

Nathan For Us

Questioning Reality: The Authority of the Camera in *Nathan For You*

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ABSTRACT

Reality television has been evolving for years. I believe that the show, *Nathan For You*, allows for the latest understanding of reality television. In this paper I would like to discuss the history of reality television and where the Comedy Central show *Nathan For You* fits into this history. Why does this matter? *Nathan For You* is an absurdist take on the makeover theme that is the focus of many reality television shows. This absurdist presentation that Nathan Fielder uses in his comedy is one that fits in the history of reality television. The series is meant to come off as a serious documentary style to struggling business owners but in reality, it consists of Fielder giving outrageous advice that works in his favor. It is a mix of tricking the people he is helping while also tricking the audience. Many of the people that Fielder gives advice to do not know that they are being tricked. This allows for feelings of a prank show, where people know different things at different times. This is where human connection is made clear. It is important to understand human interaction when a camera is present because the camera presents ultimate authority and in turn, makes Fielder the ultimate authority. This show is a mix of the discussions related to reality in the makeover, prank, late capitalism, and satire realm. Reality television shapes the way that we see reality, so is that reality real or fake? What does 'real' actually mean?

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Reality television is one of the most popular forms of television since it has come out. There is an allure to it that draws people into watching, along with the excitement that one can become famous overnight. Producers take advantage of the motivation that people carry to become famous. This eagerness is shown in *Nathan For You* with the guests that appear on the show. Fielder can take people to extremes and they just go along with it. The possibility of monetizing oneself is very appealing to people and that's why they agree to be on reality television. Why does this mean so much to people?

Nathan For You represents a whole new world to reality television, a sense of confusing banter that people fall for because they are gullible. But is everyone on reality tv gullible? There are so many shows that people watch consistently to keep up with, and often we are gullible along with the person on the tv. Our perception of reality changes when we see things from a different perspective, such as when the audience knows something that the character on the show doesn't. Then there's also the other part to perception when viewing *Nathan For You* and the politics of comedy, because he is meant to be tricking the viewer as well. When viewing this show you are not always sure what is real and what is not, so viewing can be challenging. You don't know whether he is acting or tapping into a guest's perception of him, because he could be doing both. Where has reality taken us essentially in history? There have been so many shows over the years and more to come because it is something that keeps people interested and wanting more. It seems that it is only human nature to want to see how others react to situations on television. This almost acts as a form of advice because you could watch something and say

“that would never be me” or “I would never fall for that.” In reality, if someone tells you who they are you will believe it. Obviously this cannot work as a general statement, because there are times where you will not believe something that is ludicrous. In the end, our perception can change person to person. *Nathan For You* taps into this. If you are told that someone is going to help you and save your business, you will probably listen to them if they have the credentials in front of you, even if the ideas are out of the ordinary. Many of the people he gets involved with are uncertain of his ideas at first, but they allow him to do what he wants. Fielder explains that he is there to help them and there are cameras filming, so he must be doing something right? I think that people also don’t want to come off as unwilling when there are cameras present, so they agree to do things. Even in other cases like in, *Who Is America?*, which Nathan Fielder wrote for. This show is about how Sacha Baron Cohen taps into people’s wildest fears and convinces them to experience things in hopes that he will see authenticity in people. The audience is show how gullible people can be in front of a camera. These documentary-style comedy programs show that people are willing to do things no matter what when there is a camera present and there are people who seem credible. In reality, these people are not there for the reasons listed. They are there for the experiment of what people are willing to do in situations. It’s important to touch on both the experience of the individual and the host and how different they can be, because one knows the truth while the other does not. In Laurie Ouellette’s book, “A Companion to Reality Television,” Brenda Weber writes, “makeover television takes these raw elements of fear, anxiety, and depression and seems to offer a palliative to their harms. Submit to the makeover and all will be well” (Weber, 2017: 378). This is shown in most episodes of *Nathan For You*. Tapping into these human emotions and feelings shows an honest interaction between Fielder and the people he is helping. People are willing to believe a man like Nathan Fielder because he

comes in with a camera crew and shows people that he is serious. Little do they know that this is a set up.

