

Hugo Rifkind on TV

How low can reality TV go? This series shows there is no bottom



Love Island

(ITV2)

Binky and JP's Baby: Born in Chelsea

(E4)

So I thought I should watch *Love Island* because everybody else is watching *Love Island*. Although now I wish I hadn't, because I feel shocked and sad and old.

I wasn't always old. Once, long ago, I was the first semi-official *Big Brother* correspondent this august newspaper had ever had. And that was all about the sex. Why, I remember when one couple, crazed with lust and unable to escape the cameras, built themselves a cave out of towels and cushions that they could crawl into for a secretive fumble. Quite the scandal. And another, years later, who hid under a duvet and did something that made his naked, twitching bottom stick out the side of the bed. Maxwell and Saskia, they were called.

I saw Maxwell once, actually, a little later, in a lift on the Tube. Well shifty. Everybody was staring, and he knew it. "Imagine being you!" I thought. "Imagine being a man with a bottom that was on telly, naked and twitching out the side of a bed! This is the lowest reality TV can go! You! You and your arse!"

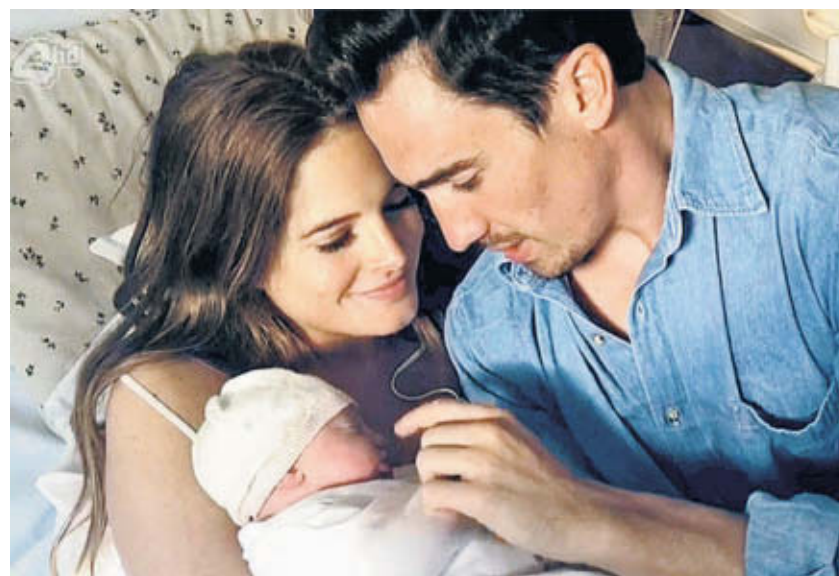
And so, a decade and a half later, to *Love Island*, a show where couples actively have to couple up, in shared beds in a dormitory, not to get kicked off the show. "SEX AND THE SETTEE," ran the headline in *The Sun* last week. "Love Island Stars Have Sofa Sex And Another Two Couples Get Steamy Under The Sheets In Most X-rated Episode Yet." Because this is what happens when you stop concentrating in your twenties and don't start again until you hit 40. While you aren't looking, the extreme becomes the norm. The transgressive, mundane. They're shagging. It's ITV2. They're shagging on ITV2. This is happening. Mary Whitehouse was right. Hell, Aldous Huxley was right. And this is OK? We're sure? Has anybody told the DUP?

We'll come back to the sex in a minute. I'm sorry, but I feel we must. First I want to talk about the hair. Or to be more specific, why there isn't any, anywhere, except for on heads. Where there is, admittedly, at least on the women, quite a lot. Great sheets of the stuff, most of which clearly started life elsewhere. On the men's chests, though, on their arms and on their legs? Nothing. Action Man smooth. Babybel smooth. It's weird. It's frightening. Is this what one does now? They look stuffed. Like haggises. Like man-shaped haggises. They do.

Well, I say "man-shaped". Here, in the Majorcan villa these people need to spend... what? Weeks? Months? More? Nobody wears any clothes. Why would you wear clothes, you weird old bastard?



