**‘How the hell did this get on tv?’ Naked dating shows as the final taboo on mainstream tv.**

As a genre of reality tv, dating shows have increased in number over the last decade. They have, in fact, taken over from the make-over shows that heralded the start of the millennium (see author removed, 2015). However, unlike their diminishing predecessors, dating shows have received relatively little academic attention in the British context. Tania Lewis (2016) has explored them in the Indian context, where the post-traditional social relations in such shows sits in marked contrast to the traditional, Indian cultural approach to dating. The dating show in the context of China has been explored by Wei Luo and Zhen Sun (2014) and Luzhou Li (2015), where a similarly conservative context is shown to require the female participants to collude with the patriarchal requirements of both market and state. Misha Kavka (2008) explores dating shows in US television in her wider discussion of intimacy on tv, finding them to be inherently conservative in what she refers to as ‘love-conditional’ discourses. Stephen Tropiano (2009) and Niall Richardson (2009) also explored an early reality dating show, *Playing it Straight* (2004), which followed the game show format in that it featured a heterosexual female who had to choose a ‘date’ from a group of men, some of whom would be gay but ‘acted straight’ in the context of the show. As these case studies show, dating programmes on television internationally are dominated by the game-show format. Indeed, this remains the most common format in the UK context that will be explored in this article.

However, in a crowded schedule of dating shows, it appears that producers are seeking more innovative and shocking ways to attract audiences. In the summer of 2016, Channel 4 in the UK launched a new dating show. With dating shows of various descriptions already cluttering the tv schedules, this show would normally have passed unnoticed were it not for the fact the majority of people on screen were completely naked, as indicated by its title, *Naked Attraction*. Stuart Heritage, writing in the *Guardian*, referred to this as the ‘death of all civilisation’ (The Guardian, 25 July 2016), and viewers took to social media to express their ‘shock’ (as with the quotation from which this article takes its name). With full frontal nudity and graphic descriptions of genitalia, this programme on mainstream tv did indeed show a significant change in the dating show genre. However, this article will explore how this visual shock could be argued to have been ameliorated by the linguistic strategies of the main participants. By drawing on politeness theory, these strategies will be explored to show how the particular programme was actually more conservative than similar shows of this genre in terms of the language used.

**Dating shows**

There has been a long history of programmes that are concerned with judging and managing the person. In the first decade of the 21st century, this emerged as one where judgement was mixed with supportiveness, exasperation and kindness, as found in personal make-over shows (see Higgins and author removed, 2017). In fact, it could be said that the lifestyle show defined popular television in the early part of the century, with the earlier manifestations of garden and home makeovers to personal fashion makeovers (see Bell and Hollows, 2005; Brunsdon, 2003; Moseley, 2000), and we could argue that there was a natural progression from fashion makeovers that claimed to be for the benefit of participants’ relationships to the merger with the existing, long-running genre of dating shows.

As the first decade wore on, there was a noticeable shift in makeover shows from the abrasive style of Trinny and Susannah in *What Not to Wear* (BBC 2001-2007) to a greater focus on relationships (Higgins and author removed: 2017). Trinny and Susannah themselves also ventured into relationship tv briefly (such as Trinny and Susannah’s move to ITV where they hosted *Undress the Nation*, 2007-2009), but it was Gok Wan on Channel 4 who marked a clear shift into a different, more playful sort of makeover with his *Gok’s Fashion Fix* and *How to Look Good Naked*. This latter show ran for four series from 2006 to 2008, and was amongst the last of the makeover programmes of this decade to carry high viewing figures. However, the emergent shift to bring nakedness to mainstream tv is clear from the title of that show, as well as the underlying emphasis on nakedness being ‘empowering’, even if explicit nakedness was not a part of Gok’s shows.

Dating shows have a long history on television, primarily in the genre of game shows. In the UK, most famously, *Blind Date* ran on ITV1 from 1985 to 2003, hosted by Cilla Black. The show was similar in format to the Australian show *Perfect Match* (which ran on Network Ten then Seven Network from 1984-2002) and based on the long-running US show, *The Dating Game* (which has run, on and off, since 1965). This game show follows a format that involves three single people of the same sex being introduced to an audience. They would be asked a question by someone of the opposite sex who could not see them, and the decision as to which of the three would be chosen by the questioner for their date. Played out before a live studio audience, the questions were decided in advance and the participants would be obliged to come up with the most witty or amusing response to win the approval of the questioner as well as the studio audience. *Blind Date* was relaunched on British television by Channel 5 in 2017, with comedian Paul O’Grady as the host. The format remained identical to that of its earlier incarnation, and the only change in this show reflects the wider changes in society where same-sex relationships are widely accepted in the twenty-first century, something hinted at rather more problematically by *Playing it Straight* (this show was franchised and the original US version, which was cancelled after one series, was also copied in Australia in 2005, The Netherlands in 2005, and two series in the UK on Channel 4 in 2005 and again in 2012). This format appears globally, and the game-show ethos is found in other dating shows that range from the ITV1 *Take Me Out* in the UK to various reality tv shows such as *The Bachelor* which is franchised internationally.