Nathan For You is the latest example of reality television because it satirizes the makeover concept. It is unique because it is a critique and spoof on reality. Nathan Fielder's execution and formula to his show is significant. Reality television is definitely a formula, but Fielder brings a new perspective where the audience and those who star in the show know different things. Baiting people is important to the formula that he executes. The audience is shown businesses that have gone under and are looking for help, so they follow in the show's footsteps in order to succeed. These plans of success that Fielder offers are often absurd and include a lot of detail and planning. This show gives businesses the opportunity to be shown on television and seek media attention, which is good for people who are struggling. This spoof on reality television leads to a more lasting impression and question. Things don't need to be real, they just need to seem real.

CHAPTER TWO

MAKEOVER

Modern day consumerism is focused on doing better, changing oneself, and leaving old habits behind. In season three, episode three of *Nathan For You*, Fielder puts this concept to the test. The episode, *The Movement*, heavily relies on spoofing makeover reality television. In this episode Nathan Fielder helps a moving company with their business, trying to create a new way of making a profit by tricking people into working for free. He sells the owner on this business plan by saying that he knows a lot about marketing. In order to do this Fielder must plan accordingly. He hires a bodybuilder, Jack Garbarino, to be the spokesperson of this fitness makeover to really sell that this works. Fielder plays on the makeover aspect when he discusses creating a book about Garbarino's story because it will be more believable for the public. People will consume this type of content because there seems to be merit within it. Fielder uses this to his advantage. In Chapter 22, "*Life Coaches, Style Mavens, and Design Gurus Everyday Experts on Reality Television*" by Tania Lewis, there is a discussion on media culture and consumerism. Lewis writes, "lifestyle experts and advisors have long been a feature of consumer and media culture - populating the pages of magazines, newspaper supplements, and self-help books appearing on early-morning breakfast television and on daytime talk shows" (Lewis, 2017: 403). Nathan Fielder uses these examples in his makeover of Jack Garbarino. He makes Jack the spokesperson for changing your life, he becomes the guru. In order to create this false identity, Fielder hires a ghostwriter to create the story behind Jack Garbarino's transformation. He claims that he has never been to a gym. Garbarino's book, *The Movement: How I Got This Body By*

Never Going To The Gym, is currently available for people to buy. With this credibility he ends up creating a media slide full of morning talk show appearances and fake before and after pictures. People are eating it up because it is on the news and gaining media attention. The book details Garbarino's makeover as a nonfiction book about his life but is completely fictional. Jack is committed to the movement. This creates a flood of requests for the moving company that Fielder is helping. People want to work for the company and get in shape because this man said this worked for him. His plan has worked. They start booking people for the moving company as a "free workout intensive" but in reality they are helping a real moving company for free. Nathan is there helping them make themselves over. After five full hours of moving, the people had no idea it was real labor and not a workout intensive. This whole puzzle of intensity and research takes the viewer on a strange loop of comedy, fake news, makeover, and consumerism. This episode is a critique on the makeover show for people who want to change their lives and the satire of fake news. It is also a critique on the endless things that one will do to be on television and believe someone because they are there working on a reality show. In the book, *A Companion to Reality Television*, Brenda Weber writes a chapter on the concept of makeover television. In Chapter 20, "Mapping the Makeover Maze: The Contours and Contradictions of Makeover Television," Weber writes, "If reality television has offered to step in and intervene in a blubbery nation through such shows as *The Biggest Loser*, *Celebrity Fit Club* (2002-present), *National Body Challenge* (2002), or *Weighing In* (2005), the larger mechanism of television stands accused and convicted of lulling the nation into a modern-day version of Tennyson's lotos-eaters, where pale faces stare with mild-eyed melancholy upon a rosy flame. Or, in other words, when the television is on, all of us zone off" (Weber, 2017: 378). People look to reality television to take a break from life and be consumed by these characters as a form of escape.

