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SIMULATING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Professor Jonathan Dovey

In this chapter I want to argue that formatted reality television game shows (RTV Games) like Big

Brother (Channel 4 2000 -) and popular TV documentary formats like *Wife Swap* (Channel Four

2002 -) and *Faking It* (Channel Four 1999 -) might be best understood as simulations. In these

programmes we see the dominant observational traditions of documentary being redeployed as

part of a different system of representation based on simulation. This proposition does *not* rest

upon Baudrillard's seductive rhetoric of the simulacra. By simulation I refer to that process in

which dynamic models are observed in order to generate understanding of complex processes.

This definition is derived from, amongst others, the research methods of natural science, social

science, military planning and financial forecasting all of which depend increasingly on building

models to understand complex systems.

Whilst TV producers and commissioning editors are not setting out to deliberately adopt or mimic

these methodologies the impulse to simulate has embedded itself at every level of the production

process. The attempt to record social reality has been completely swallowed by the impulse to

simulate social reality in performative models. Factual television practices have by and large

abandoned empirical observation that rested upon the *lack* of relationship between observer and

observed and replaced it with the observation of simulated situations that *only* exist because of

the intervention of the TV production. Factual TV has moved from direct empirical observation to

the observation of simulated social situations. This chapter will argue that *simulation* is a useful

framework that helps us to understand popular factual TV in a way that gets beyond the well-

rehearsed positions of 'media panic' (Biltereyst 2004). Moreover thinking about popular factual TV

through this framework helps us to understand a programme like *Big Brother* as a prototypical

New Media product. Although disseminated primarily through traditional television *Big Brother* is

many respects a typical New Media object in so far as it is an international brand that exists as a

multi platform hybrid of traditional and new media. A programme like *Big Brother* not only

delivers audiences to advertisers but also to phone lines, cable subscription and internet use as the viewer is drawn into a simulated game world. As such this chapter applies some of the work that I have been doing in thinking about what a 'New Media Studies' might be – that is to say a discipline that looks at 'New Media' but which also therefore represents a methodological renewal of 'Media Studies'. This renewal does seem to me to involve interdisciplinary cross pollination with various aspects of computer science and 'cyberculture studies', such as the study of Human Computer Interaction, Artificial Intelligence, software theory and study of networked systems. (See e.g. *New Media – A Critical Introduction (*2003) Lister M. ,Dovey J., Giddings S. Grant I. and Kelly K. Routledge).

THE IDENTITY SIMULATOR

The specific work of understanding *Big Brother* through New Media analytic frameworks was inspired for me by the work of Bernadette Flynn who has written comparisons of *Big Brother* and *The Sims* computer game (2002 & 2005) RTV Games can be thought of as story producing mechanisms, producing narratives of identity, affiliation and exclusion for players and for audiences. At the heart of this text machine is a simulation, a dynamic rule based game system that changes over time. In classical play theory (e.g. Huizinga 1949 Caillois 1979) the 'game' is understood as happening in a special demarcated physical and cultural zone, the 'magic circle' of play where the players all agree that reality is subject to commonly accepted rules. The reality game show is such a closed system, like the experimental computer simulation, or the pyschology lab. The *Big Brother* house, the *Fame Academy* building , the *Survivor* jungle location or *Temptation Island*, are all closed environments, fiercely policed by security guards and surveillance. Into this closed system with its own perimeters the system managers – the producers – introduce characters that have been cast on the basis of what we might call their character algorithms.

In *The Sims* computer game characters are developed according to a set of algorithmically controlled possibilities e.g. 'Neat','Outgoing', 'Active', 'Playful' or 'Nice'. The producers of RTV game shows cast housemates according to sets of characteristics which they hope will create drama and narrative, i.e. the belligerent character, the flirt, the mother figure, the quiet but deep one, the eccentric and so on. For the producers these characteristics constitute the algorithms that they hope will make the simulation run in an interesting way– i.e. stimulus from X applied to character Y might well have outcome Z. Of course , the real fun is when the unexpected happens, just as in computer games based on Sims part of the pleasure occurs when the AI does something you hadn't predicted as a result of its interactions with other AIs. Jane Roscoe has described these moments as 'flickers of authenticity – the moment where the simulation appears to break down and the viewer affect of the 'authentic' is created. (Roscoe 2001) Part of this affect is due to the possibilities for unpredictable emergent behaviour to arise from the simulation. Another way of putting this would be to talk about the process of improvisation in music or drama, set keys or rhythms might be established at the start of a jazz piece but no one quite knows where it will go nor will one performance repeat the music of the last.

