

Reality Living

"If you're like me and you enjoy seeing the pain and suffering of other people, then you've come to the right place," says Shannen Doherty, host of "Scare Tactics."

It's but one of many emerging new reality television shows that ABCNEWS.com describe as "ambush TV."

The format is fairly simple: target innocent victims; then humiliate, terrify and/or embarrass them, all for the entertainment pleasure of the viewing audience.

In one "Scare Tactics" episode, a masked man with a machete peered into a cabin where a young woman was camping with her friends. The terrified young woman knew nothing about the prank-or even the television show-although her friends were in on the whole thing.

"This new kind of programming is designed to be shocking [and] ... just about over the edge," says Bob Thompson, head of the Center for Popular Television.

Thompson describes "Scare Tactics" as an "awful, little creepy show."

"At the same time," he adds, "its awfulness and its creepiness is what makes it so incredibly entertaining."

Doherty says "Scare Tactics" isn't the meanest show on television. It's not, she says, "looking for the best reaction at someone else's expense" for better ratings. "We don't need to do that to get good ratings," she claims, because "I think that we have me to get the good ratings."

Thompson says shows like "Scare Tactics" are "morally bankrupt," but they are around because people will watch them. They are also inexpensive to produce, with no high-priced actors, sets or lighting.

What does it say about a culture when it derives its entertainment from the

embarrassment and humiliation of others?

Does such television reflect culture or help create and define it?

The answer is probably both. And in the case of reality television, neither is good news.

One Web site lists over 100 reality TV shows. Several are household names: "Are You Hot?"; "Survivor"; "The Osbournes"; "Fear Factor"; "The Amazing Race"; "The Anna Nicole Show"; "Big Brother"; "Extreme Makeover"; "High School Reunion"; "The Mole"; and "Paradise Hotel" to name only a few.

People not only watch these shows with undivided loyalty and interest, but they also talk about them during the week, further propagating their influence.

Beyond terror and humiliation, many shows also feature lust and sex, greed and materialism, ego and pride, deception and dishonesty.

Interestingly, a short book tucked almost midway in the Bible addresses these and other subjects too.

The Book of Proverbs says that only when we understand all of life in relation to God does any of it make sense.

And that's reality.

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