When it comes to the makeover theme on reality platforms, people look to it as advice. Especially if it comes down to bettering your lifestyle or one's body goals. Creating these shows were meant to make people believe that they could change their lives if others could. These inspiring stories can be true and seem real when you see it on reality television, but Nathan Fielder uses this theme to his advantage when writing the episode *The Movement*. By using pieces of other reality television makeover shows he can trick people into thinking that this is just another form of that. When in reality it is just a test of how far he can push this agenda and see how far someone is willing to take it.

Another part of the makeover theme that Fielder uses in his formula is the importance of late capitalism in all of this. Makeover reality shows have always been about one thing: becoming a better you, in whatever way that may look like. Makeover can mean many things; a makeover of your appearance, your business, your personal life, your finances, your view on the world, who you surround yourself with etc. It all centers around one thing, spending money to become a better you, and that is capitalism. Fielder's *Nathan For You* is said to be, "a Perfect Indictment of Late Capitalism" (Vice, K.T. Nelson). Makeover shows tend to push new items to the surface when discussing letting go of certain things to let new things come to you. There is a method to these shows, and it is to get you to buy into the market. To makeover something is synonymous with marketing, and Nathan Fielder uses this to see how far people are willing to go for success. In an article written for Vice, K.T. Nelson writes, "The underlying theme of all *Nathan for You* episodes is the futility of resisting corporate capitalism in American society. Episode after episode, Nathan concocts truly insane plots in his noble attempts to help struggling small business owners" (Vice, K.T. Nelson). Fielder is often seen trying to help small businesses out of debt and loss due to bigger corporations doing things better. These corporations often have

better business model's that keeps customers interested. He plays on these wants of consumers by using the boldest ideas that no one has done before in an effort to lead the business owner down a successful route. As a society we know how capitalism works. Small businesses tend to fail more than corporations, so Fielder tries to come up with another idea. In hopes to save a taxi cab service against corporate giants like Uber, Fielder plans to spread news in the taxi service of women giving birth in taxis. He thinks this will help this business owner get noticed, but this doesn't hold up in the end. Yes, it is an absurd business idea, but there is a method to Nathan's madness when coming up with these ideas. K.T. Nelson writes, "None of them actually see results from the stunts—and this is by design. Yes, the plans Nathan lays out are absurd, but their hyperbole highlights the greater point: There is no winning against the corporate giants" (Vice, K.T. Nelson). This shows the audience that small businesses cannot operate as they normally would because corporations will always suck you right back in. The cooperate world has a tight hold on smaller businesses.

CHAPTER THREE

FRAGILITY OF THE MEDIA

A large theme of *Nathan For You* is satirizing fake news. Revealing people is what Fielder is best at doing. There is a particular episode in season 2 episode 5 of his show that is called *Dumb Starbucks*. This episode aired in July of 2014 and is a tale of the fragility of mass media. We're introduced to a small cafe owner that needs help with his business, Nathan is here to help. Fielder tells this business owner that he needs to compete with bigger corporations. He needs brand recognition. Parody Law is introduced as a means of helping this cafe owner out, by turning Helio Cafe into the world's first parody Starbucks. This business owner isn't feeling up to the experience if he is the one getting sued. So in order for this to be legal, Nathan decides to research. He uses Wikipedia as an integral source of truth, but also meets with an attorney. There are so many holes in Fielder's plan but he makes sure to fill each hole legally so that this will work. He realizes that the only way this plan will work is if he becomes a well known parody artist. Fielder plans an open mic night to perform a parody of a song with the cafe owner Elias. We see Fielder planning parody sketches quickly in order to try and be well known, but Elias, the cafe owner, is less interested and is busy. There is a gallery opening that Fielder is creating where he is using corporate names and parody law and seems to attract real attention from people. These individuals are responding authentically even though the audience is aware that this is just meant to make *Dumb Starbucks* a credible business. Strangers are taking Fielder's work as a serious art piece. Fielder uses the concept of art to his advantage by staging a fake gallery opening. We see authentic experiences based on fakeness throughout this series, especially