The 'character algorithms' are then set in to dynamic motion through the experimental framework of the many challenges and tasks that constitute the daily life in the identity simulator. This daily diet of 'challenges' and games is consistent with many other types of factual entertainment which have a commonly ludic content. This game playing is also reminiscent of role-play situations, especially those associated with team building efforts in the contemporary workplace where we are encouraged to bond through play.

Big Brother is a simulation in so far as it is a closed system, bound by rules, into which characters are introduced who are set up in dynamic role-play. The *Big Brother* environment is a model just as a computer simulation or a psychology experiment is a model.

WATCHING, TALKING, AND DOING

A privileged relationship to social reality is one of the leading 'claims' of the traditional discourse of documentary. Work like Barnouw's classic *Documentary: A History of the Non Fiction Film* (1974) is redolent with the passionate social engagement of twentieth century filmmakers. Documentary film in the heroic period of modernism and in the incendiary late 60s was as much about changing the world as it was observing it. Nichols sums up this tradition in his well known position that documentary presents us with arguments about our shared world, propositions about the world that are made as part of a process of social praxis. Documentaries are akin to other 'discourses of sobriety', science, the law, education, that shape social reality. (Nichols 1991: 3-4) Brian Winston has a similar sense of documentary history, when he writes about documentary finding its place on the 'battlefields of epistemology' he captures some of the ways in which documentary film makers and critics argue about the world we share when they argue about its documentary representation. (Winston 1995). Documentary history has taken its role in the mediated public sphere for granted – it has been a given of documentary practice and documentary studies.

One of the drivers of media panic occasioned by popular factual TV over the past fifteen years has been precisely an anxiety that the moral seriousness of the documentary tradition was being driven off the airwaves by vulgar factual entertainments – 'documentary diversions' as John Corner has called them. (2002). I have analysed these debates extensively elsewhere (Dovey 2000). Like all debates about popular culture the terrain is rarely susceptible to binary reasoning – however the evidence does not suggest that popular factual has driven serious documentary from broadcasting. Schedule analysis shows that the majority of popular factual has replaced talk and quiz shows in the TV schedules not 'serious' public sphere documentary. The demise of the 'traditional' documentary has more to do with the economics of broadcast under conditions of intensifying competition and to wider cultural changes in the development of a newly demotic public sphere. (Dovey 2000) This shift is typically observed in the 1991 decision of the Discovery Channel to rebrand 'The Learning Channel' as 'TLC' in order to broadcast not worthy educational

films but lifestyle documentaries – subsequently TLC has become a highly successful cable brand on the back of every day life reality documentaries such as *A Wedding Story* (1995 -) and *A Baby Story* (1998 -) (see Stephens 2004)

In this context of concerns about the loss of documentary's public sphere role I briefly want to think about the relative 'impacts' of observational and simulated documentary work – taking at 'face value' for a moment the documentary call to social praxis. There is a reasonably well trodden path that we can use to retrace 'documentary impacts' – *Cathy Come Home* (Ken Loach 1966) is alleged to have formed part of the debate that established the housing charity 'Shelter'; Roger Graef's 1982 series *Police* led to a change in the handling of rape cases by UK police; investigative 'miscarriage of justice' stories have led to individual verdicts being overturned, notably in the case of Errol Morris' *Thin Blue Line* (1988) which brilliantly managed to deconstruct the whole notion of truth at the same time as getting Randal Adams off death row. But beyond the notable examples the evidence for documentary making an instrumental impact on the world in the way of the sober discourses of law or medicine is pretty thin. There are probably more examples of documentary creating 'media panic', furore occasioned by the form and ethics of the work itself, e.g. the films of UK director Paul Watson, *The Family* 1974, *Sylvania Waters* 1992, observational films that provoked widespread public discussion around ethics, manipulation and documentary truthfulness. When traditional documentary theorists or practitioners claim privileged access to social reality it is surely to a more diffuse sense of the documentary mission within the mediated public sphere – to a common sense understanding of communicative action, that there is a relationship between seeing, talking and doing in the world. If we accept this role for factual film and TV then it seems to me we must accept that popular factual is doing, albeit systemically rather than intentionally, all kinds of 'work' in the public sphere.

