV drama. Yet, loyal viewers of *The Hills* understand that Lauren and her friends are real people rather than fictional characters. With no internal signifiers, how is a loyal viewer able to determine, and be convinced, that *The Hills* is 'real life'?

The Hills' appealing 'reality' TV premise is maintained through *vertical intertextuality*. It is secondary texts that refer specifically to *The Hills* – tabloid magazines, gossip blogs and television talk shows, to name a few – that confirm this docusoap's ties to 'the real'. These media forms are not known for profiling fictional characters, but rather the real people who portray them. Gossip magazines do not print details about the ongoing (fictional) relationship problems between Ross and Rachel in *Friends*. Instead, tabloid journalism and television talk shows deal exclusively with actuality, gaining much fuel from celebrity culture, and tend to focus on the personal lives of the actors who play these characters: *Friends* actors David Schwimmer and Jennifer Aniston for example. This intertextual distinction can help one differentiate between actor (real life) and character (fiction).

When Lauren Conrad appears on *The Late Show with David Letterman* and talks about the depiction of her personal life on *The Hills*, and when Heidi Montag graces the cover of *US Weekly* and gives details about her tumultuous relationship with Spencer Pratt, it is their appearances within these secondary texts that position *The Hills* cast as real people existing in the real world. As these secondary texts have a reputation for dealing strictly with real-life personalities and not with fictional characters, one can determine from Lauren Conrad's appearance on a television talk show that this is the same Lauren Conrad that appears on *The Hills*, and thus the docusoap is depicting the actual life of this real person. These secondary texts, through their vertical intertextuality, distinguish the cast of *The Hills* from the

fictional soap opera characters that they so strongly resemble within the diegesis of the docusoap, and grant them status as real people.

Whilst the programme's stringent use of fictional drama conventions prevents it from claiming documentary realism from an aesthetic standpoint, *The Hills* is granted authenticity by the way in which secondary texts make specific reference to the docusoap's status in the real world. As news of Spencer and Heidi's wedding was brandished on magazine covers⁶ and news websites⁷, viewers can deduce that the wedding shown on episode 5:10 is actuality footage of a legally binding ceremony that has very real consequences in Spencer and Heidi's lives. The credibility awarded to secondary texts allows loyal viewers of *The Hills* to understand the cast as 'real' people, and the real-world status of this docusoap's narrative events enhances the drama that unfolds both onscreen and within these secondary texts.

The intertextual relationship between *The Hills*, as a primary text, and the secondary texts that refer to the docusoap is largely symbiotic. Fiske argues that the influence between primary and secondary texts in the vertically intertextual dimension is two-way, and that the meanings of secondary texts are "read back into television, just as productively as television determines theirs" (Fiske, 1987: 118). This is exemplified with *The Hills* on several levels. For one, the gossip generated by secondary texts can be 'read back' into *The Hills* and intensify the drama of the docusoap's narrative. Such commentary in tabloid magazines and talk show appearances not only heightens the drama of *The Hills* by insinuating that the drama is authentic (the sense that real conflicts are 'juicier' than fictional ones) but this vertical intertextuality also helps to fuel the narrative that relies so heavily on dramatic conflict. A magazine article detailing Lauren and Heidi's bitter friendship break-up amplifies the appeal of watching the docusoap and observing the conflict

⁶ See for example, Orloff, Brian (April 26, 2009). Heidi & Spencer 'So Happy' at Wedding Reception. *People Magazine*.

⁷ See for example, "Who's Attending Heidi, Spencer's Wedding?" 2009. MSNBC. 25/03/2010 2010. <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30354211/>>.

for one's self. Important to the appeal and distinction of *The Hills* is that this intertextual relationship is unattainable for purely fictional television texts.

Secondary texts can in fact influence the content of *The Hills'* narrative, given the way in which the docusoap and tabloid publications share a symbiotic interest in the drama-filled lives of the cast members. Their appearances on *The Hills* and its predecessor *Laguna Beach* catapulted the cast to celebrity status, and the melodramatic ways in which their conflict-ridden lives are played out on screen make them perfect subjects for gossip blogs and celebrity magazines. The widespread interest in the unfolding conflicts between *The Hills* cast members has meant that certain rumours about their lives have initially circulated throughout secondary texts, rather than the drama originating from the conflicts caught on camera.

In order to maintain its premise as an encompassing exposé of the lives of these twenty-somethings *The Hills'* narrative has had to acknowledge the circulation of rumours concerning their personal relationships within the public sphere. For example, the catalyst for Lauren and Heidi's bitter falling out was the fact that Spencer spread rumours that Lauren and her ex-boyfriend Jason Wahler had created a sex tape. Fans of *The Hills* did not find this out through the show's diegesis, but instead through the way in which the rumour spread through entertainment news programmes, radio shows, magazine articles and gossip blogs⁸ during the break in filming between the second and third seasons. By the time the third season premiered, a record number of fans (Armstrong, 2007: 36) tuned in to witness the consequences of Spencer's rumour-spreading. In the first scene of the season three premiere episode (3:1 'You Know What You Did'), Lauren explains to Whitney that hurtful rumours about her and Jason had ended up "on the internet" and insinuates that Spencer and Heidi were responsible for the widespread circulation of the rumour. The tension over the issue reaches a climax later in this episode when Lauren encounters Heidi at a club. The two former friends have not spoken since filming ended for the second season, and here they have an explosive argument in

⁸ See, for example, Peiffer, 2007 and TMZ, 2007.

which Lauren accuses Heidi, along with Spencer, of spreading a “sick little rumour” about her.

The inclusion of this storyline within the narrative of *The Hills*, and Lauren’s acknowledgement that the sex tape rumour started on the internet, shows the extra-diegetic input of secondary texts. Widespread interest in this rumour was generated by secondary texts, and the narrative importance of this rumour – in terms of the docusoap presenting an encompassing view of the cast’s lives – insisted that this discussion from secondary texts was then ‘read back’ into the narrative of *The Hills*. The sex-tape incident was of extreme narrative significance in the overarching story of *The Hills*, as it finalised Heidi and Lauren’s failing friendship.

This way in which real-life events, as played-out on magazine covers, are then acknowledged within the diegesis of the docusoap further authenticates the status of *The Hills* as a ‘reality’ programme. Furthermore, this highlights the hyper-diegetic appeal of the docusoap. The drama of *The Hills* is cooperatively played out within the diegesis of the programme and through the extra-diegetic input of secondary texts. This results in an amplification of the docusoap’s dramatic narrative, and allows one’s appeal in the programme to be expansive. Chapter Four will further examine the ways in which secondary texts enhance the appeal of *The Hills*.

Generic Assumptions, Controversy and *The Hills*

The combination of genres on *The Hills* can prove to be confusing given conflicting generic assumptions. As explained earlier in this chapter, *The Hills* aligns itself with fictional drama through horizontal intertextuality (texts linked through genre, character and content), resembling certain fictional television programmes in its visual style, narrative structure and the nature of the dramatic conflicts that are integral to it. In particular, *The Hills* emulates the melodramatic excess characteristic of soap opera, a genre renowned for its heavy editorial construction and aesthetic coding of emotional developments. Additionally the high production values also characteristic of *The Hills* ensure that the realism it portrays within its diegetic components is evocative of the classic realism aesthetic that is common to

cinematic screen fictions. And yet, the status of *The Hills* as a 'reality' TV programme is sustained through its vertical intertextuality (texts which refer explicitly to it). Secondary texts, including gossip magazines and websites, help to circulate the perception that *The Hills* depicts reality. This understanding that the TV docusoap portrays 'real life' carries expectations and assumptions that events will be portrayed truthfully and with limited editorial interference in order for the documented footage to remain as authentically 'real' as is possible. It is this juxtaposition of fiction and reality, and the audience assumptions tied to these concepts, which have led to controversy regarding *The Hills*.

We are reminded of Mittell's observation that generic mixing can "ignite controversies through the juxtaposition of conflicting clusters of generic assumptions" (2004: 163). This is certainly true of *The Hills*, where assumptions about documentary seem at odds with the docusoap's fiction-like degree of editorial manipulation and construction. Controversies have ignited due to the discovery of continuity errors and the revelation that certain narrative events were fabricated on *The Hills*. These issues have caused controversy because such slip-ups and revelations reveal cracks in *The Hills*' façade as a sleek, cinematic, yet authentic 'reality' TV programme. This docusoap's adoption of a classic realist aesthetic, coupled with its paradoxical reputation as a 'reality' TV show, can lead a viewer to believe that she is witnessing a cleverly edited form of observational documentary⁹. Notwithstanding its significant departures from the 'observational' mode in terms of philosophy as well as in narrative structure and aesthetics, *The Hills* takes on the appearance of observationalism, through its careful attempts to cultivate an evident dearth of direct interference by the producers. For although its creators wanted *The Hills* to look like a scripted fictional programme, they equally wanted to deploy some documentary conventions in order to solicit the audience's faith that the docusoap offers a genuine depiction of reality.

⁹ Observational documentary refers to a documentary form that prefers "direct access to [its subjects'] actions and their words, not in a studio environment but in the places where they lived and worked" (Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 65). Observational documentary evokes a level of intimacy beyond that of earlier documentary forms, due to the intentional invisibility of the documentary crew (1997: 67), and the subsequent presentation of close-up footage of individuals in their own milieu (1997: 66) seemingly free from producerial interference (see Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 64-67).

The complete absence of visual or aural references to the production crew is one element of support for the appearance of observationalism in *The Hills*. Another is the lack of any 'camera confessional' or 'video diary' technique as a way to convey cast members' emotions. Instead the sleek visual style of *The Hills*, coupled with the belief the programme actively instils that it is factual, can lead a viewer to determine that producers have captured the actions and emotions of the cast using a detached, seemingly observationalist method, by merely setting up cameras and letting them record the different cast members living their lives naturally. *The Hills'* premise of realism encourages the viewer to believe that the crew has captured this footage organically, and that it is only in the post-production stages that musical underscoring and evocative camera angles are edited together to enhance the meaning of the selected footage, so as to enhance the sense of a fictional aesthetic. However, as this thesis has argued, *The Hills* involves a significant departure from both observational approaches and documentary production more generally. Nonetheless, for viewers this deviation has been most effectively revealed through a succession of controversial incidents all of which have underlined the degree of intervention by the makers that *The Hills* entails.

Evidence of editorial interference surfaced after the episode 'No More Mr Nice Guy' (3:11) originally aired in the US on 22 October 2007. The episode features Lauren going on a first date with Gavin, a male model she meets through a *Teen Vogue* casting. The date with Gavin is one of several attempts by Lauren to find a new boyfriend after her devastating break-up with Jason at the start of Season Two, and to move on from her more recent casual relationship with Brody. Gavin and Lauren go out to dinner and the pair converse amicably. At one point, however, Gavin orders salmon sushi after Lauren has explicitly stated her dislike for salmon. Evidently, this revelation is included to indicate that the evening is not going well. The date is then seen to end relatively early, as Lauren returns to her apartment alone after dinner and calls Brody. Lauren and Brody discuss Lauren's date with Gavin, which she admits had "no sparks". She then flirtatiously invites Brody over for a late-night movie, and the episode ends with Brody driving to Lauren's apartment. One can deduce from the two scenes that Lauren's date with Gavin was not successful and she has reverted back to her casual relationship with Brody.

After this episode aired, viewers noticed a very obvious continuity error between Lauren's date with Gavin and her phone call to Brody. On the date Lauren is wearing red nail polish and her hair is straight. Yet, when she calls Brody – which the audience is led to believe occurs as soon as she gets home – Lauren is no longer wearing nail polish and her hair is curled. The observation sparked discussion on the internet, with some gossip websites¹⁰ questioning the authenticity of *The Hills*' alleged 'reality'. The continuity error revealed that the docusoap's action was manipulated and re-enacted rather than pieced together in anything like an 'observational' manner.

The controversy has been addressed by Lauren herself. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* (Soll, 2007) she attempts to explain the situation:

Basically what they're doing is taking our lives and telling a story. For example, the night [of the nail-polish incident, while on a date with model Gavin], the cameras stopped rolling, and I went out to a club with [Gavin]. I went home and called someone [Brody], and the next day talked about it. [MTV] was like, Okay, well, we need to get that on tape, and since they're trying to tell a story the right way, I basically had to go and call [Brody] again, have the exact same conversation on camera. I mean, it's not lying to anyone, it's telling what really happened, but it's just the way they film reality shows.

