

Michael Wyszomierski

## Reaction Paper

The shows in the PBS “House” series have two purposes. The first and unique goal of the series is to educate the general public about daily life in specific historical time periods and places. The second goal of the series falls in line with any other television show and is to gain the viewer’s interest through entertainment. Going back to the first goal, it seems that the series is set up to teach aspects of history that are both accessible to the public, and not usually taught by other media. While most historical teachings, especially those of public history, focus on key events and people, the “House” series on PBS instead teaches about the daily life of anonymous individuals living in a certain period, place, and situation.

Because the “House” shows offer something that traditional public history does not, it serves as a complement to, rather than a compromised-for-entertainment version of, traditional historical teachings. Daily life is something that is hard to be generalized, especially on paper, but it has proven through “House” to be much easier to understand by watching a small sample of real people living as if they were in that time, with the same technology and responsibilities. Not only is the public educated through this method, it also serves as an experiment for the researchers, who may have simply assumed how certain tasks were done and problems dealt with until they saw people working through them in real life. While the shows are obviously more prone to errors in accuracy than academic research, they nonetheless offer a unique insight into a different time not offered by simply reading historical documents or digging up forgotten artifacts.

Since the “House” series, like any TV show, is obligated in one way or another to attract a large audience, it is required to have aspects of entertainment to keep the viewer’s interest. The producers seem to favor two methods to achieve this: contrast and conflict.

Since all of the participants come from the modern era, and more importantly not from the time period they will live in, their modern-day view of the way life should be is contrasted with how they are forced to live on the show. The viewers can relate to the modern-day people, and also find interest in learning about the differences in today’s world and yesterday’s world by watching today’s people interact with the past.

As with almost any reality show, the casting department for “Colonial House” obviously looked for a group with varying personalities and backgrounds to stir up conflict. “1900 House” appears to be a rare exception based on the first episode. While the motivation behind this decision may have been “it’s good TV,” any community, past or present, would have had conflict. So, this may in fact add to the realism of the show more than a bunch of historians getting together with a common idea of how they should recreate the past.