



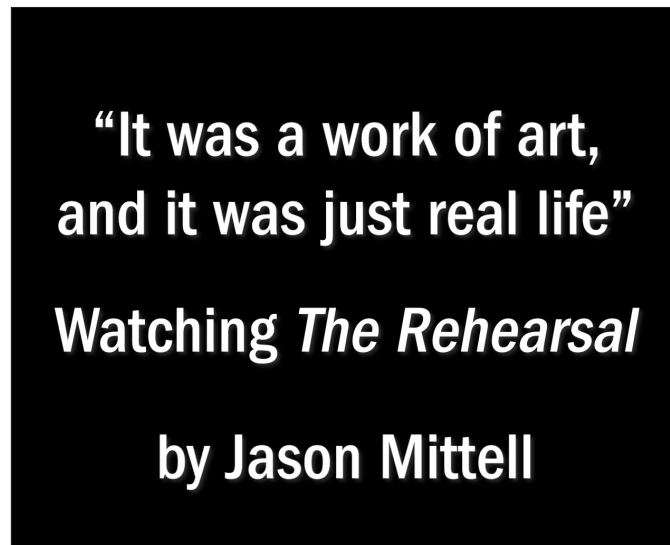
“It was a work of art, and it was just real life”: *Watching The Rehearsal*

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Few television programs both meditate on and rupture the concepts of reality and representation as much as *The Rehearsal*, Nathan Fielder’s genre-bending docu-comedy that aired on HBO in the summer of 2022. On the surface, the series purports to offer an odd variant of self-help reality TV: Nathan finds people looking to tackle challenging experiences, and stages a “rehearsal” for them to work through the situation in a low-stakes simulation before tackling it in real life. But as it plays out, the series is a deeply troubling work of media, dramatizing its own ethical failings in a way that invites us to experience both admiration and outrage at its manipulations. This video rehearses these ideas through an experimental format.

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Creator's Statement

I will let this video speak for itself.

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Biography

Jason Mittell is Professor of Film & Media Culture at Middlebury College. He has published seven books and numerous articles, chapters, and video essays on American television, narrative theory, and videographic criticism. He is the journal manager for *[in]Transition* and directs the Scholarship in Sound & Image workshop.

Review by Christine Becker, University of Notre Dame

When *The Rehearsal* first aired, many TV critics wrote that its byzantine configuration made it almost impossible to summarize the plot with any real clarity (see Alison Herman's *Ringer* essay on the season finale: "To synopsise *The Rehearsal* is to descend into madness") or to offer precise judgments about creator Nathan Fielder's aims. Viewing "Watching *The Rehearsal*" now leads me to propose that the video essay is the best possible vehicle for describing and deconstructing a show such as *The Rehearsal*. Traditional textual approaches just cannot match the impact of this essay's use of voiceover, visual and audio editing, and superimpositions to effectively convey its essential points. Despite its own absurdist flourishes, even someone who is unfamiliar with the program or Fielder's impish persona would have no trouble understanding this essay and following the organization of its ideas.

"Watching *The Rehearsal*" also embodies a tonal mode that matches that of the show but would be an awkward, even self-indulgent fit for scholarly writing in particular, from major structural elements such as the author inserting his semi-fictional self into the work to inside jokes such as the mispronunciation of his name. Particularly because of *The Rehearsal*'s playful intertwining of object and subject, these same aspects in "Watching *The Rehearsal*" serve to illuminate rather than obscure the essay's argument about Fielder's own tactics. Where Mittell does divert significantly from Fielder is that he aims to minimize ambiguity, and his expert execution of the video essay form enables him to achieve that. It ends up providing a fairly straightforward final answer to its compelling opening question, but the journey therein contributes to much more than just our comprehension of Fielder's unicorn of a show.

Review by Kimberley McLeod, University of Guelph

"Watching *the Rehearsal*" works to move away from the most common responses to Nathan Fielder's HBO series *The Rehearsal*, which focus on either the lines between what is real and not on the show or the troubling ethics that seem to be at play, especially in terms of the use of child performers. In this video, Jason Mittell notes that the former question will only ever lead to an impasse and suggests instead that we should ask "What is Nathan thinking?" in a moment during the last scene of the first (and so far only) season. By digging into Fielder's inner process, Mittell opens up the possibility that we should be asking more about what the creation process of the show was rather than focusing solely than what is on screen.

By centering this moment and asking us to consider what Fielder is thinking, Mittell playfully engages with another impossible question as the audience can never truly know what a character or performer is thinking. But zooming in on this specific moment from the show allows Mittell to play out (both figuratively and literally) a theory that has the

potential to add a new layer of thinking about Fielder's process and work, particularly in terms of the relationship between documentary and audience. Here, Mittell offers the possibility that Fielder may be manipulating the audience through editing in the opposite way many documentaries do: to make it seem unethical.

One way Mittell suggests manipulation may have occurred is through time. Throughout the show, Fielder rehearses moments before they happen, often with elaborate staging to mimic the environment in which a future moment will occur. Mittell notes that the audience can never really know if the scenes that Fielder says are rehearsals are actually rehearsals or are re-enactments that were filmed after a scene already took place. The question of whether Fielder is manipulating time through editing and narration connects to another of Fielder's docuseries projects, the HBO show *How to with John Wilson*, which Fielder executive produces. The show centers on footage that John Wilson, the show's creator and star, films and edits together with a voice-over narration. In a third season (2023) episode focused on conspiracies, the show highlights how documentaries can deceive. During the episode, Wilson reveals that a recording of a bathroom overflowing with sewage from the first season was actually staged by the production team (who all signed NDAs). This suggests that Mittell may be on to something with this theory as Fielder is clearly interested in questions of deception in docuseries and the assumptions audiences make about what they are seeing.

In speculating about what the audience does not see in the series, Mittell also effectively points to Fielder's role offscreen as the series creator and writer and the fact that a massive team put the show together, including a writing team. Several years ago, before the start of the second season of Fielder's previous show *Nathan for You*, I went to a preview for the season hosted by Fielder at a comedy bar in Toronto. After the viewing, an audience member asked Fielder how he got all his ideas. Fielder dryly replied, "We have writers," signaling to the audience that the creation process is both more complex and conventional than most audiences assume in their reception. Mittell's video encourages responses to Fielder's work to consider this broader context and to think about what may not be shown.

Competing Interests

The author is the journal manager for *[in]Transition*, but was not involved in the editorial and peer review process.