As make-over shows started to fall out of fashion, these dating shows took their place in the tv schedules. The much-used game show, studio-based format ran in parallel with those that saw an intersection of dating and reality tv, particularly those that sought to be more edgy or different, such as C4’s *The Undateables*, where people with disabilities sought love, and in a nod to the rise of single parent family, *Date My Mum*, where heart-rending tales of failed marriages were tempered by the hope it shared with *The Undateables* that ‘there is someone out there for everyone’. However, as Richardson points out, there is a tension in *The Undateables* whereby ‘disability [is] being acknowledged in order to excuse any laughter at the actions which result from this sociocultural identification but also, as in the earlier ‘freak’ shows, the physical difference is merely used as a springboard in order to code the body in a narrative of freakishness’ (2017: 337). This tension between voyeurism and empathy is one that we find in *Naked Attraction*.

These dating shows always have an underlying current of risk and sex: after all, they are largely based on the idea of ‘chemistry’ and physical attraction. One of the most popular shows on C4, *First Dates*, is based on the idea of the ‘blind date’ with couples selected by ‘experts’ to meet over dinner. The success or otherwise of the date is most frequently couched in terms associated of sexual attraction: ‘a spark’, ‘chemistry’, and perceptions of ‘gorgeousness’ abound. This idea of dating and the forming of relationships meets full circle with the make-over shows of the preceding decade where the physical appearance and clothing of the participants would be the ‘saving’ of a marriage in many cases, as the dating shows merge with such discourses of relationships to emerge as shows that featured sex. In keeping with the long-standing rules of ‘decency’ on television, such shows lacked the lingering shot of the naked body and the graphic display of copulation. For example, *Sex Box*, which started on C4 in the UK in 2014, encouraged couples to explore their troubled relationships by copulating in a camera-free, sound-proof box set in front of a live studio audience, then emerging to talk about it in the studio with a therapist. Explicit nudity outside of tv drama remained largely beyond the bounds of acceptability.

**Nakedness and nudity**

Discussions of nakedness and nudity abound in the world of art. In Kenneth Clark’s seminal study, *The Nude* (1956), he differentiates *naked* and *nude*. It is a distinction between bodies that are deprived of clothes (naked), and the body that is ‘clothed’ in art (nude). This is a transformation from the naked to the nude which is a shift from the actual to the ideal. As Ruth Barcan points out, the naked/nude division is between nature and culture, between natural and unnatural (2004: 31). Clark famously argued, ‘the nude is not a subject of art, but a form of art’ (1956: 3). John Berger’s discussion extends this, exploring how the naked body has an agency that the nude body lacks: ‘to be nude is to be seen by others and yet not recognised for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude’ (1972: 54). The nude is therefore static, impersonal, disguised as in contrast to nakedness, and the semantic connotations of each lexeme bear some discussion here. In English, *naked* has historically been used to refer to a state of undress, whether total or partial. It can also mean pared-back, natural, or unadorned. *Nude*, on the other hand, has artistic connotations and can be used as a colour tone, particularly in body-con women’s dresses by designers such as Victoria Beckham. If we substitute that for ‘naked’, we can see how different these two seemingly interchangeable lexemes are used in English. The shock of hearing a dress described as ‘naked’ is one that transfers into the title of the *Naked Attraction* show, where the nakedness links with the wider use of pared-back and natural, whilst also titillates with the associated hint of unclothed bodies.

**Nakedness on tv**

Graphic depiction of nakedness on mainstream tv has been avoided. It shares with the world of art an attitude towards female nudity, particularly upper body, which is not unusual. However, full frontal male nudity has been the cause of much puritanical shock when it has been shown fleetingly in drama (such as the BBC drama *The Singing Detective* in 1986), and in reality tv, where it has been accompanied by much pixilation, such as Channel 5’s infamous *Naked Jungle* in 2000, *Naked and Afraid* on Discovery Channel in 2013, and in the ongoing series, *The Island*. This mirrors the relative invisibility of the male nude in art, which Gill Saunders (1989: 26) attributes to ‘the fact that in a patriarchal society men have the power to define, and to define is to control’. In other words, the *looked-at-ness* of an image, to refer back to Laura Mulvey (1975:11), is to construct the nude as being controlled and interpreted by the viewer, falling under the controlling, male gaze. Mulvey was describing narrative cinema, but subsequently her work has been highly influential across a range of media texts. More recently, Helen Wheatley (2015) has employed this in her discussion of the erotics of television where the intimacy of the television screen allows for a more ‘controlling and curious gaze’ (Mulvey, 1975: 8). As Wheatley’s study of television drama testifies, through wider changes in society, where greater gender equality has emerged since the 1970s, this gaze can be shifted away from being purely patriarchal. This is as true for ‘art’ as it is for reality tv.

What makes *Naked Attraction* such a notable addition to both the genre of dating shows (where its game-show format is surprisingly conservative) and of shows depicting nakedness is that there are lingering shots of both male and female genitalia as ‘talking points’ in the appraisal process. Social media and many mainstream newspapers have remarked on this apparent breaking of a final taboo. Heritage’s *Guardian* article commented that ‘there is nowhere left for the dating show to go’, and that the ‘bottom of the barrel has been reached’ (Heritage, 25 July 2016). The *Daily Mail*, on the other hand, adopted a sanctimonious attitude, masking titillation at the naked bodies on display (the online version of such reports features numerous screengrabs from the show, but with pixilation providing a modesty that the actual show forsakes). That mainstream television in the UK has flirted with nudity and implicit sex for many years is clear, but the arrival of Naked Attraction could also be seen as part of a move against pornography whereby nudity and sex are reintegrated into a social space (TV) from the traditional private space, thus turning the images from pornographic to social subjects. What this article will suggest, therefore, is that the show is actually more conservative in its editing than the visual transgressions that achieve most attention would imply.

