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Liminal Losers: Breakdowns and Breakthroughs in Reality Television's Biggest Hit

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LIMINAL LOSERS: BREAKDOWNS AND BREAKTHROUGHS
IN REALITY TELEVISION'S BIGGEST HIT

by

Caitlin Rickert

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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LIMINAL LOSERS: BREAKDOWNS AND BREAKTHROUGHS IN REALITY TELEVISION'S BIGGEST HIT

Caitlin Rickert, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2013

This study explores how *The Biggest Loser*, a popular television reality program that features a weight-loss competition, reflects and magnifies established stereotypes about obese individuals. The show, which encourages contestants to lose weight at a rapid pace, constructs a broken/fixed dichotomy that oversimplifies the complex issues of obesity and health.

My research is a semiotic analysis of the eleventh season of the program (2011), focusing on three pairs of contestants (or “couples” teams) that each represent a different level of commitment to the program’s values. Specifically, I focus on dramatic “breakdown” moments in which these contestants are disciplined by the show for becoming emotionally fraught, overwhelmed, or antagonistic during their weight-loss journeys and “breakthrough” moments in which they are celebrated for overcoming an obstacle, proving their worth, or triumphing in a specific way. Such moments provide the most explicit examples of the ideologies that the show endorses, which associate obesity with personal problems such as poor choices, laziness, and emotional baggage, ignoring cultural factors that may have an impact on body weight.

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Caitlin Rickert

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
Obesity and Weight Loss in Popular Media.....	6
Reality Television as Surveillance and Manipulation.....	9
Reality Television and Self-Transformation	12
METHODOLOGY.....	27
Cultural Studies and Semiotics.....	27
Analyzing <i>The Biggest Loser</i>	32
ANALYSIS.....	36
Introducing the Damaged.....	36
Overview of Findings.....	48
Breakdowns.....	57
Confronting the Past.....	58
Confronting the Future.....	64
Committing to Change.....	70
Breakthroughs.....	80
Redemption.....	81
Rebirth.....	87

Table of Contents - continued

CONCLUSION.....102

APPENDICES.....106

 A. Analysis of Breakdown and Breakthrough Moments.....106

 B. Spreadsheet of Breakdowns and Breakthroughs.....110

 C. Signifiers utilized during Breakdown and Breakthrough moments.....111

 D. Values on display during breakdown and breakthrough moments.....112

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....113

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Shot of exposed stomachs from season introduction.....	39
2. “Unknown” trainers’ bodies.....	40
3. Footage of Arthur at home.....	42
4. The iconic <i>Biggest Loser</i> scale.....	43
5. Bob and Jillian confront Arthur during “breakdown”.....	59
6. Bob holds Arthur’s hand.....	60
7. A personal moment between Jillian, Dan, and Don.....	63
8. Olivia cries, worrying about her health.....	66
9. Dr. H shows Dan the date of his death.....	67
10. Jesse, Arthur, and Jessica in Dr. H’s “office”.....	68
11. Bob and Jillian address the contestants.....	72
12. Dan and Don share a smirk.....	73
13. Dan and Don weigh-in, revealing their nine pound gain.....	75
14. Don’s mouth is blurred as he rants, prompted by Jillian.....	77
15. Don and Irene weigh-in, revealing another weight gain.....	78
16. Jillian helps Hannah do a back bend.....	82
17. Jillian comforts Arthur.....	85
18. Arthur and his team celebrate his twenty pounds weight loss.....	86
19. Arthur’s homecoming “reveal” during week nine.....	88
20. Hannah plays volleyball during a visit home.....	89

List of Figures - continued

21. Hannah bungee jumps off Auckland Tower in New Zealand.....	90
22. Hannah and Olivia share a moment together in New Zealand.....	92
23. Hannah’s father reacts to her makeover.....	95
24. Olivia sings on the scale after losing 100 pounds.....	96
25. Hannah “breaks through” her old broken body.....	97
26. The three female finalists with host Alison Sweeney.....	98
27. Olivia and Hannah embrace after the winner is revealed.....	100

INTRODUCTION

America is arguably a fat-phobic society, but it has not always been that way. The “problem” of excess weight entered the public consciousness little more than a century ago. Peter Stearns’ *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (2002) tracks the emergence of America’s disgust for fat. Between 1890 and 1910, the fight against adipose tissue began for middle-class America. It was also during this period that the word “diet” began to take on its association with weight loss, rather than specifying a food regimen that would remedy illness.

In the nineteenth century, particularly after the 1830s, plumpness was fashionable. A full figure was linked to successful motherhood, and doctors campaigning against nervousness reiterated the importance of “solid weight” (Stearns, p. 9). According to Woolner (2010), during the 1860s-1870s, fleshy bodies fed a hedonism that came into vogue after the traumatic, lean years of the Civil War (p. 131). However, in the early decades of the twentieth century, an ideal of slimness emerged and slowly moved into the mainstream. A number of factors catalyzed this shift in physical ideals. The Industrial Age was focused on efficiency. In such a context, fat was unneeded surplus. Slim, strong bodies echoed the mechanization of the period. Fashion came ready to wear, in standard sizes, helping to create what could be considered a “normal” range of body sizes. Those who didn’t fit in were left behind, or criticized for weighing/slowing down the collective (Woolner, 2010, p. 132). The body itself became a site of consumption, and advertising for body

improvement products became common in popular publications such as newspapers and magazines. Dieting also served as compensatory discipline for consumerist excess. Thin individuals who spent their money on extravagances could still consider themselves physically “disciplined.” Print culture was full of photographs of female models, and “drawings of the tall, brunette, athletic, Gibson girl were found in magazines from the 1880s until World War I” (Woolner, p. 141). Models at the turn of the century departed from the voluptuous vixen ideal of the 1880s in favor of a slick, slim, and modern bodily aesthetic that would eventually become iconic of the flapper. Also, during this time period, Freudian psychology entered public discourse. Followers of Freud argued that mental health was dependent on a satisfying sex life. This implied that one had to be in peak physical condition to be sexually attractive, and thus, being fit was a necessary precondition for happiness and fulfillment.

Hatred of fat continued to intensify throughout the early twentieth century, although the explosion of diet paraphernalia in the United States after World War II eclipsed all prior experience (Stearns, 2002, p. 106). Diet books became a staple of the bestseller list. Food substitutes and non-caloric sugar substitutes were introduced to the market. Chains of weight-reduction companies such as Weight Watchers emerged across the country. It is interesting to note, however, that during the post-World War II baby boom, cultural approval of motherhood went up. This coincided with a short-lived relaxation of weight constraints on women, with fashion favoring a fuller bust. Wolf (1991) notes the regression to fuller figures during this decade,

explaining that many women were in domestic seclusion (and therefore allowed some leeway in their body size). This did not last, however. Slender models took over as fashionable ideals in the 1960s as females once again moved into the public sphere, clamoring for equal rights in the Women's Movement.

In the early twenty-first century, the notion that being slender equates with being successful is dominant. Slim male and female figures populate the mainstream media, especially on television, while overweight or obese individuals are marginalized or mocked. In contemporary American society, fat signifies failure – unless one is trying to *do* something about it, to redeem one's body and one's self, especially given current concerns about our nation's rising incidence of obesity. Perhaps the most dramatic – and public – venue for such redemption is reality television, where participants can transform their overweight bodies in front of millions of encouraging and approving viewers. According to Dowd (2006), reality television is “a genre of programming that, whether scripted or not, offers its viewers an ostensibly real depiction of both individuals and issues” (as cited in Orbe, 2008). The production of reality programs has surged over the last decade; by the end of 2010, nearly 600 reality series had aired on American networks (Barnhart, 2010), accounting for about forty percent of prime time programming. Reality programs are popular with audiences and they are often less costly for producers, who can bypass expensive unionized actors in favor of ordinary people who are eager to appear on national television (Collins, 2008).

An increasingly popular type of reality programming focuses on obese individuals trying to shed unwanted pounds. These shows can feature celebrities or ordinary citizens, working alone or in teams, and include *Celebrity Fit Club* (2005-2010), *Fat March* (2007), *Ruby* (2008-2011), *Dance Your Ass Off* (2009-2010), *Kirstie Alley's Big Life* (2010), *I Used to be Fat* (2010-2011), *Heavy* (2011), and *Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss Edition* (2011-present). The most popular of these programs, *The Biggest Loser*, premiered in the United States in 2004 and now has spin-offs in many different countries. Contestants not only participate to lose weight, but are pitted against one another to claim the title of "Biggest Loser," which comes with a large cash reward. The program is currently in its thirteenth season on NBC (two seasons are produced in most years) and regularly draws approximately ten million viewers each time it airs. It has also spawned video games for various entertainment systems, as well as "The Biggest Loser Club," a website that viewers can join for a monthly fee to get recipes, expert advice, and community support. A spin-off series, *Losing it with Jillian*, in which one of the personal trainers from *The Biggest Loser* visited a family for a week and helped change their unhealthy habits, aired in 2010.

The most emotionally charged moments of these weight-loss transformation shows, especially *The Biggest Loser*, are what I term "breakdowns" and "breakthroughs": instances in which participants either encounter or surmount obstacles in their body improvement journeys. These moments highlight and reveal

the ideological system that *The Biggest Loser* endorses, a system in which contestants' attempts to eliminate excess weight are valorized. As these subjects fail and succeed, tire out and triumph, break down and break through, their emotions serve as pedagogical aides, encouraging the audience to "undertake surveillance of their own and others' bodies in order to address a so-called 'obesity epidemic' sweeping across western society" (Rich, 2011, p. 3). Since these breakdown and breakthrough moments are arguably the most dramatic parts of the show, they are likely to be the moments that viewers will remember. They also create a binary opposition that structures the master narrative of the show. The tension between breakdown and breakthrough, fat and fit, loser and winner, is a driving force throughout the season.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how these breakdown and breakthrough moments in *The Biggest Loser* may reinforce or establish stereotypes about obese individuals. According to Barthes (1972), the goal of a semiotic study is to understand how signs pick up connotative meanings, which are naturalized through redundancy (Orbe, 1998). This study will consider how the signification process in breakdowns and breakthroughs codes emotional outbursts as either failures or triumphs. Using a critical semiotic framework, I will deconstruct the way(s) in which the images, language, and other elements of these moments serve to naturalize the denigration of obesity and obese individuals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Obesity and Weight Loss in Popular Media

America's discomfort with fat plays out in various ways across both the public and private sphere. The most visible arena, however, is in the media. Television, magazines, films, and especially advertisements echo the idea that to be thin is to be successful, while "obesity is frequently presented in public discourse within an existing moral framework which links [it with] illness [and] moral failure" (Townend, 2009, p. 171). The media has also helped highlight (and construct) the current "obesity epidemic" by providing continual coverage of the "crisis." News reports on obesity have been shown to contribute to anti-fat attitudes in members of the public (McClure, Puhl, & Heuer, 2011).

While there has been growing coverage of the obesity epidemic by mainstream news outlets, representation of obese individuals in other areas of the media has been diminishing. According to Park (2005), content analysis has shown that since the 1960s, and especially since the 1970s, the size of bodies, especially female bodies, has decreased continuously in virtually all media outlets. Interestingly, the inordinate amount of attention paid to the importance of having a slim figure is generally more prevalent in media featuring or targeting women than in media foregrounding males. For example, females in television sitcoms are significantly thinner than male characters, and the subjects of weight, food, and the body, are dealt with more frequently in women's magazines than in men's magazines (Silverstein,

Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986). Not surprisingly, the emphasis on female weight control is reflected by the prominence of female spokespersons for weight loss companies such as Jenny Craig, Weight Watchers, Trimspa, Nutrisystem, and Slim Fast. Celebrity endorsements along with real-life testimonials are dominant in weight loss commercials, juxtaposing the glamor of stardom with the accomplishment of perfecting the self.

In the 1980s, the diet industry, pressured by the government, concerned physicians, and high-powered celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey and Susan Powter, was forced to acknowledge that most individuals end up regaining all or most of the weight they lose on fad diets (Bishop, 2001). Torrens (1998) asserts that diet product makers have since co-opted ideas from feminism in an attempt to convince women to buy their products. Women are told that they control their bodies and their destinies, and that happiness can be achieved by controlling their weight and maintaining their appearance. In 2001, Blaine and McElroy identified not only weightist, but also sexist comments/contexts in weight-loss infomercials. The researchers concluded that there is an explicit message that weight loss will make an individual happy, and that the “before and after images also trade on the belief that heavy people [especially overweight women] are emotionally maladjusted and unattractive” (p. 355).

Weight loss is often framed as a women’s issue, which can have a critical impact on young girls. Hobbs, Broder, Pope, and Rowe (2006) conducted a study of forty-two females ages nine to seventeen, to see if the participants recognized

common types of deceptive claims in ads from television and women's magazines promoting weight-loss products. The girls were asked open-ended questions, such as, "How do you feel when you look at this ad?" (p. 723). While some participants exhibited critical thinking skills in decoding some of the deceptive claims, none of the participants recognized the omission of health risks and dangers associated with products containing potentially harmful chemicals. Also, "few girls in this study understood the economic factors involved in weight loss advertising, including issues related to branding and market share" (p. 727). This study is relevant in that it examines how adolescent girls, who are often heavily exposed to the media, process weight loss advertising. Young girls are taught that women's bodies are places of public scrutiny, and that in order to be socially acceptable, their bodies must fit within certain social standards.

Sung-Yeon Park (2005) explores the compounding nature of media influence, as the indirect effects can be just as crucial in shaping individual's ideas about societal standards. As Park notes, the presumed influence model hypothesizes that individuals do not always believe that the media affects their ideas, but the perception that it frames others' opinions is enough to change their own attitudes and/or behaviors. Park explains that it is not only media influence, but perceived media influence on others that reinforces thinness as a standard in American popular culture (p. 596). For example, even when a teenage girl believes that she can be beautiful without losing weight, she thinks that her peers will only perceive her as attractive if

she looks like a celebrity that they admire. As I will show in the next section, reality television programs are one of contemporary culture's principal means of conveying/reinforcing the importance – and the standards – of physical attractiveness.

Reality Television as Surveillance and Manipulation

Although reality television has become a staple of many networks over the last decade, the concept is not as new as it may seem. Talk shows, as well as court television shows, were originally labeled “Actuality Programming.” One of reality television's most popular prototypes was the show *Candid Camera*, which first aired in the 1940s. According to Clissold (2004), during the Cold War military surveillance was a source of anxiety, both social and political. *Candid Camera* made surveillance less threatening, and even entertaining. The creator, Alan Funt, decided to stage situations wherein the subject could act heroically [for example, performing a rescue or donating to charity], reinforcing American ideals of courage while also exploiting Cold War technology (Penzhorn and Pitout, 2007).

Pecora (2002) notes in *The Culture of Surveillance* that since the publication of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), academics have discussed surveillance as an instrument of social control. Borrowing Jeremy Bentham's idea of the “Panopticon,” an idea for a prison in which a single guard would be able to view many prisoners while remaining unseen, Foucault argued that if prison authorities could convince residents that they were constantly being watched, the residents would

be inclined to act in socially appropriate and approved ways. However, phenomena such as reality television and, more recently, online public profiles, imply that the public may also view surveillance as “a populist path to self-affirmation and a ready-made source of insight into the current norms of group behavior” (Pecora, 2002, p. 348). This more accepting attitude towards surveillance emerged in the 1980s, and especially after the events of September 11th, 2001. Pecora asserts that many individuals are now comforted by the idea that they are being watched, and uses the example of voluntary self-surveillance on a personal web cam to support his argument. For a growing number of people in contemporary Western society, surveillance has become less a regulative mechanism of authority (either feared as tyrannous or welcomed as protection) than a path to personal connections and popularity.

