

Okay so you may have heard about this in the last month or so:

It's the most recent finale of The Bachelor which, in its 22nd season, ended in the spectacle of a completely unedited breakup between the bachelor Arie and his fiancée, Becca, who he's leaving for the runner-up. I'm going to stop it here because this legitimately goes on for 25 minutes, before being talked about for another hour and a half. I hadn't seen much of The Bachelor franchise before this, but I couldn't help but see parallels to a show I really enjoy: the dark but incredibly smart series *UnREAL* from Sarah Gertrude Shapiro, a former producer on The Bachelor.

Some of those parallels are really obvious. It centers around an almost identical show called *Everlasting*, but instead of focusing on the contestants, it looks to show us how the sausage is made, following the producers of the show as they manipulate contestants into providing footage for the best television they can make. But what isn't as obvious is how layered *Unreal*'s approach to that commentary really is.

*Unreal* faces us with big moral questions about truth, cost, and consequences, which - in a roundabout way - is exactly what The Bachelor is about. As it turns out, Our experiences watching The Bachelor and *Unreal* are flip sides of the same coin, because they both ask us the same questions, just in completely different contexts.

So that's what we're going to look at today: how *Unreal* flips The Bachelor on its head. For the sake of simplicity, I'm going to keep this video to this season of The Bachelor and the first season of *Unreal*, but I'll be steering clear of any major spoilers for *Unreal* because I think it's definitely a show worth watching. I'm Jackson and this is Ideas at Play.

So first things first, here's a little background on *Unreal*. The show's main character is Rachel, an unstable but talented producer working on *Everlasting*. Her relationship with the show is complicated, to put it nicely, because she doesn't feel great about what they do, but she's also really really good at it. Her boss is the showrunner Quinn, who is...let's say a little rough around the edges.

We see the manipulation that creates *Everlasting*, and - because of that - gain a completely new perspective on this reality show about true love. But what makes any of this special? Tons of shows are satires or commentaries on politics or pop culture. Well, what sets *Unreal* apart is its ability to break down its target - The Bachelor - and get to its underlying ideas, and then build a new perspective of those ideas on top of the original.

In both The Bachelor and *Unreal*, we're actually tackling some pretty big moral dilemmas. A bunch of women are brought on to compete for the love of a man, who dates them all simultaneously, whittling them down through breakups before picking his final bride.

The further we go down this rabbit hole, the more invested everyone gets, and each cut becomes more painful than the one before. Basically, the idea is that through breaking 29 hearts as a nationally televised sport, the bachelor can find love. But is that worth it?

Likewise, Unreal is asking the same moral dilemma in an even more meta way. Is it okay to manipulate and cause that pain in the name of making a good television show? And if it's okay for love and not for TV, why?

The genius of Unreal, and The Bachelor, is that before we even get a good grasp on that question, we're thrown a monkey wrench by being reminded that these people signed up for this experience, whether or not they knew what that entails. And this variable introduces a whole new slew of questions.

The Bachelor consistently rakes in over 9 million viewers per finale, which is super duper insane for a 2018 show that's 2 hours long. On top of that, there's an entire culture surrounding the show. The exposure for contestants is huge. People have a lot to gain by being on The Bachelor - or Everlasting - from social media fame and the endorsements that come with it

to romantic adventures across the globe, or obviously the stated promise of finding love.

While not all the contestants get along, the sheer amount of time spent with the other women offers the possibility of a sort of sisterhood as well. The only price you have to pay is to put yourself at the mercy of producers, sacrifice your privacy, and risk humiliation on national television.

It's a deal that even Becca, the woman who was dumped for 25 minutes on camera at the beginning of this video, doubled down on when she agreed to be The Bachelorette. Unreal offers all of its characters similar deals, trading in parts of themselves to get what they want.

Rachel trades in her beliefs and personal well-being for the power and thrill that being a star producer provides.

Quinn represents the end result of making this deal for years, having lost herself completely to her job and without a life outside the show, but having become a God within her own domain.

This deal with the devil - also called a Faustian bargain - is at the center of Shapiro's intentions for making the show.

The Faustian bargain that Unreal presents to Rachel is the same one that The Bachelor presents to us. The cost we pay is being the bait for the show. After all, if nobody watched, there would be no exposure to gain, and no public humiliation to suffer. What we gain is a voyeuristic power, the ability to follow the development of relationships in a way that we never could in real life.

The way we watch *The Bachelor* shares more parallels to the producers who form the anti-heroes of *Unreal* than most of us would care to admit. We become fans of our favorite contestants and pull for the outcomes that would be best for him or for her, but in reality, they'd just be best for us.

That's the same line of reasoning that producers on *Unreal* use to manipulate the contestants, convincing them to do things by claiming that they'd be best for the contestants, when really they're just going to be best for the show. That's not to say that those goals never line up. Often, Rachel uses seeds of truth to get people to do what she wants. Sometimes it helps them out, but those payoffs for the contestant are largely secondary though, and the full choice is held back from them.

Think of Becca's breakup from *The Bachelor*. While many Bachelor diehard fans felt that there was no reason to have that breakup on camera, since the show was done filming, Arie and the show may have done her a favor in the long run. Her heartbreak is a huge story for the franchise.

That's not a deal she made though. It was made for her. And who knows if she would have traded in that heartbreak and public humiliation for the prize it provides.

On *Unreal*, everyone is "producing" those around them in the same way. In the pilot, Quinn rehires Rachel after a meltdown got her fired from the previous season, saying:

That might be true, and Rachel certainly is in her element on set - even if she struggles with the cost - but make no doubt about it, Quinn just wants her best producer back.

While it's called reality TV, we all know that it's not *real*. And Rachel knows this even better than we do as viewers.

But they're both reality-adjacent. The details might not be real, but we accept that idea when we watch reality TV because we think it might reveal something about humanity that *is* true. Becca's reaction to being dumped certainly feels real. Did she really think that this was going to be a "happily ever after"? Maybe not, but being dumped for a national audience certainly hurt pretty badly.

In the same way, everyone who works on *Everlasting* knows that it's not real. It's kind of hard to ignore the cameras and lights that change every date into a movie set. Even the premise is hard to forget.

But the show doesn't exist outside of reality. Everyone brings their own baggage, emotions, and lives into the house and that's where Rachel and the other producers find their best ammunition.

They control the context that they show these emotions, but the emotions themselves need to be real.

Having this manipulation adjacent to reality provides a really interesting setting for these debates. After all, if you're manipulated into doing something, whether it's sabotage another contestant or watch 25 minutes of breakup footage, are you separate from your actions?

And does honesty change that equation at all? Quinn hides behind the idea that she's been honest and thus they knew what they were getting into. Sure, for some choices, that's a fair point, but Unreal keeps changing the parameters of that deal, and asks us to reexamine. Quinn's reasoning that they signed up for it.

And that brings us back to the beginning. This circular argument is at the heart of Unreal, and what drives its most interesting questions. The answers are for you to decide. Just remember that while Unreal offers us views from both sides of this debate, just like it's producers it has its thumb on the scale.

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