Lauren's comments reveal firstly how selective the creators of *The Hills* are when choosing footage to place within the programme's narrative, and secondly how this selection of footage can create a narrative that can significantly depart from lived reality. The audience is unaware that Lauren and Gavin's date continued later into the evening at a night club. In fact, in the interest of building a more dramatic narrative, the audience is arguably led to believe that their date ended early and that Lauren called Brody in order to salvage the rest of her night. Whilst this omission indicates a distinctly 'creative' approach to the editing of events for entertainment purposes, Lauren maintains that the re-enactment of her call to Brody is an attempt to convey 'truth', even if by deceitful means. As Lauren explains, she did in fact call Brody once she got home, although the cameras were not rolling, and the conversation was important in order for viewers to understand upcoming narrative

¹⁰ In case you didn't already know it was fake (2007, October 23). *PerezHilton.com*. Retrieved May 13, 2008, from <http://perez Hilton.com/2007-10-23-in-case-you-didnt-already-know-it-was-fake>.

events. If one believes Lauren's statement, then the re-enactment reveals with clarity and certainty that *The Hills* is not as observational as it attempts to appear. However, Lauren insists this is "not lying" and is a common process in creating 'reality' TV.

Executive producer Adam DiVello reinforces Lauren's statement by affirming that the crew sometimes do pickup shots for continuity and ask cast members to rephrase their questions for the sake of clarity to allow producers to put diegetic conversations into a more effective context (Chan, 2007). However, as DiVello insists, "we never ask them to say anything they weren't already saying on their own. Ultimately, we're trying to produce a show that is entertaining but we in no way affect the reality of the storylines" (Chan, 2007). Despite the docusoap being seen to manufacture its sleek 'observational' appearance, those involved in its construction insist that the actuality of events is not tampered with, and therefore its claims to reality can be sustained. The comments by the cast and crew of *The Hills* suggest that the docusoap's level of editorial interference remains within the perceived boundaries of 'reality' TV construction, however elusive these boundaries may be.

Yet, another controversy regarding *The Hills* reveals that DiVello's claim that the producers "in no way affect the reality of the storylines" (Chan, 2007) is untrue. It has been exposed that events have been staged for the sake of the narrative. Whilst appearing on the talk show *The View* on 18 June 2009, Lauren Conrad revealed that a crucial scene in a fifth season episode was fabricated. This scene centred on a phone call made by Spencer to Lauren, in which Spencer apologises for his behaviour in order to get Lauren to attend Heidi and Spencer's wedding. However, this conversation did not actually take place. This revelation is included in the following extract from Lauren's interview on *The View*,

Elisabeth Hasselbeck: You guys [Heidi and Lauren] were best friends on *The Hills* and Spencer ended up coming between you. There were accusations of a sex tape, rumours that went around. He [Spencer] ended up apologising before their wedding. You ended up going to the wedding. They [Spencer and Heidi] were here on Monday and we asked them about it. We said, 'You [Spencer] apologised to Lauren so things must be okay'. He essentially said, 'Well, I apologised to her because Heidi wanted her at the wedding and I knew that was the only way to get her there'. What are your thoughts on that?

Lauren Conrad: [pauses] Um. I mean... [pauses].

Elisabeth Hasselbeck: Did you feel that it was a sincere apology when it came from him?
Lauren Conrad: To be perfectly honest I wasn't on the other line of that call. That was filmed and I wasn't on the other end. So I didn't even know about it until [afterwards]. So no, I didn't get an apology. He's lying.

Lauren's comments reveal that Spencer's apologetic phone call was staged. In other words, Spencer was filmed pretending to have a telephone conversation with Lauren. Due to the fact that the scene cuts back and forth between Spencer and Lauren as they converse, Lauren's end of the phone call presumably involves her actually talking to someone else about the wedding situation. Although that is unclear, it is apparent that Spencer's apology did not take place in 'real life' and was instead fabricated through an entirely staged conversation and a patchwork of heavily edited footage. This incident proves that DiVello's insistence that the producers of *The Hills* "never ask the cast to say anything they weren't already saying on their own" (Chan, 2007), and that they "in no way affect the reality of the storylines" (Chan, 2007), is not entirely truthful. Spencer's staged apology is an explicit example of the docusoap's producers asking a cast member to say something they were not already saying, and thus to go considerably further than a mere re-enactment of events.

The fictitious phone call reveals that cast members are not only asked to say certain things, but are asked to *pretend* to say things that they would not say in real life. Spencer was not convinced by the show's producers to apologise to Lauren and thus rectify their real-life relationship. Instead he was asked to pretend to apologise in front of the cameras so the crucial apology could be woven into the docusoap's narrative. To the extent that cast members are willing to expose it, this kind of staged event is easily separated from the cast's reality. The producers therefore are not only influencing, but are fabricating the reality of *The Hills'* storyline. To return to Chapter Two's discussion of the fifth season's mid-season finale, Spencer's apology was a catalytic event in the instigation and development toward narrative closure. Teleologically speaking, it was Spencer's seemingly sincere apology to Lauren for his past behaviour that convinced Lauren to attend his wedding to Heidi and reconcile her differences with her former best friend. This reconciliation resolved the conflict that sustained the docusoap throughout several seasons, and allowed Lauren to leave the programme with a sense of narrative closure to her own 'story arc' as the central figure.

Significantly, the revelation that Spencer's critical apology was fabricated for the docusoap indicates a prioritisation of constructing an entertaining, cohesive narrative over authentically depicting actual events. The reconstruction of Lauren's phone call to Brody after her date with Gavin similarly shows this element of editorial interference and construction in order to – as Lauren described it – “take the lives of the cast and tell a story” (Soll, 10 December 2007). This desire to tell an entertaining story, and the subsequent tampering with the actuality of events, complicates the docusoap's claims to reality, rendering them somewhat fraudulent.

***The Hills* and Authenticity**

The Hills' claims to reality are compromised because antithetical messages concerning the show's relationship to 'the real' are circulated through vertical intertextuality. As previously stated, gossip magazines, websites and talk show appearances all combine to give the cast members a presence in the real world. Nevertheless these same secondary texts have also focussed attention on the constructedness of *The Hills*. Lauren's appearance on *The View* positions Lauren Conrad from *The Hills* in the real world, and her discussions about her conflict with Heidi and Spencer prove that the docusoap's drama is 'real'. However, in this same appearance she reveals that aspects of the programme – such as Spencer's phone call – are essentially fiction. A number of conflicting messages and generic assumptions are in operation here. *The Hills* aligns with fictional drama programmes through its use of a classical realist aesthetic and also through the overt characterisation of its cast members. Despite the illusion of fiction that results, the loyal viewer understands, with these secondary texts helping to reinforce this, that *The Hills* depicts actuality. Yet, despite their contribution to the 'reality' credentials of *The Hills*, these same secondary texts occasionally circulate messages that *The Hills* is not as 'real' as it claims to be.

The Hills poses uncomfortable questions about its relationship with 'the real' given this docusoap's coupling of genres that each deliver opposing assumptions about how they should construct and represent 'the real'. This docusoap's

“conflicting clusters of generic assumptions” (Mittell, 2004: 163) justifiably raise questions. How can *The Hills* be considered ‘reality’ when it has been proven to falsify some of its narrative events? Yet, the cast and the conflicts of *The Hills* are real (as the tabloid magazines remind their audiences), so does that mean the docusoap is not wholly fictional? How are we to consider these people – these characters – on *The Hills*? Are they actors or genuine documentary subjects?

Due to its nature as a mixed-genre programme, there are no easy answers to these questions regarding *The Hills*. However, *New York Times* columnist Alessandra Stanley offers a suitable way to categorise the cast of *The Hills* suggesting that they “are not really actors, but neither are they ordinary people exactly; they are a new hybrid of semi-professional personalities who play themselves on camera” (Stanley, December 2 2007: 2.1). They are ‘reality’ TV cast members who have been constructed as characters through the selection, juxtaposition and emphasis of particular traits. Stanley’s notion that the cast are playing themselves on camera is somewhat necessary given the revelations that the events on *The Hills* are not an accurate depiction of the cast members’ lived experience. Lauren Conrad from *The Hills* exists in real-life but her lived reality differs significantly from the story that the docusoap is telling. Hence, it can be argued that *The Hills*’ depiction of these people’s lives is neither as genuine nor as complete as it attempts to appear.

Despite the docusoap focusing so intently on the personal lives of its subjects, certain aspects of the cast’s lives are deliberately omitted from the programme. Lauren, for example, did not want her current boyfriend, Kyle Howard, to appear on the docusoap, stating, “There’s very little that I’m able to keep to myself through the show and through media, so if there’s anything I can, I try to”.¹¹ It is for this reason that the narrative thread of Lauren’s love life – a topic that was previously a central component of the docusoap’s diegesis – tapers off completely in the fourth season. Audrina has shared similar sentiments about keeping aspects of her life off camera, “I do keep some of my private life private. ... I have my show life and I have my private life where I hang out with my friends who don’t want to be anywhere near

¹¹ Lauren cited in ‘Conrad climbs beyond ‘Hills’ (2008, November 10.). *USA Today*.

The Hills or have anything to do with it" (McWhirter, 2009: 28). However, the idea that cast members consciously conceal elements of their private lives from a docusoap which purports to offer an all-encompassing examination of these same lives seems highly contradictory.

Another inconsistency with *The Hills*' claims to 'reality' is that its diegesis does not acknowledge the fame and celebrity that cast members have acquired due to their involvement in this successful docusoap. In this sense, *The Hills* differs from reality TV shows like *Idol*, in which this notoriety is acknowledged, usually to provide additional irrefutable evidence of a participant's transformation in the direction of celebrity. *The Hills*' approach also differs from that of American docusoaps which profile established celebrity figures. Such docusoaps, despite focusing on the domesticity of these people, still acknowledge the public appearances and other commitments that are important in maintaining their celebrity status.

Given the above distinctions of *The Hills*' approach, its viewers never witness a cast member attending a photo shoot for one of the many magazine covers on which they have appeared, nor might they see the taping of a late-night talk show appearance. Moreover, *The Hills* never acknowledges the existence of the ever-present paparazzi who follow the cast during filming sessions. This is a conscious decision by the docusoap's creators. As *Hills* executive producer Liz Gateley observes, "We give [our audience] the access that they're not getting in the tabloids" (Stack, Armstrong, and Soll, 2008). *The Hills*' focus on its subjects' private problems and conflicts has not changed since the first season of the docusoap when the audience was first introduced to these legitimately 'unknown' young adults. The fact that this focus has been diligently maintained as these same individuals have achieved fame and notoriety due to the publicity surrounding the programme ensures that a significant aspect of their lived experiences – specifically their status as 'celebrated' public figures – is consciously omitted from the programme. Diegetically, the docusoap exclusively depicts Lauren and her friends performing the *ordinary* aspects of their lives – the office jobs, the bickering arguments and the tumultuous relationships – whilst omitting the *extraordinary* aspects that have been generated from their involvement on a television programme.

This failure to acknowledge the celebrity status of *Hills* cast members poses problems for the show's narrative in the context of the extra-diegetic input of secondary texts. Exemplifying the potential fallout is the example of Lauren's vague reference to the sex tape rumours ending up 'on the internet' (3:1) which ignored the widespread international interest in and circulation of the rumour generated by Lauren's celebrity status. The story was covered by celebrity gossip blogs¹² and discussed by cast members in various radio interviews.¹³ A discussion of this detail on *The Hills* would have required an acknowledgement of the cast members' celebrity, which would directly undermine the 'ordinariness' with which these same people are portrayed in the programme. The decision not to include the cast's newfound celebrity within the diegesis of *The Hills* underlines that this programme stops short of self-reflexivity, and instead follows a complicated path trying to be reactive to public discussions of the cast's lives, yet trying to ensure that such diegetic conversations remain purely at the level of the 'personal'. This representation allows the cast to maintain their images as 'girl-next-door' figures, which is an important aspect of the docusoap's appeal¹⁴.

Despite these omissions in the constructed 'reality' of *The Hills*, evidence of falsification, and its efforts to emulate fictional drama, the docusoap evidently still manages to sustain audience perceptions of its realism. As discussed, the viewer's understanding of *The Hills*' authenticity can be established through vertical intertextuality. But this understanding can be further authenticated by the rare moments when *The Hills* reverts back to using documentary conventions. Most of *The Hills*' footage is filmed during controlled, sit-down conversations between cast members from which a 'classic realist' aesthetic is easily constructed through re-enactments and careful editing between stationary cameras. However, at times the action is less predictable, and the challenges and limitations of a docusoap crew filming action as it occurs 'on the wing' becomes apparent.

¹² Mischalova. (2007, June 29). Lauren Conrad Sex Tape Rumors Heat Up. Blog posted to *The Hollywood Gossip* <http://www.thehollywoodgossip.com/2007/04/lauren-conrad-sex-tape-rumors-heat-up/>

¹³ Boehm, K. (2007). Jason Wahler: Spencer & Heidi 'Need to Shut Up'. *People*, (Wednesday September 05, 2007 03:50 PM EDT). Retrieved from <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20054821,00.html>

¹⁴ Chapter Four will look more closely at the portrayal of *The Hills* cast and the reasons behind this.