For instance the debate triggered by allegations of racism on UK *Celebrity Big Brother* in January 2007 facilitated a more thorough 'working through' (**Ellis)** of race in UK culture than any previous TV programme. By Jan 17 2007 the UK media regulator OFCOM had received over 19000

complaints alleging racism on *Celebrity Big Brother* over the previous three days. The broadcaster Channel Four had received a further 3000 complaints, the Asian newspaper *Eastern Eye* had gathered 20000 signatures of protest in two days. This level of complaint was record breaking, Ofcom had generally experienced 'controversiality' in terms of hundreds of complaints rather than thousands. These complaints were part of a wave of discussion of racism that dominated the UK and Indian public sphere for several days, the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown was forced to make placatory remarks in the face of street demonstrations in India whilst visiting there. The furore was the result of disparaging and critical behaviour by three white women housemates against the first Asian to appear on UK Celebrity Big Brother the Bollywood Actress Shilpa Shetty. Without going into a detailed textual analysis of the events shown, three young white working class 'celebrity' women appeared to form an alliance based on their common dislike of Shetty; these kind of emergent groupings are typical of the narratives of affiliation and exclusion that structure the Big Brother text. So what made these events different to the extent that they provoked the biggest wave of public protest in UK television history ? The protests were lead by the Asian UK community incensed at a display of the kind of 'everyday racism' with which they are all too familiar. The racism was not blatant insult or abuse, which would not be tolerated even as part of an RTV game show, it was the far more common insidious racism of people who are polite enough in face to face dealings with people of colour but then go back and make jokes to other white people about that person's food, accent, or hygiene. Overhearing the way white people talked about them in private was more than just a 'flicker of authenticity' (Roscoe 2001) for the thousands of Asians who protested, it was a powerfully accurate portrayal of their social reality. The race and gender politics of these events were further complicated by the perennial British issues of class and empire. Shilpa Shetty is a very middle class Indian – carefully and beautifully spoken, reserved, confident. The two Essex girls and one Scouser who set themselves up as Shetty's nemesis are all products of completely different working class communicative cultures in which confrontation and combat are nearer the norm. It could be argued that the interactions between these two different codes tapped into all kinds of British cultural fault lines generated by white working class discomfort at the growing power of an

Asian bourgeoisie in the UK. This short account of a case study in *Big Brother* controversy is intended to illustrate the ways in which behaviours and patterns of relationship that *emerge* from *Big Brother* turn out to make a significant contribution to talk in the public sphere. The talk in this case is significant not because it concerns who is being 'real' or 'authentic' but because it generated a greater volume of discussion about racism in UK society than any previous TV programme.

The Shetty controversy is not an isolated case. The *Big Brother* literature is full of examples where the programme provoked significant public sphere discussions on important topics that are – despite the globalised format – very culturally specific. Writing about *Big Brother Africa* 2003 Biltereyst observes,

'the programme was praised by an unexpectedly large variety of people…intellectuals and scholars claimed that *Big Brother Africa* successfully brought under attention issues such as AIDS, and openly questioned national stereotypes.' (Mathijs & Jones 2004:10)

Pitout argues that the first series of Big Brother in South Africa was structured by post apartheid hegemonies,

'With South Africa's history of apartheid the blend of people belonging to different cultural, racial and religious groups contributed to the excitement and media hype. Having black and white people living in the same house in South Africa would have been illegal ten years ago..' (Mathijs & Jones 2004:173)

Kilicbay & Minark (in Mathijs & Jones 2004:140- 150) argue that *Biri Bizi Gozetliyor* (Turkish *Big Brother*) provoked public sphere 'topics of discussion' reflecting the specific contexts modernity and secularism,

'Surprisingly we have found that each season had its own theme such as political correctness, hegemonic masculinity, gender roles, being a dutiful citizen, being respectful of dominant moral codes and so on.'(Mathijs & Jones 2004:149).