Surveillance has been a central feature of all reality television. The 1973 television series *An American Family* is another prototype for the genre. *Candid Camera* presented segments of ordinary people being placed in extraordinary situations where they were being filmed without their knowledge. *An American Family* gave an insider view of the unfolding real-life drama of the changing values of American families, chronicling the dissolution of marriage, as well as an older son's gay lifestyle. The late 1980s to early 1990s brought about the first small “wave” of reality television. In 1987, *Unsolved Mysteries* premiered, followed soon by *America's Most Wanted* in 1988, *Cops* and *Rescue 911* in 1989, and *America's*

Funniest Home Videos in 1990. This tiny (by today's standards) boom in reality television can be traced back to the writers' strike of 1988. MTV's *The Real World* moved the format ahead in 1992 by staging an environment in which "reality" could occur. Oullette (2008) notes that the government had recently relaxed rules on product placement as well. This allowed networks to collect payment from companies whose brand-name products the "ordinary people" and their roommates would consume on air.

While *The Real World* is still in production, many scholars cite the premier of *Survivor* (2000-present) as the true beginning of the current boom in reality television. During October 1999, USA Today reported CBS's plan to drop a group of ordinary people on a tiny island, and film them fending for themselves. Producer Mark Burnett told the publication that it was a human experiment in which winning and losing would involve nothing but group dynamics (Huff, 2006, p. 3). Huff (2006) credits *Survivor*, with all of its buzz and its format of creating an environment of competition amongst "ordinary people," as truly beginning a "reality revolution" on American television.

Since then, the competition reality show format has evolved and spawned hits on traditional and cable television networks. Programs like *America's Next Top Model* (2003-present), *Top Chef* (2006-present), *American Idol* (2002-present), and *Last Comic Standing* (2003-2010) are just a few programs that offer ordinary people an opportunity to prove their talent and worth on national television by competing

against others with the same dream. Another popular format is the competition dating show. Drawing from past series like *The Dating Game* from 1966, ABC's *The Bachelor* (2002-present) and sister hit *The Bachelorette* (2003-2005; 2008-present) had contestants vie for the affections of and a marriage proposal from a single man or woman. Other dating shows followed, many focusing heavily on physical contact, skimpy clothing, and hot tubs. Reality television targeted the young adult market that networks had been striving to reach. This demographic had previously shunned comedies and dramas, but reality television's short runs drew viewers who would not commit to a regular series (Huff, 2006, p. 20). The low production costs and high profitability of reality television made the genre irresistible for producers. Soon celebrities started participating in reality television, finding solace, exposure, fame, and career redemption through the genre (Huff, 2006, p. 45). Along with social experiments, competitions, dating shows, and shows focused on celebrities came makeover shows, which promised to transform ordinary people into exemplars of beauty and success. That promise of self-transformation has consistently lured participants who are anxious to remake themselves and viewers who are keen to witness the process vicariously, perhaps as a first step in their own "makeover journey."

Reality Television and Self-Transformation

As reality programming has saturated the airwaves, several subgenres have

emerged, including “self-improvement” or “makeover” programs. This category is of particular interest because it highlights the dynamics of transformation, especially in terms of who needs to be remade, why an individual has transgressed social norms, and how a state of acceptability can be achieved. Just as appearing on reality television transforms “ordinary people” into celebrities overnight, makeovers on reality television transform everything from an individual’s parenting style (*Super Nanny* [2005-2011], *Honey, We’re Killing the Kids* [2005-2007]), car (*Pimp My Ride* [2004-2007]), and home (*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* [2003-2012]), to her clothing (*What Not to Wear* [2003-present]), body (*The Biggest Loser* [2004-present]), and even her face (*The Swan* [2004-2005]).

Galit Ferguson’s *The Family on Reality Television: Who’s Shaming Whom?* (2010) explores the connection between discourses of parenting, shame and worth, class, race, gender, transformation and expertise in family-help shows. On the surface, these programs are offering parents new ways of disciplining children and keeping order in their homes. However, the subtext shows viewers correct ways of behaving in the best interests of social order. This is done through surveillance, self-transformation, and self-management. The family is the agency entrusted by society to socialize children into what is appropriate or inappropriate. Although changes prompted by reality shows are restricted to individual choices involving television viewing, diet, and other behaviors, the transformations that are encouraged and enacted contain “judgments about social class and self-comportment” (p. 92). While

audiences may derive entertainment from watching the spectacle of out-of-control families, they are in turn being taught to turn such surveillance inward, watching themselves in their private moments.

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, another makeover reality television program in the United States, ran on Bravo from 2003 to 2007. Vargas (2010) describes the program as one of the network's most profitable shows. It won two out of four Emmy nominations for which it was nominated, and brought commercial success to "the Fab Five," the sophisticated team of gay men responsible for making over a different individual in each episode. The subject is transformed by experts in food and wine, decoration, fashion, culture, and grooming. Fundamentally, Vargas (2010) points out, the subject is taught how to be a better consumer. The show is driven by consumption, and is manipulated by the interest of the brands that buy advertising time (p. 164). This is true for a variety of makeover reality programs. Audience members are inspired by the transformation of the subject on the television and delight in the "new and improved," leading them to believe that they too can be fixed up through consumption of the right products. Or, as Tarrant (2010) writes, "We are promised that by changing our hair, our partner, or our interior decor, we can change our experience of life itself" (p.171). The issue is that the "changes" offered through reality programs that feature makeovers are often superficial, and options like spiritual contemplation, economic parity, and political participation are not addressed.

Highlighting the British show *Honey, We're Killing the Kids*, Ferguson

explores the use of class mobility as a motivator for proper behavior (2010). The program focuses on a single family, and shows the parents a projection of how their children will or could look when they are 40 if they continue with their unhealthy lifestyle. Using this digital technology, parents are shocked and horrified to see how their children may appear: slovenly and unkempt, overweight, and presumably unemployed, garbed in dirty, casual clothing. However, at the end of the episode, if the family has successfully changed its lifestyle and begun eating better and getting more exercise, the parents are shown a new projection of their children. This time, the children are slim, smiling, and dressed for success. This program, in particular, equates “good habits” with advancement in social class, and suggests that “bad habits” lead to obesity, laziness, and poverty. “There is a visually communicated meritocracy, in which if the right foods are eaten and a restrained familial decorum established, “‘success’ (economic, bodily) is achieved” (p. 100).

However, scholars such as Oullette believe that, although reality television does tend to be dominated by market demands, it is possible to use the format to exemplify civic duty and problem solving. Oullette and Hay (2008) apply critical theories of governmentality to reality television. “Our focus is on the neoliberal present, by which we mean the bipartisan effort to reinvent government (particularly in the United States) and to remodel the welfare state through dispersed networks of privatization and self-responsibilization” (p. 473). In what they deem the “lost-welfare” era in the United States, they argue that the government now relies more on

the private than the public sector to produce good citizens. One example of this is the use of television, and more specifically reality television, as a kind of “self-help” vehicle for citizens who need the motivation and the know-how to improve their lives. Makeover programs, in this context, can be considered in terms of “life intervention” (p. 475) and serve as a mobilization of resources to help citizens overcome a plethora of issues. They guide and shape citizens by addressing risks and solutions.

Problems related to finance, children, unemployment, addiction, hygiene, health, and fitness have all been tackled by makeover programs on reality television. During an event inaugurating the President’s Fitness Program in 2002, for example, then president George W. Bush called on non-profit advocates, corporate sponsors, and television networks to “help Americans live longer, better, and healthier lives” (Ouellette and Hay, 2008, p. 477). Two years later, NBC responded with *The Biggest Loser*, a reality television weight-loss program pitting participants against each other in a competition to see who could lose the most body fat. Along with the program came an interactive website giving viewers information about exercise tips and healthy recipes. Ouellette and Hay argue that this demonstrates how makeover reality television programs can offer viewers more than just entertainment: they can teach viewers methods to make themselves “better” as well. However, while watching a subject transform can be motivational and moving, the audience is also being shown that having excess fat or a dilapidated home or misbehaving children represents

failure. For individuals at home watching weight-loss programs, it seems as if shedding pounds and transforming one's life is possible for anyone who wants it badly enough. Unfortunately, this can lead to the assumption that those who struggle with their weight are just not trying hard enough to get themselves under control, reinforcing stereotypes of fat people as lazy and weak willed.

The Biggest Loser presents contestants competing in challenges and being weighed in a manner that serves to highlight the enormous size of their bodies, exploiting our society's fear of fat, especially female fat. Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991) explores how idolizing a particular physique harms women; specifically, the book criticizes the ideology of beauty as "the last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control those women whom second wave feminism would have otherwise made relatively uncontrollable" (pp. 10-11). The "beauty myth" is the idea that there is an objective standard of beauty that exists, and that women should pursue it. This beauty ideal is used to psychologically weaken women who have been empowered through advancements in equal rights. For example, as working women have succeeded, the question of what the serious woman in the workplace should look like has arisen repeatedly. In fact, women who have made considerable headway in their careers may be required to meet a "professional beauty qualification" (p. 27). Most visibly, broadcasting has become an example of a profession where young, beautiful women often sit beside their older male co-anchors, who sport wrinkles and grey hair. While male anchors have been

seen as mature and more credible as they get older, female anchors have often been deemed “less attractive” and released from employment as they age.

Reality television demonstrates that the same market logic exists today. “Ordinary people” who don’t emulate beauty ideals are not celebrated for their uniqueness. These individuals are instead given the “opportunity” to transform themselves on national television - into something more acceptable, respectable, and even admirable. On a more extreme makeover program called *The Swan*, participants are transformed not only by weight loss with a personal trainer, but by dental work and plastic surgery. The audience can watch as an “Average Jane” evolves into the epitome of hegemonic femininity. Contestants are made over from head-to-toe, with hair extensions and glamorous dresses, and then participate in a beauty pageant at the end of the season. The rhetoric used in the program asserts that these women have suffered because of their inadequate appearance, experiencing low self-esteem as well as a plethora of other misfortunes. Thus, the transformation into a “swan” is justified as the only solution to a life of despair. The fact that this is a reinforcement of normative discourse of the body and weight that assumes a hierarchy in which certain weights, sizes, and shapes are judged superior to others (Marwick, 2010, p. 256) is never highlighted or discussed.

The Swan serves as an extreme example of body work as a means of validation. However, programs with more mainstream success, like *The Biggest Loser*, feature radical weight loss as a means of creating a socially acceptable body.

And while makeover programs in the past typically featured and were marketed towards women, men's bodies are now fair game as well. For example, the success of the makeover program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* shows that men are also being told that there is a "better" way of presenting themselves. Instead of specifically focusing on the expectation for women to be socially attractive, men are now held accountable for dressing well and maintaining personal grooming. Both men and women appear on weight-loss programs together, confessing that they are uncomfortable with their appearance as obese individuals.

Reality television weight loss programs have been lauded for their ability to inspire an obese nation to make healthier decisions (Borrell, 2011). However, there are also critiques of some of these programs (Blaszkievicz, 2009). Critics fear that the rapid losses featured on weight loss shows may encourage viewers to adopt extreme dieting measures (Christenson & Ivancin, 2006). Without the benefit of personal trainers and nutritionists, members of the audience may resort to desperate measures in order to achieve the results they see on television (Hill, 2005). This can lead to eating disorders, as well as yo-yo dieting, in which the individual quickly gains back the weight, and tries to lose it again. Another criticism is the way that the programs create an alternate reality, in which the participants may focus solely on weight loss and are isolated from the rest of the world. Working out for eight hours a day is not a possibility for most individuals (Rawe, 2007). Clearly, reality shows distort and exploit "reality." Of course, audience members are well aware that they

are watching the weight-loss progress of individuals who know that they are being filmed, and who have been put into a scenario that is much different from their everyday existence. However, Hill (2002, p. 324) points out that this tension between performance and authenticity is where the real drama of reality television is found. Audiences recognize that reality television does not display reality as they know it, but they are willing to play along in hopes of seeing a moment of spontaneity in which participants behave in unexpected and/or seemingly authentic ways.

Weight loss reality programs also employ conventions specific to the subgenre, conventions that reflect society's views on the "F" word: FAT. Being fat has several negative connotations in American culture. Fat people are often considered lazy, unattractive, lacking in self-esteem and willpower, socially inept, and intellectually slow (Blaine & McElroy, 2002). Seeing an overweight individual can also elicit negative emotional reactions, such as hostility, fear, disgust, and/or pity. One convention of reality television weight loss shows is the focus on physical labor that the participants must complete and/or endure. This proves to the audience that the individuals are worthy of redemption for the transgression of being fat. However, it is not uncommon to see subjects "hit a wall" (reach a physical breakdown point that leaves them uncertain that they can complete the program). Another convention is the use of testimonials from the participants, in which individuals often explain how they got to their current weight. This sometimes includes a discussion of a private emotional wound, and shows the individual in a

very vulnerable state, ashamed of his or her body and exposed to the world. But where a fat body breaks down, a fit body breaks through.

A slim figure indicates hard work, personal discipline, self-control, and moral strength (Stearns, 2002). The ultimate goal for participants of weight loss reality programs is to prove to themselves - and the audience - that they are deserving of the spotlight, and worthy of a thin, or at least thinner, body. The most common convention for signifying the achievement of this goal is the “reveal” of the new and improved body in the final show of the season. However, viewers are generally given other, more minor, breakthrough moments, to keep them encouraged about the participants’ progress. These can include participants being able to do something physical that they could not do before, or fitting into a smaller clothing size than they started in. These breakdown and breakthrough moments are of particular interest, as they often reinforce stereotypes about weight and bodies. The way these personal moments are stylized into a narrative of transformation give viewers the impression that weight loss is necessary condition in order for a body to become socially acceptable, and for an individual to become happy and fulfilled. These moments, and the weight loss shows of which they are a part, cultivate and exploit Americans’ deep-rooted “fat phobia” – a disgust for adipose tissue that has a long history in our culture (Stearns, 2002).

In the last decade, communication scholars and sociologists have considered audience reactions to the representation of obesity in reality television, especially in

The Biggest Loser. Like Ouellette (2008) and Ferguson (2010), Rich (2011) argues that reality television focused on weight loss can function as public pedagogy, prompting self-surveillance in the service of social order. She explains that UK-based programs such as *Honey, We're Killing the Kids* (2005-2007), *You Are What You Eat* (2004-2007), and *Jamie's School Dinners* (2005) and *Jamie's Ministry of Food* (2008), which feature celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, have become sites of learning about the issue of obesity for many viewers. The shows give the audience powerful moral messages about how individuals should behave, in terms of control, virtue, and good citizenship (p. 5). Part of their discourse on obesity includes a tendency to focus on specific numbers (such as weight), which abstracts and stratifies information about bodies. By ignoring the complexities of health, programs use these numbers to exemplify what constitutes a "bad" body. This then works to moralize weight loss, while also "glossing over the social and structural contexts that come to bear upon this" (p. 16).

Other studies make specific reference to *The Biggest Loser* (Christenson & Ivancin, 2006; Thomas, Hyde, & Komesaroff, 2007; Sender & Sullivan, 2008; Blaszkiewicz, 2009; Rich, 2011), framing it as the exemplar of the weight-loss subgenre. In a discussion paper prepared for the Kaiser Family Foundation, Christenson and Ivancin (2006) explore the health implications of reality television, especially "lifestyle transformation" shows like *The Biggest Loser*. Although such shows have potential as tools for public good, Christenson and Ivancin express

concern that broadcasters' privileging of entertainment value over positive health messages may mitigate any helpful effects. The researchers found that programs focused on weight loss often emphasize the idea that losing weight will increase one's physical attractiveness. While there is some helpful information on these programs about how to get healthy, they noted that *The Biggest Loser* offers the majority of its health-related information on a website where viewers need to pay for a subscription.

In response to a 2005 editorial in *Obesity Management* that ponders whether *The Biggest Loser* "is trivializing the complex genetic and environmental influences on our behavior and weight" (Hill, p. 187), Thomas, Hyde & Komersaroff (2007) asked obese viewers of the show to share their insights about what *The Biggest Loser* was really teaching them. This qualitative study showed that viewers agreed with the assertions in the original editorial: i.e., that *The Biggest Loser* is unrealistic and unhealthy. The program's approach to weight loss was taken to task by study participants who noted that the extreme techniques employed were inaccessible and unaffordable for the majority of people living with obesity (p. 212). Participants were also unsettled by the way the show has negatively impacted societal perceptions of individuals who are obese, noting that it implies that bullying, shaming, and degradation are helpful tactics to motivate someone to become healthier.