An example of *The Hills* reverting to the use of documentary realism occurs in the pivotal scene of the third season premiere episode (3:1) when Lauren and Heidi encounter each other at Les Deux nightclub. At one point in the night Lauren and Audrina escape to the club bathroom to talk about Heidi, who has just arrived at the club. As the camera is not permitted into the bathroom, the viewer is offered only an outside shot of the bathroom door, with subtitles being used to support and retain narrative focus on Lauren and Audrina's discussion, this still audible due to the microphones they are wearing. The camera's limitations here clearly signal the docusoap's status as a documentary. In TV fictions, by contrast, the camera is permitted everywhere. Accordingly, this form of inaccessibility is largely unique to documentary¹⁵, reminding us of the restrictions facing programmes that rely on the capture of unplanned actuality footage.

A documentary aesthetic continues in this scene, as Heidi confronts Lauren in the courtyard of the nightclub and the girls argue heatedly over the sex tape rumour. Unusually, their movements in this scene are notably unpredictable. An unsteady shoulder-mounted camera attempts to follow Lauren as she spontaneously moves back and forth between the doorway of the club, continually rebutting Heidi's claims of innocence. The courtyard is dimly lit, and contrasts harshly with the well-lit interior of the club that can be seen behind Lauren. The loud background noise of other club-goers is clearly audible and occasionally muffles Lauren and Heidi's comments, which, to assist viewers, are supported by subtitles. The scene then eases back into a classic realist aesthetic as Heidi and Spencer are seen to drive away from the club, and mid-shots of Heidi's despondent expression are accompanied by a non-diegetic musical score. The melancholic strumming of an acoustic guitar and the lyrics of 'This is Goodbye' by Honestly (It's much too late to be sorry for it all/You've been hanging on for too long/Don't you know that everything is not alright/This is

¹⁵ Such indicators of documentary's inaccessibility are often used in comedy verité forms in order to align a fictional text with a documentary aesthetic. This *Hills* scene is reminiscent of the approach often employed by *The Office* to evoke the authenticity of the documentary form it parodies. A specific example from *The Office*, is the moment when the character Tim removes his lapel microphone when entering a private meeting room with Dawn so that his private attempt to ask her out can neither be seen nor heard by the fictional documentary crew. See Ben Walters' (2005: 23-26; 68-69) for further discussion on the visual impediments of the docusoap camera.

goodbye) works to blatantly underscore the emotions apparently being felt between Lauren and Heidi as former best friends.

This brief moment of documentary realism, before the docusoap returns to its predominant aesthetic of classic realism, is a rare textual signifier of the status of *The Hills* as a 'reality' TV programme. Confrontational encounters like this, which commonly occur in nightclubs, are the moments of unpredictable, real-life drama that the docusoap savours and uses to support its 'reality' claims as well as to fuel its overarching narrative. Highlighting their narrative importance, Jane Roscoe (2001: 14) underlines that these "so-called moments of authenticity" are "moments when we think we see the real person..." These moments occur in *The Hills* and – although rare – are important in conveying the docusoap's linkages with 'the real'. Roscoe argues that these moments of authenticity provide a reassuring and satisfying experience for the viewer (ibid.). In a docusoap so sophisticated in its appearance, within which a succession of heavily-directed diegetic conversations are narratively dominant, these unexpected moments of action certainly are reassuring indicators of *The Hills*' 'reality'.

Furthermore, *The Hills* is able to sustain audience perceptions of realism, despite a raft of evidence to the contrary, because of the viewer's desire to believe it is real. As Kilborn and Izod (1997: 40) argue:

A significant part of our sense of a programme's realism derives from the feeling of complicity to which that gives rise. And when we add our own eagerness to accept the photographic image as the guarantor of its authenticity, we can see that documentary makers are helped in persuading us of their programmes' realism by our desires as viewers.

One can appreciate therefore, how, despite the myriad of issues which actively denounce the docusoap's 'reality' claims, a loyal viewer of *The Hills* is positioned to want to believe that the docusoap is 'real'. One incentive for this is the additional entertainment value that is derived from the understanding that conflicts on *The Hills* are, to some degree, authentic.

Conclusion

Any attempt to gauge how 'real' or 'fake' *The Hills* is, relies on oversimplified concepts of documentary connoting truth and drama connoting fiction. As a mixed-genre programme, it is best to consider *The Hills* as a docusoap that delivers conflicting generic assumptions, to which there are no easy answers or reconciliations. It is through generic verisimilitude that viewers are able to determine a programme's relationship to 'the real'. It is thus through their use of a documentary aesthetic that 'reality' TV forms are able to foster and manipulate audience assumptions about their authenticity. *The Hills*, however, presents a more complex mix of generic assumptions by purposefully emulating the classic realism aesthetic of TV drama in an effort to make the show look like fiction. The generic assumptions that viewers can draw due to *The Hills*' alignment with TV fiction through its horizontal intertextuality are then counteracted by the extra-diegetic input of secondary texts. Constant references to *The Hills* from sources located in the ostensible 'real world' help to give its realist claims some credibility.

Accordingly, an appreciation of *The Hills*' 'real world' status requires an engagement with secondary texts. While these sources authenticate the docusoap's 'real world' status they also interrogate its truth claims. This creates a conflicting dialogue that surrounds the programme and often results in controversial revelations of narrative fabrication. The show's relationship with secondary texts also illustrates the limited portrayal of the cast's lives within the diegesis of the docusoap. *The Hills* does not actually document the private lives of its characters as wholly as it purports to do, nor does it acknowledge their experiences as 'reality' TV celebrities. Instead, the docusoap presents the staged and determinedly 'personal' reality of Lauren and her cohort. This depiction is somewhat questionable in that these people do interact with each other, but it is a forced and manipulated reality in that their interactions largely occur purely for the sake of constructing the show's narrative. Accordingly, *The Hills* portrays a version of the cast's lives in which the *ordinariness* of their interpersonal conflicts is exaggerated whilst the *extraordinariness* of their celebrity is deliberately omitted. Further, these 'ordinary moments' are sometimes fabricated for added narrative cohesion and entertainment value. The resulting portrayal of ostensible 'normalcy' results in a compelling, seemingly authentic narrative.

Brief moments of documentary realism on *The Hills* add further to the perception of its 'real world' status. Still, *The Hills'* claims to reality are rendered somewhat fraudulent due to the evident continuity errors and the additional narrative fabrications that have been exposed within secondary texts. Again, however, the symbiotic relationship between *The Hills* and its surrounding texts plays a pivotal role in generating an all-encompassing hyper-diegetic appeal that augments the consumption and enjoyment of the show itself. *The Hills* combines aspects of fictional drama and documentary realism for the purpose of entertainment, and this combination proves to be conflicting and confusing when interrogated. At face value, this unique blend combines the most compelling aspects of the competing television forms that are involved, in an attempt to satisfy the audience's desire for new forms of television entertainment.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Appeals of *The Hills* for both Producer and Consumer

Introduction

This chapter begins by exploring the context of MTV, as both a basic cable channel and a global television network, in the evolving landscape of American commercial television. Of particular importance is the establishment and maintenance of MTV's identifiable 'youth-oriented' brand amidst an increasing proliferation of cable television channels, an environment which has necessitated a niche demographic approach to channel identity and programming. By explaining the context in which *The Hills* has emerged, the 'flagship' function that the docusoap performs for MTV becomes clear. The chapter then details the specific facets contributing to the popularity of *The Hills* amongst audiences, including the ways in which its adoption of a soap opera narrative structure fosters a loyal fan-base of predominantly young, female viewers, and the ability of the docusoap's reality credentials to inject an alluring element of emotional voyeurism into the programme. It is then discussed how this status of *The Hills* as a mixed-genre programme is commercially beneficial to MTV and its corporate affiliates. The docusoap's reality credentials allows for a powerful, embedded form of marketing that supports MTV's brand of youthful 'cool', which in turn signals a response to current trends in the way the network's youth demographic is consuming media.

MTV and Post-Fordist Television

Launched in 1981, MTV emerged during fundamental changes in the televisual landscape of the United States. As Dunleavy (2009: 133) explains, beginning in the 1970s, and gaining momentum in the 1980s, "American television moved from an era of 'scarcity' to one of multi-channel 'availability'". In large part, this shift was due to media deregulation, to the increasing concentration in global media ownership that this stimulated, and to advances in transmission and viewing technologies. Such changes generated increasing competition in the inherently commercial climate of American television. The proliferation of cable and additional terrestrial channels broke down the traditional dominance of the 'Big Three' networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) which had hitherto enjoyed monopolistic control over American television

industries, programmes, advertisers and, importantly, over what could be offered to audiences (ibid.). No longer were American television viewers split relatively evenly into three large masses, as was the case in the era of 'scarcity'. Instead, audiences were increasingly disseminated across the number of channels offered by cable television, which, by 1995, had "reached an estimated 66.8 per cent of American homes and 64 million subscribers" (Hilmes, cited in Dunleavy, 2009: 137).

The proliferation of American cable channels saw television networks and advertisers adjust the way they considered viewers as consumers. Marketing strategies moved from perceiving audiences as large masses (the bigger the better) to more carefully considered 'quality' niches. Targeting such 'niche' audiences allowed for a more reliable connection between advertisers and their intended consumers. 'Quality' viewers, in this instance, denoted the lucrative 18-to-49-year-old demographic as an audience which involved higher incomes. The niche nature of the proliferating cable market ensured that the benefits of this 'quality' approach could also be derived from the way in which certain viewers could be drawn to specific-interest programming, and thus directly solicited by advertisers of specific consumer items, such was the case for viewers of cooking or fishing shows (Reeves, Rogers and Epstein, 2007: 94). Partly in response to the niche-audience approach of newer cable channels, broadcast networks began to consider their programming in such 'demographic' terms, with content being developed and selected with regard to "desirable audience segments in terms of gender, occupation, disposable income, and lifestyle" (Dunleavy, 2009: 136). Meanwhile, cable networks could build reputations as caterers to specific audience niches by devoting entire channels to these audiences.

This shift from 'scarcity' to 'availability' in America ushered in a post-Fordist era of commercial television. The standardised mass-marketing and mass-consumption of the classic network era gave way to segmented and specialised marketing strategies. As Chris Barker (1997: 162) explains, "the transformation to post-Fordism involves the use of new technology to enable economic small-batch production and customisation of consumer goods which stresses niche marketing

and life-styling more than mass-based advertising”. Basic cable channels were at the forefront of post-Fordist thinking in the commercial American television industry throughout the 1980s and 1990s. As Reeves, Rogers and Epstein (2007: 94) explain, owners of television networks require programmes to generate revenue. Basic cable channels generate revenue through both subscription service fees and commercial breaks amidst their programmed content (ibid.). This approach differs from advertiser-funded broadcast television, as well as premium cable services, which rely solely on viewer-subscription fees. This dual-revenue approach allows basic cable to cater to the interests of both niche audiences and their advertisers. They can establish channel identities through selective programming, which attracts specific audience segments that are confident such channels are relevant to their interests. Accordingly, these special-interest channels provide advertisers with reliable avenues through which to access their target consumers. This “logic of niche-marketing” (Reeves, Rogers and Epstein, 2007: 87) performed by basic cable networks is the “economic logic of post-Fordism” (ibid.).

As a basic cable channel, MTV is an exemplar of the shift to post-Fordism in the American television industry. Launching in 1981, the MTV network quickly established its reputation as the televisual home for 12- to 34-year olds. As the network’s schedule has shifted from its initial music video focus to its more recent devotion to reality-based programming, MTV continues to reflect, manufacture and promote current trends in youth culture in areas including music, fashion, technology, television and film. As a commercial entity, MTV has a secure hold on the highly coveted youth demographic. The network has positioned itself as the avenue through which advertisers flock to reach such a mass audience who are considered lucrative both for their youthful impressionability and their disposable income.

Although the idea of a ‘youth market’ first emerged in the 1950s, the concept has boomed during the post-Fordist era of MTV due to “a combination of technological development and business deregulation” (Osgerby, 2004: 47). The targeting of a youth demographic by MTV is emblematic of a post-Fordist economic approach, in which “style, image and marketing practice” are seen as important factors “as

businesses strive to invest their products with values and meanings that will appeal to buyers associated with specific 'lifestyles' and market 'niches' (Murray, 1989: 43). Since its conception MTV has been performing extensive market research to ensure its appeal to the elusive youth market (see Jhally, 1987: 94; Osgerby, 2004: 51). Bill Osgerby (2004: 51–52) remarks on the “sophisticated methods of analysis” that have been “deployed to monitor the attitudes and behaviour of young consumers, allowing products and brands to be pitched in just the right way to win their allegiance”. One discovery that market research has revealed about this demographic has been that youth increasingly “value themselves by experiences, not labels, and don’t want to be walking billboards” (Osgerby, 2004: 52). This kind of demographic mindset suits MTV’s strategies as a commercial television network, because it is in a position to surreptitiously market a lifestyle of ‘youthful cool’ through its programmed content.

