

Performing Duggars: The Interaction between Producers, Performers and Spectators in the Reality Show *19 Kids and Counting*

Children as Media Arrows

¹ Christy Mesaros-Winckle, “TLC and the Fundamentalist Family: A Televised Quiverfull of Babies”, *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, 22.3 (Fall 2010), 1.

² Amanda Kondolojy, “Tuesday Cable Ratings: ‘Sons of Anarchy’ Tops Night + ‘Pretty Little Liars’, ‘Snooki & JWOWW’, ‘Tosh.0’, ‘Ravenswood’ & More”, *TV by the Numbers. Zap2it*, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com>>, 13 December 2013.

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁴ Mesaros-Winckle, *TLC*, 8. Adherents to the Quiverfull movement conform to a literal reading of the Bible, especially as far as gender roles are concerned, strictly observing a patriarchal structuring of family and community life. They are, however, better known for their belief that not only should procreation never be prevented by the use of contraceptives, but also that Christian couples should actively seek to have as many children as possible in order to fulfil the biblical commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1: 28).

⁵ Michelle Duggar and Jim Bob Duggar, *The Duggars: 20 and Counting! Raising One of America’s Largest Families – How They Do It* (New York: Howard Books, 2008), 92.

When in 2004 TLC aired a documentary about a frumpy-looking family called *14 Children and Pregnant Again*, nobody expected it to evolve into a successful reality show. Five documentaries and innumerable interviews later, the Duggar empire is at its peak. Jim Bob and Michelle Duggars’ family are currently filming the thirteenth season of *19 Kids & Counting*. The show, which had averaged 1.409.000 spectators a week in 2009,¹ was viewed by 1.520.000 people on October the 23rd, 2013, when the grand finale of the twelfth season was aired.² The third Duggar book is due on March the 4th, 2014, and their speaking engagements seem to take them across the U.S. all year round. The present paper addresses the way in which the interaction between producers, performers and spectators of the Duggar show contributes to and shapes the Duggars’ success, focusing, in particular, on the complex strategies that enable all three categories of participants to engage effectually and effectively in the performative process itself. In a synergetic play of dialoguing consciousnesses and power balances, the performative nature of identity, as theorised by Judith Butler in her seminal works *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*,³ is both confirmed and challenged by the double nature of a performance that takes place on stage as well as off stage. The following sections of this paper will, therefore, analyse the way in which the Duggars are represented on screen from the perspective of performance studies. However, it is first necessary to define the Duggars’ socio-cultural context, since the latter is crucial to understand what motivates both the producers – Deanie Wilcher, Bill Hayes, Kirk Streb and Sean Overbeeke – and the viewers to join the heated debate of which *19 Kids and Counting* is the result.

Christy Mesaros-Winckle has already convincingly argued that, behind the “serene, pleasant picture of life in a big, Quiverfull family”⁴ portrayed by the Duggars in their show, there lies the disturbing reality of a Christian fundamentalist family constructed around the hardcore values of biblical patriarchy. TLC has raised the movement supported by the Duggars to a prominent spot in mainstream culture, which it would not have held otherwise. However, the ramifications and rhizoid articulations of their decidedly counter-stream cultural discourse are far from being limited to the network of families who declare themselves to be ‘Quiverfull’. Indeed, the Duggars themselves clearly state that they “do not belong to the Quiverfull movement”.⁵ Yet, they belong to a much more wide-spread movement, of which self-declared Quiverfull families are but a small portion. Indeed, what the Duggars do acknowledge, nay, underscore on their website and the two books they have published so far is their membership to Bill Gothard’s Advanced Training Institute

(ATI) and to his overarching Institute for Basic Life Principles (IBLP). The latter constitutes one of the two fundamental sources of ideological indoctrination and networking for Christian fundamentalist families through its vast array of literature, homeschooling curricula, DVDs, seminars, spiritual retreats and conferences.⁶ It also functions as a means for outreach by penetrating mainstream America via a series of apparently secular seminars and self-help literature, which Gothard has managed to sell to a number of governmental agencies and political institutes.⁷ The other central pillar of Christian patriarchy, Doug Phillip's Vision Forum Ministries, has also benefitted from the Duggars' patronage and has overtly used the Duggars' media success to promote their patriarchal message.⁸ Regardless of whether a family declare themselves to belong to the Quiverfull movement or not, as long as they pledge allegiance to any of the aforementioned institutions and political 'think tanks', they will *de facto* admit to having the same beliefs as the Quiverfull movement.

One of such beliefs derives from a literal reading of Psalm 127: 3-5.

