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30 Days Returns

The Maker of *Super Size Me* creates compelling liberal TV.

By Louis Wittig

New reality TV shows need edgy, fresh-seeming concepts like plants need sunlight: a dramatic new way to renovate a house, or something. Invariably the result is derivative crap. Except when they occasionally come up with things like sending a programmer who lost his job to outsourcing to live in Bangalore with the Indians who are now doing it.

This gold nugget belongs to *30 Days*, a reality series created by mischievous man-child Morgan Spurlock (of *Super Size Me* fame), which is making its second season premiere this week. The show demands and deserves attention. Extra attention indeed, because Spurlock has figured out how to fashion crude reality TV into an effective left-wing polemic.

The *30 Days* concept is to take someone from one side of an American socio-cultural-economic divide and sentence them to live with someone from the other side for a month. In season one, a West Virginia Christian was embedded with a family of Michigan Muslims. Now and again, Spurlock pulls a page from his *Super Size Me* scrapbook and lives the other life himself: hacking it as a minimum wage-earner in Ohio, or an inmate in Virginia. All just to see what it's like, the show says.

This season's kick-off episode features Frank George, an anti-immigration activist and Minuteman volunteer living with a family of five illegal immigrants in a tiny East L.A. apartment. As he opens the front gate to the Gonzalezes' home, Frank muses to the camera how his first instinct would be to call the INS and have the family summarily deported. Tension, anyone?

The ride is well-paced and detailed. Frank butts heads with Armida, the Gonzales's teenage daughter, who's about to be the first in her family to go to college. He goes to work with Rigoberto, a day laborer and quietly bonds with Patty, the matriarch, as she scrimps heartbreakingly small amounts of bottle deposit money for her kids' Christmas presents.

What *30 Days* means by "seeing" is feeling. And it's feelings – sympathy, pity, shock – that surge as Frank visits Mexico, to see the extreme poverty in which his hosts used to live. After a round of goodbye hugs, Frank is on his way home, contemplative and misty-eyed: seemingly, a changed man.

Nowhere in the dime-a-dozen genre of reality TV is there anything that feels as real or important. A testament to the show's technical skill, because *30 Days* is even more contrived than most. Producers have planned well who will "just see" what and episodes are framed with straw-man explanations of the issue at hand.

Manipulative too: Reached by phone, Frank said he still believes in deporting all illegal immigrants. Off camera, the producers asked him how his opinions had changed. They didn't like his answer and they didn't bother to ask him again on camera.

Even knowing this, it's hard to resist *30 Days*. Partly it's Spurlock's simple and mischievous affect. Partly its because the show's promise – that you can really see into someone else's life, and that seeing could change your mind about big things – is the most intelligent provocation on TV.

The show's liberal assessment of its subjects – sometimes in the form of Spurlock, in jail, soliloquizing on how we need a system that helps people not punishes them; other times just as clear through camera work alone – is similarly irresistible. It's not manipulative video editing. It's Spurlock's genius. He knows how to connect viewers to the liberal Id.

Underneath all the big health-care-policy proposals and cookie-cutter speeches about opportunity is an emotional urge – a surpassing, little-qualified empathy for people in distress. This empathy is the current that keeps liberals interested in poverty during good economic times and passionate about things like racial discrimination long after they've ceased to be the country's primary social problem.

This empathetic response is good, human, and universal. For liberals it may be the cornerstone of all their political impulses, but there's no one that doesn't feel it. If you see someone who is sick or poor, you imagine their suffering, compare it to your own, and you want to give them medicine or money. The most efficient way to get someone into a liberal frame of mind is to show them the distress of others, prime the empathy pump, and make them want to help. At this point, socialized medicine and income redistribution seem imperative.

Television, a fundamentally emotional medium – where expressions communicate whole emotional histories in a second – can serve as this emotional catalyst better than any other medium. And reality TV can do it best.

Issue-laced dramas like *The West Wing* and *Commander in Chief* are, like all scripted shows, fundamentally fictions. Depending on the topic, news and documentaries can elicit empathetic viewer responses. They also raise viewer's expectations for hard information and balance – things that a show with an overriding socio-political message can't deliver. Satire like *The Daily Show* can make conservatives seem absurd, but evoking sober emotions is not something any comedy can do well.

When Michael Moore twice tried to make a go of a weekly liberal show, with *TV Nation* in the early '90s and *The Awful Truth* in 1999, he split the comedy-news difference: documentary style segments featuring a corporate crime fighting chicken. Neither is still on.

Spurlock and his team of producers (which includes veterans of Moore's shows) on some level realized the contrived-but-technically-unscripted reality TV setup of *Super Size Me* would allow audiences to see and feel real distress, and an hour format would be enough time to get really emotionally involved, to want to help. This bit, though is their pièce de résistance: the appearance – sometimes false, but still – that the character who's been exposed to the distress of others has changed his mind on the issue, which whispers to the audience, "it's okay for you to change too."

Everyone should watch at least an episode of *30 Days* this season. It's sophisticated and relevant reality TV: something akin to a live Dodo bird. The Left should watch diligently. Ever since the

2000 election, liberals have been trying to find their magic megaphone – that one media outlet that can serve their message as effectively as Fox News and AM radio have supposedly served conservatives. It's a slightly ludicrous idea that it's out there. But if it is, Morgan Spurlock knows more about it than they do.

- Louis Wittig is a writer living in New York.