Whilst the target audience of MTV may be considered ‘niche’ due to its limited age range, the network has built a following of young viewers on a global scale. Owned by the Viacom media conglomerate, MTV is the world’s most widely distributed television network, screening in over 166 countries and territories (Smith, 2005: 89). A local manifestation of the global MTV network will often incorporate elements of an importing nation’s culture, examples being its screening of music videos from local artists and chart countdown programmes fronted by local video-jockeys (or ‘VJs’). However, the majority of the channel’s programmed content and advertising material originates from the United States, promoting “Western, capitalist, middle-class values and ideologies” (Wee, 2004: 96) and reflecting “industry-oriented values that emphasise capitalism and consumerism” (ibid.). The global dissemination of the MTV Network spread in tandem with the growth of US-based multinational corporations, forging commercial partnerships that benefit the global branding motivations of both the cable network and corporate advertisers.

Particularly beneficial to MTV’s commercial brand as a global purveyor of youth culture is the ability for youth-associated products to transcend cultural boundaries. Differences in “culture, language, taste, media and regulations” (Barker, 1997: 158) makes the advertising of brands on a global scale difficult to achieve. However,

successful cases of more homogenised global marketing strategies have proven to be consumer products commonly ascribed to youth, such as food, drink, and clothing (ibid.). This, in part, explains the success of MTV's corporate partnerships with global corporations including McDonalds, Burger King, CocaCola, Pepsi, Nike, Levi's, Phat Farm, and other clothing labels (see Barker, 1997: 157; Sowards, 2003: 231-2). Consumer items from corporations like these are screened in the commercial breaks between MTV programmes and also appear as 'product placements' within music videos, which themselves act as advertisements for multinational record labels. By encouraging both viewership of the network and the consumption of affiliated commercial items, this widely available cable network positions itself at the centre of youth culture. In doing so, MTV fosters a global teen audience who are unified through the consumption of products touted as emblems of a youthful 'cool' lifestyle, at the commercial benefit of the network and its affiliated global corporations.

Through the content it broadcasts, MTV both reflects and promotes a Westernised, commodified version of youth culture for the network's own commercial gain. In this sense, the cable network blurs the boundaries between 'advertising' and 'culture' in what has been described as 'promotional culture' (Wernick cited in Barker, 1997: 161). Barker (1997: 181) argues that television is "central to the production and reproduction of a postmodern 'promo-culture' centred on the use of visual imagery to create value-added brands or commodity signs". The 24-hour-a-day bombardment of images emanating from MTV has facilitated the network's central status within the commodified culture of the younger generation. Viewers are constantly presented with visual representations of a desirable lifestyle; one portrayed as attainable through the consumption of associated, advertised goods and services. These advertised products are granted an exchange-value that supersedes the tangibility of the object, with such objects promising the symbolic value of initiation into the lifestyle brand of 'American glamour' (Chalaby, 2003: 465) as perpetuated through the MTV network.

The ability for programmes to support and build a cable network's brand is essential in this highly-competitive era of commercial American television. The prioritisation of music videos in its early years cemented MTV's brand of youthful 'cool'. The network's more recent prioritisation of reality television programmes has

helped to underscore the presence of MTV in the increasingly competitive current television environment in which cable channels compete against each other as well as with the internet in vying for the attention of viewers. The unprecedented cinematic aesthetic of *The Hills*, as a docusoap, allows it to perform a 'flagship' role for MTV. On broadcast networks this role has often been the preserve of dramas and sitcoms which are designed or purchased to reflect a channel's core brand and draw in large audience numbers (Dunleavy, 2009: 29). *The Hills* performs this flagship role for MTV through the youth-centred and glamorous portrayal of its cast and setting, which reflects and serves the network's Western, middle-class capitalist ideology. Whilst the docusoap signals a marked departure from the cable network's initial music video-laden schedules, *The Hills* allows MTV to promote its commercial youth brand through a compelling blend of the appeals of both reality TV and television drama.

A Feminine Appeal

The docusoap entails an alluring blend of fictional and factional elements. The previous chapters have explored this mix, specifically the entertainment enhancement granted to *The Hills* due to its adoption of soap opera narrative techniques. The docusoap's use of certain 'fictional' strategies fosters audience loyalty to *The Hills*, and thus to the MTV Network. The narrative structure of and characterisations within *The Hills* are pivotal contributors to this programme's popularity with audiences. The serial narrative structure of this docusoap encourages sustained audience engagement. The prolonged interweaving of cast relationships on *The Hills* develops a complex backstory, a fulsome understanding of which is only granted to loyal viewers. Just like the soap opera, from which *The Hills* borrows its serial narrative structure among other elements, viewers can become 'experienced' readers of the docusoap's overarching narrative. They can draw on their knowledge of its history to enhance their understanding of particular narrative events and this dense plotting can allow such 'fans' to get to know Lauren and her cohort and cultivate a vested interest in their personal developments as they unfold on screen (see Harrington and Bielby, 1995: 14).

Further adding to the soap-like appeal of *The Hills* is the way in which its factual cast members undergo a fiction-like characterisation for the sake of the docusoap's narrative. The performance of contrasting character roles – such as the virtuous Lauren versus 'the bastard' Spencer (Geraghty, 1991: 102–104) – allows for the generation and sustaining of narrative conflict, which is integral for the continuation of plot in a serial narrative and has evidently enhanced the popularity of *The Hills*. Ratings for the docusoap soared when the narrative of *The Hills* most closely resembled a crisis of conflict between 'good' (Lauren) and 'evil' (Spencer). The second season finale – a climatic point in Spencer and Lauren's struggle over Heidi which culminates in Heidi moving in with Spencer – was "watched by 2.7 million viewers making it MTV's highest rated series" (Armstrong, 2007: 36). These ratings were then eclipsed by the third season premiere when 4.8 million viewers tuned in (Weiss, 2008) to see the repercussions of Heidi choosing to join Spencer 'on the dark side' and the hostility this decision caused between Heidi and Lauren¹⁶. The allure of this ongoing narrative conflict, which was sustained until Lauren left the show (5:10), was assisted by the overt characterisation of *The Hills* cast members. The moral chasm that exists between Spencer and Lauren allowed for a compelling conflict to fuel the narrative of *The Hills*. Spencer's success in extracting Heidi from the community provided an elevated version of the show's existing conflict for subsequent seasons, as it then pitted two former-best-friends against each other. The docusoap's ability to maintain this narrative conflict saw ratings for the third season average 3.9 million viewers, with those for the season finale episode exceeding even the 'numbers' won by the 'larger' broadcast networks in the coveted 12-to-34 demographic (Stack, Armstrong and Soll, 2008).

The ability of *The Hills* to produce conflict through the characterisation of its cast members, and sustain this conflict through its serialised narrative structure, has proved phenomenally popular. As is also true of audience loyalty patterns for continuing soap opera, the way in which Lauren and Heidi's conflict plays out over several seasons is especially alluring for loyal viewers. For those who have come to 'know' the characters and have witnessed Lauren and Heidi together in the much

¹⁶ The audience's anticipation for the third season premiere was undoubtedly heightened by the way secondary texts spread news and rumour over the increased animosity between Lauren and Heidi during the seasonal break in filming, namely, gossip surrounding the 'sex tape rumour'. The season three premiere provided viewers with the first chance to witness the cast interact since the rumour surfaced. The increased ratings reflect this piqued viewer interest.

happier time of season one, the bitter rivalry between these two former-best-friends holds much narrative and emotional significance, as fans can track the sad trajectory of this pair's diminishing relationship. The demise of Lauren and Heidi's friendship is just one example of the many narrative threads about the lives of *Hills* cast members which develop over the course of several seasons and work to sustain audience interest over an extended period of time. This ability of the docusoap's serial narrative serves MTV's commercial objectives to optimum effect. *The Hills* succeeds "in fostering loyal and habitual patterns of viewing" (Dunleavy, 2009: 130) amongst its young target demographic, doing so more effectively than MTV's previous music-video-dominated schedules. The reliability of this docusoap in luring a lucrative youth demographic during each weekly instalment of its ongoing narrative in turn attracts advertisers who seek a reliable platform from which to expose these viable consumers to their commercial products. In this regard, *The Hills* performs a commercial function for MTV that is akin to the role that continuing soap operas have traditionally played for broadcast networks.

Within MTV's youth demographic, *The Hills* more overtly targets a female audience. The attempts of *The Hills* to appeal to young women, particularly those who are heterosexual, white, and middle-class, is reflected in the casting of the docusoap's core characters and content. The premise of *The Hills* centres on strong young women and details their personal and professional pursuits in Hollywood. Men appear as peripheral characters whom primarily perform supporting roles in the lives of these women, namely as love interests or bosses. The content of the docusoap is arguably skewed towards feminine interests. In any given episode, the viewer witnesses Lauren, Heidi, Audrina and Whitney work within the realms of fashion and event promotion, go on dates with men, go clubbing with girlfriends, and gossip with each other about these events. The viewership of *The Hills* has indeed supported the female-centric premise and content of this show. For example, of the 3.7 million viewers who watched the season three finale, half of these were women between the ages of 18 and 34, with those under the age of 18 making up an additional 17 percent (Leppert and Wilson, 2008). Accordingly, MTV is evidently succeeding in its attempts to attract a young female audience with the premise of *The Hills*, and this programme offers further gratifications to this gendered demographic through its adoption of soap opera conventions.

The close resemblance of *The Hills* to soap opera in regards to its narrative form and content encourages comparisons between this docusoap and soap opera's reputation as a feminine genre. Harrington and Bielby (1995: 15) describe how soap operas "have long been considered part of "women's fiction", which includes romance novels and melodramatic films", despite the fact that 20 to 30 percent of the soap audience has been male for an extensive period of time (ibid.). Harrington and Bielby argue that soap's "gendered typecasting" is largely due to the genre's narrative structure and conventions being "characterised as feminine and especially resonat[ing] with the experiences of female viewers" (ibid.). Whilst ascribing gendered characteristics to generic conventions is problematic, assessing the argument that certain soap conventions are inherently feminine can help to shed light on why *The Hills*, through its adoption of soap attributes, is similarly skewed towards the female audience it has proven to attract.

The Hills, and the influences upon it of such recent female-oriented series such as *Sex and the City*, owe credit to the way in which soap opera has put women "at the forefront unlike any other genre" (Geraghty, 1991: 50). Christine Geraghty claims that, unlike thrillers and crime stories, soap opera is one genre that has historically presented women as thorough, fully-developed human beings (ibid.). Similarly, the centrality of women on *The Hills* allows female viewers to recognise women much like themselves on screen. The depiction of Lauren Conrad's life within this docusoap is both enticing and relevant to the imagined female viewer watching at home. Viewers witness the choices Lauren makes as a young woman balancing her work and social commitments, as well as the joy and sorrow she experiences in her interpersonal relationships. Like soap operas do, *The Hills* places women in positions of importance and significance, a facet with demonstrated appeal to female viewers. Lauren and the other female lead cast members not only "take action" (Geraghty, 1991: 50) but they also invite viewers to accompany them through this process (ibid.), which can foster identification and solidarity amongst the docusoap's predominantly female viewership.

Beyond the gender of the show's core cast, further conventions of this docusoap have been attributed to principally feminine traits. For one, the status of docusoap as

a “deeply conversationalised documentary form” (Dovey, 2000: 138) allows it to perform the same ‘feminine’ functions of emphasising verbal interactions and rehearsing the handling of personal relationships that have been ascribed to soap opera (Geraghty, 1991: 43). Like soaps, the majority of a *Hills* episode consists of the core female characters having “prolonged, involved, intensely emotional discussions with each other” (Modleski, 1983: 68). Some have argued that this intense verbalisation of feelings and discussion of personal problems particularly appeals to female viewers because the intimacy of “the sharing of personal and emotional information, the telling of secrets” (Harrington and Bielby, 1995: 16) is considered a particularly feminine trait (ibid.). Such intimate disclosures amongst its female cast further positions *The Hills* as a space for female bonding. The act of women talking together and the devotion of the docusoap’s narrative to female friendships continues the soap tradition of normalising such depictions on television, and reflecting the female viewer’s own experiences.

The Hills further engages with female viewers by the way in which it trains and prepares its audience for their own interpersonal experiences. Geraghty claims that with their narrative emphasis on verbal disclosure soap operas “rehearse to their female audience the process of handling personal relationships” (1991: 43). The intimate portrayal of the conversations that the *Hills* cast continually conduct – these usually taking place on apartment couches or over restaurant meals – invites the female viewer in particular to feel involved in these moments of confession and to identify their resemblance to her own experiences. Suspicions about the motives of untrustworthy friends, debating the pros and cons of new work opportunities, and the details of recent romantic dates are all familiar conversation topics for the imagined *Hills* audience.