The place of RTV game shows in the popular public sphere is tacitly acknowledged by the appearance of the Columbian Prime Minister in the *Big Brother* house in 2003, using his

appearance to explain to housemates and viewers a forthcoming referendum on economic austerity measures. (Denhart 2003)

In all the cases above the formatted Reality TV gameshow has a particularly productive effect on public sphere discussion, raising issues, airing concerns, exploring anxieties that are all already part of the cultural context for the production. However this is clearly not the intention of the programme producers - *Big Brother* is massively successful global media franchise, turning Endemol, the rights holder, into one of the most successful independent media companies in the world. Nevertheless the public sphere discussion seems to be a characteristic emergent quality of the *Big Brother* system. The simulation model that is at the core of the Reality TV game is producing 'real world' outcomes in the shared public communicative space of the mediated public sphere.

SIMULATION AS MODEL

The definition of simulation I want to use is derived from computer applications within the social sciences. Gilbert & Doran (1994) argue that first of all simulation is a process of modeling,

'We wish to acquire knowledge about a target entity T. But T is not easy to study directly. So we proceed indirectly. Instead of T we study another entity M, the 'model', which is sufficiently similar to T that we are confident that some of what we learn about M will also be true of T' (Gilbert & Doran 1994 :4)

Typically the phenonema under consideration are dynamic, a model therefore consists in 'structure plus behaviour' . Simulation happens when we observe the behaviour of the model, when it is 'set running' . In Gilbert and Conte (1995) this approach is summarized thus,

'…computer simulation is an appropriate methodology whenever a social phenomenon is not directly accessible, either because it no longer exists ….or *because its structure or the effects of its structure i.e. its behaviour, are so complex that the observer cannot directly attain a clear picture of what is going on'* (Gilbert and Conte 1995 :2 my italics)

This justification for the use of simulation is interesting because it lays emphasis on complex structures and behaviours which are not directly observable, such as identity and sociality, the content of the RTV Game which here are seen as complex and *dynamic* processes subject to multiple networked determinations rather than linear cause and effect. Simulations made by social scientists using computer programmes are being used to address fundamental problems of societal organization and evolution in ways that are explicitly designed to take account of highly complex interactive systems whose characteristics are always permanently emergent rather than fixed or predictable by any linear cause and effect mechanical method.

In a less arcane field, simulation is also of course widely used by the military; this has been growing for many years. In 1996 the US Department of Defence Modelling and Simulation Office asked the National Research Council to convene a conference in which military trainers and members of the entertainment industries could share information. It was attended by game developers, film studio representatives, theme park industries , military trainers and universities (Prensky 2001 : 315). Marc Prensky in his book 'Digital Game Based Learning' (McGraw Hill 2001NY) claims that the US military are the biggest spenders in the world on simulation games for training. It is clear that warfare is now conducted on the basis of knowledge produced through simulation. This highly rule based mediated version of war of course produces its own counter image in the form terror – a viral resistance to the systemic totality of the computerized war machine.

Real world uses of simulation to produce knowledge are not confined to social science or military planning. There are numerous other examples. Currency markets use simulations everyday in order to calculate the best market advantage for speculation. In science simulations are used

increasingly in recognition of the fact that understanding emergent behaviour is an important aspect of understanding many natural processes e.g. in immunology to predict micro biological behaviours.

Simulation is used then to represent complex processes with multiple agents and causalities at work – in this way it seems to answer a theoretical need for ways of producing knowledge that take account of the levels of interaction between micro level agents and macro level forces as well as to address a need articulated by post modern theorists for a method of representation that takes account of rapid change. In all the cases cited above real world knowledges are being produced that have real world effects – embodied, direct and material. The simulation has become a significant way of producing knowledge, modifying behaviour and entertaining ourselves.