Sender and Sullivan (2008) also evaluated viewer responses to *The Biggest Loser*. They coded episodes of the program, spoke with regular viewers, and showed a test episode to interviewees who were not familiar with the program. Research

participants had varied reactions, including feeling sympathy for the contestants, appreciating the racial diversity of the cast, being uncomfortable with the scanty outfits required of contestants while weighing in, and pointing out the lack of helpful diet information. The contestants' surprising weight loss - sometimes more than ten pounds per week - stood out as conflicting with viewers' knowledge of what "healthy" weight loss means.

In a fascinating comparison between *The Biggest Loser* and Canadian weight-loss programs, Blaszkiewicz (2009) asserts that there is a discernible difference in their approach to health. *The Biggest Loser*, "as with many things American...has the mentality of 'go big or go home'" (p. 32). The show's depiction of extreme weight loss is unrealistic and can be dangerous as well. Canadian programs *X-Weighted* (2006-present) and *The Last 10 Pounds Bootcamp* (2007-present) focus instead on making small changes over a long period of time for healthy weight reduction.

Most of the scholarly work on *The Biggest Loser* has focused on audience reaction to the show. Although Blaszkiewicz considers show content, she limits her detailed analysis to one episode of *The Last 10 Pounds Bootcamp*, making only general remarks about the content of *The Biggest Loser*. An important recent study that does media analysis rather than a reception study is "Shifting the Balance: The Contemporary Narrative of Obesity." Examining *Big Medicine* (2008 season), *The Biggest Loser* (fifth season, 2008), and episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* addressing obesity (2007-2008), Shugart (2011) found an emerging master narrative

that frames obesity as the result of emotional troubles. She noted that this is in “marked contrast to the conventional narrative of obesity as personal moral lack or failing” (p. 40). Instead of blaming individuals for their failure, reality television programs are focusing on the emotional issues at the root of the problem. This narrative takes its cue from the language of addiction, with food presented as the “drug of choice,” used to block the pain of a history of abuse, for instance. Thus, the audience is given a reason to be sympathetic to obese individuals, as long as they are willing to fight to overcome their issues, and their unhealthy relationship to food.

This focus on overcoming internal, emotional troubles “entails intensive and extensive self-reflection, at least as an individual endeavor but ideally with the aid of a counselor or therapist who might aid in the journey of self-reflection” (Shugart, p. 43). This is an apt description of the breakdown and breakthrough moments that characterize participants’ weight-loss journeys on *The Biggest Loser*. Typically, these moments are catalyzed or precipitated by the personal trainers, who push contestants to explore their limits and discover what is “holding them back.” Shugart’s study, though perceptive in its identification of an emerging “master narrative” of obesity and its causes, covers too many shows and episodes to offer detailed analysis of specific instances in which contestants overcome emotional troubles as part of their physical transformation, and other scholarly articles on *The Biggest Loser* focus primarily on audience reception. Such studies have demonstrated that viewers of *The Biggest Loser* have conflicting opinions about the show and its

impact. While many enjoy it, they also see flaws in how it portrays obese individuals and obesity in general.

To further understand how *The Biggest Loser* frames health, weight, food, exercise, and relationships, it is necessary to look at the form and content of the show itself. We must examine not only the lessons on offer, but how they are being enforced. What strategies does *The Biggest Loser* employ to engage the audience, not only to view the program, but to identify and reflect on powerful moral messages?

These messages are most memorable during the personal and dramatic moments of “breakdown” and/or “breakthrough,” when participants come face-to-face with the “hidden” baggage that has prompted them to accumulate excess weight. These moments, including all the stylistic elements that compose them, such as performance, music, camera position, lighting, editing, and so on, offer a unique look into what the viewer is supposed to be learning from the program. They act as constellations of signifiers that produce a relatively seamless message about obesity: why it happens, how it affects one’s life, and how to combat it. This study will conduct a critical semiotic analysis that will aid in our understanding of these moments, and the way(s) in which they construct obesity. The primary focus will be the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the signifiers employed during breakdown and breakthrough moments?

RQ2: What values are framed or suggested by the signification process

METHODOLOGY

Cultural Studies and Semiotics

Cultural studies scholars define “culture” as practices and texts in everyday life (Storey, 1996, p. 2). Grounded in Marxism, cultural studies emphasizes the importance of understanding a text in terms of its conditions of production and reception, both socially and historically. It contends that industrial societies are unequally divided by lines such as class, ethnicity, and gender (Storey, p. 4). Stuart Hall saw popular culture as a stage for political resistance and consent, an important site where social relations are produced and reproduced. Hall’s (1973) seminal essay “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” theorizes the mechanism(s) by which “meaning” is circulated. A text (novel, film, television program, advertisement, etc.) is first framed by its creators, according to their experiences and world view. Once the text is encoded, it becomes a “meaningful discourse” that may be both visual and aural (pp. 510-511). During the decoding process, the audience develops an understanding of the text that is dependent on *their* experiences and world views. This creates the possibility that the audience will decode a text in one of three ways. The viewer may decode and understand the text in the way that it was encoded; this is called a “dominant reading” of the text. The “negotiated position” of decoding combines elements of a dominant position, but factors in an individual’s world view and lived experience to decode the program according to their unique perspective. In a negotiated reading, the viewer understands the meaning constructed by the

encoder(s), yet is able to mold the meaning to fit it into their beliefs. The “oppositional position” describes a viewer who understands the dominant code, and yet chooses to decode the text with an alternate frame of reference (Storey, 1996). For example, in the *The Nationwide Audience* (1980), Morley found that social class was one such significant determinant in an individual’s interpretation of a text.

Imperative in our understanding of the processes of encoding and decoding is the use of signs. The study of signs that create meaning and represent reality is known as semiotics (Chandler, 2002). Its roots can be traced back all the way to Plato and Aristotle (Danesi, 1999), yet Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce are generally considered its modern founders. Saussure, a Swiss linguist, first used the term “semiology” in a manuscript for his *Course in General Linguistics*, dated 1894. He defined it as “a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life” (Chandler, 2002, p. 3). U.S. American philosopher Charles Peirce borrowed the term from John Locke. He believed that “logic” itself is “only another name for semiotic” (1940, p. 98).

Both the Saussurean and Peircean models are currently embraced in the field of communication. The Saussurean model emphasizes two parts of a sign - the signifier and the signified - whereas the Peircean model consists of three parts: representamen (the “sign-vehicle,” or the form the sign takes), interpretant (the sense made of the sign), and object (or referent, something beyond the sign to which it refers). This model has been proven useful for media analysts, because it is

emphasizes that something cannot be represented without the sense being made of it. The triadic nature of Peirce's model parallels Hall's (1973) three-point model of the encoding/decoding process. Although signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, acts and objects, they have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign. The interaction between the three elements in Peirce's definition is referred to as "semeiosis" or "semiosis" (Chandler, 2002, p. 30). Peirce also identified three modes of signs: symbolic (the signifier does not directly resemble the signified, i.e. the word "rose" representing a rose), iconic (the signifier imitates or resembles the signified, i.e., photographs) and indexical (the signifier is connected either physically or causally to the signified, i.e. fingerprints). The modes are not mutually exclusive, however, and categorization generally depends upon context.

Social semiotic theory states that truth is a construct of semiosis. Reality has several different "authors" from this perspective, and is based on lived experiences and world views. This can affect how individuals make modality judgments, or give credibility to a text. For example, viewers may interpret a text as fiction or nonfiction, with scripted performances or unplanned, impromptu action. Often, the medium employed also has an effect on the modality judgment. Film and television have a higher modality, or apparent credibility, than writing, largely because of their visual nature (use of iconic signifiers). When viewers are absorbed in a narrative of moving images, they often fall into a "suspension of disbelief" (Chandler, 2002, p.

66), wherein they compromise their ability to distinguish reality from representation. Familiarity with iconic signifiers can eventually become so routine and thorough that “at a certain point the iconic representation, however stylized it may be, appears to be more true than the real experience, and people begin to look at things through the glasses of iconic convention” (Chandler, quoting Eco 1976, pp. 204-205). For example, in film and television, the continuity style (or classical Hollywood style) is a set of conventions that has now become naturalized for many viewers. All formal elements (lighting, framing, performance, editing, sound) serve the development of the narrative. Typically, the audience is introduced to a protagonist with a specific goal, which is often countered by a conflict. Viewers’ attention is guided by invisible cutting, subtle camera positioning, selective lighting, and dramatic sound cues that highlight narrative details. Audience members may forget “real” time and space, and give themselves over to the plot, ignoring the lack of explanation about what was “left out” during periods of ellipsis, or why their attention has been directed in specific ways. The continuity style has lent itself not only to television, but even to the genre of “reality television.” Because this way of “watching” has become so naturalized, the outcome is that the medium, a televised program, is taken for granted as the representation of a pre-existing reality, presented neutrally. For example, viewers may be so absorbed by the narrative that they do not notice that the music playing in the background or the selective lighting affects their feelings about the scene they are watching.

Thus, codes for creating narratives on television are important to identify and understand, as often they are so naturalized that the audience believes it is seeing an unmediated reality. The presentation of both visual cues and audio codes (including music and speech) shapes the way in which the television program is read and understood by the viewer. Some codes are arguably more accessible and mainstream than others. Fiske (1982) separates codes into broadcast, which are “lowbrow” and shared by a mass audience, and narrowcast, which are “highbrow” and more elite. While narrowcast codes are subtle and aimed at a limited audience, broadcast codes are highly repetitive and restrictive in meaning, and structurally simple. These codes (such as obesity equating laziness) serve to “emphasize and reinforce preferred meanings” and are often found in mass media texts such as television programs and movies. (Chandler, 2002, p 170). Hall (1973) argues that during the encoding process, the preferred or dominant meaning comes from not only the production of the texts, but from the “wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part” (509). When a television program is produced, it is encoded to carry a meaningful discourse. Although moving image media employ iconic or even indexical signs that seem to directly represent or reproduce reality, reality does not exist outside of codes.

Analyzing *The Biggest Loser*

Using a critical semiotic approach, this study situates *The Biggest Loser* in a fat-phobic society. I have conducted a semiotic analysis of *The Biggest Loser*, taking into consideration the presence of codes and attempting to identify the preferred or dominant readings of the show. The focus is on breakdown and breakthrough moments because such moments provide the most explicit examples of the ideologies that the show endorses. It would be difficult to consider all episodes of all the weight loss reality programs that have been produced over the last decade, as the subgenre has proven to be prolific. As I noted earlier, in addition to *The Biggest Loser* (2004-2011), the subgenre includes *Fat March* (2007), *Ruby* (2008-2011), *Dance Your Ass Off* (2009-2010), *Kirstie Alley's Big Life* (2010), *I Used to Be Fat* (2010-2011), *Heavy* (2011), and *Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss Edition* (2011-present). In this subgenre, shows are basically of two types: those that follow the weight loss journey of one or two characters and those that follow the weight loss journey(s) of one or more teams and involve competition. I have chosen to limit my study to *The Biggest Loser*, because, in addition to being the longest running and most popular reality weight loss program on television, it is an excellent example of the "competition" subtype that is so prominent in reality television. I examine episodes from Season 11, also known as "Couples 4," which features contestants in pairs. The pairs are friends, siblings, spouses, and parents and children. The season consists of 20 episodes, each ranging from one to two hours, and aired from January 2011 through May 2011.

Although I analyze all the episodes from the season, the study focuses on specific portions of those episodes: the breakdown and breakthrough moments. Although twenty-four contestants participated in the season I am considering, I am concentrating primarily on six individuals from three different teams. I believe that these teams are the most representative of the ideological values of failure and success as promoted by *The Biggest Loser*. Don and Dan, twin brothers and police officers from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, were eliminated in weeks three and four of a twenty-week season amongst controversy that they had thrown the competition in order to go home. Olivia and Hannah are sisters who were the big winners in Season 11, with Olivia earning the “Biggest Loser” title, and Hannah coming in as the runner-up. Jesse and Arthur are a father and son, who, despite creating contention and drama, ultimately proved themselves to be strong competitors before they were eliminated halfway through the season.

Initially, I screened each episode and tried to identify breakdown and breakthrough moments for these contestants, both as teams and as individuals. This may seem like a straightforward process, but my definitions of these moments evolved as I identified them. Essentially, I define a breakdown moment as an instance in which (1) a participant loses control of his or her emotions or body: crying, yelling, throwing up, collapsing, and so on, and (2) that loss of control is framed negatively by the show (with criticism from a trainer, dramatic lighting, and/or other exaggerated elements of style). A breakthrough moment is one in which a participant

demonstrates an important step in self-transformation. These moments may involve an emphasis on physical change(s) and/or the loss of emotional control. The crucial difference is that whatever occurs in breakthrough moment is framed positively by the show – given approval within the ideological system that the show endorses. It was sometimes difficult to identify these moments, particularly in terms of breakdowns. If a participant collapses on the floor of the gym for a few seconds and then gets up, is that a breakdown moment? As I examined the episodes, I was guided by the severity and framing of the moment. For example, if a participant collapsed and remained on the floor for a long minute as he or she was verbally abused by a trainer, then I called that a “breakdown.” After viewing the entire season, and honing my definitions for breakdown and breakthrough moments, I watched the season again to make sure that I had identified all of the moments correctly.

I then coded the breakdown and breakthrough moments for the members of these two teams in terms of thematic and stylistic elements, including performance, sound, camera position, lighting, editing, and so on. I developed a form that guided me in identifying the salient features of breakdown and breakthrough moments for Don, Dan, Olivia, Hannah, Jesse and Arthur as individuals and as teams, since the show emphasizes their journey as individual contestants *and* as family members with similar backgrounds and emotional obstacles to overcome, who can offer each other mutual support. (See Appendix A.)

My analysis of these moments centers on the binary opposition of fat as failure versus slimness as success. As I have previously noted, literature has shown that individual views of obesity in the United States are value-expressive (Crandall, 1994), with anti-fat attitudes based on the belief that fat individuals lack self-determination (p. 884). This idea is mirrored especially in the word play utilized in the title of *The Biggest Loser*. The program's name brings to mind the irony that the person who "loses" the most will win, but also convinces the audience that the only way for this group of losers to become admirable is to make up for the transgression of being overweight through hard work that will lead to a winning (thin) body. Ultimately, I believe that focusing on breakdown and breakthrough moments is a valuable approach because it offers insights into the contestants' lives and the "emotional baggage" that has "held them back," while also allowing the audience an opportunity to judge whether these "big losers" are worthy of the transformations they are being offered. My hope is that this research will highlight the ideologies present in weight-loss reality television programs, ideologies that both reflect and reinforce popular opinions about obesity and fat.

ANALYSIS

Introducing the Damaged

Before discussing *The Biggest Loser*'s use of breakdown and breakthrough moments to offer a redemptive narrative about obesity, I will outline the dynamics of the show as they are enacted in the eleventh season, including the ideologies of the trainers and producers, the emphasis on extremes, and the motivations of the contestants to participate in such a publicly revealing program. The first episode of the season helps to orient the viewers to the contestants, the trainers, the format, and the results that participants can expect.

The program has employed different formats; the “couples” format in the season under consideration features eleven teams of two individuals (plus an at-home team of two that competes for a spot on the *Biggest Loser* campus in week 13, but fails to qualify). During this season of couples, the teams include a husband and wife (Q and Larilmy), friends (Rulon and Justin), sisters (Hannah and Olivia), twins (Don and Dan), fathers and sons (Arthur and Jesse, Austin and Ken), fathers and daughters (Moses and Kaylee, Jen and Jay), and mothers and daughters (Deni and Sara, Courtney and Marci, Irene and Ana). The duos are then placed on one of two larger teams that compete with one another.