The viewer’s initiation into, and recognition of, such intimate confiding moments allows her to personally assess and read a cast member’s feelings. The consistent use of close-up camera techniques, which *The Hills* too adopts from soap opera, further requires the viewer to use her ability to ‘read’ other people and be “sensitive to their (unspoken) feelings at any given moment” (Modleski, 1983: 70). *The Hills* relies on one’s ability to read these meaningful, lingering glances for the sake of full narrative understanding due to the docusoap’s abandonment of other modes of confession

(see Chapter Two). The reading of such close-ups to gauge vital emotion and feeling has been attributed to the “feminine ability to understand the gap between what is meant and what is said” (Fiske, 1987: 183). *The Hills* utilises this gendered convention to draw female viewers in and call on their ability to pick up on subtle nuances to achieve a skilled, satisfying understanding of how the cast is feeling. In this regard, *The Hills* offers its female viewers the same “pleasures of recognition” (Geraghty, 1991: 47) that soap opera does. The “endless analysis of emotional dilemmas” (ibid.) undertaken in soap reflects as well as rehearses the viewers’ own experiences regarding interpersonal conversations and confessions.

Whilst *The Hills* adopts many of soap opera’s gendered characteristics, the docusoap’s appeal to female viewers differs from ‘traditional’ soap opera in several distinct ways. Soap opera’s traditional daytime scheduling position has targeted housewives and stay-at-home mothers. As such, academic literature on soap’s femininity focuses on how the genre’s emphasis on emotional conflicts works to reassure wives and mothers about the difficulties of managing the family household (Geraghty, 1991: 44; Modleski, 1982: 92). Moreover, the fragmentation of the daytime soap narrative has been attributed to the need of this target audience to divide its attention between several household tasks (Geraghty, 1991: 43; Modleski, 1982: 102). Given its primetime position on MTV, *The Hills* operates differently in order to appeal to a younger demographic. The docusoap’s narrative has a quicker pace than daytime soaps in order to reflect its primetime status. The fragmented, flexi-narrative structure of *The Hills* operates not to accommodate the distracted attention of housewives, but instead to reflect the short attention span and multi-tasking tendencies of its younger demographic. Rather than reassuring housewives over domestic crises, *The Hills* reassures the concerns of a younger female audience. Both the cast and the narrative of *The Hills* reflects and rehearses the experiences of the 14-to-34 year old female viewers that ratings data suggests are watching at home. The catty backstabbing between female friends, the perils of dating and the pressures of entering the workforce are all put on hyperbolic display here. *The Hills* can therefore be considered a new ‘soap’ for a new generation. The docusoap continues the normalisation and prioritisation of female interaction, whilst reflecting the social concerns of the modern young women MTV targets, who seek professional as well as personal success. The cast and their aspirations are just one avenue

through which *The Hills* emulates the appeals of soap opera genre in its attempt to attract and hold the young female viewers of MTV.

The Input of 'Reality' TV

Through the generic mix characteristic of docusoap, *The Hills* blends the appeals of soap opera with those of reality TV. Rather than viewing the dramatic performances of television fiction, 'reality' TV invites the viewer to witness the private and unscripted actions of 'real' people (Deery, 2004:6). The proliferation of popular factual programming in the 1990s was borne out of the combined forces of tabloid journalism, documentary television, and popular entertainment (Hill, 2005: 24). 'Reality' TV provided "cheap, often locally made, factual programming which is attractive to general (and niche) audiences" (ibid.). These same attributes proved economically beneficial in an era of "increased commercialisation and deregulation within the media industries" (ibid.). In the United States, 'reality' TV forms also proved adept in attracting younger adult and potentially lucrative demographics, in marked contrast with the appeals to lower-income earning, older viewers that was the tendency of British-produced reality TV programmes (Hill, 2005: 26). Fox spearheaded the popularisation of 'reality' TV in the United States in the late 80s, which, being a new terrestrial network, focused on targeting previously under-served audience factions including African-American viewers and youth (Dunleavy, 2009: 137). In the United States therefore, the new meta-genre of 'reality' TV resonated most strongly with this young generation of viewers. Underlining the tendency for American 'reality' TV formats to be pioneered by newer rather than established older networks was that MTV, through *The Real World*, used this to attract its target youth audience as early as 1992. As the 1990s progressed, 'reality' TV soared to become the main staple of primetime programming, which was "testament to the mass appeal of entertainment stories about real people caught on camera" (Hill, 2005: 39). MTV's prioritisation of 'reality' TV shows on its schedules, as exemplified by the 'flagship' position and role of *The Hills*, underscores its own acknowledgement of the appeals of actuality footage.

Due to the real-life and real-world aspects of 'reality' TV, one of the main audience appeals commonly attributed to 'reality' TV is voyeurism. Viewers are able

to anonymously watch very intimate moments in the lives of strangers. Several academics, however, have questioned whether voyeurism is an appropriate term to describe an audience's observation of 'reality' TV participants. This process of interaction concerning 'reality' TV arguably differs from 'classic voyeurism' because cast members know they are being watched and such viewing is largely not for the sake of sexual gratification (Deery, 2004:6; Nabi et al, 2003: 327). In addition, the type of voyeurism that 'reality' TV offers is commonly diffused over a group of human subjects rather than involving a focused gaze on a particular person, being "based more upon [the] knowledge of others' secrets than upon visual pleasure" (Middleton, 2001: 60). This audience appeal of 'reality' TV is thus a type of "emotional voyeurism" (Flitterman-Lewis cited in Middleton, 2001: 62). This involves a viewer's pleasure being derived from her ability to acquire an intimate knowledge of a participant's emotional relationships whilst remaining anonymous and unaccountable.

The Hills, as a docusoap, is able to satiate one's interest in emotional voyeurism due to its blend of 'reality' allure and soap-like emotional intensity. The prolonged telling of Lauren and others' lives through a serialised narrative allows viewers to acquire a detailed knowledge of the cast's personal experiences and develop a vested interest in the continuation of their interactions and relationships. The docusoap's frequent use of close-up camera shots to explicitly convey the feelings of its cast contributes to the emotional voyeurism that the show offers. *The Hills* deals with the deeply personal, as exemplified by the betrayal between friends and the blossoming of new love. The docusoap's demonstration of such intimate moments produces a paradoxical allure for a (predominantly) young female audience, due to its facets of melodramatic intensity and to the relevance of its aspirational narrative to this group in particular. Like Lauren, many young women have experienced the 'low' of being betrayed by a best friend, or the 'high' of a particularly fun night out with good friends. However, unlike Lauren, these experiences do not involve embarrassing rumours about themselves being brandished on entertainment news programmes and gossip blogs, nor do they usually involve an impromptu flight, by private jet, to Las Vegas or Hawaii for a fun weekend away. As *The Hills* purports to depict 'real life', the docusoap offers viewers the gratification of an anonymous observation of the cast's lives. One can vicariously experience the pleasures of Lauren's privileged lifestyle, yet can also empathise and revel in the gossip, when things do not go her

way. Accordingly, this docusoap displays an enhanced version of everyday life for its core cast and even though these are exceptional circumstances as compared to those of many viewers, the emotions are both authentic and relevant. Whilst this operates, as with soap opera, as a form of emotional realism (Ang, 1985: 41–46) in *The Hills* there is the additional thrill of emotional voyeurism.

Because it offers such an intimate depiction of its cast's lives, *The Hills* invites its viewers to develop a connection, albeit one-sided, with these people. More specifically, and as ratings spikes suggest, a direct connection and identification with Lauren is encouraged. The relationship that a *Hills* fan may feel she has with Lauren can be described as a 'para-social interaction', a term that refers to "relations of intimacy constructed through the mass-media rather than [through] direct experience and face-to-face meetings" (Rojek, 2007: 171). A viewer witnesses the intimate confessions and details of Lauren's life through a one-sided mediated relationship. This notion of 'para-social interaction' is largely attributed to the relationships that fans may come to believe they forge with celebrities. One can develop a (perceived) personal connection with a celebrity due to the overwhelming presence of information about that celebrity circulating through the mass media (Rojek, 2007: 172). As Chris Rojek argues, although celebrities appear both physically and socially remote, their appearances on television shows, and in tabloid magazines, interviews and biographies "personalize the celebrity, turning a distant figure into a significant other" (ibid.). Fans can thus develop a sense that they share an emotional bond with particular celebrities, and are able to 'keep in touch' with them by engaging with the media texts in which they appear. The myriad of American docusoaps that focus on the lives of established celebrity figures greatly contribute to the potentials for para-social interactions between celebrities and their 'fans' or 'viewers'. Such programmes offer viewers intimate access into the lives and homes of celebrities and do so to a level that is unattainable by tabloid media. *The Hills* operates in the same way, since it details the cast's lives – especially that of Lauren – in such a personal manner that the viewer really can obtain enough information about these people to consider them as 'significant others' as opposed to the 'distant figures' they really are.

Although they were not established celebrities at the conception of *The Hills* (unlike the subjects of many other US docusoaps) the cast quickly gained celebrity status due to their involvement in the programme. Earlier MTV docusoaps which detail the lives of established celebrity figures, such as *The Osbournes* and *Newlyweds*, privileged viewers by inviting them into the extraordinary lives and private spaces of the rich and famous. *The Hills*, however, does something different by taking ordinary people and elevating them to celebrity status through their public exposure. This approach is different again from that of 'reality' TV game-docs in which the narrative of a participant's transformation is integral to the programme. Instead, the 'ordinariness' of Lauren and her cohort is strictly maintained within the diegesis of *The Hills*, with no diegetic reference to the burgeoning celebrity status of its cast members being made. Their celebrity is only acknowledged in the secondary texts which surround the docusoap (see Chapter Three), which fans of the show are expected to consume in order to experience the multi-diegesis of *The Hills*. Fans are expected to be aware of Lauren's celebrity, yet take enjoyment from the idea that, as *The Hills* suggests to them, Lauren is an 'ordinary' young woman who has achieved fame simply by having her 'ordinary' life filmed for a reality TV programme.

The premise of *The Hills* can be highly alluring for a young audience 'obsessed' with celebrity culture and the desire to be famous. MTV has undertaken extensive market research as to the interests of its young target audience, and its programming has been guided by the findings that young people overwhelmingly consider celebrities as role models (Saxton, 2005: 20). The youth network's history of celebrity-based docusoaps and other reality TV shows, such as the car makeover show *Pimp My Ride* hosted by rapper Xzibit, have clearly been driven by this public interest in celebrity culture. *The Hills* should be considered a development within MTV's televisual history and its attempts to produce as well as to reflect youth consumer culture. *The Hills* presents a message of the attainability of celebrity for 'ordinary' people. This message has the ability to resonate particularly with a young generation who, as research indicates (Saxton, 2005), ascribes significant value to the attainment of fame. The desire to be famous is also tied to the desire for freedom and recognition. Leo Braudy claims that "fame promises a liberation from powerless anonymity" (1986: 7); a validation of existence in a mass-populated society that is intent on progression. Fame means that a person need not be lost in the sea of the masses. It allows them instead to become someone of significance, to leave a mark

on the world through our mediated world of texts and images, and to be “an object of attention rather than one of the mob of attention payers” (Braudy, 1986: 6). These kinds of outcomes make it easier to understand why fame resonates so strongly with the younger generation, who struggle with adolescent identity and status, and who have grown up in an era in which the avenues through which to acquire fame have proliferated.

Writing in 1986, Braudy (1986: 5) argued that advancements in media technology have allowed fame to become far more achievable than the time of Alexander the Great and Cleopatra. Where once the fact that the face of Alexander the Great appeared on a coin “where only those of gods and mythical heroes had been before” (ibid.) was considered a mighty achievement, many more can now achieve the elevated status of fame on a far more widespread scale, due to the proliferation and rapid circulation of images within our mediated society. Since these assertions were made by Braudy, reality television has further democratised the attainability of fame. Stardom is no longer limited to those with a discernable talent or existing status. Citizens can now gain entry to celebrity status simply by auditioning to participate in a reality TV programme. Reality TV shows generate celebrities who are famous simply for performing themselves. As Braudy claims, to be famous for being yourself is seen as the ultimate validation of existence and “means you have come into your rightful inheritance” (1986: 7). In an image-obsessed culture, becoming initiated as one whose image is circulated for consumption, rather than merely being part of the image-consuming mass, has become an indication of achievement and self-worth. Lauren Conrad from *The Hills* can be seen as having achieved the ultimate goal of fame through self-performance. By simply having her personal and professional life filmed for a docusoap Lauren was elevated to celebrity status. Her life experiences became points of discussion for gossip columns and internet chatter, elevating her life as one to be admired. Lauren’s success at achieving celebrification through her seemingly ‘normal’ life can be admired amongst her fans. This is certainly how Lauren is portrayed within the multi-diegetic world of *The Hills* that is available. However the complexities of Lauren’s particular portrayal and the motivations behind the way she is portrayed, need to be interrogated.