because while producing this episode there was an immense amount of media coverage. The public latches right on to the idea of *Dumb Starbucks* when the business opens. Nathan Fielder creates this artificial reality that is meant to bring the media in, and it does to great lengths. Duping the media is done extremely well here because *Dumb Starbucks* has everyone in the area discussing it and even appears on major news outlets. People came in thinking it was a real Starbucks, but it is legally an art gallery and not a real coffee shop. This marketing effort worked unexpectedly well. The media started latching onto this and it is exactly what Fielder wanted to happen, because now it will be successful. Within 24 hours, *Dumb Starbucks* became a national sensation. People were rumoring that it might be Banksy. This marketing plan is a sensation, but with that comes with negative aspects. The Los Angeles Health Department shut Fielder down, and he fell into being at odds with Elias due to the business. Fielder explains that he became someone that he never wanted to be. He received the success he had hoped for, but he still felt bad in the end. This mockery of Starbucks made him lose the opportunity to help the Helio Cafe in a real way. This episode was still a success though because it showed how fragile the media can be because they will cover anything that people are talking about.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MEDIA LOVES CONTROVERSY

Welcome to another half-assed makeover episode starring Nathan fielder explaining who he is. A top business school graduate with great grades, showing us before and after shots of past clients he has had. He promises that he is here to help your small business in this competitive world. In the first episode of season one, *Yogurt Shop*, Nathan introduces us to a frozen yogurt business he is helping. Here we are introduced to a young man who seems a bit shy. The yogurt shop is empty, showing us that it must need some help. Nathan questions the young man if he has seen him before. This young man, Nick Bautista, does not recognize him. Fielder proceeds to tell him that he was undercover the day before. He had come by and scoped out the shop wearing a wig and beard. Quick shots, back and forth to spice things up, we are shown Nathan in full undercover gear. Nick doesn't know what to think but just goes with it. He is there to receive advice from someone who tells him he'll help. Nathan is in control of the narrative and shows us his mission and plan while narrating the show. We see the business owner's reaction to this plan, which includes having a poop flavored yogurt that people will want to try. Nick is confused and not so sure about this idea. Nathan then defends it claiming that, "the media responds to controversy" (Fielder *Yogurt Shop*). He uses this as a way of getting him behind the idea. Believing that poo-flavored yogurt would make the news and land in the paper, it would get people to come to the shop to try it. Not such a bad idea when you think of it from this perspective, but still what is this saving your business idea? Tapping into people's curiosity, that's what Nathan is achieving. Nathan claims that it could bring hundreds of thousands of people in

just to try the flavor. This will take some convincing for the business owner. Nathan narrates that he has to sell the idea to Nick in order for this to work smoothly. He usually has to do this because these ideas make no sense. His plan starts with research online. Who would create this poop flavor? Who would want to? Who would agree to this? The company Nathan finds is not allowed to say “no” to any flavor, so this plan may just work. A week later, he ends up picking up this flavor from a business called Gold Coast Ingredients. Nathan begins asking again and again, making sure that this is edible for humans. To his surprise it is completely edible. Trial and error now. His plan begins. But wait. It doesn’t start just yet. Nathan begins a blind taste test with three random strangers he has found. Poo flavored frozen yogurt, but no one is aware of it. There is an older man that has a disgusted look on his face when he tastes it, looking disgusted. There is then a woman who explains that it doesn’t taste good. The two of them start comparing what they think this flavor is: one says peppermint and another says licorice. Another guy says “no it’s got some other familiar flavor,” while closing his eyes and thinking deeply with a grin. Nathan asks her what it tastes like and the woman says poo! While giggling. He then starts to question her response and asks “what are you basing that on? It’s amazing how quick you got it.” He keeps questioning her that maybe she’s tried it because it’s based on real poo. The woman makes it clear that she has never tasted it before. Nathan reassures her, “even by accident or something? It’s okay, it’s totally fine if you have.” She is laughing and assures him that no, she has never tasted poop. The other two people there are looking uncomfortable and the shot is zooming in and out of people’s faces. He then shows the flavor to the owner, he is disgusted, but says he’d try it for a day. Fielder decides to hire a publicist who is one of LA’s best to help him. He wants to see if he could get an article in the paper. This publicist, Tyler Barnett, hates the idea. He claims that he should change the entire campaign. Explaining that there are so many other ways