During their time on the show, contestants can expect “temptations,” “challenges,” and “eliminations.” Temptations are manipulated events in which the individuals are faced with the opportunity to indulge in fatty foods. For example,

during one temptation, the teams are put into a room that contains racks of each person's favorite food, from macaroni and cheese to fried chicken. In a Valentine's Day-themed episode, they are faced with a room full of chocolate candies. It would stand to reason that on a show about weight loss, avoidance of such foods would be rewarded, and it is. However, during temptations contestants must decide whether they should remain faithful to their new regimen of low-calorie eating – or stuff themselves to win a strategic advantage in the game, such as the chance to swap team members.

Challenges are also manipulated events created by the producers for the contestants to compete for prizes, such as immunity from elimination, or the chance to receive letters from their friends at home. These events, however, are more physically focused than temptations and often showcase how far the players have come in their quest for fitness. Examples of challenges include running a 5K on a treadmill, or sprinting across a football field while trying to keep giant inflated balls in the air.

Eliminations are another important aspect of the program. During eliminations, contestants are either voted off, or automatically let go because they have lost the least amount of weight that week. The rules for eliminating individuals, including how many leave per show, change throughout this season, and a contestant who has been voted off even returns to make the final four. The power to decide who stays also changes hands, making the show highly dramatic, emotional, and arbitrary.

Another convention of the show is to present “confessional style” interview footage, in which the contestants speak directly to the camera, often alone, but sometimes accompanied by a teammate. Although they are being questioned by off-screen producers and prompted to offer comments, the contestants’ footage is edited to produce the illusion that they are spontaneously giving unsolicited information about their feelings, their fears, their hopes, and their regrets. While common in reality television, these conventions bespeak *The Biggest Loser’s* prioritization of sensationalism and ratings over its supposed emphasis on healthy weight loss (Sender and Sullivan, 2007).

The first episode of the season begins with a fast motion aerial shot that flies over an expanse of ocean, some hills, and onto the *Biggest Loser* campus, also known as “the Ranch.” The voice of a male narrator tells us, “For ten seasons, trainers Bob and Jillian have taken over 200 morbidly obese Americans and turned them into the epitome of health and fitness.” Multiple images of previous contestants in mono- and bichromatic color schemes are shown in very brief shots that focus on bare bellies and rolls of fat (Figure 1).

The narrator is referring to trainers Bob Harper and Jillian Michaels, both known for their “tough love” approach and the competitive edge they offer contestants. According to *The Biggest Loser* website, Bob is one of the most in-demand fitness experts in the world. The success of the program has led to “DVDs, supplements, books, motivational speaking engagements, and personal appearances”



Figure 1: Shot of exposed stomachs from season introduction

(“Bob Harper” n.d.). Jillian’s website describes her as a “fitness expert, life coach, author, blogger, and creator of DVDs, and video games” (“About Jillian” n.d.). The two trainers have become very iconic through their work on *The Biggest Loser*, and the show often deifies Bob and Jillian as saviors. Upon first meeting the trainers, one of the contestants remarks that there is a collective gasp in the room when they walk in, as if some “royalty or dignitary” has just entered, adding, “It’s like meeting your heroes.”

Before formally introducing the trainers for the season, we are given a glimpse into their former successes while working with contestants at the Ranch. In a series of brief shots, we see an overweight woman working out on a treadmill with trainer Jillian Michaels and then the same woman, now in shape, once again using a treadmill. Color is largely absent when the woman is obese, but becomes saturated and vibrant in the footage of her slimmed down body. During this introduction, we

are shown the contrast between fat and fit, failure and success, and shame and pride. Distinguishing between these “loser” qualities and “winner” qualities frames the significance of weight loss. Not only must individuals lose their excess weight to become healthier; they need to change their lives to become happier, more accepted by society, and respectable to themselves and others.

The first “plot twist” of the season is the inclusion of two new “unknown” trainers, whose identities will remain a mystery for the first few episodes. We get a glimpse of the “mystery trainers” in silhouette during the first episode, and even though we cannot see their faces, we learn that they are “fighters.” The new female trainer says that “obviously these people [the contestants] gave up” and that the trainers are there to bring the “fight” back. We are introduced to these new trainers through footage that is very focused on the body; their faces are not yet revealed. In contrast to the earlier footage of contestants with rolls of fat, we see that the new trainers are tight, toned, and muscular (Figure 2).



Figure 2: “Unknown” trainers’ bodies

The contestants are unaware of the presence of the new trainers; the narrator assures us that the only thing they know is that they are in for the “fight of their lives.” The fighting metaphor plays a large role in the season, with contestants training for physical combat (boxing, martial arts), and often referring to their weight-loss journey as a “fight.” The “fight of their lives” in the context of morbid obesity (previously referenced by the narrator) is presented throughout the season as the fight *of* their lives and a fight *for* their lives.

The contestants are presented as broken, damaged individuals who *need* the trainers’ help in their struggle to survive. In order to prove that they are worthy of help and attention, they must demonstrate their humility, and reveal their shame for all to see. This is achieved by physically exposing their bodies to the audience. Audition tapes feature bare, bulging bellies, while weekly weigh-ins present contestants stepping up on the *Biggest Loser* scale wearing only shorts (men) or shorts and sports bras (women). The large bodies of the contestants are emphasized, particularly their bellies. They may be able to hide under a shirt out in the world, but here on *The Biggest Loser*, their fat is out in the open. Throughout the season, they are often prompted by the trainers to further expose themselves by disclosing their emotional baggage. By allowing everyone to see how dysfunctional they are mentally and physically, they may begin to “break through” the pain, and focus on fixing their bodies and their lives (Thomas, Hyde, & Komesaroff, 2007, Sender & Sullivan, 2007, Shugart, 2011).

During these first few minutes of the inaugural episode of the season, the shots are all very brief. The music is intense, fast-paced, and staccato, and the focus is on extremes. One minute and forty-five seconds into the episode, we are introduced to Arthur. At 507 pounds, Arthur has already lost over one hundred pounds. We see an image of Arthur at home, grabbing his large stomach (Figure 3). Trainer Bob informs us that while a previous contestant weighed more, he was taller, making Arthur the “largest contestant . . . in *Biggest Loser* history.”



Figure 3: Footage of Arthur at home

After arriving on campus for the first time, contestants are weighed in on the iconic *Biggest Loser* scale, which beeps and flashes several random numbers for about five suspense-building seconds before settling on a final weight (Figure 4). The number that appears on the scale is quantifiable shame for the contestants. Arthur, the season’s biggest contestant, says with dread at his first weigh-in, “Now all of

America is going to see what I've been doing to myself.” Rich (2011), citing Monahan and Wall (2007) notes, “Contemporary media associated with obesity



Figure 4: The iconic *Biggest Loser* scale

frequently employ these techniques of ‘somatic surveillance,’ such as the monitoring of weight, whereby the complexities of participants’ bodies are ‘abstracted’ and ‘stratified into information’” (p. 8). For contestants on *The Biggest Loser*, the number on the scale is the ultimate testimony, either to the extent of their failure, or in the case of losing weight, the worth of their hard work.

After the initial weigh-in, the teams are asked to complete a 5K run/walk on a treadmill; they can take turns with their partners. This challenge serves to show the audience just how out of shape the participants are as they first begin their “weight-loss journey.” A similar 5K treadmill run is featured as an individual challenge later in the season, when contestants have become more physically fit. When each team completes the initial 5K, they are given the choice between training with Bob and

Jillian, who have a “proven track record of success,” or leaving to work with two unknown trainers, whose identities will not be revealed until later in the season. This has never happened before on the program, and is a shocking twist to the contestants, who get four weeks of immunity (safety from elimination) in return for picking the unknown trainers.

While the yellow team (1st place in the 5K), gray team (2nd place), pink (5th), brown (6th) and red (8th) choose to train with the unknowns, the teal team (3rd), purple team (4th place), and green team (7th place) decide to train with Bob and Jillian. The orange, blue, and black teams are left without a choice, and default to training with Bob and Jillian; this is the first of many plot devices used to create drama and tension amongst the contestants. The two-person teams or duos thus become members of two larger teams, based on their choice of and/or assignment to Bob and Jillian or the “unknown” trainers.

During the first episode, we are given small glimpses of contestants’ background stories, and their reasons for coming on *The Biggest Loser*. In a way, they have all experienced a breakdown before ever stepping foot on the campus, and in their desperation and pain, they have put their faith in the program and in the trainers to help them break through to a better place. Aside from the universal breakdown that led them to the program - a presumed realization that appearing on the program is their last hope - many of the contestants deal with further breakdowns during their time on the show. For some of these individuals, the breakdowns lead to

breakthroughs and weight loss, allowing them a chance to redeem themselves for the transgression of obesity. This study focuses on three teams that represent different levels of commitment to the *Biggest Loser* process.

The black team, Dan and Don, is composed of fifty-four-year-old identical twins from Oklahoma who claim to have never spent a day apart from one another. They are both married with families of their own. However, Dan lost a son to a drug overdose, and Don's son has disowned him for being so heavy. They are both policemen, and have come to work together towards losing weight. At an early weigh-in that takes place only a few weeks into the competition, the brothers both gain significant amounts of weight, presumably because they have done so deliberately. This allows Dan to leave the *Biggest Loser* campus. The next week, Don again gains weight, and departs from the show. Jillian and Bob both attempt to get the twins to open up emotionally, and are sad and disappointed when the men leave, one after another, appearing to give up. The two members of the black team represent a lack of commitment to the ideals of the trainers and the program. Although they take the first step in exposing themselves physically and emotionally, they are still portrayed as quitters, and criticized by their trainers and teammates. Analyzing the process of signification in their breakdown moments will help explain how and why these two individuals are treated as failures when they leave *The Biggest Loser*.

The blue team, Jesse and Arthur, are a father and son from Portland, Oregon. Arthur, 34, is highlighted in the first episode as the “biggest contestant to date.” Although he comes into the competition weighing over five hundred pounds, Arthur has already lost almost one hundred and fifty pounds at home. He has his share of breakdown moments, often involving other contestants, but Arthur ultimately is portrayed as having been redeemed, and his eventual elimination is a consequence of the extreme measures he is willing to take to stay on the program.

The purple team consists of sisters Hannah, 32, and Olivia, 35. While Hannah is single, Olivia is married, and an opera singer. She laments that her weight has made her “the butt of the joke” in opera, referring to *Romeo and Juliet* in which she plays a nurse. Olivia’s weight is affecting her personal life, as well. She wants to have children, but being obese has made it difficult to make her dream a reality. Her sister Hannah has a similar domestic goal. Hannah wants to get married, and worries that she will never find a suitor at her current weight. Over the course of the season, we learn that Hannah was once a star athlete in volleyball. After falling down a set of stairs, she suffered a back injury that stopped her from pursuing her dreams and broke her spirit. These two sisters come in first and second place in the competition. They not only expose themselves physically and emotionally, and redeem themselves through hard work and determination; they triumph over their past failures and emerge victorious. Their transformations are emphasized by personal makeovers in episode 18. In the beginning of the season, Olivia and Hannah bet on themselves,

risking elimination in order to train with Bob and Jillian. The show presents them as winners who atone for the transgression of being obese through their commitment to working hard with their trainers and their teammates so that they can remain on the *Biggest Loser* Ranch as long as possible. At the end of the season, they are portrayed as almost different people from who they were when they began, as if the journey from overweight loser to fit and healthy winner has altered their identities..

The audience learns the most about these contestants through moments of breakdown, which often feature confrontations. Whether being confronted with the reality of their health, the fear of elimination, the pain of what they have done to their bodies, or the overwhelming work ahead of them, the contestants often react with outbursts of emotion, or *breakdowns*. This may make the viewing experience more “real” for the viewers, as they are allowed to witness behaviors that appear intimate, authentic, and unscripted. A breakdown can be followed by a *breakthrough*, in which the audience again shares a typically personal, private incident, often marked by a contestant’s redemption, either within themselves, with their trainers, or with their teammates. So many of the elements on *The Biggest Loser* (and reality television in general) are formulaic and repetitive: challenges are planned, and weigh-ins and eliminations are scheduled events. The breakdown and breakthrough moments in *The Biggest Loser* appear unplanned and novel. The apparently authentic reactions of the competitors to the twists and turns of the process, both positive and negative, are what allow the audience to develop a connection to the participants, and also to feel

justified in rooting for certain contestants over others. By creating these connections and encouraging empathy from the viewers at home, the program's ideologies become more personal. Instead of change and growth being theoretical, the contestants become examples of the hard work and dedication needed to prove themselves "worthy" and "deserving" of weight loss (Teffeteller, 2009).

Overview of Findings

After viewing all twenty-one episodes of *The Biggest Loser*, I have concluded that there is an overarching narrative structure to the season in addition to the individual stories presented about specific contestants. Shugart (2011) defines a "master" narrative as one that shapes public discourse about a certain issue (p. 38). One example Shugart presents is the biomedical narrative of health, in which disease is reduced to a "biological mechanism of cause and effect" and doctors are viewed as omnipotent deities with the power to identify and cure with the help of technology and medicine (p. 38). Such "master" narratives can inform public opinion about a variety of subjects, framing it according to specific ideologies..

The "master narrative" employed by *The Biggest Loser* involves a group of obese, implicitly (and sometimes explicitly, which we will explore further in the analysis) "broken" individuals with dysfunctional bodies and emotional baggage who compete for the opportunity to be "fixed" by the show's exalted, superstar trainers. The contestants, however, are not all equally worthy, and through weeks of proving

their devotion, must convince their trainers, their cast mates, the viewing audience, and themselves that they are deserving of transformation. Huff (2010) concludes that capitalist/consumer logic dictates that if being fat does not come at the mercy of genetics, “You must have made choices that led to being fat and ought to be held responsible for those choices” (p. 91). Evans (2010) argues that judgments about “healthy” food as moral versus non-healthy foods as inferior and working-class imply that it is acceptable to look down on the obese as immoral and uneducated (p. 146-147).

In order to understand the ideologies celebrated by *The Biggest Loser*, it is necessary to examine both the master and individual narratives presented by the program. Nichols (1991) notes that narrative is a particular kind of communication, and “communication, always political, is realized in texts that have to be read in relation to the codes organizing them” (p. 10). Therefore, my analysis of *The Biggest Loser* takes consideration how “teachable” moments are produced out of instances in which individuals display exaggerated, raw, or visceral emotions, emphasized by editing techniques, music, lighting, and redundancy.

Many of the contestants display extreme emotions that are framed as “breakdowns” within the first few weeks, although these moments also appear sporadically throughout the entire season. Similarly, there are instances in the first few weeks in which contestants have individual “breakthrough” moments, but these generally come during the second half of the season. The attached chart shows the

incidence of breakdowns and breakthroughs, for all individual contestants competing during the season, including a filled out example (See Appendix B.)

Although this is a qualitative study, it is interesting to identify the pattern of “breakdowns” and “breakthroughs” throughout the season, and consider how many of each emerge for individual contestants. The chart makes it clear that there is not always a direct correlation between how long a contestant is on the program, and how many instances of that person breaking down or breaking through are televised. For example, one outlier is Arthur. Despite the fact that he is eliminated halfway through the program, there are ten examples in which the focus of the show is his personal, emotional, and/or physical limitations or abilities. Thus, Arthur is featured disproportionately, especially when one considers that the only players with more featured moments are the first and second place winners. One can assume that Arthur is featured so heavily because of his status as the “biggest contestant ever,” but it is also interesting that Arthur has a one to one ratio of breakdowns to breakthroughs, with five in each category. The only other competitor with a similar ratio is Arthur’s father Jesse. Generally speaking, most players have more breakthroughs than breakdowns. The exceptions to this rule for the season are Dan, Don, and Q, who are all portrayed as antagonistic and resistant to the ideologies of the program. Arthur and Jesse’s one to one ratios imply that for every setback they experience, they are able to overcome and redeem themselves. However, according to the value system

established by the show, the absence of further breakthroughs suggests that they lack the endurance needed to make it through to the final weeks of the competition. Arthur becomes a divisive figure in the competition, making enemies on both his team, and the opposing team. This provides the opportunity for him to “prove himself” to his trainers and his team, and he often elicits the most extreme reactions (from his teammates and his trainer) of any player during the eleventh season, ultimately facing elimination in the ninth week.