***Naked Attraction*: production and format**

The show is produced by Lambert Studio, a production company that specialises in reality tv shows and is probably most famous for the *Gogglebox* series. Of their other UK shows, most are very traditional, such as *Four in a Bed*, the titillating title of which actually masks a very mainstream show about competition between bed-and-breakfast owners in a similar vein to *Come Dine With Me*. The scheduling on Channel 4 of *Naked Attraction* is at 10pm on a week night, a slot that is filled elsewhere on the channel by the most popular show they broadcast: *First Dates*. Whilst safely after the 9pm watershed, 10pm is still in a slot that would otherwise be filled with comedy or documentaries.

The format of the show is quite conventional as far as dating game shows go. As with most dating shows, its reason d’être is given as there being a failure of other methods of dating, particularly in the second decade of the century in terms of social media. The opening credits to *Naked Attraction* set this out very clearly, with the voice-over stating the problem and then the voices of participants validating each of these points:

Voice-over: Online dating has been a complete nightmare

Participant: I’ve used Tinder (.) Facebook Snapchat (.) none of them work

(*Naked Attraction* Series 1 and 2)

It is not dissimilar to *Blind Date* in that we are introduced to a ‘chooser’ who then goes through a process of elimination by various tests before the remaining person is declared the ‘date’. In *Blind Date*, the elimination test is a series of questions with highly scripted answers that are supposed to reveal something of the personality of the potential date. It is not until the end of that process that the participants finally see one another. In *Naked Attraction*, there is no interaction between participants until the very end. Instead, the chooser and presenter stand in a studio that has six coloured cubicles at the back. Each cubicle contains the naked participant who matches the gender and sexuality desired by the chooser. Over the course of the programme, the cubicles’ front screens are raised to various heights, initially revealing the body to waist level, then to shoulder, and finally face. At each stage, one person is rejected on the grounds of them not being desirable to the chooser. The final four have one person eliminated because of their overall appearance, then the final two are narrowed down after finally getting to speak in response to a formulaic question posed by the presenter: usually some reformulation of ‘what part of your body do you like the most, and which part do you like the least’. The final two then leave their cubicles and stand in the centre of the studio where they are joined by the chooser, who now appears naked: the only person on screen who is fully clothed throughout is the presenter. With no linguistic interaction between the chooser and other participants to this point, choices are made entirely on sexual desirability and so the linguistic strategies employed are of great interest. Like the revamped *Blind Date* and *First Dates*, sexuality is broadened beyond heterosexuality in *Naked Attraction*, and shows how far society and television has moved in this century from the early attempts at diversifying from heterosexuality that Tropiano (2009) and Richardson (2009) observe. In the case of *Naked Attraction*, this is something that is embodied by the host, Anna Richardson.

Anna Richardson is a well-known British tv presenter and consumer affairs reporter. Her straight-talking, humorous persona has made her a popular host for a variety of programmes that deal with consumer affairs, sexual health issues, and real-life story shows. Richardson is very open about her bi-sexuality, and at the time of writing is in a relationship with comedian and fellow presenter, Sue Perkins. She foregrounds her sexuality at the opening of each edition of *Naked Attraction* with a variant of the following:

Every naked body has something to offer (.) and as someone who has swung both ways (.) I’m well aware of the joys of a Johnson (.) and the loveliness of a lady garden (.) so I’m in the right place (from Series 1, Episode 5)

This places her in the position of being able to appraise the sexual appeal of both male and female bodies, depending on the sexuality of the participants, and thus enhances her sincerity as host.

The need to have a naked dating show is tackled in its opening section, with the same strategy of voice-over presenting a solution to the problem of a failure of social media dating, and then the voices of participants validating such claims:

Voice-over: Status symbols (.) online profiles and the clothes we wear can all get in the way of finding our perfect mate

Participant: I can look at a guy and say (.) okay he’s fit (.) but when it comes to getting naked I’m like (pulls doubtful face) okay maybe not

Voice-over: But what would happen if we were stripped of all the things that usually define us? (.) In this dating show (.) we go back to basics

(*Naked Attraction*, Series 1 and 2)

The final comment that this is ‘back to basics’ calls on discourses of common sense, with no alternative, and an assumption that physical appearance is more important than personality (clothes ‘get in the way’). It also serves to play on the title of the show, where ‘naked’ carries the semantic associations of pared-back truth, sincerity, and genuine emotion.

In other words, it is the same principle as *Blind Date* in that appearances can be deceptive, but in this case, it is the layers of a person’s appearance that need to be stripped away.