ITV; E4/PLANET PHOTOS



DROOL BY THE POOL
Relaxing on *Love Island*.
Left: Binky and JP's
Baby: *Born in Chelsea*

Why would you do that? The women wear only bikinis, always. The men wear only shorts, always. And their bodies are... what's the word? Not terrifying. Beyond terrifying. These bodies are terrified. They are just right, so the only way is down. They have so much to lose. They are always, always, always a chip away from disaster. On *Big Brother* the hot ones always used to get fat after a fortnight, it was sort of hilarious. But here? You can't risk it. Not in a bikini. Not when you need to keep looking like this, so that the guy who needs to keep looking like that doesn't dump you for somebody else who looks very slightly better. This is body image anxiety as a game show. The producers should make them all eat baked

potatoes and melted cheese for a week, just to see what happens. They'd fall apart.

The sex, though, is weirdly unsexy. Even the promise of sex is unsexy. You know that thing where criminal psychologists arrange plastic dolls to recreate the precise geometry of a sexual assault? This is the sort of eroticism we're talking about here. True, you don't see much, because it all happens in communal rooms, under duvets, under the fixed, unblinking gaze of the cameras, like that cat your one-night stand had that time, which just sat on the end of the sofa staring, in a manner that made you wonder — although obviously didn't say this — whether it had been possessed by the soul of her dead dad. Although that's not all of it. Mainly, it's the

simple ennui of physically perfect people fancying physically perfect people. As in, they don't really. They just appraise. There's no lust here, except for that of acquisition.

Sometimes, in the morning, getting out of their shared dormitory double beds, the boys will be, um, standing to attention in their shorts. No, I don't know why I'm being all coy in a world where they have shagging on ITV2, either. Stuff that. Boners. They have boners. They aren't embarrassed. They cup, adjust. "I've got a semi on," they might say, conversationally. The girls don't even giggle. Why would they giggle? Why wouldn't this be happening? They're beautiful, a man is in bed with them, they know what to expect. Probably, they'd lapse into self-loathing if it didn't happen; lose another pound, put on another foot of hair, have another conversation about how they liked him, but didn't, like, like him, and move on to the next. How low can reality TV go? *Love Island* is not the answer. *Love Island* tells you that there is no answer. There is no bottom. There is no end.

Binky and JP's Baby: Born in Chelsea, next to that, felt like *Little House on the Prairie*. A spinoff from *Made in Chelsea*, which is basically *Love Island* with more clothes, posher people and no on-screen shagging, but in Chelsea, a couple from that show who are having a baby. Presumably via off-screen shagging. Although you never know. They're different, the posh. They might do it like fish.

Binky Felstead has the name of a hobbit's horse, but isn't one. She's too posh to be able to say words like "most" and "going" ("meeohst", "gaying"), but is jolly well determined to do this baby thing properly. JP Paterson has the same name as the Sloane Jack Whitehall character in *Fresh Meat*, and is exactly like him. He says things like "bon soir" when he answers the phone, even if it's 3pm, because he doesn't know what it means.

Posh voices are amazing, aren't they? I don't mean the strangulated Miss Jean Brodie ones, like mine. I mean the proper ones, where every noise sounds a bit like "waah" or "felafel". They are a case study in how class works, because they sound faintly clever, even when they definitely aren't. Witness the bit where JP loses his keys and can only think of writing a plea for help on the windscreen of Binky's mum's car, in lip-salve that he finds on the street.

Still, the families are rallying round. Binky's mum, Jane (Jane? Just Jane?) is on hand to explain the facts of life. "You were a surprise," she says. "And I never water-skied again." Um, what? "It all goes up the front bottom and washes the coil out," she explained, "which is what happened with you!" What a world this is. Still, they all seem nice enough. The baby was born at the end of the episode, so next week we'll get to see the pair of them on no sleep, with brains like mush, utterly failing to cope with the most basic and fundamental tasks of mammalian life. I wonder if we'll notice the difference.

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