Another anomaly is the duo of Dan and Don, who leave relatively early in the season, yet manage to have a high number of “breakdown” moments. The twin brothers only experience one “breakthrough” each, during the season finale when every player (with the exception of Rulon, who does not return for the finale) is weighed in a final time. The twins’ time on the program is short; however, they each manage to have confrontations with their trainers, who do not believe that the twins want to be there.

Hannah and Olivia, the winner and first runner up of the eleventh season’s *The Biggest Loser*, have more televised moments than any of their competitors. The sisters are present for every week of competition possible, and therefore experience more opportunities to showcase their growth by way of breakthroughs. Perhaps foreshadowing their “champion” status, neither of the sisters experience many breakdowns, outside of the initial confrontations about how they got there, and how they were feeling about their bodies in the beginning. Both women are very receptive

to their trainers and seem to embody the values framed by the show through their consistent hard work and graceful acceptance of their need to change.

Many of the contestants' "roles" on the program (i.e. Arthur as the reformed dissident, Dan as the shamefaced deserter) can be traced back to their breakdown and breakthrough moments, which serve as important signifiers of their potential ability to change. When repeated and framed within the larger narrative of *The Biggest Loser* and even more broadly, within a cultural master narrative about obesity, these signifiers produce ideologies about weight, weight loss, and obese individuals. Specifically, the show pathologizes obesity, and emphasizes the importance of losing weight through humility and diligence (Silk & Francombe, 2009).

In the first few weeks, the majority of the breakdown moments come when the trainers take the contestants aside and talk to them either individually or as a team and find out how they got to the point of being (morbidly) obese. This part of the program reflects one of the show's biggest values, which is that being overweight signifies a deeper problem within. An obese person is not only burdened by extra mass, but is also broken, unable to move forward in life without the help of a savior. The trainers are able to step in, not only acting as physical motivators and instructors, but as "therapists," aiding the helpless contestants, whose obesity is a sign of something more. While the people mentoring the contestants demonstrate compassion and understanding, they also imply that it is not acceptable to be fat, and that something

must be wrong with individuals who have chosen to abuse their bodies by becoming overweight (Crandall & Martinez, 1996; Stearns, 2002).

The next element of the show that is designed to produce “breakdown” moments is the consultation with “Dr. H.” This confrontation takes place during the second and/or third week, and essentially acts as a way of scaring the contestants straight, motivating them to either change their ways, or face a terrifying future. Dr. H, who has been asked to assess the contestants’ current physical status and future prospects, uses tactics such as exposing x-rays of the contestant’s bodies and estimating their “real age,” based on their level of health. Ferguson (2010) describes a similar method on the program *Honey We’re Killing the Kids*, wherein parents are shown a digitized image of how their children *may* turn out if they continue with their unhealthy habits. This “reveal” of a potentially hazardous outcome works to shame the contestants, and reinforce unequal power relations between the all-knowing, well educated, superior, thin individuals (i.e. the trainers and the doctor), and the ignorant, lazy, humbled obese (p. 99).

Other breakdown moments are unique to the individual(s) involved, such as when Don is confronted by his fellow team members about throwing a weigh-in, or when Arthur becomes emotional talking to his trainers about strategically trading his teammates after winning a temptation. These moments are accentuated by reaction shots and clips of confessional footage, to emphasize the significance of the interaction not only for the individual, but for their teammates as well. When a scene

of Arthur talking to his team and his trainers is followed by a reaction shot of several teammates looking upset, we understand that Arthur is no longer in his team's good graces, and when we cut to a shot of team member Courtney's confessional footage, in which she explicitly states that his actions put a "target on his back," we understand the severity of the situation through the eyes of other contestants. Signifiers during these moments include melodramatic music, high contrast lighting, and collision editing that frame the scenes as intense and filled with conflict. Through emphasizing these incidents, the program highlights its ideological foundations, and separates acceptable behaviors from deplorable actions. On *The Biggest Loser*, hard work is valued over manipulating circumstances in one's favor (Thomas, Hyde & Komesaroff, 2007; Townend, 2009).

In the same manner, breakthrough moments construct a model of the ideal citizen. In such instances, contestants are self-actualized, confident, and rewarded for their hard work. Not only have they lost weight, but they have become better people because of it. The majority of these breakthroughs come toward the end of the season, as the individuals are closer in size and shape to a mainstream physical ideal. These moments frame the subjects as free from derision or pity, exonerated from the burden of their weight, from the sin of having had so much excess flesh. The homecoming episode in week nine is orchestrated so that the remaining contestants have an opportunity to return to their loved ones and show off their massive weight loss. This results in breakthroughs for all of them, as they are lauded for their hard work, and

their current appearance. Later in the season, a trip to New Zealand offers several opportunities for the players to try new things. The trainers encourage them to “jump into a new life” by bungee jumping, or climb a mountain that “represents the struggle they will face” when the show is over. In another stunt following the contestants’ return from New Zealand, the program has celebrity fashion guru Tim Gunn arrive as a “fairy godfather” to give the remaining five contestants a makeover. This also leads to breakthrough moments in which their loved ones visit to see the results of the makeovers and become emotional describing the contestants as “new people.”

The most dramatic reveal, however, is reserved for the finale, a special episode in which all of the cast returns for the final weigh in. The last four contestants are still in the running for the title of “Biggest Loser” (which comes with a cash prize of \$250,000 for the person who has lost the greatest percentage of body weight), while everyone who was previously eliminated is eligible for the “At-Home” weight-loss prize (\$100,000). Contestants come out dressed in formal and/or sexy clothing, showing off their slimmed down figures, and an interview with the host, Alison Sweeney, is intercut with footage from the season, documenting the transformations that contestants have undergone. To be weighed in, they must first change back into their iconic costumes from the show: t-shirts with *The Biggest Loser* logo, and athletic shorts.

Two themes that arise from the breakthrough moments are “redemption,” in which the individual redeems him- or herself for past transgressions, and “rebirth,” in

which the individual exceeds the expectation of simply making up for the past, and begins to construct a new identity based upon his or her success. It is important to note that these emerging themes are not, in most cases, explicitly tied to weight. However, they are implicitly connected to the “failure vs. success,” “broken vs. fixed” dichotomies that frame the show’s presentation of its contestants. Once an individual has been “fixed” through dramatic weight-loss, he or she is finally allowed agency, and the opportunity to “take control” of his or her own life.

The themes that emerge during breakdown moments reflect the need for those who are “broken” to acknowledge the damage in order to demonstrate their willingness to conform. This happens in three distinct phases. The contestants must first confront the past, by admitting to failure and taking responsibility for personal ruin. They must next face the probable future that may await them if they continue on their current “path,” including disease and death. Finally, the participants are “put to the test” by the reality of now. This is where the contestants submit to the ideology of the show, by devoting themselves to their trainers, and agreeing to do whatever is necessary to stay on the program. This third category of breakdowns is the most crucial, and upon further analysis we will see that not all contestants experience this type of breakdown.

I will now consider these themes as messages that reinforce the ideology of the program, thereby “exploring the social practices that are embedded in the content” (Bishop, 2005, p. 125). As Roy (1996) asserted, a researcher should “work back

through the narrative elements of form, rhetoric, and style to uncover the underlying social and historical processes . . . that guided its production” (as cited in Bishop, 2005, p. 124). By considering emergent themes as signifiers of ideology, it becomes possible to understand *The Biggest Loser* as a cultural site that both reflects and produces attitudes, beliefs, and cultural narratives about obesity and weight loss.

Breakdowns

Breakdown moments on *The Biggest Loser* often happen at times when contestants are confronted with something that is difficult for them to deal with. For different individuals, this can mean various things. All of the contestants presumably hit “rock bottom” before they realized that they needed help and applied to be on the program. However, once they are selected as contestants, they can expect to be pushed to their limits not only physically, but emotionally as well. The trainers often take individuals aside to talk to them about the emotional problems that led them to their current state. This can result in painful breakdowns, giving the audience opportunities to sympathize with contestants. The competitive nature of the program sometimes provokes breakdowns as well, as the cast decides who will be eliminated, and who deserves to stay. Being confronted with the future consequences of their unhealthy lifestyles is another catalyst for contestants to experience breakdown moments.

Confronting the Past

For *The Biggest Loser* contestants, the first step toward change is confronting the factors that produced their obesity. The first big breakdown moment of the season occurs fifty-six minutes into the first episode, when Arthur is having difficulty performing on the treadmill. The trainers, Bob and Jillian, counter that nothing is wrong with him other than the need to lose weight, and eventually Arthur dramatically falls to the ground, exhausted. Eventually, Bob and one of the producers help Arthur up, and then Bob and Arthur walk around outside together, engaged in an emotional conversation about the past.

This breakdown moment introduces us to two important messages that are repeated throughout the season. The first is that these obese individuals are “broken.” The second is that through tough love, the trainers can “fix” them. Often, signifiers of the “brokenness” of obese contestants come directly from their confessional interviews. For example, as we watch this confrontation between Arthur and the trainers, we see interview footage of him addressing the camera, informing the home viewers, “This workout is a reminder that this is the shape that I put myself in. This is the damage I did to my body and it’s painful, not only physically but mentally, too.” When Arthur complains that he is in pain and needs something for his leg, Jillian replies, “I’ll give you something for your leg. It’s called a treadmill. Enjoy.” Bob tells him, “What you NEED is to lose some weight,” and declares, “I’ve been doing this since season one. Dude, I know you better than you think.” This interaction

implies that obese individuals are all the same (i.e. “broken”), and that the trainers do not want to listen to any excuses. At one point Jillian asks Arthur, “Do I look like a woman who gives a shit?” to which he replies, “No, you don’t.”

After Arthur’s fall, as he lies on the floor, the trainers are literally looking down on him, and Bob puts his foot on Arthur’s back, stepping on him as if he is not even human (Figure 5). During this scene, we see mostly individual close-ups of Arthur or Bob, emphasizing the emotional intensity of the moment – but also the difference in status between the two men, as well as their physical separation. While Arthur is pathetically and literally lying broken down on the floor, Bob looks down on him from his position of superiority. A reception study of the program (Thomas, Hyde & Komesaroff, 2007) revealed that viewers felt this tough love approach led people to believe that it was acceptable to bully, shame, and degrade obese individuals because it would help them change. One individual even commented, “People start to think it’s okay to disrespect people who are obese” (p. 212).



Figure 5: Bob and Jillian confront Arthur during “breakdown”

Bob's "tough love" approach ends when he and one of the producers help Arthur up. After a transitional shot of the blue sky, sun, and trees, we see Bob and Arthur walking outside together without the distractions of the gym and the other contestants. In contrast to the close shots of Arthur and Bob that isolate them in space, we now have shots of the two of them walking together. Arthur's hand rests on Bob's shoulder, and Bob's hand rests on his (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Bob holds Arthur's hand

This scene signifies the beginning of the healing process, as Bob starts to "fix" Arthur. Bob asks Arthur what he wants to learn from all of this, and Arthur replies, "I want to get myself back." Bob then asks Arthur about how he got to the point of being so obese (how he "broke"), and why he decided to finally lose the weight. We learn through conversation that Arthur was once an athlete, but after getting a desk job and having a son, he "stopped moving." During this conversation, we see images of a young Arthur in a football uniform, with his father (and teammate, Jesse), and in

a baseball uniform. Following this is a series of images that depict his weight gain. At one point, he reached a top weight of six hundred forty-six pounds. While watching television, Arthur came across a special about people who were smaller than he was, needing to be cut out of their houses. Realizing that he was lucky to still be mobile, he decided to do something about his weight. During the conversation with Bob, Arthur gets choked up talking about having lost over one hundred pounds before coming on *The Biggest Loser* - and still having three hundred to lose. At this point, we can see that Arthur's physical breakdown is also an emotional breakdown. Bob assures Arthur that no one is going to be cutting him out of a house, as long as he focuses on the day-to-day aspects of what he needs to do to improve himself, and listens to his trainers. This signifies once more that the trainers are there to fix broken contestants. However, instead of adopting a "tough love" approach, Bob uses the opportunity to establish trust with Arthur, who, in confessional footage that is intercut into the end of the scene, tells the viewers, "It's good to know that Bob has my back."

Moments such as this work to reassure the audience that the trainers do have at least a modicum of respect for these obese individuals, and treat them like human beings with complex emotions and unique backgrounds. Sender and Sullivan's (2008) audience reception study showed that some participants felt that the program offered viewers a chance to empathize with contestants. Breakdown moments can present individuals as more than just a number on the scale. They allow the audience to connect with the experiences and feelings of the show's participants.

Another example of this occurs in the third episode, when Jillian takes brothers Dan and Don out for a walk to check in on how they are doing emotionally. Dan admits that he is suffering “separation anxiety” as a result of being away from his wife and daughter. He notes that the only thing more difficult has been the death of his son. Jillian inquires further about the incident, encouraging Dan to open up about his past. This leads to a heart-to-heart discussion between Jillian, Dan, and his twin Don. Dan talks about his son who died six years before, and laments that it was his one great failure in life. This is when Jillian is able to “diagnose” Dan, telling him that if he doesn’t process this tragedy, it will take his life as well. This scene serves as an explanation as to why Dan is here. It constructs the black team, especially Dan, as emotionally stunted, a problem which has led Dan to compensate for his problems with unhealthy behaviors.

This interaction is marked by natural lighting, slow piano music, and sympathy from Jillian in her conversation with the two men. The scene slows down the pace of the show, leaving the gym and setting Dan and Don apart from the other contestants, allowing their unique situation, the untimely death of a loved one, to come into focus. Pictures of Dan’s son, as well as Dan with his daughter, are intercut with shots of Dan and Don sitting atop a mountain, talking to Jillian (Figure 7).

These initial moments in which contestants are confronted by their trainers about their past not only allow the audience an opportunity to sympathize with the contestants, but also encourage the contestants to open up to their trainers, and trust



Figure 7: A personal moment between Jillian, Dan, and Don

that the trainers have the contestants' best interests in mind. By taking the time to sit and talk with their charges, the trainers are showing that they are interested in helping these contestants overcome their emotional issues as well as their physical inadequacies. This "sets the stage," so to speak, for the trainers to demonstrate that they are there to "fix what is broken," in accordance with one of Bob's quotations posted on a wall of the gym. Thomas, Hyde, and Komesaroff (2007) argue that identifying with the personal struggles of the contestants is one of the reasons regular viewers give for watching the program (p. 211). Audience members appreciate the opportunity to listen as contestants speak candidly about their struggles, and may even be able to relate to the emotional turmoil and pain that contestants have experienced.

These interactions are consistent with Shugart's (2011) findings in "Shifting the Balance: The Contemporary Narrative of Obesity," which suggest the emergence

of a master narrative about obesity. Shugart asserts that the blame for being overweight used to be placed on the individual's lack of responsibility and moral failure. However, in a newer paradigm, "Obesity is depicted as a symptom of emotional dysfunction [in which] overconsumption of food has been used (always ineffectively) to 'fill the hole' left by unaddressed emotional needs" (p. 40). This narrative posits exercise not as punishment, but as empowerment. Instead of forcing individuals to fall in line with society, they are encouraged to overcome their demons and triumphantly join ranks with the rest of us.

Traditionally, obesity has been depicted as an individual failure (Crandall, 1994, Stearns, 2002, Sender & Sullivan, 2008, Blaszkiewicz, 2009). Although the new narrative moves the locus of blame from an individual failure that is unlikely to change to an ongoing emotional struggle that can potentially be resolved, outside factors that represent the culture at large are still ignored. Obese persons are then constructed as objects of pity rather than objects of disdain. This implies an improvement in social standing for overweight individuals; however, it still allows society to bypass complex factors, such as poverty and lack of education, that may factor into the production of an overweight population.