Lo: children are a heritage of the LORD;
the fruit of the womb is His reward.
As arrows are in the hand of a mighty warrior,
so are the children of the youth.
Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them.⁹

If, on the one hand, the Duggars do share the beliefs of the Quiverfull movement in that they do not use any form of family planning, and, on the contrary, are more than happy to have as many children as possible,¹⁰ it is also true that the list of Duggars' beliefs that derive directly from a literal reading of the Bible is one that far surpasses the statement that "children are a heritage of the Lord". For children are seen as both a reward from God to the faithful believer 'and' as crucial weapons, "arrows" provided by God to Christian "warriors" to defeat His enemies. In this holy war to reclaim the Earth and "subdue it",¹¹ Christian families should seek to outnumber the children of the heathen and the secular so as to comply with God's command. Quiverfull families are simply those who choose this name to express their obedience to God's will for their families, the peak of the iceberg, as it were. Like the Duggars, many may choose not to self-identify as Quiverfull, despite the fact that they actually do live in a Quiverfull way.

Besides insisting on the sinfulness of any form of contraception – since it interferes with God's supreme authority over the womb – Christian patriarchal families espouse a "vision"¹² of the family unit as the true and only basis of society.¹³ Families, not individuals, constitute the cells of the social body: they are literally social atoms, that is to say, indivisible and fundamental. What is more, the biblical construction of the family envisioned by Christian patriarchy is a reflection of the rigidly hierarchical and theocratic social structure described in the Old Testament. It follows that family structure should mirror the said strict hierarchy, with the human father at the head of this social microcosm, just as the heavenly Father governs the universe. Unconditional and immediate obedience to their head is thus expected

⁶ Kathryn Joyce, *Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 22, 179-180.

⁷ Ibid., 23. See also R. L. Stollar, "The Political Reach of Bill Gothard: Jeri Lofland's Thoughts", *Homeschoolers Anonymous*, <www.WordPress.com>, 12 December 2013.

⁸ In 2010 Vision Forum Ministries presented Michelle Duggar with the "Mother of the Year" award and collected her interventions at Vision Forum conferences in two DVDs, *Tea with Michelle Duggar* and *Hospitality with Michelle Duggar*.

⁹ KJV Bible. The Duggars, like most Christian fundamentalist families, only use King James' version of the Bible.

¹⁰ Duggar, *The Duggars*, 72; "Duggars' Big Thaw", *18 Kids and Counting* (First aired: January 25th-June 23rd 2009; produced by Figure 8 Films for TLC, 2010).

¹¹ Genesis 1: 27.

¹² Duggar, *The Duggars*, iii.

¹³ Joyce, *Quiverfull*, 3.

¹⁴ Rousas John Rushdoony and Gary North, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Publishing, 1973).

¹⁵ Joyce, *Quiverfull*, 41-92.

of fundamentalist wives and children. The Dominion Theology at the heart of the new Christian patriarchal movement construes female submission to male leaders as the sole means through which society can prosper.¹⁴ Women, according to Doug Phillips' and Bill Gothard's reading of 1 Timothy 2:11-12, Colossians 3:18 and Ephesians 5:22, are helpmeets created by God to serve and glorify men, as men were created to serve and glorify God.¹⁵ Likewise, in such hierarchical and hieratic family models, children's unquestioning submission to their father is the only means of exerting control over their minds and bodies, and of ensuring that, once grown up, children will enforce the same patriarchal scheme in their future homes. Hence, the importance of homeschooling, courting and the culture of the stay-at-home-daughter. By not allowing their children to attend public schools or even Christian private school, parents guarantee that no external influence whatsoever might awake their children's intellectual curiosity or lead them astray by opening their eyes to alternative lifestyles. Young people are discouraged from leaving the family home before they marry and start a family of their own. Since dating or any autonomous attempt to find a spouse are severely forbidden, the system ensures that young adults who have never left the family's aegis will only do so in order to enter another domestic space moulded on the very same principles.

The Duggars adhere to every single one of these values. All nineteen of their children have been or are still being homeschooled. They are not allowed to leave the home unchaperoned by at least one older sibling to ensure moral accountability. They are not allowed to surf the Internet unmonitored nor to watch TV at all. The Duggar girls can only interact with a prospect husband after the boy has asked Jim Bob for a formal permission to 'court' his daughter and provided the boy is considered to be in possession of the right moral, religious and financial assets. Physical and emotional purity are championed as the only Christian approach to sex and love, and even dancing or listening to pop or rock music are banned since they might wake up unsavoury appetites of the flesh. Nevertheless, no regular viewer of the show could disagree with the statement that the Duggars have undergone a most striking cosmetic makeover over the past twelve seasons. The family has gone from wearing matching Prairie-style, ankle-long dresses for the girls and solid-coloured, collared shirts and slacks for the boys to wearing denim and graphic T-shirts. It is true that the female members of the family are still under a strict dresses-and-skirts-only policy,¹⁶ but the hemlines have progressively been raised to the point that now kneecaps peep from beneath the skirts when the girls are sitting down. The necklines have been increasingly lowered, too. They are still far from revealing any cleavage, but, for a family whose members used to wear undershirts to cover their collarbones, this is a huge concession to the ways of the world. Despite the evident ultra-conservative behaviour displayed by the Duggars, the cosmetic makeover to which the aesthetic side of their performance has been subjected suggests an attempt to soften the least palatable aspects of their lifestyle and to become more appealing to a broader, even mainstream audience. Who is ultimately responsible for taking such a decisive step in the direction of mainstreaming *19 Kids*