The Strategic Portrayal of Lauren Conrad

As discussed above, *The Hills* depicts the experiences of Lauren and the rest of the cast as seemingly ordinary. The docusoap's narrative details the cast going to work, going on dates, dancing in clubs and gossiping with friends: all activities to which the docusoap's young female target audience can readily relate. This depiction of the cast is, however, a simulated normalcy. The fame quickly acquired by the cast due to their involvement in the docusoap ensured that their actual daily activities largely consisted of the commitments involved in maintaining their fame: photoshoots, interviews for radio, magazines, talkshows and the pursuit of their spin-off careers as actors, singers and fashion designers. These extraordinary aspects of the girls' lives were strictly omitted from the diegesis of the docusoap, resulting in the preservation of their apparent ordinariness. This preservation proved challenging as the docusoap continued and the normalcy of the cast's lives progressively diminished. The sixth season of *The Hills* illustrates the pressing challenge of maintaining the show's diegesis as a strictly celebrity-free zone, with an increasing number of the docusoap's storylines being fuelled by the tabloid gossip circulated in and by secondary texts. Heidi's revelation of her new body after her extreme plastic surgery and Kristin's alleged drug problems are examples of tabloid-fuelled narrative threads from the sixth season. The five seasons in which Lauren performed a central character role made it easier to manage the omission of the 'extraordinary' aspects of the cast's lives, because of both the pivotal normalising function of Lauren's character and the smaller public profile of the cast in earlier seasons.

The Hills producers have always maintained the importance of omitting the cast's celebrity. Executive Producer Liz Gateley maintains that the docusoap gives viewers access to the content that tabloids cannot provide (see Stack, Armstrong and Soll, 2008). There appears to be an acknowledgement on the producers' behalf that fans view the plotlines of *The Hills* in tandem with their consumption of the secondary tabloid gossip surrounding the docusoap. In this sense, *The Hills'* diegesis works "in concert with the tabloids" (Klein, 2009). A viewer really must consume both in order to achieve a full comprehension of *The Hills'* meta-narrative. An extra-diegetic knowledge of Lauren's sex tape rumour scandal is required in order to fully understand why Lauren and Heidi are no longer on speaking terms at the beginning

of season three (ibid.). Within the symbiotic relationship between the tabloids and *The Hills* diegesis, the docusoap's strictly personal detail of the cast's lives can provide a satisfying, emotionally voyeuristic peek into their private world that the tabloids fail to penetrate. However the reasons behind the omission of the cast's celebrity arguably go beyond those offered by the show's producers.

Lauren's depicted normalcy importantly encourages viewers to believe that they too can achieve fame through similar means. The meta-narrative of *The Hills* gives the impression that Lauren achieved fame simply by performing herself: a young woman from a small town who enjoys socialising with friends and has career aspirations in the fashion industry, yet who was plucked from obscurity by being chosen as the subject of an MTV reality show. Lauren's fame thus appears attainable and duplicable for young female MTV viewers who relate to her 'normal' portrayal. By 'performing her ordinariness', Lauren Conrad encourages perceptions that *The Hills* depicts reality, and gives the impression that one can similarly be initiated into her world of celebrity (Turner, 2006: 158). Though *The Hills* perhaps lacks the public audition process of other reality TV programmes, the docusoap similarly suggests the opportunity for participation for its fame-aspiring target audience. Lauren's small-town beginnings, her apparent luck in being selected as a reality TV subject, and her performed ordinariness within the docusoap's diegesis, are all aspirational for the viewer. The fantasy being offered to them through the trajectory of Lauren is that of their own potential for initiation into the kind of glamourised existence that is experienced by *The Hills'* cast.

The Hills thus urges the viewer to find Lauren both ordinary and extraordinary. Her position as an 'everyday girl' experiencing the enviable luxuries of fame makes her a suitable candidate for wish-fulfilment in the eyes of this docusoap's target audience. Lauren's position encourages young female viewers to develop a 'wishful identification' with her: "a psychological process through which an individual desires or attempts to become like another person" (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005: 327). Desiring to be like a celebrity is a common want given the privileged status awarded to them by society. Lauren is unequivocally a celebrity herself, and is treated as one in the tabloid media, yet the normalcy with which *The Hills* presents Lauren Conrad makes the emulation of her success seem more achievable than most.

Hoffner and Buchanan's research into audiences' wishful identification with media characters indicates the importance of how the 'character' is portrayed (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005: 329). More specifically, their study found that "women identified with female characters whom they perceived as successful, intelligent, attractive, and admired" (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005: 342). Lauren is strategically presented with these attributes on *The Hills*. Her centrality to the narrative and her acquired celebrity status (extra-diegetically) positions her as an object for admiration. Lauren is level-headed and driven, and values loyalty, determination and hard work, all of which attest to her intelligence. Her physical beauty is continually underscored within the docusoap, with the ritualisation of her make-up application before going on dates and the myriad of compliments she receives from friends on her appearance. The viewer is encouraged to view Lauren as successful too, both in balancing her school, work and social commitments in the fast-paced, competitive environment of Hollywood within the show's diegesis, and with her acquired celebrity status, the knowledge of which one obtains through secondary texts surrounding the docusoap. Viewers are thus encouraged to identify with Lauren through a process of wish-fulfilment. She takes on an aspirational role for young female viewers, helped in part by the idyllic illusion of adulthood portrayed by *The Hills* (see Klein 2009). Work promotions within the fashion and entertainment industries are obtained simply by expressing an interest in them, impromptu weekends in Las Vegas are taken without reference to how they are funded, and the biggest concern facing the cast is whether they are being treated loyally by their friends and boyfriends. The lifestyle Lauren leads is enviable for the targeted audience. *The Hills* cast perform the fantasy of the docusoap's target audience by leading a glamourised, privileged lifestyle within the Hollywood entertainment industries, for which they are celebrified.

The Embedded Lifestyle Branding Strategies of *The Hills*

The aspirational quality of *The Hills* allows it to act as a powerful tool for MTV's associated brands and the network's consumerist ideology. Whilst aspirational programming is nothing new for the network, the 'reality' premise of *The Hills* provides the opportunity for a highly effective, integrated promotion of a Western, capitalist, middle-class youthful lifestyle. By placing the docusoap cast within the glamourised setting of actual Hollywood locations, *The Hills* acts as a compelling

advertorial for the Los Angeles entertainment scene. Elizabeth Affuso discusses in detail how *The Hills* promotes various entertainment companies and their products through a series of corporate partnerships (Affuso, 2009). Specifically, the docusoap has affiliations with SBE Entertainment, Sony BMG and Condé Nast and profiles subsidiaries of these companies by “positioning Lauren and her friends as employees of these companies, while simultaneously covering up the fact that their non-work entertainment is also provided by arms of these same entities” (Affuso, 2009). The result is a surreptitious promotion for these companies and their products since *The Hills* so effectively positions them as the backdrop of narrative events within the docusoap.

The Hills promotes the subsidiaries of these corporations by positioning its cast as employees of their companies. Early in the series Lauren and Whitney receive internships at Teen Vogue (owned by Condé Nast), Heidi begins working at Bolthouse Productions (under SBE Entertainment) and Audrina is later employed by Epic Records (a subsidiary music label under Sony BMG). These companies receive publicity due to the cast’s workplace activities forming a significant part of the narrative of this docusoap. Lauren and Whitney are continually shown working on photo shoots and corporate events for *Teen Vogue* magazine, Heidi works closely with her boss, Brent Bolthouse of Bolthouse Productions in running a series of Los Angeles nightclubs, and Audrina helps to promote recording artists associated with Epic and Sony BMG. Episodes of *The Hills* have included Audrina helping artists such as Sean Kingston and Red Jumpsuit Apparatus with publicity commitments and attending showcase concerts by artists such as Lady Gaga. By having *The Hills* cast placed as employees of these companies, Teen Vogue, Bolthouse Productions and Epic Records gain valuable exposure for their brands and associated commercial interests. The glamourised portrayal of Lauren and her friends’ career pursuits enhances the desirability of these companies for young *Hills* viewers and solidifies their importance within the competitive entertainment industry.

The extent of *The Hills*’ role as a promotional tool for these entertainment companies goes further, as evidenced by the underhanded publicity granted to SBE Entertainment venues. Beyond the more-explicit promotion of Bolthouse-owned clubs that Heidi is occasionally seen to work at, such as Area, Hyde and S Bar, *The*

Hills cast often 'choose' to congregate at the SBE-owned restaurants Katsuya and The Abbey (Affuso, 2009). They also regularly visit Ketchup, Bella, Les Deux, and Geisha House which are owned by the Dolce Group, whose investors have close ties to Brent Bolthouse (Affuso, 2009). What appear within the docusoap to be arbitrary decisions as to where the cast spend their evenings are in fact a carefully planned front for advertising a network of entertainment venues for the commercial benefit of their owners. At the beginning of a scene the name of a venue appears on screen which, as Affuso (2009) argues, enables participation amongst viewers and encourages them to re-create the desirable experiences of Lauren and her friends. Due to the real-world position granted to it by its docusoap status, *The Hills* acts as a compelling advertorial for the L.A. club scene, fashion and entertainment industries.

With an integrated, considered promotion of corporate interests masquerading as the cast's career and entertainment ventures, *The Hills* sells its viewers an encompassing lifestyle in keeping with the 'youthful cool' brand of MTV. To focus on Lauren Conrad specifically, the lifestyle presented is one of being a young professional succeeding in the competitive fashion and entertainment industries whilst enjoying the thriving social environment of Los Angeles. Lauren's lifestyle is presented as being one that is attainable with relative ease. There is certainly no explanation of how she is able to maintain her spacious apartment, designer clothing and social events on the income of an interning design student, nor is there narrative interest in how she manages to balance study and work with regular nights out with friends and boyfriends. The ambiguity surrounding the upkeep of Lauren's lifestyle is an important aspect of its desirability. The clubs and venues that Lauren attends are symbols of her cultural success and *The Hills* presents viewers with the opportunity to acquire cultural capital by encouraging the re-creation of Lauren's experiences. However illusory, the attainment of this cultural capital may be, it is presented as something that viewers can themselves emulate due to the apparent ease of the cast's lived experiences, the portrayed normalcy of Lauren Conrad, and the grounding of the docusoap's setting in 'reality'.

Viewers who cannot physically recreate *The Hills* experience by visiting the featured venues are encouraged to literally buy into the lifestyle being depicted in *The Hills* through the consumption of other goods. MTV has a long history of

commercialising youth culture (Jhally, 1987: 102) and encouraging the purchase of consumer products as emblems of the cool, youthful style with which the network has become synonymous. *The Hills* particularly targets young female viewers with the portrayal of Lauren Conrad. As discussed above, *The Hills* devotes much screen-time to emphasising the female cast's physical beauty and fashion. 'Cute' outfits are regularly complimented and attentive detail is paid to the process of Lauren preparing for a night out. Bathroom mirror scenes ritualistically track Lauren's application of makeup and accessories, with a series of extreme close-ups focusing on the (unmarked, unbranded) products she uses. The act of getting 'made up' is promoted and glamourised as a result, in part aided by the sleek cinematic appearance of the docusoap.

There is an element of commodity fetishism (Marx, 1976: 163–177) at work in the way makeup and clothes are presented on *The Hills*. Beauty products and clothing are granted cultural power in the way they equip cast members. These commodities are presented as necessary tools in the cast's success, both professionally, as fashionable appearance is highly valued in their workplaces (upon beginning at *Teen Vogue* Lauren and Whitney are given brief makeovers to ensure their looks are suitable for the magazine in 1:1), and also personally, as the amount of time spent out socialising in L.A. clubs ensures the importance of maintaining appearances.

Whilst the promotion of such consumer goods may be subtly integrated within the diegesis of *The Hills*, the consumerist message is more overtly emphasised through the advertisements surrounding the docusoap. In one example, Lauren has acted as the spokeswoman for Mark cosmetics, the advertisements for which screen as brief commercial breaks as viewers watch episodes of *The Hills* online through the official MTV website. One of the two 30-second advertisements features Lauren applying makeup in the car as she drives to a club to meet some friends ('The Club'), while in the other she applies makeup in her bathroom before meeting a date at a restaurant ('The Date'). The advertisements bear a striking resemblance to scenes from the docusoap itself, both in terms of content and the sleek, cinematic shots used. These also feature a voiceover from Lauren dispensing wise advice that alludes to her application of makeup:

There are a few things every girl needs to make her 'Mark' in the world. Keep your eye on the prize [Lauren applies eye shadow], always mean what you say [Lauren applies lip gloss], be true to yourself no matter what, and choose your company very carefully [Lauren is seen meeting a date at a restaurant]. Make your 'Mark'.