Confronting the Future

It is not only the past that the contestants must face before changing their lives for the better. *The Biggest Loser* also pushes participants to confront the future, to

gain an understanding of potential problems that may result from their obesity. During the second episode of the season, the teams meet with “Dr. H.,” who speaks with them about how their weight is affecting their physical health. Presumably, Dr. H. discusses health risks with all of the contestants, but only partial meetings for select teams are televised.

In one scene, Dr. H. asks Olivia what she does for a living, to which she responds that she is an opera singer. From the purple team’s introductions, we understand that this is a large part of Olivia’s identity. Dr. H. then shows Olivia an x-ray of her body, explaining that the fat is pushing up into her diaphragm, making it difficult for her to hold notes as long. The scene focuses very specifically on close ups of Olivia and Dr. H., with Olivia acknowledging that both her professional life and her personal life have been put into jeopardy because of her weight:

You know, you see that, you just see how much damage you’ve done to yourself. And you know I think for a long time I didn’t think about how my weight really affected other people, but I have a husband of twelve years at home [who] may not have the chance to be a father because I can’t get myself under control.

Olivia begins to cry as she speaks, and the scene concludes with her wiping away her tears in slow motion, while the music crescendos with a timpani roll (Figure 8).

This scene serves as a reminder not only that fat is bad for business - but especially that being fat is selfish. Specifically, Olivia points out that her body is



Figure 8: Olivia cries, worrying about her health

standing in the way of her husband being a father. This theme of obesity being selfish and affecting one's family (Ferguson, 2010) is reinforced throughout the rest of the scenes in which Dr. H confronts the contestants.

Directly following the scene of the purple team in Dr. H.'s office, we see the black team, Dan and Don, sit down with Dr. H., who asks about their professions. When Don answers that they are both policemen, Dr. H. asks, "What would you do if I said there was compelling evidence that some individual had plans to kill your brother Dan? And I also knew what the murder weapon was?" Don answers that he would take immediate action. "Because, based on all the risk factors that we found in your brother, we know the date that he's going to die, and that date for Dan is not that far off. Estimated at 3/29/20," Dr. H continues, referring to a computer screen (Figure 9). As he speaks, he dumps sugar, chocolate, and corn chips on a nearby table. "The murder weapon? Cigarettes, sugar, chocolate, and corn chips. You know? I mean,

that's a crime!" Dr. H. gives Dan and Don a visual lesson about how lethal Dan's lifestyle is, and to drive home the point, allows Dan a call from home - something that is very rare on *The Biggest Loser*.

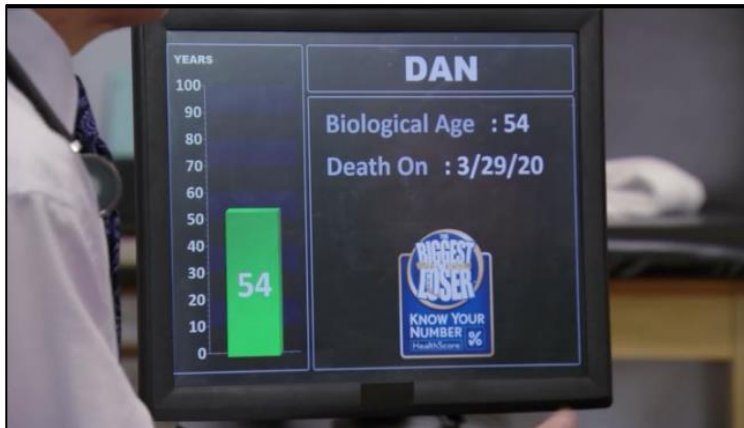


Figure 9: Dr. H shows Dan the date of his death

Dan speaks to his nine-year-old daughter and wife. In a confessional shot of Dan and Don, Dan speaks about the loss of his son six years ago, leading to a sense of urgency about ensuring the safety of his remaining child. We then cut back to the scene of Dan talking on the phone in Dr. H.'s office, where he tells his family, "I promise, I'm going to do this, as long as the two of you are there waiting for me when I get home, I can last anytime. As long as it takes." This scene reinforces the idea that being obese adversely affects one's family, and is therefore selfish (Ferguson, 2010). Dan's commitment to staying in the program for as long as it takes is his promise of redemption to his family.

The next contestants in Dr. H.'s office are Arthur and Jesse, the blue team,

and once again, responsibility for family is a major theme. At thirty-four years old, Arthur is horrified to learn that his “real age” (a calculation that takes into account physical health as well as chronological age) is in fact sixty years. He has small children at home, and fears that he won’t live to see his daughter graduate from high school. Dr. H. tells the blue team that while he wants them to succeed, he wants their whole family to succeed as well and lets them know that he has invited someone they both know who can help. Jesse’s daughter (Arthur’s sister), Jessica, walks in with her baby. After hugging Arthur, Jessica informs him that that hug was from his daughter, who wants him to get better so that he can take her on a ride at Disneyland (Figure 10). For Jesse, Jessica issues a challenge:



Figure 10: Jesse, Arthur, and Jessica in Dr. H’s “office”

Dad, Bob and Jillian challenge you every day, but your daughter wants to give you a challenge. You need to set an example for your family. You always

taught us never to give up, to do the best we can, so my challenge to you is that I want you to be the best that you can, but push more than that, and do better than that.

In a solo shot of Jesse in a confessional interview, he explains what the moment meant to him. “Jessica said, ‘Dad, we’re looking to you,’ and that says to me, ‘Dad we want you to lead us, you always have.’ Yes Jessica, I will come back, and we will do this, me and you, together.”

This breakdown moment reinforces the idea that obesity impacts others, and in this case, pushes the point even further by showing three generations of a family dealing with obesity. Jesse’s daughter’s request is for Jesse not only to lose weight for them, but to do it as an example, in a position of leadership for the family. All of the scenes from the “Doctor’s office” show us that obesity affects more than just these contestants (Rich, 2011). Their families will also face the consequences of their actions, whether through infertility, the death of a loved one, or the lack of a positive example of health. These outcomes, however, are still theoretical, and can change with the contestants’ hard work and dedication to changing their futures.

Confronting the contestants with the prospect of continued obesity as eventual mortality serves the show in various ways. The first is that it opens up very raw emotions in the contestants, who are disgusted and ashamed of what they have done to themselves. It also reinforces the stereotype that obese individuals are selfish, and need to be shown the error of their ways. Third, by showing the theoretical future

complications of obesity, the program is justifying the use of extreme diet and exercise as a means to a happy ending. The trainers are not just helping the contestants lose weight and improve their situation; they are saving their lives, and are therefore able to rationalize the use of fat shaming as legitimate motivation.

Another important aspect of Dr. H's interventions, which rely heavily on discussing fat as problematic for the entire family, is that they reinforce the idea that obesity is contagious. As Evans (2010) facetiously explains:

Obesity is - as we all know, don't we - a *disease*. And "it" is not produced by social and economic factors, or indeed constructed discursively as an ideological regime, and certainly not clustered within similar class groupings and shared habituses in families, friendships. Rather, it is spread by some kind of perhaps morally aware, semi-mythic cultural pathogen. (p. 150)

Ironically, although the show suggests that obesity is contagious within families (perhaps because of shared bad habits or common emotional baggage), it fails to explore wider cultural factors that may influence body weight, such as socioeconomic class or advertising campaigns, both of which can promote the consumption of inexpensive, unhealthy foods.

Committing to Change

When the contestants confront their pasts, we, as an audience, gain sympathy for them as individuals. When they confront their futures, we hope that they will be

able to turn their lives around and become healthier, happier people. The breakdown moments that happen in the “present” on *The Biggest Loser* campus, however, give us the most insight as to how contestants are coping with their lifestyle changes, how devoted they are to the process, how much they are willing to do for themselves and for others, and whether or not they are deserving of this opportunity to “save their lives.” Such moments differ from breakdowns that involve confronting the past or the future. Instead, they focus on the current situation, on the ways in which contestants are able (or unable) to struggle with the “now,” with the daily herculean struggle of making the right moment-to-moment decisions to lose weight (and stay on the show). Some contestants meet this challenge head on, while others practice avoidance.

Just making it on the show is an achievement, and the cast members are constantly reminded that they are extremely lucky to have this opportunity. A great deal of prize money comes with the title of the “Biggest Loser,” adding incentive to stay on campus as long as possible. Presumably, staying on the “Biggest Loser Ranch” is of the utmost importance to the contestants, who have often struggled to lose weight on their own. It is no surprise then that conflicts often arise from the process of sending home and eliminating cast mates. Specifically, the “couples” format of this season adds extra drama to the situation, as individuals have difficulty voting off teammates with whom they have personal ties. However, early in season eleven, Dan and Don, the members of the black team, decide that they just can’t

handle being on the program, and, without actually quitting, create controversy by throwing the competition to ensure their departure. In a tense interaction between trainers Bob and Jillian, and black team member Dan, we find out that Dan is “prepared” to go home during the third week’s elimination. This information does not sit well with Jillian, who, earlier in the episode, took Dan and Don aside for a conversation about committing to the healing process. During this scene, Dan and Don sit side by side at a table along with cast mates from the purple, turquoise, green, blue, and orange teams. Bob and Jillian are sitting atop a counter looking down on the cast (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Bob and Jillian address the contestants

Arthur defends Dan, telling the trainers, “I think he doesn’t want to see anybody go home, [but] he feels that he could go home, be his daughter’s dad and still do this.” Jillian responds:

I’m just not buying it. You’ve got a lot of work to do. You two have more work to do here (pointing to her head) than anyone else in this room, and I

think that you are so afraid of dealing with that reality that you're living, you know in a future that hasn't occurred yet, and you're missing the benefits of the now.

While Jillian is addressing the two men, we get a two-shot of Dan and Don smirking at each other (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Dan and Don share a smirk

Bob agrees with Jillian's sentiment, as he tells Dan, "You're here now Dan, don't 'prepare' (air quotes) yourself for your plan B, you're still in plan A right now, Dan. Live in plan A. Don't be thinking about plan B, because the plan before was sending you to your funeral." Once more, the trainers are reinforcing the idea that they need to "fix" the contestants, not only so that they can lose weight, but so that they can survive. In a confessional interview, Jillian tells the audience, "I thought we'd been through this already. I know we've been through this actually, and now

Dan is back to square one, in that he's avoiding everything and he's acting like a martyr."

This confrontation between Dan and the trainers shows that the biggest transgression a contestant can make is not wanting it badly enough. Dan, and later Don, are framed as "breaking down" and quitting the program, because they are not strong enough to stay and fight. Later in the season, there are contestants who go home to save other teammates; they are framed as selflessly sacrificing themselves for the greater good. However, this early in the season, the trainers are frustrated and upset that people would give up their opportunity to turn their lives around. Jillian, especially, seems to think that although they know how to count calories now, the members of the black team don't understand how to surmount the mental challenges they will face if they want to live a healthier life.

During the week three weigh-in, Dan and Don are the last to step onto the scale. As the screen shows a nine pound gain for each of them, they act disbelieving, asking "You want to check that again?" (Figure 13) Bob tells them that he is disappointed, and we cut to a confessional interview of Bob, who says, "You don't gain nine pounds on the Biggest Loser Ranch, you just don't. So . . . it was deliberate, OBVIOUSLY, and all I could think about were those thousands of people that wanted to be on this show, I was SO offended." At the weigh-in, Bob tells the men on the black team, "I feel like you guys just gave up on us . . . and that's really



Figure 13: Dan and Don weigh-in, revealing their nine pound gain

disappointing.” Jillian chimes in, “You guys don’t look too broken up about it,” and Dan responds, “If I had an explanation for what happened, I promise I would own up to it. I don’t know and I’m sorry that I disappointed Bob and Jillian, I’m disappointed in myself. You know?” Bob and Jillian leave, as it is time for the elimination.

Deliberation is almost unnecessary, as everyone knows that Dan is missing his young daughter at home, and no one is surprised when he is voted off. The rest of the cast is sad to see Dan go. Courtney, from the turquoise team, poignantly tells him that she hopes he will soon have his “breakthrough,” as it is part of the journey that Dan did not get to experience during his time on *The Biggest Loser* campus. As Dan leaves, he says that he must now “redeem himself” to honor the memory of his son. Because Dan’s “breakdown” moments were not followed up by “breakthroughs,” he feels the need to prove that he can successfully transform himself by the season finale.

In the aftermath of Dan’s departure, Don is left alone to defend himself, as the trainers and his fellow cast mates show their disappointment at the previous week’s

elimination. Don argues that he “didn’t want to be involved in any type of controversy.” In a confessional shot, Jillian tells the audience that Don claiming not to have purposely gained nine pounds insults her intelligence, and when the teams arrive at the gym, Bob and Jillian confront Don.

In another “breakdown” moment of conflict, Don assures them that he is not ready to quit, but Jillian argues with him:

Jillian: You have quit! You can’t even express one (bleep) emotion! You quit! Either get angry, and say what you think or acknowledge that you’re not willing to change, you’re not brave enough!

Don: No good can come of it, Jillian!

Jillian: Really? No good can come from feeling? This is what happens when you don’t! This is what happens when you don’t express yourself or look inside, or question things. No good can come of it? You are afraid... and that’s fine, God bless, but –

Don (exasperated): I’m afraid of what?

Jillian: Getting angry . . . afraid of feeling anything! Afraid of looking at anything, afraid of questioning your life. Let me have it, show me that you have it, get mad, go, I’m right here!

Don (upset, glancing off camera): Get the bleeps ready!

His cast mates react to this statement, looking surprised and amused, and Don begins a tirade in which he tells them that he is sick of being called a liar (Figure 14). The



Figure 14: Don's mouth is blurred as he rants, prompted by Jillian

music is percussive and tense, and the harsh lights of the gym shine down on the group.

There are in fact several “bleeps,” as Don releases his frustration that his trainers and teammates are insinuating that he did something wrong. Afterward, Bob asks him how “it” felt (referring to Don’s release of pent-up emotion), to which Don responds, “It was fine.” Suddenly, the music changes from intense, to victorious and up-tempo. Jillian tells him that that was exactly what they wanted to see. However, in a confessional shot, Bob tells the audience that if Don doesn’t have what it takes for this week, “He might as well just start packing his bags right now.”

In this scene, the trainers are trying to demonstrate that one needs to “fight” for it. The program uses language such as “fighting for your life,” and “giving up the fight,” and Jillian and Bob egg Don on, to see if he has the passion that he needs to stay in the competition. While Don obliges with his vocal outburst, Bob’s comment

during the confessional, and the outcome of the subsequent weigh-in, prove that he isn't compliant with the aggressive nature of the competition, and therefore lacks the willpower to change (Hill, 2005).

Since Don has lost his teammate (and twin brother) Dan, he is paired with Irene, another cast member who lost her partner to elimination. During the weigh-in following his brother's departure, there is a lot of pressure on Don to prove himself to the trainers and the other teams. Once again, his team is the last to weigh in. Irene and Don step on the scale, and it is revealed that both team members gained six pounds (Figure 15). Irene is the first to speak, and says that she did it for her team; everyone



Figure 15: Don and Irene weigh-in, revealing another weight gain

knew that Don wanted to go home, and the two of them wanted to save someone else. The host asks Don if he was in on it, and he replies, “Yes, I always tell the truth. It’s not necessarily that you’re playing a game, but it’s a good strategic move.” We see a reaction shot of Jillian rolling her eyes and biting her lip, then cut to Bob, who says,

If I could crawl into Don's head right now. . . . He has got such a sigh of relief. He cannot WAIT to get on that plane and go back home, because it's just – this place isn't for everyone . . . and I hope, Don, I hope to GOD that when I see you at the finale that you did get something from this, because, you're not going to get it here. I actually think that it would have an adverse effect on him the longer he was here. Let him come down, let him put his shirt on, and let's just like, move on.