BIG BROTHER AS GAMEPLAY

In the case of *Big Brother* the mimetic content produced by the system is centred upon another and different kind of simulation, that of the game in which the players are called upon to perform certain roles in accordance with a set of rules. Here the simulation in question is not a computer programme but of a kind of play more akin to 'lets pretend'. There are two levels of play in operation here. First , to use Caillois' (1979) definitions of play , the whole event is staged within a space characterised by mimicry in which participants are called upon to play a part in an imaginative construct, here the housemates are playing a version of themselves which engages audiences in endless speculation around whether or not this performance of self is a true 'authentic' self or calculated performance. At the second level the day to day action of house is structured by games of 'agon', competition in which housemates compete against one another or against *Big Brother* to win food supplies and treats etc.

Moreover this game play takes place within the overarching context of social psychology experiment which uses 'role play ' and observation as its method. (see Palmer 2002)The entire

apparatus of *Big Brother* resembles a social psychology experiment re designed for mass entertainment consumption. The isolation, surveillance, comments from psychologists who explain behaviour and the confessional Diary room all mark the programme as pyschology laboratory. As such it is a deliberately designed 'model' of human interaction in exactly the same way that a computer simulation is a model designed to investigate other natural and social processes.   The experimental or behaviour modification techniques of pyschology are here adapted to entertainment TV.

I want to establish that these forms of 'play' are also simulations that are concomitant with computer simulations in the way that they are models of 'behaviour plus structure' which exist outside of the day to day but which are designed to model it. Many of us are familiar with this process through the experience of role play - how many of us have been on any sort of training in the last ten years when we were not at some point asked to go into role to simulate professional conditions ? Here we encounter simulation as an embedded form of social learning. Although the object of role play was originally behaviour modification and training it has some similarities with simulation in so far as it also sets up a model situation outside everyday perimeters in which the participants are encouraged 'to see what happens if'. This social role play also has much in common with play theories, deriving in psychology from the work of Joseph Moreno who invented psychodrama as a therapeutic technique which effected personal change through direct embodiment of improvised role play. Moreno's development of the technique encompasses children's play and story telling as well as the use of theatre, founding the 'Theatre of Spontaneity' in Vienna in 1923.

FACTUAL TV PLAYTIME

Factual TV entertainment formats are now brand leaders in the ratings war between channels. Simulation is now the driving force of a great deal of factual TV programming – the impulse here is "What if ? ' – " What would happen if we got a burger cook to pretend to be a cordon bleu chef

? " , (*Faking It* Channel Four 1999 -2003) "What would happen if we persuaded wives to swap families for three weeks ? " (*Wife Swap* Channel Four 2002) . "What would it be like to live in a Victorian House ?" (*The 1900 House* Channel 4 1999) The biggest majority of popular factual programmes are now based in events that have been set up and constructed by the producers themselves – 'Factual ' TV has, more or less, abandoned any notion it ever had of observational documentary practice in which the attempt was made to capture reality as it actually happened without intervening in any way. Instead there is only intervention – only recording and editing of simulated conditions.

On television the constructed documentary form has become dominant, its factual quality guaranteed only by the casting of non-actors into the producers' scenarios. The camera only captures events that are happening *because* the camera is there. In the docu-soap – the forerunner of the reality game show- dramatic narrative structure and casting techniques together with a self conscious performance of subjects for camera all ensure that we are looking at experiences constructed and modified for the series itself. Without the camera's fame conferring gaze there is there is no event worth filming, the camera constitutes the reality.

VERITE TO SIMULATION

At one level its possible to see these developments as being the ultimate popular triumph of the Rouchian tradition that the camera creates and catalyses social reality more than documents it . (See Winston 1995:148 – 169) This is a persuasive argument but I'd want to put it into a wider cultural context and ask Why Here ? Why Now ? It is not because film makers or commissioning editors have been suddenly rediscovering the French creator of Cinema Verité Jean Rouch.

