

The reality show has been around in one form or another since the Louds opened up their home on *An American Family* in 1973 on PBS (which should give you an idea of how the genre was once perceived), and it has gone through many evolutions in the culture, now culminating with *Jersey Shore*, which is defining the genre today. But one can't really talk about *Jersey Shore* without taking note of its progenitor and foil: *The Hills*. If *The Hills* was the angsty grande dame of MTV's reality shows, then *Jersey Shore* is its shaggy fun-hearted younger cousin. *Jersey Shore* is an accidental triumph, a minor goof that during its first season became more interesting than most scripted shows. No, it isn't better than *Mad Men* or *30 Rock*, but the pleasures reality shows offer are different from those of scripted shows, though the lines separating them have become increasingly blurred.

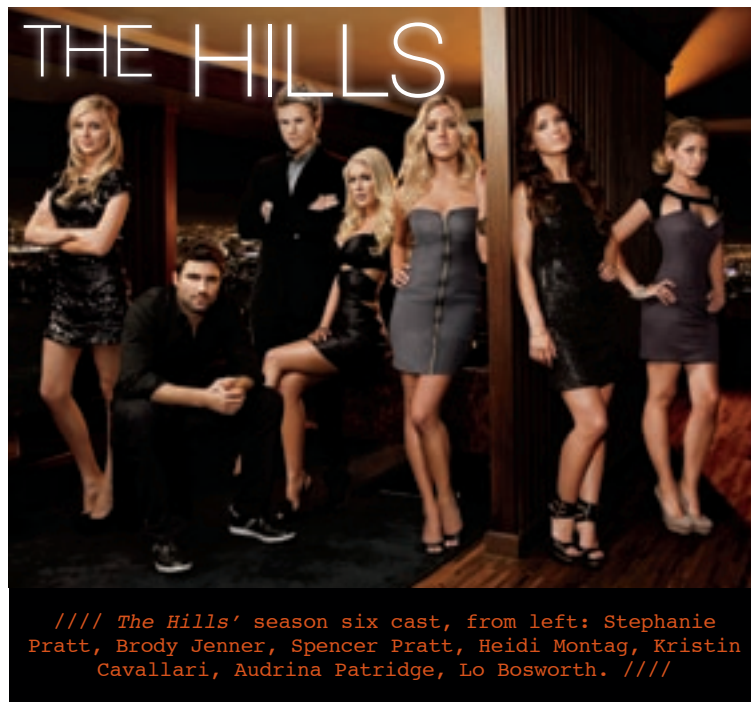
Somewhere between *The Osbournes* (which was pleasingly aimless and rooted in behavior) and *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* (in which all the dialogue and every scene seem scripted) there was a shift in what audiences would accept. We're past the point at which anyone cares whether it's "reality" or just a new genre: reality TV. Viewers now accept the fact that what they're watching is manufactured reality (the game shows

and cooking contests don't count), and when *The Hills* began its reign this wasn't entirely the case, though by the time that show ended everything on *The Hills* seemed much less real in seasons five and six than it did in seasons one, two and three.

If you somehow missed *The Hills* or avoided it because of the facile judgments of too many critics, then you missed one of the great TV series of all time, one that in its novelistic attention to behavior and detail almost ranks with *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* in its ability to capture a world in free-falling breakdown mode (the young, hip L.A. singles scene). The people I know who missed *The Hills* haven't missed *Jersey Shore*—it has gotten so big so quickly that if you're interested in what's going on in the culture

you have to tune in. This wasn't necessarily the case with *The Hills*, which because it seemed so girlie probably limited its initial audience.

What distinguished season one of *Jersey Shore* is that despite the mechanical setup, the show felt real when it first aired, and the personalities seemed real, and the whole thing had a casual charm that in reality-TV terms couldn't have been faked. It seemed almost like a throwback (unscripted reality) even though it quickly became the epitome of post-Empire programming. But first let me define Empire: It started in roughly 1945 through 9/11, limping along during the rest of the Bush years until the economy blew up and Obama was elected. Programming shifted to accommodate the cultural needs after the cataclysm—post-Empire: an age of coconut water, the Tea Party, *The Human Centipede* and Shia LaBeouf.