The participants themselves are selected through a process of regional auditions. The production company advertises these on social media. Many of these potential participants have been either nominated by or at least supported by their parents. The episode we are going to look at in more detail has one heterosexual female participant (Rebecca) who appears with a brief biography at the start of the show to decry her failed love life, with a supporting statement from her mother who sympathises with her daughter in that she acknowledges ‘she really deserves to find someone who is going to be good for her’. Rebecca then draws on this mother-daughter bond by declaring her pride in her body: ‘I’m quite happy with what my mother gave me’, in support of her statement that she finds being naked ‘just natural’.

In this way, the concept of nakedness in dating is validated before we even see the studio, with the participants, their families and the wider production values of the show being endorsed in the opening credits. We are left with no alternative but to continue with the nakedness, a ‘basic’ human feature. However, the radical approach to dating is ameliorated by a more conservative linguistic collaboration that, as we shall see, seeks to minimise the threat to someone’s self-esteem that is associated with the exposure of the naked body in a public forum.

This show’s format is typical of many reality shows that embody make-overs:

1. contextualizing information;

2. interview/s with the participant/s;

3. host offers advice on makeover;

4. work in progress, with occasional appearances by the host;

5. the ‘moment of revelation’ (see Moseley, 2000);

6. independent assessment – the ‘validation’ (author removed, 2010).

Unlike make-over shows, stages 3 and 4 are replaced by the gradual revealing of the participants’ bodies, with the culmination of full body reveal operating as Moseley describes (2000). The validation is two-fold in this show, with an initial interaction between participants in the studio, then a final section where the ‘winners’ go on a (fully dressed) date and then report back to an unseen interlocutor as to their opinions of each other.

As the show is so very formulaic, it is possible to establish an argument for just how the nakedness is rendered broadcastable by exploring in detail one episode. This allows for the most systematic use of politeness theory as employed in critical discourse analysis, a method of linguistic analysis that places language in context.

**Politeness theory**

As a programme which attempts to make what is generally considered taboo broadcastable, politeness theory is relevant to our discussion as it can help explain how the potential for embarrassment and shame – the naked body discussed in a public domain – is managed to render it suitable viewing. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness suggests that all cultures adopt similar linguistic strategies to manage the interactions we engage with. ‘Politeness theory’ was developed by Brown and Levinson in the wake of Erving Goffman’s work on ‘face’. In this sense, ‘face’ means our public presentation of self, and the associated desire to protect this: in lay terms, this is referred to as ‘face saving’. Without drawing on implied lay value judgements, negative face is our desire not to be imposed on, to have freedom of action or will, often exhibited through deference or the desire for such. Our positive face, on the other hand, is our call to solidarity, to connect with others through strategies such as humour and compliments. By turn, if we make a comment about someone’s appearance, we risk imposing our views on them in an unwelcome way; in other words, we would be risking engaging with a ‘face threatening act’. For example, to say ‘You are overweight’ would risk offending the person being described in a different way to the same sentiment expressed to reduce the risk of a face threatening act, as in ‘I prefer a more toned body’. The importance of placing interaction in context is now one that has been added to Brown and Levinson’s theory, (eg Zadar and Haugh, 2013), and so as a text in the public domain, *Naked Attraction* needs to meet certain standards of broadcasting as well as the interactional confines of the show’s format. This theory of interactive needs is therefore relevant to this discussion of *Naked Attraction* as we are rarely more vulnerable than when we are naked and in public.

**Initial inspections**

The show opens in the studio with Richardson and the chooser standing in front of the six coloured cubicles. There is no studio audience, and the stage set is otherwise featureless with black floor and backdrop. This is the first opportunity for viewers to see Richardson interact with the chooser, and in keeping with Paddy Scannell’s theory of broadcast sociability (1996), she introduces the chooser to us once again. In this extract, from Series 1 Episode 3, we have Rebecca, who is heterosexual, and as mentioned previously, has declared her need for help as she has had no luck in finding a partner herself through online dating.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR | Rebecca (.) welcome to the show (hugs)  Hello  How are you?  I’m a bit nervous (.) I’m not going to lie to you  Are you?  Because it’s not every day you see six naked guys now (.) is it so (laughs)  Why are you single?  I’m awful at finding the right guy for me (.) I once dated a guy who also dated four other girls  At the same time? (.) You really are picking the wrong kind of guy then (.) Rebecca aren’t you?  I really am  So you have been dating then?  I’ve done Tinder (.) but the pictures can be a bit misleading at times (.) you are not always guaranteed to get what you see on your phone  Well (.) on this show you really do know what you’re getting | 1  5  10  15 |

Extract 1

After welcoming Rebecca to the show by referring to her by name then the positive politeness strategy of physical hugging (line 1), Richardson follows up with the conventional ‘how are you?’. In common with most other choosers, Rebecca responds not with the conventional adjacency pair response of ‘fine’, but with an admission of nervousness based on the potential face threatening act (FTA) on her part of seeing six naked men. Thus the potential FTA is based on her own need for social distance that is a convention of Westernised societies where nakedness is not a public matter. As is usual in this show, Richardson does not pick up on this explicitly, but instead asks a question that leads Rebecca to repeat her earlier to-camera point about usually finding boyfriends who are ‘not the right guy’, and thus serves to emphasise the need for dating shows. The necessity for this to be a *naked* dating show is then reinforced by Rebecca’s follow-up comment that on-line dating can be ‘a bit misleading’, something Richardson again doesn't develop for details but instead responds to the assumption that physical appearance is the ‘misleading’ part of online dating rather than any other aspect.