¹⁶ The Duggars do so in observance of the biblical principle that "the woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment" (Deuteronomy 22:5; KJV Bible; cit. in Michelle Duggar and Jim Bob Duggar, *A Love that Multiplies. An Up-Close View of How They Make It Work* [New York: Howard Books, 2012], 101).

and Counting? Is it the Duggars or TLC? I shall attempt to answer this question in the third section of this paper, whereas, in the fourth, I shall address the extent to which the audience's (re)actions have morphed the Duggars' TV performance. In the next section, however, I shall analyse the Duggars' reality show as a collectively informed discourse in which identity is constructed as a conscious succession of performative acts carried out on the self by the self.

19 Kids and Counting as a Narrative Performance of the Self

The way the Duggars play their identity against and for the expectations of both mainstream and non-mainstream viewers is a patent instance of the fact that the interaction between the producers, spectators and performers contributes decidedly to the way in which the Duggars perform their identity on and off stage. This interaction is formatted as a visual and verbal narrative performance via the voiceover recaps at the beginning of each episode, but also through the talking-heads that regularly punctuate every episode. Most of the talking-head shots, far from being actual interviews are merely mechanical means to stitch together the fragmented ensemble of footage, thus transforming it into a cohesive story. Other than answering obvious leads, such as the question "where have you been today?" or "what have you done today?", the Duggar framed in a given talking-head will generically answer a number of questions that prompt a description of whatever images the spectators are simultaneously seeing on screen. In this sense, the Duggars are both performing and narrating their selves on TV. However, the Duggars had also been performing for one another for years before the TLC crew became part of the system. In fact, their identity as individuals was informed by their having to 'perform' continuously, both in the sense of delivering the expected and approved social behaviour, but also of 'living up' to a pre-ordained ideal. Each member of the family would 'embody' a given system of norms by 'acting' out what had been assimilated through previous sequences of reiterative performance. Performance thus becomes both the way through which normative standards are learnt and interiorised, and the way through which their assimilation is assessed and externalised. In this sense, the process of identity construction of each member of the Duggar family is a clear example of the 'performative' essence of identity of which Judith Butler speaks.¹⁷

The pre-eminent role attributed to the audience in sociological approaches to the concept of performance is re-elaborated by scholars like Erving Goffman¹⁸ to include the self in the definition of audience. It is always a performance "for someone", even when "that someone is the self".¹⁹ It follows that reality show stars are not being casually filmed as they go on with their lives. Their behaviour is turned into performance by the presence of external observers as much as by the internal observer who carefully monitors the verbal and non-verbal acts taking place in front of the camera, even when the audience is invisible and/or forgotten. In the case of the Duggars, however, the possibility of performing for one's self

¹⁷ Butler, *Bodies*, 12-16.

¹⁸ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959), 2.

¹⁹ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

only is non-existent. Given the strictness of the vigilance to which every single member of the family is subjected to, it follows that the Duggars are putting up a performance for an audience round the clock. The absolute lack of privacy and the chaperone system in full swing all day long and all year round construct a system in which the children's performance was constantly being measured against the patriarchal standards of fundamentalist beliefs long before it came under public scrutiny. Given also that the children are not allowed to watch TV and thus very rarely see their own show, many, especially the youngest, will not realise that there is a second audience observing them. In the metaphorical and literal closed-circuit TV of Duggar family life, they will still consider the other members of the family as the main, if not the only, judges of their performance. Regardless of their age, the Duggar children are considered so immature – or kept that way – that they are not even trusted to have interiorised the system's norms in the way ex-convicts eventually assimilated the rules system of the Panopticon in Foucault's homonymous work.²⁰ Orwell's dystopian depiction of the ever-vigilant gaze of the Big Brother²¹ would better describe the Duggars' predicament.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995).

²¹ George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Random House, 1992 [1948]).

²² Carlson, *Performance*, 3.

²³ Cit. in Carlson, *Performance*, 4.

²⁴ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1977), 112-168 and Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 35.

²⁵ Carlson, *Performance*, 5.