//// *The Hills*' season six cast, from left: Stephanie Pratt, Brody Jenner, Spencer Pratt, Heidi Montag, Kristin Cavallari, Audrina Patridge, Lo Bosworth. ////

****Jersey Shore* has become MTV's most popular reality show since *The Hills*, but the two are from very different planets because the cultural moments they were developed in have changed in just about the space of five years. *The Hills* began presenting its characters and their various dramas in a carefully "naturalistic" way, whereas *Jersey Shore* is essentially just a more amped-up *Real World* with a fixed cast. *The Hills* seemed

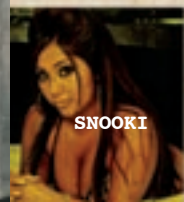
elegantly constructed. It had a vision. Critics who dismissed *The Hills* simply weren't watching it. People who complained about the characters they read about in the tabloids weren't watching the show, which actually humanized vacuous celebrities like Heidi Montag and Spencer Pratt. *The Hills* was about *pain*, particularly romantic disappointment. The whispered conversations in sun-blasted cafés, the subtitled shout fests in the darkly glamorous clubs lining La Cienega, the heartbreaking close-ups of a face trying to keep itself composed when confronted with rejection—*The Hills* took the mundane realities of its characters and shaped them into something painfully accessible. No matter how unattractive the characters seemed taken out of the context of the show (where they increasingly



AS SEEN ON TV

*** by Bret Easton Ellis **NOTES ON JERSEY SHORE** author of AMERICAN PSYCHO and LESS THAN ZERO

//// On MTV, The Hills was the most popular Empire reality show; now, in the post-Empire, Jersey Shore reigns ////



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RONNIE



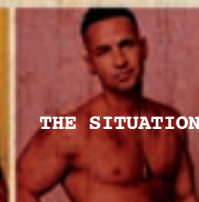
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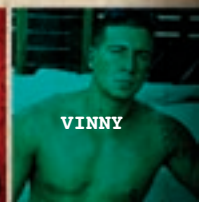
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THE SITUATION



ANGELINA



VINNY

strayed from the roles the show had demanded of them), within the context of the show they were compelling and vulnerable. There was a tension that kept running through most of the show because it never provided the fake catharsis that so many shows rely on. Friends became enemies, lovers were never reunited, loss hovered everywhere, so little was resolved....

****The Hills* premiered at the height of the Bush era in 2006, but the whole thing really began with *Laguna Beach* in 2004, when it only kind of worked—*LB* didn't have a particularly visual style, and given the age of the cast the stakes weren't as high. But *Laguna Beach* was the rough sketch for the style that ultimately made *The Hills* seem startlingly new: You couldn't tell what was real and what was "scripted" because, unlike most reality TV, it was so well made and the "performances" were so natural and subtle. It also removed on-camera interviews commenting on the action, which reinforced the sustained illusion. *The Hills* took its cues from L.A. life and its neurotic protocol about surfaces, while also selling the glamour of being young and rich. Very Empire....

Well, most of the cast of *Jersey Shore* isn't as young

and tasty as the beauties of *The Hills*, and they're definitely nowhere near as rich (though that's changing as I type this). The main complaint from the uninitiated is that *Jersey Shore* is a trash show about trashy people. Yeah, the guidos and guidettes are a mess, but they're basically *kids*. *Jersey Shore* is an ode to youth;

it's about looking good and hooking up in hot tubs, and how much work sucks (selling T-shirts on the boardwalk, scooping gelato) and the drama of it all ("It shouldn't be hard. But it *is* hard. Because it's the *Jersey Shore*"). When I first started watching, it seemed like a train wreck, patched together and desperate, with a serious case of ADD (*The Hills* had pauses that rivaled Pinter's), and then Snooki got punched in the face and everything changed. But for most of season one *Jersey Shore* seemed to blissfully accept what it was: an Italian American parody of *The Real World*. *The Hills* had a sophisticated architecture behind it, it was shimmeringly

beautiful, and there was an elegiac tone throughout. But that was yesterday: *Jersey Shore* has—intentionally? consciously? unconsciously?—avoided all of these things big-time. Very post-Empire....

***Shot in August 2009 in Seaside Heights and aired that December, *Jersey* (continued on page 138)



//// Top: Ronnie defends himself against allegations made in an "anonymous" letter sent to Sammi; bottom: Sammi and JWovw rumble. ////



//// Above, from left: Angelina, Snooki; top center: the Situation worries he may have mistakenly hooked up with a guy at a club; bottom center: Spencer and Heidi; top right: Lauren Conrad; bottom right: Lo Bosworth. ////

JERSEY SHORE

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Shore: Season One was about the giddiness of summer and of being young and getting drunk and creeping and the attendant bragging rights. Unlike *The Hills* it could also be funny as hell. (Think of it as *Goodfellas* for the YA set.) It had a big adorable cast that made the kids on *The Hills* seem like WASP zombies. If *The Hills* was a Jane Austen novel reset in Aughties L.A., then *Jersey Shore: Season One* was about the guys and their issues: lad drama about friendships and self-esteem and girls.