The show then commences its reveal, with the fronts of the coloured cubicles being raised to waist height to reveal the other participants’ genitals. In a world where eye contact and facial expression is conventionally the main thing that we are thought to notice in a potential date, this is the point in the show where the participants may feel most exposed and is certainly the part that results in most social media comment and mainstream media outrage. As discussed above, the exposed body on tv is most frequently done in such a way to hide genitals, with male genital exposure in particular being least common. So how does the programme manage this potentially most risqué and sensational sections? The following transcript is typical of the discussion that surrounds the potentially smutty section of the show:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| AR  AR  Reb  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb | Can we please reveal the bottom half of the bodies?  Dramatic music, dimmed lights, sweeping camera. Anna and Rebecca holding one another  Hold on tight Rebecca  Holding on  Camera sweeps around studio to reveal men’s bodies naked up to waist level, close up shots.  Oh wow (laughs and nods approvingly) Okay (4) so  First impressions?  Immediately (.) I’m actually drawn to Yellow (.) he’s got a good size penis (.) which is good  Size is important  Yes (.) I’ve been in a situation before (.) where a guy treated me like an absolute princess and then when it came down to it (.) he had the tiniest penis  Oh yes  So it’s quite a big thing (.) you need you need sex for love (.) I think  Anything here that you see that you think (.) yeah I could work with that?  I’m quite drawn to Green (.) actually  Do you want to go and take a closer look?  Yeah (.) why don’t we?  Come on then  [Walk across the studio to green pod]  Let’s go and inspect  Let’s inspect the goods (.) em (.) it’s a little bit of the Tinder thing (.) from a distance it er looked a bit better  OK  But I have to say (.) he does have a fantastic pair of legs (1) he looks quite tall (.) height in general (.) that is quite important to me (.) as I’m (.) five foot eight (.) I’m quite tall  How about blue?  Blue’s looks like he’s got a nice sized penis (.) he’s got hair on his legs which I like (.) I’m not into the whole (.) completely shaved (.) I mean  On his legs or on his pubic area?  On his legs  Have you met guys that (1)  These days  Shut up Rebecca (disbelieving)  Yeah  Seriously?  It’s apparently the new thing | 1  5  10  15  20  25  30  35  40 |

Extract 2

Richardson issues the command to ‘raise the screens’ to unseen and unheard operatives. After six seconds of dramatic music and the slow raising of the screens with subsequent close-ups and lingering shots of the men’s genitals, Rebecca is shown nodding and looking approvingly. She initially responds with phatic observations that are nevertheless approving, employing a politeness strategy that is complimentary rather than one of disgust or mirth, which would be face threatening. Richardson prompts Rebecca with an introduction to speak by posing a question on line 9. Rebecca’s utterances are positive, in that she expresses approval rather than rejection: she is ‘drawn to Yellow’ (line 10) because of the size of his penis. She also immediately justifies this decision by drawing on a past relationship misfortune and then the wider cultural ‘common sense’ collocation of sex with love (lines 13-17), something Richardson affirms. In agreeing with Rebecca on this point, she is not only enhancing Rebecca’s positive face, but is also holding back from the obvious alternative: that physical attraction is only one part of a successful relationship. To make such a comment would undermine the entire reason for a naked dating show.

The participants are referred to only by their coloured cubicle at this point, so Rebecca’s comment on line 19 – ‘I’m quite drawn to Green’ – is a cue for Richardson to move her across the studio floor to the relevant cubicle, where the euphemism ‘inspect the goods’ draws on a register of consumerism. However, Rebecca’s disapproval of this body is masked by her reference to her earlier comment about the misleading aspects of Tinder (Extract 1, line 14). She immediately follows this up with a contrastive compliment on line 28, using the intensifier ‘fantastic’, thus ameliorating the potential FTA. She also reveals another criteria that was previously undeclared: she herself is above average height and is keen to have a boyfriend who is taller. Richardson doesn’t pick up on this, though, and instead moves the show on as she focuses on the other participants who up to this point have not been discussed although their bodies have been the subject of lingering camera shots. In Tolson’s brief discussion of the earlier version of *Blind Date* (2006), he notes that the host often steps in to save participants from embarrassment, and it seems that here Richardson operates in a similar way. She directs Rebecca across the stage towards ‘Blue’, whose body is complimented through ‘nice sized penis’ (line 32) and then a seemingly random comment about ‘hair on his legs’. This comment is engaged with by Richardson, who expresses incredulity that men would shave their legs (‘Shut up’ line 38, and ‘Seriously?’ line 40). What appears to be the beginnings of a girlie talk about male grooming (triggered by the seemingly spontaneous slang), is then edited from the studio to an animated graphic of a naked male body showing shaved and unshaven legs, with voice-over from Richardson explaining this particular point in a, pseudo-educational style:

Men shaving their legs (.) also dubbed legscaping (.) does appear to be a growing trend (.) a survey reported that 33% of men admit to trimming their leg hair (.) whilst 15% confess to shaving completely to get super-smooth pins (.) interestingly (.) 52% of women like it when a man does a bit of legscaping