According to Carlson, re-doing something on stage presupposes the fact that that very something was previously done off stage.²² This seemingly mimetic role attributed to performance is, nonetheless, radically challenged by what could be dubbed as the 'self-conscious reiteration of performance'. The crucial ingredient of consciousness, when added to most human endeavours, instils in their pursuers an appetite for creative innovation that is hardly ever successfully suppressed. Performance thus becomes an ongoing act of creation, a fruitful dialogue between reality as it is 'done' in what is perceived as 'real life', and as it is imagined through onstage performances. In this sense, we could safely assume that whatever is being performed for the benefit of an audience will always be new, for, as David Román puts it, performances "are never the same".²³ Even when defined as "consciously repeated copies", the very consciousness that allows for the repetition also allows for deviance and originality. The Duggars perform their lives on screen not merely as a historical interpreter would at a 'living history' event. Their performance cannot be dismissed as instances of "restored behaviour", as defined by Schechner,²⁴ but, more crucially, their performance of their own lives becomes a literal representation of the fundamental identification between performance as understood by theatre studies and performance as viewed by the sociological and psychological sciences. The Duggars play themselves and, so, a double performance takes place. Carlson eloquently speaks of the "consciousness of doubleness"²⁵ that lies at the heart of a definition of performance approved by anthropologists, sociologists and researchers in the so-called performative arts alike. It is not just the presence of the conscious gaze of the audience that bestows a dialogic structure to performance, but the consciousness of the performers themselves. Like Gothic characters confronting their doppelgangers, the Duggars split their identity to match that of the performer and that of the performed, whereby a conscious process of self-observation transforms the actions performed into a narrative. It is as if both roles of narrator

and character were embodied by the same agent. Richard Schechner coined the term “restored behaviour” to signify a type of performance not so much involved in the display of skills but rather with a “certain distance between ‘self’ and behaviour”.²⁶ The same things that are ‘performed’ on stage – or before a camera, in the case of the Duggars – are merely ‘done’ off stage. Remarkably, at the very heart of a reality show of this persuasion, in which people are allegedly being filmed during their everyday activities and while ‘being themselves’, is the claim that ‘performing’ and ‘doing’ converge and merge into one single documentary-like narrative of reality.²⁷ Hence, the inseparability of the Duggars’ offstage identities from their performance in the show.

The Duggars’ evolution from counter-stream to mainstream can be traced with absolute precision, at least as far as their outwards appearance is concerned. Likewise, from the first documentary to the last episode in the most recent season of *19 Kids & Counting*, the *iter* followed by the show’s narrative parallels the progression of their public identity. Thus, since the show claims to be portraying the ‘reality’ of their life, the reiterativity of their identity performance becomes literal, with plenty of chronologically-ordered DVDs ready to narrate the Duggar story all over again, from its conventional beginning to the present time. Each performative act they carry out before the camera is of a ‘citational’ persuasion not only because it connects the individual with the collective, but also because it literally refers back to previous performances. Indeed, the Duggar show is visually representing the concept of performative citation since each performative act is played against past acts through either the lineal – that is to say, chronological – development of the show, or the literal juxtaposition of flashbacks and present events. In the first case, the identity of the Duggars is (re)created in the mind of the spectator, as the latter’s memory replays scenes from past episodes of which certain present events remind them. In the second case, the producers consciously and purposefully choose to put past events right next to present ones, thus manipulating the referentiality of a given performance in the show. In either case, the Duggars’ performance is being organised discursively as a narration. Their identity is thus continuously undergoing a process of construction through onstage and offstage performance, while this process is being narrated before the very eyes of the viewers. “This is the *story* of my family”, declares Michelle’s voice at the beginning of the show-opening of each episode. It may well be Michelle voice we hear and the Duggar family we see on screen, but whose words are they? Whose story is it?

Producers and Performers: The Process of Editing the Performance

The authorship of performative events is a matter open for discussion. Performers are seen moving along a thin line that winds its way to and from the roles of author, agent, and even observer, as it has previously been discussed. Furthermore, the liminal – and liminoid – space inhabited by onstage performers²⁸ does not apparently exclude anyone from taking part in the creative re-production of the authorial text.

²⁶ Cit. in Carlson, *Performance*, 3.

²⁷ See Nicolas Evreinoff, *The Theatre in Life*, trans. by Alexander Nazaroff (New York: Brentano’s, 1927), 99-112.

²⁸ Victor Turner, “Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology”, *Rice University Studies*, 60.3 (1974), 53-92.

The creative force emerging from the direct and indirect collaboration between performers and spectators will be addressed later on. However, the particular configuration of a reality show implies the existence of a third party: the team of producers and editors who are ultimately responsible for the product we see on screen. For the image the Duggars wish to project must square up with the image TLC is set on showcasing. Inasmuch as the latter directs and often re-directs the performance of the Duggars, the producing/editing team are also responsible for ‘making’ the show.

²⁹ Duggar, *The Duggars*, 6.