The smush captains with the overwaxed eyebrows of *Jersey Shore* just want to have fun (Paul DelVecchio—DJ Pauly D—with his hyena grin kept stressing this), and in season one they're sexier than the girls. Compared with Brody, Spencer and Justin Bobby—who entered tortured, complicated relationships with girls while maintaining their surface cool—the guys on *Jersey Shore* just wanna gym, tan, laundry (GTL!) and, of course, creep—except for hulking, neurotic Ronnie, who didn't go to the shore to fall in love but ended up in a tight relationship with husky-voiced Sammi. The player is Mike Sorrentino, a.k.a. the Situation, and if you don't know why he's called that by now then you're probably not reading this. The oldest at 30, Pauly D is his amiable wingman with the pierced penis. This is never glimpsed because the show, despite the massive alcohol intake and all the bedroom antics, is strenuously PG-13, with only glimpses of smoking—MTV never shows people taking drugs or using steroids. Vinny, the youngest guido, seemed at first, oddly enough, the show's moral compass, the responsible one, the Lauren Conrad, and then we're told at one point in season two by Snooki after the two have hooked up how well-hung he is. The guys on *Jersey Shore* are nicer than the guys on *The Hills* (clearly no one likes to fuck with girls by pitting them against one another the way Brody Jenner does), and certainly Pauly D and the Situation are preferable to Brody and Justin Bobby—douchey, perhaps, but aware of the douchiness, which kind of makes all the difference. Unlike the guys on *The Hills*, they have a code based in the machismo they cultivate and exude in some metaverse of Italian chivalry: not quite gentlemen but certainly not the pretty L.A. boys who play sadistic mind games with the girls they're involved with (Justin Bobby/Audrina, hello?). Self-proclaimed guidette Nicole Polizzi (a.k.a. Snooki) holds her own with the dudes with her cutie-pie deadpan charisma. (Snooki has more natural charm than most movie stars her age. That's not a freaky compliment—it's just a fact.) Everybody's wasted, but they're all endearing, and the constant asides ("This is crazy, yo!" to wannabe vet tech Snooki's heartfelt "I save animals. That's what I do.") become their own kind of whacked-out poetry.



The Empire vibe that loomed over *The Hills* was chilled-out and luxe, but in the post-Empire you find the Situation flexing his abs to get people to buy gelato: And we're

now front row in the carnival of the unapologetic hustle. And then there's the epitome of post-Empire trauma that put the show on the map: The gang is hanging at the Beachcomber Bar and Grill, and Snooki, hunting gorillas and juiceheads, gets punched in the face by a drunk who is neither. (This man, Brad Ferro, a New York City schoolteacher, should be getting residuals.) And yeah, Ronnie beats up two guys he says were asking for it, and Sammi has painful self-esteem issues, but everyone's bounce-back time is high, and the girls on this show...eat! And the guys do...the cooking! And the big moment near the end of season one isn't a girl throwing away a job opportunity for a loser guy (which *The Hills* played for all the drama it possibly could in its studiously casual way) but a make-out session in a Jacuzzi between *Jersey Shore*'s two biggest stars: the Situation and Snooki. But in this post-Empire world Mike can barely even kiss Snooki, though the camera and the editing keep wishing he would. But no, he stops the proceedings to have a cigarette break while Snooki lolls drunkenly in the hot tub....

Reality TV is almost entirely dependent on stressing "personality." And early on in season two it's apparent that Nicole "plays" Snooki just as Mike "plays" the Situation. By the very nature of the show they're assigned parts and characters to play and they're encouraged to play them in a way that's both natural and dramatic—and they get better at it as the show moves forward. So, in a sense, what seemed real now seems manipulated. (What gave *The Hills* so much of its tension was Lauren refusing to play this game.) And if you cut a sequence of Ronnie deciding *not* to creep on Sammi and you strike a certain music cue, you're already presenting a fixed vision of Ronnie and the choice he's made. The cliff-hanger of the first show is that Snooki might leave (of course we know she won't, and if she does, so what?), but cue the soaring piano music as Snooki decides to stay, and whoa, she's made the right choice, the show decides for us.