This is a typical feature of this show, with each episode featuring several such ‘factoids’. Channel 4 is a public service broadcaster, although it receives far less money than the non-commercial BBC. However, like the BBC, Channel 4 has a requirement to be ‘educational’, and so this very sexually explicit show is peppered with ‘cold science’. What is interesting is that none of these factoids ever offer explicit proof of the statistics they provide. Here, we see that ‘a survey’ is the source of this data; elsewhere, there is mention of ‘experts’ and ‘a recent report’. As here, the factoid is most frequently used to expand on an observation by a participant, which simultaneously pays attention to the viewers who might not be aware of such statistics about what are often intimate or taboo topics. In other cases, the factoid can be used to essentialise a particular preference, such as in Rebecca’s case where her initial confession to choosing ‘bad boys’ is medicalised:

When women ovulate (.) research suggests that judgement about what makes a good partner becomes clouded (.) ovulatory-induced hormones mean rebellious muscular-looking men (.) temporarily appear to be best choice for a long-term partner

In this way, factoids can be used to create a sense of biological determinism: women will fall for strong, muscular men because they are hormonally predisposed to do so. Without clear medical evidence, this is one of the more perplexing aspects of this show. However, it does serve as a face-saving act for Rebecca (and others) within the structure of the show as the biological essentialist argument equates to it be ‘natural’ and therefore unavoidable.

To return to the appraisals, there is an overwhelming sense of positive politeness, with the appraisals being couched in compliments or at the very worst, disapproval of one feature that is balanced by praise for another. For example, when the screen rises to shoulder height in the second revealing part of the episode under discussion, Rebecca’s comments are typical in their avoidance of humiliating criticism. Here, she is focusing her gaze back on the body of Green, someone whom she has expressed some disappointment with penis size but admiration for his legs in Extract 2 earlier:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Reb  AR  REB | I was a little bit surprised by (.) G. Green (close up of body) (2) I thought maybe because he’s got great legs (.) he was a bit more athletic  Ah so you thought he’d be more ripped  Just a little bit more | 1  2  3  4 |

Extract 3

The noticeable paunch of this man is in contrast to her expectations, which she frames around her personal feelings ‘I was a little bit surprised’, along with the explanation for this surprise being around the expectation of a ‘more athletic’ body. Richardson reformulates this as ‘more ripped’, which Rebecca agrees with. The implicature[[1]](#footnote-1) carried by ‘more ripped’ contains the positive appraisal of the male body as being muscular (‘ripped’), and that Green’s body is in such a state but not quite as far as Rebecca would like. Thus it is Rebecca’s expectations and preferences that are not being met, rather than a more general fault. This is common in both male and female participants, who routinely express a personal preference rather than drawing on a more widely-acknowledged fault or deficiency. In the case of the female body, where there is a heterosexual chooser, then the favoured description of female genitalia is ‘neat’, ‘tidy’, and ‘clean’, which are all euphemisms for shaven. Such discussions dwell on the topic of female pubic hair and labia size/shape, but the underlying politeness strategies are nevertheless the same: an avoidance of direct criticism or expression of disgust. Thus this show follows the convention of face-saving acts that go into relationships: it’s not you, it’s me.

What is also interesting to observe at this point is the way in which the bodies of the participants are shown. To refer back to Kenneth Clark’s discussion of the nude, we can see that here the men’s bodies are being discussed and interpreted, objectified and ultimately rendered passive. In other words, they are less ‘naked’ than ‘nude’, in art terms.

**The rejections**

As mentioned earlier, the format of this show whittles the participants down from six to two, the first two rejections being based entirely on the body parts revealed. The remaining four participants’ faces are revealed (matching Moseley’s definition of the make-over show (2000)), and one is rejected based on their total look, then another is rejected based on a question posed to them by Richardson. The answer is most frequently less important than the tone of voice, accent, or other vocal feature. If we look now at the ways in which the participants are rejected, we can see that the pattern of appraisal already established is very much in evidence.

Sticking with Rebecca for the sake of coherence, we can nevertheless see a pattern that is not only typical of this episode, but of both series thus far aired. To return to the first revelation, the part of the show where the screen has been raised to waist height, we find Rebecca rejecting her first potential suitor.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Paul  Reb  AR  Paul  Reb  AR  Paul | You’re going to have to lose one guy out of these six (3) remember (.) you’ve got to pick the guy that (.) at this point (.) you find the least physically attractive  Okay (.) erm (8 seconds of close-ups of penises interspersed with pensive Rebecca)  Are you ready Rebecca?  Er (.) I would like to lose Blue (2)  Why? (rising intonation of surprise)  I didn’t think it would be (.) but height is quite a big thing to me (.) as (.) I love to wear the heels  Let’s reveal who you’re saving goodbye to (4 seconds of screen slowing revealing whole body)  Hello  This is Paul (.) he’s twenty (.) he’s a dancer (.) from Glasgow (2) it’s nice to see you  He is gorgeous actually (2) as you can see (.) I’m not the smallest  Exactly tall lady (1) you’re not so tall  Not so tall  You are lovely (.) yeah  So I’m afraid it’s a goodbye  Bye (walks towards camera off stage)  Cute though  Yeah (.) good bum (close up of bum)  Pretty girl (.) but just not for me (.) I’m quite short so (.) it’s fair enough (.) yeah (.) it was nice to have a few compliments (.) you can never really complain when you get a few compliments (.) at least it wasn’t all bad (8 second montage of Paul being reclothed) | 1  5  10  15  20  25 |