of marketing instead of this idea. The shots are back and forth of Nathan and Barnett's argument. Their conversation goes from Barnett insulting Fielder's business marketing plan to talking about whether Nathan is a penis expert. They argue back and forth about cars and penises, then Nathan starts the narration again. He narrates that the publicist didn't want to take him on. Instead, he tries a different route to get the word out. Nathan is standing on the street pretending to be on the phone with someone and drops things to get others attention. He acts helpless saying his hands are full when they are obviously not. Then uses this situation to bring up that he heard about this yogurt shop has poo flavored yogurt. Telling strangers to check it out. Narrating that it was working and people were flocking to the store. People did start to come into the store more often and Fielder believes that his plan has taken off. No matter if people liked it or not, they were still filling up the store. The editing is filled with interviews of people who tried the new flavor and they look disgusted. To Nathan, in the world of business it matters that people are still talking about it. In the end he gives up on the idea. He tells the manager of the frozen yogurt shop that it really isn't a good look to have something poo related in a food establishment. The awkwardness of this interaction is palpable. The guy seems in shock as if Fielder has flipped the script now.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BEGINNING OF *NATHAN FOR YOU*

A question, a cry for help, what is the meaning of *Nathan for You* and why would anyone watch this? Nathan Fielder is desperately trying to connect with people on his show. Awkwardness presents itself in the shape of Nathan. For some background, this is my go-to show when I am feeling down. I think when a show falls under this umbrella it is important to discuss. Nathan takes the viewer on this scavenger-like experience, making you fall into a path of intense planning and viewing pleasure. Satire like this can help people feel better when things feel dark. Nathan Fielder is so painfully awkward in his experience with strangers that it is palpable. He comes up with ludicrous ideas that are meant to help a business flourish. In other ways it is a show about Nathan and the role he fills. The first few clips in the opening moments give us some background on who Fielder is. These clips show Nathan saying he has great grades and is an accomplished graduate from a top school. It is then contrasted with a different narrative, with a photograph of his poor grades that appears on the screen. This “fake it till you make it” attitude is shown through Nathan lying to people about his background and who he really is. The audience also has no idea who Nathan Fielder is because there is no distinction between his character on the show and the real Nathan. The small businesses featured on *Nathan For You* all tell stories of human interaction and the marketing world. Where if someone seems qualified enough one will believe them. This shows us that people are willing to participate in a game of suspicion because they derive from it aesthetic pleasure. The audience is aware that it is fake, but it is also real. It is almost like a game of finding out what happens, because one already knows

the conclusion that it's fake. Reality television taps into the desire to see what happens, even if audiences already imagine the outcome.

Early days of *Nathan For You* were made on the platform YouTube, by Nathan Fielder. These early clips were short deadpan comedies that now have millions of views by fans of the show. Reality shows in general have a fake uneasiness to them that is scripted. It is hard to tell with this show because there is a new sense of uneasiness. Since the camera has the ultimate authority we can see how people operate in a space they are unsure of. Fielder is someone who is meant to be the Gordon Ramsay of *Kitchen Nightmares* type. Instead of taking a real dramatic turn to help failing businesses, Fielder works to use satire and strange ideas in order to help businesses. This type of model works to take a positive creative spin on how to run a business even though it is not real. By telling people he is qualified, they in turn believe him and don't fight with his ideas too often. It shows us what people are willing to do in front of a camera and how people and things operate in space. This program is meant to be about moments of human connection and the theme of Fielder desperately trying to connect to strangers. This attempt at human connection makes the viewer uneasy and creates feelings of a prank show. Except unlike real prank shows, there is no ending that calls it a prank. The situations that occur on the show could be considered to be pranks even though there is no "got ya" moment like on other prank shows. It is unique what Fielder finds from the people he interviews for the show. There is a lot lost in translation when it comes to what people are aware of. There are people who know different things about the situation that is being filmed. This is integral for Fielder's plan, since they all are experiencing different things for different reasons. The complexity of this show is shown throughout later episodes, where you are taken on a puzzle of intensity.