³⁰ Ibid. 47 and 53; Duggars, *A Love*, 76-84.

The Duggars have often spoken of their show as a “ministry” through which they wish to “inspire”²⁹ other families to consider putting God in charge of every aspect of their family life. Both the books written by Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar include specific and frequent allusions to this.³⁰ So, it would seem safe to assume that these declarations are spontaneous and unfiltered by TLC representatives. If this were so, it would be in the Duggars’ interest to modernize their outward appearance. This would, in fact, aid their evangelical efforts by communicating a sense of normality that is not usually associated with oversized families. Let us go further and suppose they not only approve of the final editing of each episode in their show, but also agree with the content, its presentation and the resulting representation of the Duggar family members. This would imply the possibility of a cooperative relationship between the Duggars and TLC as part of a plan to ‘sell’ the Duggar brand to as many buyers as possible. Once the initial fascination for the Duggars as spectacle had given in to their re-presentation as a model of parenting and of harmonious, closely-knit family life, the Duggars went from performing in a freak show to developing a product: a best-selling recipe for a return to happy family life. From this point of view, then, TLC would be responsible for collaborating with the Duggars in advertising a dogmatic and highly restrictive model of parenthood as the God-given answer to modern-day anxieties about the crumbling of the heterosexual nuclear family. Mesoros-Winkle’s paper provides the premise to delve further into the complex nature of the process of representing the Duggars as charmingly old-fashioned rather than unapologetically patriarchal. Building on her convincing arguments that the Duggars are unquestionably a source of visibility, even popularity, for the Christian patriarchy movement,³¹ it is now possible to ask *cui prodest*. Who benefits from the specific way in which each episode, each season is designed, performed and produced? Who is responsible for the way in which the show is formatted? Who chooses what is left in and what is edited out? The answer to any of these questions will determine up to what extent TLC is manipulating the Duggars’ image in their interest, as suggested by the style makeover mentioned at the beginning of this paper, or whether the Duggars themselves might be having an active role in shaping the show by modulating their performances in accordance to the political agenda defined by the Christian Right and/or to profit from the show’s success.

³¹ Mesoros-Winkle, *TLC*, 8.

The eighth episode of the first season of the show – when they were still *17 Kids and Counting* – is thematically constructed around the Duggars’ approach to

gender roles within the domestic sphere. I suggest we consider it as an instance of the complex arm-wrestling relationship between the way the Duggars seek to present their faith and the way the TLC crew/editing team strive to manipulate it to raise the audience, particularly as far as the issues of gender construction and representation are concerned. The episode, titled “Trading Places, Duggar Style”, revolves around the distribution of chores in the Duggar home. The eldest Duggar daughters are responsible for indoors domestic duties – from cooking to cleaning, to doing the laundry. They must also each take care of a certain number of youngest siblings in what the Duggars call ‘the buddy system’. Conversely, the Duggar boys are in charge of “the outside manly work”. Soon the spectator learns that, on that particular day, Michelle and Jim Bob have decided to let the boys have a go at the girls’ “jurisdictions”, while the girls are to be taught how to take care of a car’s engine and change a flat tyre. The deeply suspicious, even disgusted expressions on the Duggar girls’ faces, together with Jim Bob’s obvious amusement when he has them wear oversize lumberjack flannel shirts, underscore the fact that this is to be considered as a one-time experiment, mostly staged for the benefit of the TLC cameras. None of the Duggars seems to take any real interest in the chores usually associated with the opposite gender, except perhaps the younger kids, who see the whole affair more as a playful role-inversion than as an actual learning experience. The assumption is that everything is going to go back to normal after this exceptional day has ended. This is supported by the fact that one of the girls states that “hopefully, [the boys] will enjoy our meals a lot more knowing how much work goes into it [sic]”. Interiorised patriarchal definitions of gender undermine the family’s efforts to show they can indeed be open-minded and act according to a less essentialist view of gender. Contemporarily, the TLC producer and editing team are also actively sabotaging the Duggars’ experiment by selecting the images, questions and answers that most strongly reflect the Duggars’ belief system, ‘in spite of’ the latter’s intentional disguising of its most controversial aspects.