As this advertisement comes to an end another female voice encourages viewers to "Get Lauren's look from Mark" by going to the official MTV *The Hills* website and purchasing the corresponding cosmetics. Viewers are also exhorted to watch the upcoming premiere episode of the fourth season¹⁷. The marketing of these consumer products is reliant on the *brand* of Lauren Conrad, as a level-headed, wise, attractive, admirable Californian girl, an image that her character on *The Hills* largely helps to portray. *The Hills*, as a docusoap, is a branding mechanism itself. The programme encourages consumption in order to attain the aspirational lifestyle presented on screen. In fact, the similarities between Mark advertisements and the docusoap itself – in terms of the glamourisation of Lauren's consumer-driven lifestyle – illustrates how carefully embedded consumerist messages are within *The Hills*.

The embedded, multi-platform marketing strategy of *The Hills*' lifestyle brand reflects the current consumption trends of MTV's target audience. In this current era of television, broadcasters must consider the internet as a competitor for their viewer's attention, especially regarding the younger generation so keenly sought by the MTV Network. The construction of *The Hills*' narrative and the marketing of its affiliated consumer items has clearly been considered with a viewer's multi-tasking approach to media consumption in mind. The docusoap can be watched online via the official MTV website, which encourages simultaneous internet surfing. The MTV website itself offers the viewer multiple avenues through which to consume *The Hills* on an extra-diegetic level. Beyond allowing viewers to watch full episodes of the docusoap online, the website encourages fans to watch 'Aftershows' in which hosts evaluate the events of a newly aired episode with guest contributors, who are occasionally cast members themselves. The website also includes episode summaries, photos and biographies of the cast, as well as blogs discussing both diegetic and extra-diegetic elements of *The Hills*. Participation is encouraged in the

¹⁷ This advertisement is viewable on YouTube. MTV Networks, (2008, August 5). *The Date* [Video file]. Retrieved October 14, 2010 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Csm0hQHnmfQ>.

form of message boards, which allow fans to converse over narrative events and gossip surrounding the programme.

Importantly, the MTV website provides easy opportunities for fans to purchase consumer items affiliated with *The Hills*. The SeenON! MTV online store invites viewers to 'Get the Look' of their favourite *Hills* cast members, enquiring 'Are you as fashionable as Lo?' or whether you 'Want Lauren's LA chic look?'¹⁸. Upon selecting her favourite cast member, a fan is presented with a number of specific fashion items featured on *The Hills*, including an American Apparel tank top labelled as having been worn by Lauren on episode 4:7, or the Tom Ford sunglasses Audrina wore in episode 4:9. Clicking on these items leads to the respective label's online stores, enabling consumers to effortlessly purchase an emulation of *The Hills* cast's signature styles. Moreover, *The Hills* website actively promotes the music featured on the programme, by way of narrative soundtrack, in listing the titles of these songs and providing links for them to be purchased in both ringtone format and through the iTunes online music store. The website also links to social network sites including Facebook, allowing viewers to become 'Fans' of the docusoap and express their interest in the programme whilst promoting it to their friends. Through its web-based marketing strategies, *The Hills* creates a "multiplatform consumer franchise" (Greenfeld, 2009) which is highly conscious of the ways in which its technologically-competent audience utilises the internet.

The diegetic content of *The Hills* itself reflects the current MTV generation's familiarity with social exposure through internet-based social networks. *The Hills*, and other docusoaps, publicise the personal; audiences are kept updated on the private, arguably mundane aspects of these subjects' lives. Brian Graden, the president of programming at MTV and VH1, has acknowledged the correlation between social networks and the structure and content of *The Hills* and its docusoap counterparts to attract its target audience. He suggests that:

Once you hit 15, 16, you are onto Facebook, onto Twitter, so this is the first generation that has already published the story of their life in real time... These shows are what they wish

¹⁸ *The Hills*: Get The Look. *SeenON! MTV Store*. Retrieved October 14, 2010 from <http://www.seenonmtv.com/index.php?v=mtvhilsomlok>.

their story was, with pictures they choose, with songs they choose, with their friends (Graden cited in Greenfeld, 2009).

Graden's comments hint at the similarities between the projection of *The Hills* cast's social interactions through the docusoap, and the projection of the viewer's own interactions through social media. The narrative of *The Hills* is thus familiar to its core audience in the way it shares 'normal' people's everyday experiences. The banality of *The Hills*' plot, or lack thereof, is reflective of the current Facebook-driven social era. Blogger Henry Wolfe has commented on the way that the "one-sided dialogues" that *The Hills* narrative comprises act as "the televisual equivalent of facebook status updates ("heidi is feeling sad." "lauren doesn't know what to do anymore." "audrina is done with him.") (sic)" (Wolfe cited in Klein, 2009). This exposed social banality assists in the apparent accessibility of *The Hills* cast. Yet, their aspirational quality is maintained by what *Hills* executive producer Adam DiVello refers to as their "alpha" status. These are people's personal lives of which audiences are particularly encouraged to take notice due to their privilege and fame. This aspirational quality of the cast is integral to the success of *The Hills*' consumerist message. Once again, the encouragement to emulate these cast members - to get 'Lauren's LA Chic look' - is designed to foster consumption of the tangible commodities that symbolise the lifestyle of Hollywood glamour promoted by *The Hills* and, by extension, the MTV Network.

Conclusion

In an age of increased multi-channel competition, in which technological advancements have rendered traditional commercial breaks ineffective and a younger generation of television viewers have proven to reject label-oriented advertising campaigns, *The Hills* exemplifies the more advanced, sophisticated advertising strategies undertaken by the MTV Network. MTV maintains its position as a purveyor of youth culture with its current prioritisation of docusoaps such as *The Hills*. With its glamorous presentation of attractive, affluent young adults living amongst the fashion and entertainment industries of Los Angeles, California, *The Hills* continues MTV's dissemination of "Western middle-class, capitalist values and ideologies" (Wee, 2004: 96) to young audiences the world over.

The international popularity of *The Hills* amongst MTV viewers is attributable to the docusoap's blending of the appeals of serialised, conflict-laden drama with the emotionally-voyeuristic qualities of reality TV. In particular, the programme employs strategies of soap opera to appeal to the female members of the current MTV generation. The narrative structure of *The Hills* fosters prolonged audience engagement whilst the content of the show promotes the consumption of items associated with the fashion and entertainment industries integral to the show's diegesis (namely clothing, cosmetics and music). The 'reality' status accredited to this docusoap extends its potential as a promotional vehicle beyond that of fictional drama. The docusoap's symbiotic relationship with secondary tabloid texts allows *The Hills* to indulge in the unwavering societal interest in celebrity culture and the attainment of fame. The reality credentials of *The Hills* fosters an albeit, one-sided connection between viewer and cast which enhances the fandom surrounding the programme. The conflicting profiles of the cast on the docusoap (which emphasise their normalcy) versus the tabloid media (which garners them celebrity status) work to enhance the allure of these publicised individuals and encourage the perception that their attainment of fame is similarly achievable for the viewing audience. This perception is commercially beneficial for the MTV Network, whose advertised commodities present viewers with the opportunity for initiation into *The Hills* lifestyle.

The multi-platform marketing of *The Hills* and its various commercial entities signals current youth trends regarding the consumption of media. The promotional strategies surrounding *The Hills* in this digital era indicate its attempts to keep up with the televisual habits of MTV's targeted young audience, as they spend an increasing amount of their time online. *The Hills* presents an alluring lifestyle, the tangibility of which is promoted through a number of avenues – the docusoap itself, the official MTV website and secondary media texts – all of which provide an encompassing promotion of a coveted luxurious existence of an L.A. socialite. This style of marketing reflects the technological competence and multi-tasking abilities of the young MTV audience, and assists the cable network in maintaining its brand as an essential component of Western, commercial youth culture.

Conclusion

The Hills exemplifies the ways in which the docusoap is a valuable tool for networks in the commercial environment of the American television industry. Its blend of observational documentary and character-driven drama (Hill, 2005: 27) awards docusoap the dual attractions of 'reality' television and soap opera. The conceptual framework of docusoap provides the opportunity for an enhanced form of audience entertainment due to the way in which it mixes the conventions of two genres that have separately achieved immense audience popularity. This ability for the docusoap to provide a new, alluring form of entertainment for audiences has significant commercial benefits for networks whose dependence on advertising revenue requires their scheduled programming to reliably sustain audience interest for a prolonged period of time. The MTV Network's cultivation of the American docusoap over several decades is indicative of the commercial benefits of the docusoap form. The youth-oriented cable channel has continually produced docusoaps that reflect the cultural interests of youth in the compelling style of fictionally-enhanced 'factual' content. This type of innovative programming through generic experimentation has come to be expected of MTV, which has built a reputation of fresh originality in accordance with its channel identity of leading-edge youthfulness, which itself is a strategy to attract a young demographic.

MTV continues its tradition of offering fresh, new programming with *The Hills*. For a relatively new genre rife with experimentation potential, *The Hills* signals previously unseen developments within docusoap due to its wholesale embrace of fictional conventions. From initial impressions alone, *The Hills* looks different from most other 'factual' television forms. Its cinematic visual style demarcates it from other docusoaps that maintain closer ties to their genre's 'reality' TV roots through their adoption of a documentary aesthetic. *The Hills* stands out from this tradition with its unparalleled employment of classic realism and the sleek visual appearance more commonly ascribed to TV fiction. With the understanding that *The Hills*, despite its highly processed appearance, is produced from actuality footage, the cinematic appearance of this docusoap contributes to its attempts to glamorise the ostensibly 'normal' lives of its human subjects. This cinematic depiction of factual content establishes *The Hills* as an anomaly within 'reality' television, with the

docusoap departing overtly from the lower-grade production values and 'on the wing' camera style that have been signature aesthetics for this meta-genre.

The Hills' reliance on the appeals of TV fiction extends beyond its sleek visual style and is most significantly employed in the construction of this docusoap's narrative. Somewhat ironically, the use of fictional narrative techniques aids the construction of *The Hills'* realistic diegetic world. The interweaving of carefully constructed narrative threads, a strategy borrowed from serial fiction, facilitates a unification of time and place within *The Hills'* diegesis, giving the impression of simultaneously progressing experiences. Through a careful selection of edited actuality footage, these narrative threads collectively detail the overarching story of the cast's interlinking lives, creating the "naturalistic illusion" (Dovey, 2000: 142) that viewers are offered a transparent window into the world of the docusoap's participant characters. Such fictional narrative construction grants *The Hills'* world the complexity of real-life interactions amongst a community of shared friends and acquaintances.

The prominence of fictional conventions in this docusoap is further evidenced by the various strategies that enhance the dramatic quality of its content. These devices, attributable to TV fiction, transform the docusoap's captured occurrences into narrative events. Combined with her dominance over narrative threads, Lauren Conrad's role as an extra-diegetic narrator solidifies her status as the show's protagonist, thus awarding her centrality to the narrative world. Lauren's duality as a narrator and *Hills* community cast member places her both outside and inside the docusoap's diegesis at various times, insisting she takes on a role similar to the first-person narrator of a novel. Lauren frames narrative events from her own perspective, enhancing the story with her own thoughts and reflections, and these strategies of fictional enhancement further distance the docusoap from any sense of documentary realism in the process. The way in which Lauren's narratorial voice-over complements the narrative progression of *The Hills'* heavily-edited storylines is an overt marker of this docusoap's fictional construction.

The Hills aligns further with fiction through the characterisation of its docusoap subjects. The generation of narrative events involving this interlinking cast is reliant on the establishment of a *Hills* community in which its members perform certain narrative roles, a narrative structure borrowed from soap opera. Thus, Lauren and the rest of *The Hills* cast operate in much the same way as characters in fictional narratives; their portrayal designed as a “function of the plot” (Fiske, 1987: 30) that facilitates certain dynamics between ‘characters’ which in turn generate conflicts and bonds to fuel the progressing serial narrative of the docusoap. Spencer’s performance as the archetypal soap opera ‘bastard’ (Geraghty, 1991: 102–104) provides an ongoing source of conflict with Lauren, the show’s heroic central figure. The moral polarisation between the portrayals of Lauren and Spencer solidifies Spencer’s ‘outsider’ status, as he threatens the stability of the *Hills* community by attempting (and eventually succeeding) to extract Heidi from her network of supportive friends. Spencer’s unrelenting villainy provides a constant threat to the community’s shared values of harmony and happiness, rendering the ideal of community stability unattainable due to his presence. It is this pursuit of community harmony that sustains the serial narrative of *The Hills*, and this is a narrative structure reliant on the overt characterisation of its cast members. Accordingly, the portrayal of Lauren and the rest of *The Hills* cast eschews in-depth exploration of human personality, instead emphasising the foregrounding of particular traits for narrative purposes. The docusoap’s cast are reduced to a two-dimensional simplification that assists their capacity to reliably generate conflict-ridden stories for the sake of entertainment.