Extract 4

The air of tension is increased by the use of dramatic music, with close-up shots of the men’s penises being interspersed with shots of a pensive-looking Rebecca. As we have not heard her criticise any one man’s body without also complimenting it to this point, as viewers we are none the wiser. After twelve seconds of deliberation, Rebecca’s decision is finally revealed on line 7. Richardson immediately responds in a formulaic manner, her intonation implying surprise. This is a standard response, with only occasional variation in that she sometimes refers to the colour of the cubicle, eg ‘Why Blue?’. This intonation serves to save face for the rejected participant: as someone who is openly bisexual, Richardson has licence to admire and find attractive the bodies of all of the participants, and thus she is able to place herself in the position of one who finds the rejected participant’s body agreeable irrespective of their gender.

Rebecca’s validation of her rejection follows the established pattern of ‘it’s not you, it’s me’, in that she refers back to her point in Extract 2 (lines 27-29) that she is looking for a man who is taller than she is.

Richardson briefly introduces the rejected participant by name, age, occupation, and geographical location in the conventional manner of dating shows before speaking directly to him on line 14-15 (‘it’s nice to see you’). Rebecca is also able to speak directly to him, but initially speaks to Richardson (line 16-17) to reinforce her point about her height being the most relevant factor. However, on line 19, she does speak directly to the participant, offering a compliment. There is no real space for the rejected participant to interact with the chooser on screen, and even the longer interactions are only one or two utterances in any show, usually to issue compliments (even in one show where this was not the case, Series 2, episode 4, the rejected participant chose to save her own face with the comment: ‘You’re not my type’). Close-up shots of the retreating backsides of the rejected participants are usually accompanied as here with compliments (lines 23 and 24) and not infrequent expressions of regret, therefore the rejected participant is able to leave with the chooser’s final words being complimentary and therefore avoiding an FTA.

Backstage, the rejected participant is always given the chance to talk to camera about their experience. Generally, this is a comment about the ‘empowering process’ of appearing naked on television, and in the case of Rebecca’s first rejected participant Paul, he acknowledges his height is an issue (line 24) but most of all he is appreciative of the compliments he’s received. Each rejected participant is then shown in a montage being reclothed, but has no further part in the show. However, if we think back to the make-over show, *How to Look Good Naked*, then the concept of nakedness being empowering is one that continues to be drawn on here.

**The winner**

The final segment of the studio-based part of the show features the two participants who are left at the end of the cubicle-based elimination process walking to centre stage to meet Anna Richardson and, eventually, the newly-naked chooser (and establishes the ‘validation’ that Author Removed (2010) argues is a defining feature of make-over shows). This means that the only person wearing any clothes that we can see on stage is Richardson. At this point, we move most clearly from the presentation of the nude to the performance of nakedness, with individualism and personality ascribed to each participant. It is also the first time the chooser’s body is open for discussion, something that is invited by Richardson when the naked chooser arrives back on stage. Here, we can see Rebecca’s return to the stage is framed initially as a chance for the men, Andrew and Sam, to comment on her body.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| AR  And  AR  Sam  AR  Reb  Sam  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  Reb  AR  And | Boys (.) what do you think about Rebecca’s body?  Erm (.) okay (.) I’m just trying to think of cold water right now (.) absolutely amazing (.) like amazing figure (.) boobs are great (.) erm (.) face is also absolutely beautiful (.) and (.) there’ just nothing at all that I can see (.) any problem with it  There Sam  I’m I’m still trying to pick my jaw up (emphasizes by turning to one side)  Yeh  Laughs  I think everything is in proportion everything is where it should be everything is exactly how I’d love somebody to seem  Okay (.) it’s decision time (2) who would you like to date? (3) You have Sam (.) and you have Andrew  Can you decide?  You can only take one (7 seconds of close-ups of faces and dramatic music) who’s it going to be?  (2) The person that I’m going to pick (.) is going to be Sam  Ooh Andrew!  Sorry Andrew  I’m sorry  I’m so sorry  You’re gorgeous (.) but you’re going to have to leave (3 seconds of Andrew walking off stage)  She seems like a really nice girl (.) she’s obviously incredibly beautiful and just absolutely flawless (.) the only bad thing that I can say about her is that she has a (.) poor sense of judgement (2) what I’m taking away from this experience is (.) I saw a hot girl naked which is (.) a (.) massive massive victory for me (5 second montage of Andrew reclothing) | 1  5  10  15  20  25 |

Extract 5

Andrew’s opening remark draws attention to his own nakedness, as he claims he is ‘just trying to think of cold water right now’ (line 2), a metaphor that carries the implication that he finds Rebecca sexually attractive but is aware of the context and so does not want to have an erection whilst on stage. His further comments are entirely complimentary, drawing on superlatives such as ‘absolutely amazing’, ‘absolutely beautiful’ (lines 2-4). Sam draws on similar metaphors and compliments, in his case the metaphor is that he thinks Rebecca is jaw-droppingly attractive (line 7). He also comments on her body, but instead of itemising her features, resorts to ‘everything is in proportion’ (line 10). Rebecca, unlike the men earlier, is not forbidden from speaking during this appraisal. It is also interesting that both Sam and Andrew use linguistic strategies that blur the boundaries as to just who they are speaking to: it is neither spoken directly *to* Rebecca, nor *about* her to Richardson. In this way, they maintain the face needs of both women as they are both being attended to linguistically: Richardson who has her questions answered, and Rebecca who is the subject of their gaze.