Nevertheless, it is quite hard to tell up to what extent the Duggars’ performance is being manipulated according to an external policy. There always lingers an all-embracing ambiguity over each episode – especially in the first series – so that it is unclear whether some of the most fundamentalist aspects of the Duggars’ faith are intentionally left out because the Duggars want to or because TLC reckons they would scare most of the audience away. Nowhere in the episodes can there be found a direct allusion to one of the most foundational principles of the Dominion Theology espoused by Bill Gothard: the male headship of the Christian family. Neither are there any statements regarding it in the two books published by Jim Bob and Michelle. Since there is no reason to believe anyone exerts any censorship on their books but the Duggars themselves, this could be interpreted as evidence that the Duggars intentionally hide the most sensitive parts of their faith. Back to the episode about gender-roles-swapping, when a member of the TLC crew asks Michelle if gender has anything to do with the distribution of ‘jurisdictions’ to the various children, Michelle diverts the subversive potential of the question by ambiguously

hinting at her children's 'natural' inclinations, thus suggesting they are not forcing them. Undeterred, the TLC interviewer presses her further, asking whether she thinks she might be reinforcing gender stereotypes in her children and training her daughters to be stay-at-home-wives, Michelle's answer diplomatically tries to omit a direct mention to the principle of women's submission to men. She limits her answer to stating that her daughters want to let their future husbands be the breadwinners of their family. Her admission to her daughters' homogenous desire to give up their rights to emancipation is enough for the interviewer to rest his case.

As early as the third season of the show, the way the televisual text is weaved already seemed to suggest TLC was attempting to find a subtle balance between broadcasting the Duggars as freaks and portraying them as a unique example of successful parenting and of the fact that it 'is' possible to have a large family without compromising its members' physical and spiritual health. Even when sensitive questions were still being asked, the answers were now delivered triumphantly and poignantly. For instance, when Jessa, the third eldest daughter and fifth child in line, was asked why the Duggars all dressed the same, she responded by pointing out that most youngsters in their teens like to conform to the dressing code of this or that 'urban tribe'. Jessa's countenance betrays her satisfaction at having parried the potential threat contained in the question. The fact that TLC is including more and more examples of the Duggars' 'improved' performance also indicates a willingness to provide a more flattering portrait of the family than it had in previous seasons.

TLC's previous insistence on portraying at least some of the Duggar beliefs as controversial will have faded out considerably by the time the tenth season was released. *19 Kids and Counting* has grown into a format quite frequently used in other reality shows: TV celebrities are filmed while doing exciting, adventurous things on screen every week for the entertainment of their viewers. The bottom line is that, once the spectacular, the amusing or the freakish have been squeezed out of the celebrities' daily life, it is time to revitalize an otherwise agonizing show by shifting the emphasis from the 'normal' activities the celebrity in question carries out on a regular basis to unexpected, unusual or even spectacular challenges which the celebrity is set to face by the producers of the show. Even when, from time to time, genuinely exciting events might still occur in the celebrity's life – and for the Duggars, these mostly consist in births and marriages – they are usually too few and far between to justify a string of new episodes. The spectacular is then artificially reconstituted to guarantee a satisfactory amount of entertainment, with the added bonus that it is now possible to adjust the content of each episode to the audience's response. After Josie Duggar's ordeal as a premature baby fighting for her life at the NIC unit had been dutifully capitalized in 2010, and so had been Michelle's miscarriage of baby n. 20 in 2012, there seemed to be little left to feed the media machine with. Now that it is quite possible that Michelle might not conceive again, TLC seems to be going to great lengths to architect new adventures with which to 'surprise' the Duggars and the audience alike. We see the Duggars sky-diving, digging for diamonds, travelling to Europe, Israel and Asia, and meeting other

celebrities. A weight-loss challenge was organized between Jim Bob and his eldest son Josh, during which professional personal trainer and former football player Steve Conley was hired to inflict all sorts of creatively painful workout routines on them in the most classic Marine sergeant's style. The inclusion of an ever-growing number of out-of-the-ordinary activities, evidently designed to present the Duggars with new situations, suggests a shift back to portraying the Duggars as spectacles, while the performative potential of the reality show is reduced to a narrative of the spectacular. Interestingly, this further limits the possibility of reading the show as critical of the Duggars' patriarchal beliefs.

The Influence of the Audience on the Duggars' Identity Performance

Numerous viewers of the show comment on the Duggars' blog, on their official Facebook profiles and interact with them physically at conferences, book-signing events or at shopping malls and in the street. The audience's feedback has obvious and immediate repercussions on the direction towards which the producers of the show want this alleged 'performance of the real' to be headed. The audience is construed as the final judge of the Duggars' performance in terms of their ability to glue viewers to the screen week after week, year after year. Regardless of the reasons why a given spectator chooses to be exposed to the show, the very fact that they are watching it at all is already making a success of *19 Kids and Counting* in the eyes of TLC. This is not so for the Duggars, though, whose interest is that their name/brand should be popular for the 'right' reasons. An invisible tug-o'-war ensues between the performers of the show, whose name and fame are directly associated with it, and the audience of the show, whose opinion determines the performers' public recognition and, in turn, their public, if not even their private, identity. On the one hand, the audience does influence the way in which the Duggars perform their very own selves on screen, by dictating what is perceived positively and what is not. On the other, the Duggars wield the audience's feedback as their most powerful weapon in modifying their own conduct so as to create a new image of their selves with which a larger number of unquestioning consents might be reaped. In other words, just as gifted orators possess the power of talking the masses into agreeing with their point of view, the Duggars' performance has the power to manipulate their audience into approving of them.