Both observational (Direct Cinema) and reflexive (Cinema Verité) modes of factual representation were achieved during the exact same period (late 50s early 60s) as the first realizations of the meanings of an image saturated and stage managed society – the period in fact of the publication of Daniel Boorstin's 'The Image ' (Boorstin 1963) which offered one of the first analyses of image

based public life and the mass effects of the PR industry. I would argue that the direct observational mode of documentary practice emerged in response to this moment as a way of seeming to 'get behind the scenes' of a foregrounded stage-managed reality. Hence films like *Primary* (Ricky Leacock 1960) , *Meet Marlon Brando*, (Maysles Brothers 1965) observational rock performance films e.g. *Don't Look Back* (Leacock and Pennebaker 1966) all of which are attempts to show reality by direct observational techniques of the backstage process of stage managed performative events. The observational mode clearly emerged as the dominant TV documentary tradition in response to and as part of these cultural circumstances.

However by the end of the century this kind of observationalism can be seen to be played out for a number of reasons. Firstly, and most significantly for the purposes of my argument, observational documentary operated as part of the philosophical belief system of empiricism. However this foundation has clearly suffered multiple philosophical and pragmatic shocks over the last hundred years. Philosophically for instance, relativity, and new ideas about the ways in which observers effect what they observe. Pragmatically in so far as science now more often that not concerns itself with processes that are in fact not observable, sub atomic processes or astronomical cosmology for instance. Here empiricism can be seen to have outstripped its own project, to have as it were reached the edge of the observable world before moving on into ways of representation that depend upon simulating natural phenomena. Simulation helps us to understand a world that no longer seems susceptible to cause and effect logic but more and more to non-linear causality and network logics. By network logics I mean the understanding that all events or behaviours may have multiple determinants and variable outcomes, that any given node in a network has numerous in and out points. Planning or predicting outcomes in a network therefore becomes a cybernetic problem, matter feedback estimation, of probability management and of risk calculation.

The 'problem' of the observational can also be seen in operation in the great faking scandals that engulfed documentary practice in the late 1990s. It is possible to read these events as the new

modes of performativity, mimicry and simulation, challenging observationalism. 'Faking' controversies dominated factual TV reception in a three year period starting in 1996 when German TV producer Michael Born was prosecuted and jailed for four years as a result of selling more than 20 faked documentaries and culminating in the UK in 1998-1999 when the press 'exposed' a number of documentaries as 'fake'. These campaigns led to the regional commercial franchise Carlton TV being fined £2 million by the commercial regulator the ITC for 'faking' a documentary 'The Connection' transmitted in October 1996. (see Winston 2000 : 9-39) Factual television and documentary practice was under severe epistemological pressure. What emerges from this feverish bout of self-questioning and doubt? *Big Brother* – conceived during precisely the same period that these scandals were circulating amongst the mediacrats of Europe. The perfect beauty of the reality game show and the performative factual mode in this context is that because *everything* is set up *no one* can be held accountable for fakery. Since the whole event is a game any quasi-legal obligations that producers may previously have had to meet are displaced. The whole terrain of debate has been shifted from the legal to the ludic. Problem solved.

REALITY TV AND REFLEXIVE MODERNITY

The question that remains is 'If programmes like Big Brother are a simulation – what are they a simulation of ?' In *Freakshow* (2000) I argued that some elements of contemporary factual media, especially its emphasis on First Person Media and intimacy should be attributed not merely to greater commercialisation and marketisation of television but also to attempts to represent identity and sociality after the end of tradition. I used one of Anthony Gidden's formulations of the consequences of reflexive modernity,

'Life politics is about how we live after the end of tradition and nature – more and more political decisions will belong to the sphere of life politics in the future.'
(Giddens and Pierson 1998 : 149)