The final decision is then made at Richardson’s invitation (line 15-16) accompanied by dramatic music and lingering close-ups of the participants’ faces. It seems that, at this final stage, the conventions of the dating show finale that we find elsewhere are drawn on rather than the preceding camera work that featured close-ups of body parts. When Rebecca makes her decision to choose Sam (line 17), Richardson’s first response is not to congratulate the winner but to console Andrew. In fact, we don’t hear from Sam until after Andrew has departed amid emphatic expressions of apology (lines 20-21), and Richardson’s final compliment ‘(You’re gorgeous’ – line 22). Andrew is then shown backstage talking to camera, where he saves face by jokingly referring to Rebecca having a ‘poor sense of judgement’ (line 26). He underlines this insincerity by making a further self-depreciatory observation about himself: he has seen ‘a hot girl naked’ (line 27), emphasising this through the repetition of ‘massive’ (line 27) before ‘victory’.

The ‘couple’ then go on a filmed date to a bar, either later the same day (if the show is recorded in the morning) or the following day. In the case of Rebecca and Sam, this didn’t lead to a second date; ironically, Rebecca judged Sam’s dress sense as being a big turn-off.

**Conclusions**

The naked human body is rarely seen on television, and the rules of British mainstream television continue to prohibit the exhibition of the naked human body before the 9pm watershed. As discussed earlier, the UK tv schedules are cluttered with variants of dating shows, and it seems that *Naked Attraction* carries the double meaning that the participants are ‘going back to basics’ to find a date by rejecting ‘new media’, but the title of the show itself also carries the shock of ‘naked’ that attracts attention to it from amongst the dozens of other dating shows. This use of naked as an adjective is one that has been used frequently before, as with the early Jamie Oliver cookery shows that were called *The Naked Chef* to refer to his stripped-down, unfussy cooking style (BBC 1999-2001) and, as mentioned earlier, the make-over show *How to* *Look Good Naked*. What makes *Naked Attraction* so unusual is its lingering camera shots and explicit descriptions of the naked human body, framed around sexual attractiveness rather than biology or art (although the curious use of factoids does bring something of this to the show). The potential to shock and titillate is ameliorated by the use of surprisingly conservative language to support and hearten the participants, along with a use of the unclothed body initially in the same way as the nude in art. Linguistically, we see direct criticisms avoided, with a formulaic strategy of ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ routinely adopted by all participants. Anna Richardson as host is careful to keep a sense of light-hearted but sincere humour, where mocking is prohibited unless it is self-directed. Richardson herself is a host who can draw on her own sexual history to underpin her observations. Unlike the openly gay host of *Blind Date*, Paul O’Grady, she does not have a camp or insincere performance of her sexuality, and so the delicate line between mockery and humour is one that she is able to tread and thus save face for the participants.

Changes in gender and sexuality in society in the course of the twenty-first century can be clearly seen in this show, with many forms of sexuality – gay, lesbian, bi-, trans, pan – being accepted in the same way, without ridicule or shame. The underlying homophobia and misogyny that Richardson (2009) and Trepiano (2009) both observed about *Playing it Straight* is not apparent here. At least, not in the same way: the influence of pornography on female body image is only too clear in the routine absence of pubic hair in heterosexual and some gay women on this show, with a preference for the ‘clean’ and ‘tidy’ body. In this way, there is a commonality with the use of the nude in art, where the static female body is usually hairless. This show’s format, along with that of *Blind Date*, allows for variation in sexuality that the static participant line-up of *Take Me Out* excludes. However, as we have seen, the shock value of the explicit naked bodies on *Naked Attraction* are ameliorated by highly conservative linguistic strategies that are not so frequent on more conventional dating shows, where a studio audience needs to be entertained (Scannell, 1996) as much as the home viewers.

Ultimately, what *Naked Attraction* offers is an overt display of the naked human body, both visually and linguistically explicit, which is de-eroticised by the underlying format of the show and the participants’ co-produced linguistic utterances. As Kavka (2008) has pointed out in her discussion of reality tv, the potential to shock is ameliorated through such mundane exposure. Following Kavka, Wheatley (2015: 201) has observed of explicit sex in television drama that there is also a move to the ordinariness in such depictions, seen here as sex is rendered essential to human happiness through relationships. Through the exploration of these utterances using politeness theory, an inherent conservativism can be seen in the linguistics strategies used. In response to the initial question of ‘how the hell did this get on tv?’, the combined analytical tools of linguistic politeness theory and art history have allowed us to see that there is a way that such programmes can be broadcast within the remit of what is acceptable on television.

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1. ‘Implicature’ is used here in the Gricean sense of an utterance carrying with it a conclusion that can reached based on what we know about a set of circumstances or the world (Grice, 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)