This series of “breakdowns” involving Don and Dan establishes Bob and Jillian's disappointment over the two men quitting. However, by resisting the ideology espoused by the trainers, the twins are also essentially discrediting the narrative of redemption offered by the program. Although the Ranch wasn't for them, they both come back to the season finale having lost a substantial amount of weight, showing that even though they do not subscribe to the show's ideology in its entirety, they are compliant enough to successfully lose weight. However, due to their many confrontations and lack of obedience, the brothers are forever tarred as deserters. This is because *The Biggest Loser* serves “as a highly politicized and contested space that educates subjects, disciplines the non-compliant and becomes part of a moral economy that differentiates between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ citizens” (Silk, Francombe & Bachelor, 2011). The program is structured such that any obese individual who chooses to leave the program before losing a sizeable percentage of weight is presumed to be doing so for selfish reasons, and at the price of someone else who

could have benefitted from being on the show. The trainers, as well as the other contestants, are “offended” by the twins’ seemingly willful disobedience. “Not wanting it badly enough” is a transgression that proves just how lazy and disgraceful obese people are.

This is not to say, however, that every contestant who has a momentary setback, lapse of judgment, or complication along his or her weight-loss journey is vilified. For some contestants, the “breakdown” is followed by a “breakthrough,” in which the individual is redeemed to trainers, teammates, and him- or herself.

Breakthroughs

Breakthrough moments showcase the triumph of the human spirit. They are the most inspirational part of the program, and are especially encouraging when they occur after someone has previously had a breakdown. These can happen during challenges, during work outs, and especially during weigh-ins. Two major themes that emerge from these moments are redemption and rebirth. Redemption occurs when a contestant “makes up” for a past fault, proving him- or herself worthy of transformation. Rebirth moments happen when the person has gone above and beyond making up for the past, to the point of becoming a whole “new person.”

Redemption

It is not uncommon for a participant on *The Biggest Loser* to have an overwhelming moment in which emotion gets the best of him or her. For most of the contestants, a sort of “breakdown” at home may have been the catalyst that pushed them to apply for the program in the first place. For Hannah, as we learn in episode three, an injury to her spine twelve years earlier caused a sudden change in her life, prompting her descent from athlete to “loser.” Hannah fell down a flight of stairs, injuring her back and ruining her chances of advancing in volleyball. She emotionally explains that she has been “sleeping through” the last twelve years of her life. When Bob asks Hannah what she wants from the experience (of being on *The Biggest Loser*), she replies that she “wants her life back.” Before her accident, she was “jump serving volleyballs,” and then “couldn’t even bend over to pick up one,” so she just “gave up.”

Luckily for Hannah, she experiences the first “breakthrough” moment of the season, which occurs in episode five when Jillian takes her aside and tells her that she is going to do a backbend. Jillian explains that Hannah is “constantly living in a state of fear,” and she wants to show Hannah that her injury has fully healed. Hannah is doubtful at first, but Jillian helps her up off of the floor, arching her back. During both the initial “breakdown” moment, when Hannah discusses her past, and this new “breakthrough” moment, that shows Hannah overcoming the hurdles she believed her injury created, we see images of her (from home footage) in her athletic gear, playing

volleyball. Uplifting music sounds as she experiences what she refers to as “a very big turning point in my *Biggest Loser* journey.” Hannah continues to stay in a backbend, with Jillian literally “having her back” by holding her up (Figure 16).

Later, at the weigh-in for this episode, Hannah speaks about the incident, thanking Jillian, and noting, “Every time she tells me I can do something, I can!” She also says, “Looking back, I let so many things with that injury push me down, and now the chains are coming off.” This moment of redemption for Hannah



Figure 16: Jillian helps Hannah do a back bend

perfectly exemplifies the broken/fixed binary opposition that is so deeply entrenched in the show’s value system. By accepting the fact that she “let” herself be a victim after the injury, and acknowledging that it is only with Jillian’s help that she can finally see how strong she is, Hannah is embracing and reinforcing the “neo-liberal” role of the program, accepting personal responsibility for her past failure (Silk, Francombe & Bachelor, 2011).

Another individual who is able to “redeem” himself during the season is Arthur. During a “temptation” in episode six, the contestants are given the chance to “win” the power to trade a duo from their “side” (people training with Bob and Jillian) to the other “side” (people working with the “unknown” trainers), and in turn have a duo from the other side join them. At this point in the game, many of the players assert that they feel like part of a family, and even if given the chance would not make a trade for a strategic advantage. However, Arthur takes it upon himself to ensure a victory in the challenge - by eating 35 chocolates - and thus gain the upper hand by selecting duos to switch teams. One of the stipulations of the temptation is that the winner is allowed anonymity, and therefore has the opportunity to bypass taking responsibility for changing the game. After it is announced that Jay and Jen, the green team, and Deni and Sara, the pink team, are to switch sides, many other players assume that it was someone on the team working with the “unknown” trainers who won the challenge and is now trading their weakest team (Deni and Sara) for the other side’s strongest team (Jay and Jen).

At this very tense moment, Arthur decides to come forward, and let everyone know that he had traded the teams, saying, “I’d like to say something. I don’t want there to be any animosity in the house. I’m a man of my word, and I want to tell everybody why I did it, so there is no ‘who did what.’” Everyone is shocked and upset, with Jay telling Arthur, “Karma is a bitch.” Arthur reminds everyone that it is a

game, and that he did it to protect his father and himself (by bringing a “weak” duo to his team). Jen retorts,

This IS a game, and you’re only on the game for so long. You’re here on this ranch for an opportunity to change your life, but your game playing switch is on. We’ve been here a while Arthur, and it hasn’t gone off. I don’t think it’s ever going to go off and you can see that in your actions, and you can see it in your habits, you can see it in your food, you can see it in your exercise, and it shows on the scale.

Jen’s words highlight the connection between Arthur’s moral failings, and his failure to lose weight. Arthur’s acknowledgement that he plans to use the recently traded pink team as “sacrificial lambs,” to go home in his or his father’s place further upsets the other team. His own team is also furious with him, and this all comes to a head when they meet with Bob and Jillian. When the two trainers walk in, they notice the change in mood, and inquire about the events of the previous evening. Everyone circles up for a group discussion, resulting in Arthur’s tears. Jillian comforts him, saying, “But honey, here’s the thing, I think that what you actually created now, is the very thing that you were afraid of, cause they seem real (beep) mad, and now, am I right? That you’re the first to go?” (Figure 17) In an interview shot, Courtney, a member of Arthur’s team, affirms that Arthur now has a target on his back.

Although he is the largest contestant the show has ever had (a fact that is



Figure 17: Jillian comforts Arthur

brought up numerous times, especially in the first episode), Arthur's weight loss throughout the season is less than impressive. His teammates are frustrated with his lack of progress and effort, and attempt to help him after his controversial trade. Despite their anger with Arthur, they know that if their team has the greatest total weight loss each week, no one on the team will be eliminated. The next weigh-in (week seven) is Arthur's "make it or break it" moment, his "do or die." Slow, repetitive piano music plays as Arthur steps up onto the scale, and he tears up as he talks about how it kills him to think that if he didn't do his job, someone is going home. When the scale shows that Arthur has lost twenty pounds, he cheers as his team rushes forward with celebratory hugs, as his big loss means that they will all be safe from elimination that week (Figure 18). We see Jillian run over and embrace Bob, as the entire team continues to cheer excitedly. In footage from his confessional interview after the weigh-in, Jesse, Arthur's father and teammate, tells us, "It's the breakthrough that I know has been coming for so long."



Figure 18: Arthur and his team celebrate his twenty pounds weight loss

While this moment takes place during a weigh-in, it is not just Arthur's dramatic weight loss that makes this a "breakthrough" moment of redemption. The significance of this moment comes from the fact that Arthur is able to trust and learn from his teammates. We have previously seen in his "breakdown" moments that one of Arthur's flaws is his selfishness and inability to trust his trainers. However, by succeeding in saving his team from elimination, this breakthrough shows Arthur's personal growth, and redeems him in the eyes of his teammates.

It is important to understand that this moment exemplifies an intrinsic connection between success in life and success with weight loss, reinforcing the notion that the trainers have effectively "fixed" Arthur by helping him lose these twenty pounds. The link between weight loss and morality is well documented (Stearns 2002; Townend, 2009), and regardless of their disappointment in Arthur's previous actions, his teammates view his "breakthrough" as signifying that he is a changed man who is no longer morally inferior.

Rebirth

At a certain point in their weight-loss journeys, many of the participants explicitly state that they feel like new people. No longer burdened by so many extra pounds, they are “reborn” and unable to identify with the broken individuals they once were. *The Biggest Loser* capitalizes on this idea of a new beginning, creating situations in which the contestants are able to display their new physiques and their new healthy lifestyles.

During the ninth week, the fourteen remaining contestants are told that they will be going home for two weeks, before coming back to once again run a 5K. This is very exciting, as many of them have not seen their loved ones in months. They have all lost a great deal of weight at this point, making the reveal fairly dramatic. Most of the contestants’ loss is in the range of twenty percent of their initial body weight. However, returning home will also test their new resolve, tempting them to fall back into old habits.

Arthur’s homecoming “reveal” takes place at his daughter’s elementary school (Figure 19). He informs us that he once doubted if his daughter wanted him there for her first day of school, because of his shameful appearance. However, this time, Arthur, who has at this point lost one hundred and seventeen pounds on the



Figure 19: Arthur's homecoming "reveal" during week nine

Ranch, informs the audience, "Now I can hold my head up high when I walk through this building." Before he steps out onto the stage, the crowd gathered at the school chants his name with pride and encouragement. His greatest achievements while back at home, however, are the little things that he was worried he would never be able to do. He is able to sit in his car without pushing the seat all the way back, which previously made it impossible for his daughter to ride in her booster seat behind him. Now, he victoriously takes them to the park. He refers to this as his "*Biggest Loser* moment," implying that for him, being a new man who is able to do the things the old Arthur was unable to do gives him the pride of being a winner.

When Hannah returns home, it is her father who remarks, "It is almost like seeing her when she was born - a new Hannah." This "new" Hannah, however, resembles the Hannah before her accident years ago, and she takes her father to the gym to play volleyball. There, Hannah faces the anxiety that she has built up around her injury, and is able to overcome her fear and serve the volleyball the way that she

used to do (Figure 20). “It’s my favorite thing in the world when my Dad is proud of me,” Hannah states. “In the past ten years I have failed them [her parents] at life.”



Figure 20: Hannah plays volleyball during a visit home

For both Arthur and Hannah, returning home to display their weight loss is symbolic of a rebirth that they believe allows their loved ones to finally be proud of them. They look back at their bodies at their highest weight with so much shame that they are unable to identify themselves as the same people. After all of their hard work, they disassociate themselves from their formerly fat bodies, which carry the social stigma of being lazy and marginalized (Crandall, 1994; Stearns, 2002; Townened, 2009; Rich, 2011).

During week fifteen of *The Biggest Loser*, host Alison Sweeney informs the remaining contestants that they “have all **earned** the adventure of a lifetime.” This once again denotes that after losing enough weight, the individuals are no longer the fat losers that they used to be, but are new, deserving members of society. She further illustrates the change in the participants’ social status, explaining, “Four months ago,

you were unhealthy, you were unfit, you were unwilling to take advantage of the opportunities out there.”

Referring to the contestants’ previous, broken, selves, Sweeney is implying that being obese was a choice that they made by being “unwilling to take advantage of the opportunities.” There is no discussion of how their living conditions, social statuses, and lack of access to resources may have influenced their body size. However, in the new life afforded them, which depends on submitting themselves to the ideology and values of *The Biggest Loser*, they now *deserve*, and are therefore presented with, the opportunity to travel to New Zealand.

The two episodes that take place in New Zealand present the contestants as new people in a new environment trying new things. One of the first challenges they face is bungee jumping from the Auckland Sky Tower (Figure 21). Both Hannah and



Figure 21: Hannah bungee jumps off Auckland Tower in New Zealand

Olivia see this experience as a way to symbolically “jump” into their new lives, with Hannah saying, “I’m leaving my old life behind,” and Olivia noting, “It was . . .the most freeing experience I’ve had in my life!”

In another challenge in New Zealand, Hannah goes cliff jumping, and once again tells the audience about how different this experience is for her, and how different she is from the person she was when she started *The Biggest Loser*:

In my previous life, I offered to hold all the purses, and take all the pictures - but that’s not my role any more in this life. . . .The only thing I jumped off of was maybe the couch to go to bed and that was it. . . . Fear has driven my life for many years. You don’t realize it until you’re not afraid anymore. . . .

Being able to let go was the best thing I could have ever asked for.

After Olivia wins a river boarding challenge in week sixteen, she is granted immunity as well as a helicopter excursion, which she can share with another contestant. Olivia chooses her sister Hannah, and during the ride, the two women once again discuss their journey, while taking in the beautiful scenery (Figure 22). Olivia tells her sister, “I’m just ready to live my life how I want to live it, and I’ve always been too scared, too broken, too fat to do it.” Hannah agrees that they are now, finally, ready to move forward. She says, “We’ve been given our life back [*sic*],” and then corrects herself: “We’ve EARNED our life back [*sic*].”



Figure 22: Hannah and Olivia share a moment together in New Zealand

The way that the two sisters discuss their transformations endorses the program's ideology, which the women have both embraced and adopted in order to be successful. Olivia explicitly states that when she was fat she was broken, mirroring Bob's quote on the wall of the gym that reads, "We're here to fix what is broken." Hannah's acknowledgment that they have both "been given" and "earned" their success expresses the program's insistence that the trainers are there to "fix" the contestants, and that the contestants also have to put in a great deal of work and dedication to be worthy of being "fixed" (Franco, 2008).

The statement about getting their lives "back" can also be traced to earlier in the season, when several contestants state that they are there to "get their lives back." This highlights the idea once again of not identifying with the fat self, but rather with the process of finding one's *true* self through weight loss. Weber (2009) explains that in the world of TV makeovers, people can change - but only to become who they

“truly” are. Citing a participant on the makeover program *What Not To Wear* who asserts, “They’re going to transform me into the person I really am!”, Weber argues that this idea echoes across the makeover canon (pp. 129-130).

By dissociating from their former physiques, and announcing themselves as new individuals, the reborn contestants imply that between the broken-down husk of their obese selves, and this new improved self, there is a transitional or in-between stage for “losers” on the show. Within this liminal space, contestants’ hard work and dedication will either prove enough to make them the “Biggest Loser” with the positive connotation of losing as many pounds as possible or the “Biggest Loser” with the negative connotation of being the fattest failure.

The amount of time that participants remain on the show (i.e., avoid elimination) is an indication of how worthy they are of change, and two weeks after their New Zealand adventure, the final five contestants are treated to an elaborate makeover that they have “earned.” Throughout the season, we have seen them transform through diet and exercise, but in this specific episode, celebrity guest Tim Gunn exclaims, “You’ve been working hard for five months. You deserve a fairy tale!” The “fairy tale” that is being offered includes a “three wishes,” which are a makeover, a visit from someone special to them, and safety from elimination for that week.

Hannah expresses her joy in actually being able to wear nice clothing after being a “window shopper” for so many years. Olivia tells the audience that she has

never felt beautiful before *The Biggest Loser*. Now that the contestants are thin enough, they are no longer excluded from fashion, and are encouraged to indulge in sparkly dresses and tuxedos. Sender and Sullivan's (2008) discussion of representation of obese bodies notes that obesity is often regarded as both the cause and the effect of low self-esteem. They also warn, however, citing Cruikshank (1996), that "contrary to the innocent notion of self-esteem as feeling good about oneself, such positive regard is put to work in the production of a self, willing to cooperate with – indeed to joyfully meet – the demands of neoliberalism to self-govern, to look to the self to meet needs, and to consume appropriately" (p. 581).

The remaining five contestants are "given" makeovers as something that they have earned. However, this is another way of placing expectations on their bodies to conform to social standards. Wegenstein and Ruck (2011) describe this as part of the "cosmetic gaze," wherein bodies are always looked at as awaiting improvement (p. 28). Now that their bodies are more aligned with mainstream beauty standards, the individuals are subjected to makeovers that help to situate these bodies as either hyperfeminine (all the women are given extravagant hair-dos and gowns) or traditionally masculine (the two remaining men wear tuxedos).