The two books published by the Duggars so far, as well as Michelle's blog on the TLC website, are explicitly configured as a response to the thousands of questions the viewers mail them every month. Michelle has for instance often answered questions about the family's modesty standards, their courtship system or their strategies to "shape minds and hearts".³² On the one hand, this tells us that these are among the most frequently asked questions, which is already significant, as it shows a particular concern regarding the tenets of the Christian patriarchal faith. As the editors of Michelle's TLC blog explain, the process of choosing the next topic is mostly led by the questions to be answered by Michelle.

³² Duggar, *A Love*, 73.

We asked you if you had a question for Michelle and we received a ton of curious queries. While we weren't able to ask Michelle all of the questions due to the volume of submissions, we did choose questions that we saw over and over again.³³

³³ "You Asked Michelle", *TLC Parentables*, 5 July 2010, <<http://parentables.howstuffworks.com/family-matters/you-asked-michelle.html>>, 12 December 2013.

On June the 22nd, 2012, December the 7th, 2012, September the 30th, 2013, and then again on October the 10th, 2013, Michelle has answered as many questions on the topic of modesty: why she has chosen to don a modest apparel and how she teaches modesty standards to her daughters. On the other hand, although Michelle does not – at least as far as we are told – choose the topics for her blog entries, she does have and exert the power of moulding her answer to the end of projecting a certain image, rather than to answer the question itself. On May the 27th, 2010, Michelle wrote a post answering a viewer's question as to whether they "do or have ever had to spank their children". Michelle's reply carefully avoids saying aye or nay, but rather focuses on describing some of her parenting strategies that just so happen to be in line with the most politically correct children's discipline theories of late. The lack of a decisive negative answer to the question might have been overlooked as an implicit denial of the use of corporal discipline if the Duggars had not devoted an entire chapter of their first book to describing how they 'blanket-train' their infant and toddler children. This method became widespread among Christian homeschooling fundamentalist families after Micheal and Debi Pearl published their controversial *To Train Up a Child*,³⁴ in which various kinds of corporal punishment are advocated and described in detail.³⁵ While there is no evidence whatsoever that the Duggars ever resorted to spanking to discipline their children, Michelle's avoidance of a direct answer to a question that was probably selected because it had been asked "over and over again" is nonetheless open to interpretation. Some may choose to read her post as a clear rejection of spanking, while others may lean towards interpreting Michelle's selective answer as a case of 'he who remains silent consents'.

³⁴ Michael Pearl and Debi Pearl, *To Train Up a Child* (Pleasantville, Tennessee: No Greater Joy, 1994).

³⁵ Joyce, *Quiverfull*, 77.

³⁶ Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1973).

³⁷ Rosy Daisy, "Re: Duggars, Duggars Everywhere – General Discussion Part 2", *Free Jinger*, 25 November 2013, <<http://freejinger.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=8&t=19818&hilit>>, 12 December 2013.

³⁸ Its name alludes to the sixth of the Duggar children, whose names all start with the first letter in their father's name.

³⁹ "Quiver Full of Snark", *Free Jinger*, <<http://freejinger.org/forums/viewforum.php?f=8>>, 12 December 2013.

The existence of different readers and different readings of the Duggars' narrative performance of their selves can be explained via the categories of 'decoding/encoding' proposed by the audience reception theory. The audience's interpretation of the show can vary from dominant positions to negotiated or oppositional ones.³⁶ The inherent ambiguity of the final cut of each episode of the middle seasons makes it difficult to agree on what the hegemonic position might be, whereas, as previously discussed, the TLC's bias on the first and last seasons can be more easily guessed. The fact that TLC seems ready to "throw the Duggars under the bus"³⁷ has been often discussed in *Free Jinger*, an online forum.³⁸ This forum is dedicated to the discussion of fundamentalism, or rather, as its members put it themselves, to "snarking" on the "fundies".³⁹ Many of the most prominent Christian fundamentalist bloggers are discussed in threads whose content may range from highly educated and eloquent interpretations of fundamentalist theology and politics, to open condemnation and ridicule of misogynistic and homophobic positions. Threads on Doug Phillips and other so-called "fundie royalties" are often