Whilst the characterisation of its cast sustains narrative events on *The Hills*, the lack of incident in this “deeply conversationalised documentary form” (Dovey, 2000: 138) is further compensated through melodramatic underscoring. The vast majority of this docusoap’s scenes consist of dialogue between cast members. Within these conversations the cast express their feelings about other community members and recent narrative incidents, and it is the collective motivations and experiences of this cast that encapsulates the story of *The Hills*. This docusoap’s deliberate distancing from a ‘reality’ television aesthetic sees it abandon the ‘camera confessional’ method of conveying a cast member’s emotions. Instead, *The Hills* relies on fictional strategies to emphasise the unspoken feelings of its cast. The extreme close-up, a common convention in screen melodrama, is employed liberally in this docusoap to

foreground character emotions. The prolonged focus on a character's gaze acts as a "form of punctuation" (Feuer, 1995: 120), awarding her expression heightened narrative significance that requires a close reading from viewers in order to achieve full narrative comprehension. An emphasis on emotion that is so vital for the appeal of this docusoap is easily manufactured through the construction of such close-ups, with the accompaniment of suggestive extra-diegetic music further emphasising character emotion. The frequent use of the melodramatic close-up on *The Hills* benefits the story-telling abilities of this character-centric programme, whilst awarding the docusoap the dramatic enhancement of fictional conventions.

The melodramatic tendencies of *The Hills* are further evidence of the docusoap's foregrounding of heightened drama over realism. The characterisation of its cast and its emphatic emotionalism assists in the prioritisation of storylines that focus on female rivalry and overt villainy, attributes of melodrama's "moral polarisation and schematisation" (Brooks cited in Feuer, 1995: 114) that enhance the otherwise lacking plot of docusoap's factual material. Thus, *The Hills* compensates for the banality of its actuality footage with a dramatic excessiveness that is largely created through the conventions of melodrama. This excessiveness extends across multiple facets of the docusoap, whose cinematic visuals endow *The Hills* with a degree of glamour that is reminiscent of 1980s 'high-end' American primetime soaps, *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. The presentation of the predominantly female *Hills* cast echoes the excessive glamour displayed by *Dallas* and *Dynasty* characters, with the designer clothing and heavy make-up of *Hills* participant characters similarly signalling their affluence. Just like a fan of melodramatic supersoaps, the female viewer is encouraged to see the clothes and hairstyles of *The Hills* cast as objects of both desire and ridicule (Geraghty, 1991: 28). Theirs is an enviable life of privilege, yet the cast's fashion choices can often be deemed inappropriate and 'over the top', inviting audience critique. The melodramatic tendencies of *The Hills* provide the viewer with an excessively dramatic indulgence. The narrative encourages a prolonged fascination with the cast's incomprehensibly conflict-ridden, glamorised lives. Accordingly, questions surrounding the narrative of *The Hills*, and notably that of 'Who spread the rumour of Lauren's sex tape?' are seen to perform the enthralling and ongoing interrogatory functions of a younger generation's 'Who shot J.R.?'

Encouraging an even more impassioned engagement with *The Hills*' narrative is the 'real-life' status of this melodramatic docusoap. Additional appeals are awarded to *The Hills* – beyond those of soap opera – due to its highly fictionalised content operating on a platform of perceived factuality. This status removes a barrier of distance that can exist between fictional character and audience, and can grant a sense of credibility to a fan's interest in the cast due to their existence as 'real people' in the 'real world'. *The Hills* thus offers a compelling allure due to its unusual blend of a 'reality' television premise steeped in the factual, to which high levels of dramatic enhancement are incorporated through its adoption of fictional conventions. Whilst appealing in its difference from other docusoaps, *The Hills*' provision of something 'new' by combining the fictional appeals of melodrama with the voyeuristic allure of a factual concept is keyed to generate some confusion and questions about this docusoap's actual proximity to 'the real'.

The confusion caused by the blending of variable generic conventions on *The Hills* stems from the docusoap's manipulation of perceived generic rules. Generic verisimilitude dictates that a television text should conform to the conventions of a particular genre (Neale, 1990: 46). Thus, a programme's generic classification is identifiable due to the textual conventions it employs, and its realism is assessed based on an audience familiarity with other texts within the same genre. Within a single television programme *The Hills* intertwines generic conventions that entail conflicting aesthetic assumptions, making it difficult either to place this docusoap within a single generic category or to effectively assess its realist position. In order to validate its claims to authenticity, in accordance with generic verisimilitude, *The Hills* should exhibit the spontaneity, shaky camera work, and natural lighting all expected of 'reality' television forms. Instead, in a purposeful attempt to make it look like a scripted, episodic programme (*Videography*, 2006: 8) *The Hills*' adoption of fiction's classic realist style puts the docusoap at odds with the aesthetic expectations that so often attend 'popular factual' TV forms.

The "juxtaposition of conflicting clusters of generic assumptions" (Mittell, 2004: 163) exhibited in *The Hills* is a reminder of the power of generic classification in generating entrenched expectations about what a text should look like and how it should operate. Mixed-genres offer opportunities to assess such generic

assumptions, and *The Hills* challenges the oversimplified perceptions of realism that are so often brought to the viewing of 'reality' programming. *The Hills* invites an interrogation of the perception that certain genres signal closer ties to 'the real' than others: specifically that a lower-budget, hand-held, grainy aesthetic signals an 'authentic' representation of actuality whereas the artful camerawork, subtle lighting, meticulous editing, and musical underscoring common to TV fiction are all indicators of the controlled, rehearsed, 'staged' environment of drama production. Through its juxtaposition of such contrasting generic assumptions, *The Hills* raises questions over the axiomatic status that certain textual conventions hold as signifiers of authenticity.

The perceived authenticity of a 'documentary aesthetic' is derived from the original function of the camera as a "scientific apparatus" (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 9). However, 'reality' television forms have used this reputation to enhance their appeal with audiences, by employing the aesthetics of actuality whilst heavily manipulating this footage through extensive post-production editing. Thus, conventional 'reality' television forms are reliant on the use of documentary conventions to evoke a compelling sense of factuality, despite the extent of editorial manipulation which renders these realist claims fraudulent. *The Hills*, then, complicates traditional understandings of distinctions between factual and fictional genres with its overt use of fictional aesthetics in the context of a programme that purports to be factual. There are relatively few stylistic markers through which to easily distinguish *The Hills* from the fictional dramas it so strongly resembles. The docusoap therefore aligns with television drama as a fictional form (described in this thesis as a process of *horizontal intertextuality*). However the simplification of this textual categorisation is counteracted by the extra-diegetic input of secondary texts (which this thesis has identified as instances of *vertical intertextuality*).

The Hills negotiates a complicated space between the factual and the fictional due to these conflicting intertextual relationships. Gossip blogs, celebrity talk shows and women's magazines authenticate the realist claims of *The Hills* due to the 'real world' grounding of these secondary texts and their strict devotion to factual content. The relationship between *The Hills* and its secondary texts ensures the existence of an intertextual dialogue that performs important roles in a viewer's consumption of

this docusoap. Although *The Hills* itself is intentionally non-self-reflexive (in order to evoke the sophistication of 'high-end' drama), discussion of the docusoap's content within secondary texts provides a level of narrative enhancement for fans of the show. For instance, the docusoap and the tabloid media at times share a mutually beneficial relationship, with the existence of a two-way influence on media content. The conflict-ridden narrative of *The Hills* provides scandalous material for gossip columns, whilst such secondary texts authenticate the docusoap's 'factual' grounding and also generate audience interest in watching the docusoap to witness narrative events as these unfold. This textual interaction facilitates a level of audience engagement that can be deeper than that permitted by TV fictions, and highlights the expectation that *Hills* fans will also consume the docusoap in extra-diegetic ways.

The various ways in which *The Hills* is connected to other texts illustrates the intertextual status of contemporary television. Programmes are not isolated texts existing in a vacuum, but are instead texts whose meanings are derived from a web of textual knowledges. Thus, when revelations surface through secondary texts that *The Hills* has fabricated narrative events, this can influence audience readings of the primary text. For instance, such knowledge can discredit the docusoap's realist claims and act as confirmation for those struggling with the docusoap's "conflicting generic clusters" (Mittell, 2004: 163) that the docusoap is closer to fiction than to factual programming, due to its extensive use of related conventions. Moreover, such controversies highlight the function of the texts that surround the docusoap's diegesis. Because secondary texts effectively interrogate as well as promoting the content of *The Hills*, these work to encourage viewers into extra-diegetic readings and analysis of the docusoap.

The extra-diegetic dimension of *The Hills* allows it to be an unusually compelling form of television entertainment. The docusoap has created a substantial fan following that is commercially beneficial for the MTV Network. The fictional-factual crossover of *The Hills* provides for an active engagement from the viewer, which draws on the combined popularity of both serial melodrama and reality television. The docusoap's heavy use of soap conventions facilitates an impassioned fandom for *The Hills* that is similarly enjoyed by soap operas. Its serial narrative structure encourages prolonged audience interest in *The Hills* as a viewer can watch the

progression of the cast's lives, with the factual grounding of the docusoap awarding this observation a heightened level of allure. The dramatic highs and lows experienced by *The Hills* cast provide the viewer with an experience of emotional voyeurism, in that she can derive pleasure from her ability to anonymously acquire an intimate knowledge of the cast's lives (Flitterman-Lewis cited in Middleton, 2001: 62). This emotional attachment that viewers can develop with *The Hills* provides them with an incentive to tune in to MTV and watch the docusoap on a regular, prolonged basis.

The particular audience targeted by MTV through *The Hills* is reflected in the cast and content of the docusoap: namely, young, heterosexual women. Through the foregrounding of strong female characters *The Hills* facilitates audience identification from a gendered faction of the viewing public in ways that are paralleled by the particular appeals of soap opera to women (Geraghty, 1991: 50). Soap opera and docusoap share an emphasis on verbal interactions, and *The Hills* illustrates this through the narrative dominance of emotional conversations between cast members. The confessions shared between Lauren and her friends regarding their relationships both emulate and rehearse the personal experiences of the imagined viewer, encouraging her to identify with the people and emotions on screen, in ways that are similar to soap opera (Geraghty, 1991: 43). Beyond the possibilities of soap, however, the real-life status of the docusoap cast enhances the potential of audience identification. A viewer can develop an intimate para-social relationship (Rojek, 2007: 171) with *The Hills* cast, due to the confessional nature of the docusoap's narrative, the availability of the cast through their ongoing appearance on the television screen, and, importantly, through their status as real people. The way in which *The Hills* portrays its cast as 'normal' people can invite the formation of a powerful (albeit, one-sided) bond between viewer and cast, encouraging extensive audience involvement in and identification with the narrative events.

The apparent normalcy of *The Hills* cast works to assist the docusoap's portrayal of the attainability of fame – a status that appears to be valued particularly highly by young adult viewers. It is here that the ways in which the audience appeals of *The Hills* transfer into commercial benefits for MTV become apparent. By “performing

her ordinariness" (Turner, 2006: 158) Lauren Conrad encourages the perception that a viewer can similarly be initiated into her world of celebrity. Lauren is strategically presented as both accessible and aspirational: a dual profile that is awarded to her by the generic mix of fictional glamour and factual immediacy contained within the docusoap. Lauren's fame and privileged lifestyle appear as consequences of her apparent luck at being selected as a docusoap subject, and her celebrity is based on her ordinariness as a young woman whose active social life and career aspirations are broadcast to the viewing public. Lauren's existence, as portrayed by *The Hills*, is not beyond the realms of possibility imaginable by the targeted MTV viewer. Thus, the perceived attainability of Lauren's enviable experiences can fuel a fan's enjoyment of the docusoap, and subsequently encourage her consumption of commodity items in her attempt to emulate elements of *The Hills* lifestyle.

It is apparent that a deeply entrenched, powerful marketing strategy is available to MTV due to the generic mix of *The Hills*. The lifestyle of young Hollywood glamour depicted in the docusoap is strongly reflective of MTV's channel identity of fashionable youthfulness, and both text and channel surreptitiously promote the opportunity for initiation into this desirable lifestyle through the purchase of affiliated consumer products. The 'reality' television aspects of *The Hills* provide young MTV viewers with the allure of watching similarly-aged people achieve fame through self-performance, whilst the glamour and melodrama that are afforded by the docusoap's wholesale embrace of fictional conventions work to amplify the cast's celebrity. *The Hills* relies on its audience's desire for the fame and success being achieved by its cast to generate interest in and demand for the lifestyle that is on display. MTV uses this programme to suggest that this lifestyle can be attained through the purchase of those products that its advertisers want to sell. This process provides an indicative example of the broader promotion of "Western, middle-class capitalist values and ideologies" (Wee, 2004: 96) in which MTV is actively engaged. *The Hills* provides MTV with a compelling marketing platform, through which the additional opportunities for audience engagement being facilitated by this programme's appealing generic mix can be exploited to yield economic advantage in the highly competitive environment of the commercial American television industry.

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