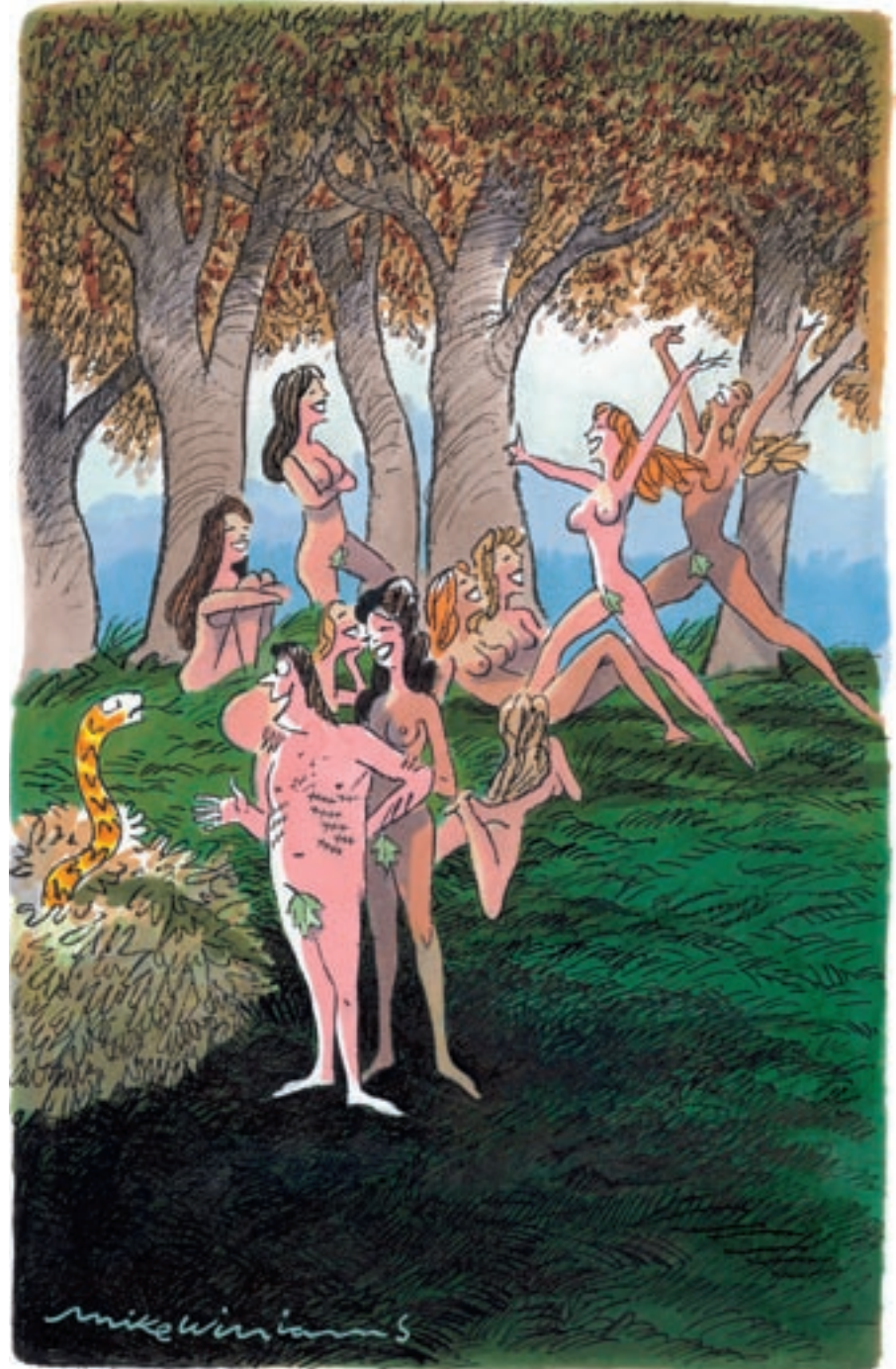
In season two—and this always seems to happen—the girls have taken over and pushed the guys to the side. The show has moved into dramatic hyperdrive and the entire cast is less inhibited in front of the camera: They know now. Everyone's different. Everyone is more self-conscious. Most of them look better than they did in season one. That authenticity—that verve—is now over before it began. But what else are they supposed to do? *The Hills* was an affair, and *Jersey Shore* was supposed to be just a fling. No one knew it would become the most riveting soap opera on TV. And the cast has to live up to it. Yes, Vinny looks *hot* in season two, which makes him, in the hall of mirrors that is reality TV, both less and more interesting....

Still, the "dialogue" in both seasons one and two is totally pungent—screenwriters, take note. It's the best romantic comedy about young people that Hollywood can't make anymore. They're funny. They've got heart. They're drunk most of the time

(they take cabs or walk), but they remain lost and sweet. (In season one they made the kids on *The Hills* look so glazed that they're like something out of an Antonioni movie.) *Jersey Shore* jumps the shark in season two when Snooki and JWovw type up the letter to Sammi describing Ronnie's transgressions—and suddenly we're thrown into doubting whether this would ever have happened if the cameras weren't rolling. Despite the many debates among friends over this, I guess I'm still watching.... If it's a choice between Ronnie and Sammi's wake-up to breakup or, um, *Treme*, well, give me

the shock value of Vinny hooking up with Angelina in season two any day.

When you're tired of the nihilism of *Mad Men* (*Jersey Shore*'s second-season debut easily beat *Mad Men*'s fourth-season premiere) or the rapid-fire wit of *30 Rock*, then come watch the Ferris wheel glowing against the night sky lit up by fireworks on *Jersey Shore: Season Three*. You're a fool if you get pissed off at *Jersey Shore* and its success. Come on, guys, *that attitude*? So Empire....



"I was actually amazed at just how few ribs one really requires for an average day-to-day existence."