CHAPTER SIX

THE LOOPHOLE

Fielder finds a loophole in the law where people can smoke inside if they are putting on a theatrical performance. This is an important look into the complexity of his plans for the show. This episode is called, *Smokers Allowed*, in season 3 episode 5 of *Nathan For You*. Fielder uses this makeover episode to help a bar owner, Ellen, get more customers; he incorporates smoking laws in their favor. Ellen explains that smoking restrictions have caused the bar to lose money. In California law, one can smoke indoors if it is a “theatrical production, integral to the plot.” So with this in mind, Fielder has people legally smoke in the bar. People start smoking freely as a performance in Nathan’s eyes, but they don’t know that it is a performance. This is playing on how art can be so open, it is up to a person what art is and how it is interpreted. Fielder uses this to his advantage and kind of makes fun of performance art. He invites an audience to witness this “play,” but everyone in this situation knows different things. They are all aware that they are being filmed for a show, but don’t know the reality of it. Those smoking think that it is just allowed, those watching in the corner think that it is a new play, and Ellen thinks it is to help her business. The audience and Nathan Fielder are the only ones who know the truth. Fielder is playing upon people's willingness to participate when there is a camera present. The audience goes love it, explaining in detail that it is incredibly profound. These ladies thought that it had merit and was a beautiful experience. This fake play that is happening shows the audience how easy it is to believe what is in front of you. To make this an official legal theatrical production, Fielder does more research. He finds a woman working in the theater department at a community

college nearby. This woman believes it has theatrical merit, explaining that it is a slice of life theater and compares it to famous playwrights. This is a real play based on fakeness. this demonstrates the plot of the show. *Nathan For You* is meant to show people that if there is a camera present it has the ultimate authority and people are willing to participate no matter if the knowledge they know is real. They're the butt of the joke and people get a thrill from watching this on television. Like most reality shows, people make themselves into whoever the camera wants them to be. At the end of this episode, the business owner did not end up liking the idea that her bar is now a theatre. Ellen decides to give up on Fielder. He is shown to feel discouraged, but people said they loved the play. Hearing this brings Fielder to tears. This episode in particular shows the endless risks that Fielder is willing to take to save a business with his ideas. We see what people will go along with, where the ideas end up, and if it was all worth it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Nathan For You allows for a new look into the realm of reality television and what it means. People look to commodify themselves when the opportunity arises, and reality television is a prime example of that. The authority of the camera throughout Nathan Fielder's series is important in understanding what people are willing to do. The episodes *The Movement*, *Dumb Starbucks*, *Smokers Allowed*, and *Yogurt Shop* all show us about human nature and human connection. There is a difference between what the audience knows and what the people on his show know. What is real and what is told to them. This is something that is unique to Fielder's formula of the show. It is a unique show in this way because it allows for the audience to connect with the guests on the show while also connecting to Nathan Fielder's outrageous ideas. Comedy, fake news, makeover, and consumerism are all vital in understanding how this show works. Together, these four episodes give a look into what people are willing to believe in order to help their business, even if the ideas are out of the ordinary. *Nathan For You* is the reality of how people will act in a situation given to them. The camera's authority allows Fielder's authority because if he says he is there as a business man they are more likely to believe his credibility with a camera crew present. This is an important show in the context of reality television history. Fielder uses past reality themes to come up with marketing strategies and mixes it with satire to create a comedy. This is something that we do not see often in the reality television realm.

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