Hannah and her father, who was brought in as her second surprise, implicitly discuss the feminization and even sexualization brought about by her makeover (Figure 23). He remarks that he is "going to need a bigger gun." Hannah tells him, "I'm going to be going down the church aisle like this pretty soon." As a single

woman, Hannah has often cited her desire to find a man as central to her motivation for weight loss. Now that she has lost weight and received this makeover, she believes that she is much closer to finding a relationship.



Figure 23: Hannah's father reacts to her makeover

Another breakthrough moment from the makeover episode comes when Olivia weighs in, revealing that she has now lost one hundred pounds. She had previously stated that when she got to this milestone, she would sing on the scale. As she sings, Bob the trainer tears up, and tells the audience that nothing like this has ever happened on *The Biggest Loser*. Olivia says of the experience, “To stand a new person, in my new body. . . . I can’t explain how liberating it was. It was a very special moment. It was beyond a fairy tale” (Figure 24).

The contestants who are sent home during the competition do not necessarily get to have breakthrough moments focused on their rebirth as new people. However, during the finale, almost all of them come back to weigh in and demonstrate their

progress, while competing to be “the Biggest At-Home Loser.” The finale takes place on a stage in front of a live audience that includes many of the participants’ families and friends, who are there to cheer them on.



Figure 24: Olivia sings on the scale after losing 100 pounds

As the cast members are introduced, they wear their “street clothes,” allowing them to show off their bodies. When it comes times for them to weigh-in, however, they wear a standard “Biggest Loser” uniform, although it is not as revealing as their initial scale outfits, which included shorts only (for the men) and shorts and sports bra (for the women). At the finale, they all wear a *Biggest Loser* t-shirt and shorts. This more modest costume allows the contestants more dignity, which they have presumably earned through their weight loss. The show is no longer interested in making a spectacle of their bare bulging bellies, and focuses instead on how fit the contestants are, many with muscles where flab used to hang.

The narrator informs the audience, “They came here to lose weight, but in the end, they found themselves.” Some of the contestants explicitly use language that refers to the broken/fixed dichotomy, acknowledging their old selves as symbolically dying to reveal new, different people. During Arthur’s segment, he tells the audience, “This is my rebirth. Arthur is reborn now.” Once each of the eliminated cast members weighs in, and the \$100,000 “At-Home” winner (Deni Hill, who left the Ranch after week eight) is named, the finale focuses on the remaining players.

One of the four finalists, Jay, is eliminated by audience vote, becoming “America’s Vote Victim.” The remaining finalists include Olivia, Hannah, and a woman named Irene. Rather than walking onto the stage, the three finalists have the extra spectacle of “breaking through” pictures of their bodies that show what they looked like when they first arrived on the Ranch (Figure 25).



Figure 25: Hannah “breaks through” her old broken body

As the finalists have generally lost the most weight of all of the contestants, they are portrayed as not only the most successful, but the most removed from their former failure. By symbolically “breaking through” pictures of their former fat selves, they are actively destroying their obese self-images, and emerging as beautiful butterflies (Torrens, 1998). Once they all gather on the stage, host Alison Sweeney describes the three female finalists (Irene, Hannah, and Olivia) as “gorgeous Goddesses” in her eyes, and tells the ladies, who all come out wearing fancy dresses, to get changed for the final weigh-in (Figure 26).



Figure 26: The three female finalists with host Alison Sweeney

At this point in the finale Sweeney talks about “the Pound-for-Pound Challenge.” She tells the audience that over the last three seasons, Americans have pledged to lose over 12 million pounds, with each pound lost securing a pound of food for local food banks. This program was started by *The Biggest Loser*, General Mills, and Subway in 2009. For every pound pledged and lost at the *Biggest Loser*

website, participating institutions donate eleven cents to Feeding America, a domestic hunger relief charity (“Pound-for-Pound Challenge inspired Americans to lose weight for a cause,” 2011). In a short segment about the initiative, the communications manager from the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank informs the audience that one in six Americans are at risk for going hungry. It is surprising that at this point in the season, as the winner is about to be announced, the program is focusing on issues of food scarcity and poverty. The way that this is addressed implies that while many Americans need to lose weight, many Americans are also in danger of starvation. However, the program does not acknowledge that many individuals at risk for hunger can often only afford foods that are high in calories whilst lacking nutrition, one of the many factors that has led to the “obesity epidemic” in question (Silk & Francombe, 2009). The segment focusing on the Pound-for-Pound Challenge lasts about two minutes, and is quickly followed by the introduction of Anna Kournikova, a new trainer for the next season. The novelty and excitement of keeping new blood in the program outshines the opportunity to foster dialogue about poverty and obesity in the United States.

By the time the finalists weigh in, there are less than fifteen minutes left in the finale, which is broadcast live, which makes giving time for interviews, reveals, and crowd reactions an arduous task. Before the three women weigh in, they each have an introductory segment of footage from their time at the Ranch. Applause from the audience roars after the introductions, and grows even louder after each woman

weighs in. Hannah weighs in first, followed by Irene, and then Olivia. Again, timing is a factor as the last weigh-in will determine the winner of *The Biggest Loser's* eleventh season, and suspense is built with commercial breaks in between each one. In the final moments of the season, Olivia steps on the scale, revealing a dramatic 129-pound loss, shedding almost half of her starting body weight and beating out her sister for the title. She throws her hands into the air, cheering as glitter cannons explode from the stage (Figure 27).



Figure 27: Olivia and Hannah embrace after the winner is revealed

The final moments of the season seem a little rushed and anti-climactic, given the emphasis, redundancy, and reverence with which earlier breakdown and breakthrough moments have been presented. The finale is primarily about revealing dramatic changes in the contestants, especially in terms of scale numbers, which are the key signifiers of success. All of the contestants (with the exception of Rulon Gardner, who did not return for the finale) are applauded for their weight loss.

However, it is clear from the finale, and the entire premise of the competition, that an individual's value is dependent on not only losing weight, but on losing the *most* weight, and generally at the quickest pace. Small day-to-day changes to improve one's health are overshadowed by the exciting prospect of revealing a socially acceptable, slim, and attractive body during the finale.

While health is discussed throughout the season, and identified as a dominant motivational factor for most of the contestants, the number on the scale is what allows them to survive; they must demonstrate consistent and dramatic losses in order to remain on the Ranch and continue their transformations. By making pounds lost the primary determinant of status, the program endorses a problematic ideology that devalues and potentially marginalizes overweight citizens.

According to McClure, Puhl, and Heuer (2011) weight discrimination and stigmatization affect people in a wide variety of settings ranging from the public (educational institutions, hospitals, workplaces, etc.) to the private (clubs, homes, etc.). This can lead to emotional and physical impairment for heavy individuals, who may avoid situations in which they feel unfairly "judged" on the basis of their weight, such as visits to doctors' offices or employment interviews. By reinforcing the idea that the more a person weighs, the less he or she is worth, *The Biggest Loser* is doing a disservice to the obese individuals that it claims it wants to help.

CONCLUSION

The Biggest Loser is currently one of the most popular, accessible, and entertaining sites of public discussion about obesity. The program's dominant position in popular culture gives it a unique opportunity to help viewers understand the health benefits of proper nutrition and exercise, recognize the importance of believing in oneself, and experience the satisfaction that being proactive in self-improvement can bring. However, by emphasizing the most sensational aspects of the contestants' weight loss, the breakdown and breakthrough moments, the show chooses to exploit the extremes of human emotion for ratings. This study demonstrates that the exaggeration of these moments, and the extreme value placed upon overcoming one's past to redeem and reinvent oneself, expresses to the viewers at home that obese individuals are weak and pitiful, and that their only possible path to success in life involves losing weight. This notion is particularly harmful when woven into a cultural master narrative that views fat as a physical and moral failure.

While the inspiration and transformation that *The Biggest Loser* has offered to millions of people is admirable, it is only part of what society needs in order to overcome the "obesity epidemic." The Pound-for-Pound Challenge, for example, draws attention to the issue of food insecurity, one of many problems facing the world today. However, the cut-and-dried solution of feeding the hungry through food banks ignores the bigger picture of poverty and health. During the discussion of the challenge, the program makes no mention of the connection between poverty and

obesity, or the need for accessible health care for the poor. Just as many factors affect inequities in society, there are many facets to the problem of obesity, facets which are often ignored when the issue is dramatized in reality television

The PBS documentary *Fat: What No One is Telling You* (2007) explores the physiology of hunger, eating, and human metabolic operations, while also highlighting psychological and environmental issues that all add to the complexity of the problem of excess weight. This documentary is engaging and entertaining, featuring many personal narratives from participants. The difference between reality television's view of obesity, and a more detailed documentary treatment of the subject demonstrates the importance of a holistic, multifaceted understanding of the issue. In general, the success of reality television has come from the exploitation of participants willing to share their personal lives, including their darkest moments. Hours of footage are trimmed to brief clips, reducing participants to one-dimensional characters who can resolve their weight problems with a few dramatic breakdowns and breakthroughs that are aided and abetted by helpful trainers and teammates. In the over-simplified world of reality television, the highly personal, extremely complex issue of obesity is represented by a simplistic broken/fixed dichotomy.

One thing is clear when it comes to overcoming the phenomenon of obesity. Stigmatization and shame are not sufficient motivators for social change. Education, compassion, and cooperation are better tools for addressing our society's expanding

waistlines, as is an acknowledgment that the issue is biological, cultural, and environmental – not simply personal.

There are many limitations to this research. One is the possibility of personal bias. I have attempted to use repeated viewings and detailed notetaking on each episode to combat and minimize any potential bias. Another obvious limitation is that I was only able to analyze one season of *The Biggest Loser*. Taking the entire run of the program into consideration is beyond the scope of this study. *The Biggest Loser* enterprise is very prolific, and often releases more than one season in a year. A study that spans the show's entire history and examines each season would be beneficial because of its inclusion of more comprehensive data. There are also several different formats to the show's weight-loss competition (individuals, families, "battle of the ages") which may affect the dynamics from season to season, and the treatment of the issue of obesity. Considering the differences between each season, and including information on the trainers and their varying styles, would also have been helpful. Future research in this area, specifically when considering *The Biggest Loser*, could potentially explore the use of teenagers (contestants aged 13 to 16), a twist being utilized in the current season of the program, which premiered on January 6, 2013. Comparing *The Biggest Loser* with other weight-loss reality programs could also be a fruitful area of research. While *The Biggest Loser* is the most well-known of reality television weight-loss shows, there are several other shows that take a different approach to weight loss, and could possibly produce a different master narrative. For

example, the program *Heavy* (2011) on A&E took a more individual, long-term approach to documenting weight loss, and did not pit any participants against one another. Subjects are shown working at their own pace as they attempt to shed pounds, instead of facing elimination if they fail to lose “enough” weight each week. Future research could also explore the employment of a master narrative of obesity in different types of media, such as movies, advertisements, and fictional television. Are there forms of media, such as documentaries, that are more likely to inform the audience of all the different facets of obesity? Also, do newer forms of media (such as social-networking websites and message boards) reflect a progressive, holistic vision of weight loss and health?

In closing, I believe that we as a society need to move away from looking at obesity as a personal issue, and instead view it more broadly, as a social problem. Instead of defining success as a dress size, or number on the scale, we need to accept that health and happiness are far more nuanced phenomena. As a society, we must acknowledge the complex nature of human experience and identity, and avoid carnivalesque celebrations of those who discipline their bodily excess to become our “biggest losers.” Reality television applauds the determination and “success” of those who appear on its weight-loss program, but does not ask what, in addition to weight, they have truly lost.

Appendix A

Analysis of Breakdown and Breakthrough Moments

CONTESTANT or TEAM (circle): DON / DAN / DON & DAN / OLIVIA / HANNAH / OLIVIA & HANNAH /ARTHUR / JESSE / ARTHUR & JESSE

	Breakdown	Breakthrough
Episode Number and Position/ Length of Scene		
Brief Description, including location and characters present		
Action (behavior, performance)		

Language (dialogue, voiceovers, subtitles)		
Music		
Composition (lighting, costumes, make-up)		
Framing (camera position and/or movement)		
Editing (shot- to-shot juxtapositions)		

Special effects (transitions, visible digital manipulation, etc)		
Themes		

Notes:

Data Collection for *The Biggest Loser*, season 11 (2011) - March & April 2012

Episode Number: 2

Breakdown ~~Breakthrough~~ that involves: Olivia

Position and Length of Scene	29:06- 29:54
Brief Description, including location and characters present	Olivia, Hannah, and Dr. H are in Dr. H's "office" to see how Olivia's obesity is affecting her health
Action (behavior, performance)	Displaying/explaining information, crying
Language (dialogue, voiceover, subtitles)	"What do you do for a living?" "I'm an opera singer" Because of fat "you can't take as deep of a breath, or hold notes as long"
Music and sound effects	Music is mostly strings, intensely building up until he asks for her reaction (swelling low note), when she speaks, it is now slower, piano based, until Olivia says that she can't get herself "under control" which is followed by a timpani roll signifying the end of the scene.
Composition (lighting, costumes, make-up)	Contestant's hair is pulled back and Olivia does not appear to be wearing make-up
Framing (camera position and/or movement)	Close ups on Olivia, close up on Dr. H, close up on the monitor which shows Olivia's x-ray. One reaction shot of Hannah
Editing (shot-to-shot juxtapositions)	Mostly single shots, back and forth of Dr. H and Olivia
Special effects (transitions, visible digital manipulation, etc.)	As Olivia wipes away her tears in the last shot of the scene, it appears to happen in slow- motion
Themes	Obesity is affecting her career, and her personal life- including other people.

Appendix B

Spreadsheet of Breakdowns and Breakthroughs

KEY:

D = Breakdown T = Breakthrough
E = Elimination R = Return
V = Voluntary elimination

	Episode 1	Episode 2	Episode 3	Episode 4	Episode 5	Episode 6	Episode 7	Episode 8	Episode 9	Episode 10	Episode 11	Episode 12	Episode 13	Episode 14	Episode 15	Episode 16	17	18	19	20	21	
Ana	D/E																					T/3rd
Irene								T						T	T	D/T	T			T		T
Dan	D	D/D/D/E																				T
Don	D		D	D/E																		T
Laralmy				E																		T
Q		D		D	E																	T
Jay	T					E					R			T	T				T		T	T
Jennifer	D/T							T			T	E										T
Deni	D/T						E															T/ At home winner
Sarah								T	E													T
Jesse	D							D/T/E														T
Arthur	D	T,T,D		D		D	T		T/D/E													T
Marci				T					T		E											T
Courtney				D,T					T					D/T/E								T
Moses		D								T	D/T	T			T/E							T
Kaylee		D						D/T	T	D/T				D/T						E		T
Justin		D							T				T/E									T
Rulon						D	T	T		D/T	T				T	V						T
Ken								T	D/T					T	T/E							T
Austin								T						T	T				T	T/E		T
Hannah		D		T				T	D/T	D/T			T	T	T			T	T	T		T
Olivia		D						T		T		T		T	T			T/T	T	T		T/Winner

Appendix C

Binary Oppositions

Signifiers utilized during Breakdown and Breakthrough moments

Breakdown

Breakthrough

Physical Strain	Trainer Praise (Bonding)
Trainer Criticism	Physical Vigor
Negative Confession	Positive Self-Talk

Appendix D

Values on display during breakdown and breakthrough moments

Breakdown	Breakthrough
Fat	Fit
Broken	Fixed
Underserving	Deserving
Sinful	Redeemed
Loser	Winner
Weak	Strong
Unhealthy	Healthy
Ugly	Beautiful
Defiance	Compliance
Isolation	Integration
Shame	Pride
Closed	Open
Quitter	Fighter
Vulgar	Sophisticated
Lazy	Hard-working

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