The Reflexive Modernity argument is that in contemporary social life identity and ethics are under constant re evaluation for all kinds of reasons. Essentially the description of contemporary society in the West as a condition of 'reflexive modernity' argues that the project or trajectory of modernity has been radically transformed by its own success. (This is rather like the argument about empiricism above – itself constitutive of modernity – that it has through its own success reached the limits of its own aims.) The social structures of modernity have been transformed by their own fulfilment. Formations of class, labour, gender and technology that underpinned the formation of modernism have all been radically challenged. Neo liberal employment practices in which short term and freelance employment in the context of a highly aspirational culture deny the subject the possibility of long term security or personal development. (Sennett 1999) Increasingly flexible family structures which break out of nuclear family models as a result of changes in sexual and gender politics leave many of us with neither ethical map nor moral compass. Changes in gender roles also cut across our experiences of work, parenting, and identity. Similarly our relationship with nature, which as Giddens explains was previously a 'given' is now under scrutiny, reproductive politics are now opened to a degree of choice, genetics opens up whole new areas of ambiguity which we are trying to learn to deal with. Moreover these scientific developments occur within a context of widespread mistrust of scientific technical systems, described by Ulrich Beck as part of 'risk culture'. This instability of identity and social structure is all experienced within the context of a consumerism marked by aspiration to a high degree of social mobility – where lifestyle choice replaces class, education or gender as determining social identity.

It hardly surprising then these questions of 'life politics' are reflected in the mediated discourses of everyday life that have become the staple fare of factual TV. This focus on identity work should not be misinterpreted as a merely individualistic concern, for identity in this context is deeply wedded to belonging, to group consciousness. The narrative action of *Big Brother* is constituted as on ongoing improvised drama of affiliation and exclusion, driven by the weekly eviction

process which is deliberately designed to undermine group identity whilst at the same time the daily action of challenges and tests is designed to reinforce it.

Subsequently other commentators have made the same set of connections, notably Ib Bondebjerg in his article ' The Mediation of Everyday Life : Genre Discourse and Spectacle in Reality TV' (Bondebjerg 2002)

'This reflexive modernity and the new awareness of the self in public and private life as well as of the mediation of the self in a network society moving from a nation state to global frames ..is the fuel of the new reality genres….

…It is also a reflection of the deep mediation of everyday life in a network society which creates a strong need for audiences to mirror and play with identities and the uncertainties of everyday life , thus intensifying our innate social curiosity.' (Bondebjerg 2002:162)

In the context of this pervasive 'make over culture' it should therefore come as no surprise that factual programming looks increasingly like part identity lab, part intimacy simulator in programmes like the recent *Wife Swap* (C4 2002 -) in which husbands and wives swap for 4 weeks, *Trading Races* (BBC2 2001) in which participants swapped skin colour and lifestyle or the very successful *Faking It* (1999-) on Channel 4 in which subjects are asked to try to learn a new professional identity in just four weeks. *Wife Swap* is a particularly interesting text in this regard. The title is of course designed to suggest some kind of salacious content but in fact the programme turns out to be exactly the blend of sociology and voyeurism that a producer might dream up thinking about the questions of reflexive modernity. Each programme brings up questions about who does what kind of domestic work, how work outside the home is gendered, how this new status of women in the work force effects parenting and attitudes to parenting. Equally the men, the husbands who don't swap, are also called into question, the traditional man, the new man, and everything in between, has been portrayed and more often than not found wanting in yet another example of the contemporary 'crisis of masculinity'.

The Reality Game show can also be seen as having a productive role in this processing of the themes of reflexive modernity. At a primary level its clear that the talk we talk about *Big Brother* or *Survivor* or *Fame Academy* is as much about ourselves as it is about the participants – our water cooler conversations are the site for viewers to do our own identity work, when I express a preference for an Irish, lesbian ex nun as *Big Brother* contestant I am saying more about myself and what kind of man I am than about anything else. Whilst the primary goal of the reality game show is profit through entertainment and participation these programmes also actively produce the conflicts and problems of reflexive modernity as a by product of their discursive effects. We have seen above how *Big Brother* has generated public sphere discussions in different national contexts on a wide variety of topics arising out of modernity, tradition, morality, health and sexuality.   Although the RTV Game show does not set out to do public service work, its simulations are nevertheless productive of emergent debates that raise questions about he way we live now, in terms of identity, relationships, gender and ethics.

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