to be found among the top topics on the forum. However, the Duggars must be credited for consistently leading the chart of the most discussed threads. One of these threads, “Duggars, Duggars Everywhere” is devoted to a general discussion of the family. On November the 19th, 2013, a member posted on this thread an account of her trial after having been arrested at the flea market run by the Duggars in the grand finale of the twelfth season of the show.⁴⁰ Apparently, someone had emailed Michelle about the said member’s intention to attend the event and, if possible, to approach Michelle and ask her a few questions. The poster claims that she had then been found out to be the member of *Free Jinger* about whom Michelle had been warned, which subsequently led to her being charged with harassment. This incident, if true, might validate what the posters in *Free Jinger* have been discussing for a very long time: that the fundamentalist to whom their ‘snarking’ is directed do know about the forum’s existence and do react to what they read in it. Some bloggers might go private, and others might delete or alter their posts. It has been often commented how numerous scenes have been deleted from the various episodes of the Duggars’ show ‘after’ they were aired so that they are now no longer to be found in the DVDs available from TLC. This seems to indicate that not only is the process of editing the show still on-going, but also that it is influenced by the negative reviews a certain scene might have received.

Not all reviews the Duggars get from the World Wide Web are criticisms and instances of negative publicity. A clear example of a dominant position, as far as the Duggars’ encoding of their show is concerned, can be found in private blogs, such as the one run by a mother-and-daughter team of die-hard fans of the Duggars,⁴¹ and which contributes to spreading around a flattering version of the Duggars’ ups and downs. The fact that all the content of the self-proclaimed ‘official’ Duggar family’s blog is published by permission of the Duggar family – including the impressive collection of private pictures, is proof of it being designed as a propaganda tool. The blog provides bite-sized morsels of information about the Duggars’ approaching public events, their current whereabouts and calendar highlights, while contemporarily allowing fans to send their own pictures and comments, all invariably favourable to the Duggars.

The third possible position held by the viewer in relation to the media text is the most interesting, from the point of view of performance studies. A negotiated position entails a partial acceptance of the general intended meaning of the performative text through an ambivalent, though cooperative interpretation thereof. In other words, meaning is both shared and resisted. According to Carlson, one of the (many) possible definitions for performance reads as follows: “a self-consciousness about doing and re-doing on the part of both performers and spectators”.⁴² It is not simply that the fact of re-doing presupposes the act of doing and that this neatly dovetails into Judith Butler’s reading of the discursive continuum of identity as citational. Carlson’s “consciousness of doubleness”⁴³ refers to performers and spectators. The former is aware of his/her mirroring identities as onstage persona and offstage individual. The latter must identify with

⁴⁰ FMJ. “Re: Duggars, Duggars Everywhere – General Discussion Part 2”, *Free Jinger*, 19 November 2013, <<http://freejinger.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=8&t=19818&hilit=arrested&start=380>>, 12 December 2013.

⁴¹ Lily and Ellie, “The Original Duggar Family Blog”, Blogger, <<http://duggarsblog.blogspot.com.es/>>, 13 December 2013.

⁴² Carlson, *Performance*, ix.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5.

the focaliser in order to share the narrative viewpoint and understand the nature of the performative act, while also maintaining enough of a distance so as to observe and decode the socio-cultural signification of the performance. In other words, regardless of how a given viewer feels *a priori* about Christian fundamentalism, they will first have to establish, however briefly, an identificatory connection with the Duggars in order to make sense of on-screen action. Creative and critical interpretations can only be offered subsequently.

Judith Butler's analysis of Slavoj Žižek's works discloses a similar attempt to "rethink identity-claims as phantasmatic sites, impossible sites, and, hence, as alternatively compelling and disappointing".⁴⁴ The need to either praise or condemn the Duggars is generated through an oxymoronic chain of identifications reminiscent of the Gothic definition of 'anxiety' as the clash between desire and repulsion.⁴⁵ It might seem that individual spectators do actually take sides, either identifying with the Duggars' beliefs and practices or rejecting them as abject. In reality, before articulating their standing before the show as positive or negative, spectators must first experience the unavoidable ambiguity of identification: they must first 'both' feel attracted to 'and' repelled by the Duggars. The viewers move virtually in and out of the reality paraded on screen. Their gaze is first drawn into (attraction) the illusion of tridimensionality of the show on screen and then is pushed back out (repulsion) when the thin illusion of 'being there' dissolves. Yet, while the spectator's gaze sustains the temporary illusion of presence inside the oppositional reality of the show, it also forges an impression of oneness with the performer/focaliser of the show. A spectator's claim to 'like' or 'dislike' the Duggars is the consequence of the specific way in which the said ambiguity is resolved. However, regardless of how or whether it is resolved, this Arkansas family of nineteen will still be consistently perceived as phantoms, as ghostly symbolic representations of how the viewers alternatively see them. The phantasmatic existence of the performer in an ongoing reality show is what makes the Duggars' identities as volatile and as ductile as the media market – and the producers of the show – require them to be, and as the observers of the performance, who include the Duggars themselves, choose to decode them.

⁴⁴ Butler, *Bodies*, 188.

⁴⁵ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 2-3.