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Reality Television and the New Subject of Politics

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Hence, too, democracy's specific aporia: it wants to put the freedom and happiness of men into play in the very place–"bare life"–that marked their subjection.[1]

Best exemplified worldwide by *Big Brother*[2] or *Survivor*,[3] reality television has attracted and fascinated all manner of commentators. The initial reaction was a "media panic," to use Kirsten Drotner's apt category:[4] Yet, unlike previously known moral panics, there are no folk devils menacing society, rather situations in which the media are seen "both as a source and the medium of public reaction." Broadcasters, media experts, politicians, and psychiatrists, among others, in very different national settings[5] have joined the debate, generally to condemn. A few voices, mostly from commercial media professionals, have praised the genre. While academics have been for the most part hostile, some have started producing research that takes stock of the phenomenon in a less axiological manner. Overall, "reality television" may become one of the most thoroughly researched television genres after news and drama; a remarkable feat considering its relatively short life span.

This article offers an interpretation of the global rise of the genre of *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, and their offshoots. It does not focus on the genre as highly specific and hence one worthy of radical condemnation or praise. Rather, on the contrary, the claim made is that it represents a wider transformation in the age of late capitalism. Such a triumphant, post-industrial capitalism seems to have defeated or discouraged opponents, critics, and the efforts of the nation-state to harness it to its own interests. Further, it has found a "new

spirit,"[6] one no longer based on entrepreneurial or organizational ideals, but rather on the ability of individuals to actively engage their personalities in various "projects" in order to serve the specific corporate interests of the moment. Even though television has been a major agent of change, the ideology of the "real" at work through reality television is not specific to television. As a prerequisite, however, we must deal with definition and evaluation, traditional obstacles to the study of the genre.[7] This process will lead us directly to the political dimensions of reality television.

Definition

Most articles and books about "reality definition" start with the problem of "defining reality TV."[8] Five years before the advent of *Big Brother*, Richard Kilborn noted that the term had become "something of a catch-all phrase, at least in the British context."[9] Indeed, the phrase "reality television" has been used at different times, in different countries, without attempt to integrate them into a coherent definition of all manner of "labeling games." Furthermore, though these authors have had very different aims–to condemn, to support, to defend, to debate, rarely have they sought to define this phenomenon. The industry has been slow to adopt the phrase as a working definition of a new genre. Among academics, reality television is an ideal notion for theorists like Jason Mittell[10] who seek to minimize the place of textual structures in discussion of genres and to use them simply as one element of a set of wider "discursive practices" that help to categorize texts. Although textual structure should certainly not be fetishized by the theorist, it still remains central to the analysis that is both general and specific to the case at hand. Furthermore, at a given moment of television history, viewers do make considerable use of textual characteristics to classify and to categorize programs according to genres, both traditional and new. More importantly, in regard to the case at hand, after the advent of *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, "reality television" has coalesced into a genre with a high level of textual and social stability. In many countries it has started being used without quotes, as a *bona fide* social label by the media and the industry.[11]

The definition proposed here is based on the "*Big Brother* family."[12] This definition applies to a group of programs occasionally referred to as "reality games."[13] It applies strictly to *Big Brother* and a group of closely related programs, as well as to previous waves of reality programs and programming trends that are supposed to be outside the genre, notably in documentary and current affairs. There are several reasons for this decision. First, much like game shows, the genre of reality games is based on clearly defined formats with a "bible" (and a table of ratings at the time of selling the formats). Format replication is supposed to insure success. It also contributes to textual stability across space and time. This is connected to the impressive international circulation[14] and undeniable success of many of these formats. Second, the show is

based on a cast of contestants who compete for a prize over a series of episodes building up to a finale when the winner is announced. Third, as a short series of programs (some ten weeks or more), reality games try to escape the routine of long-term scheduling. Contestants perform and their performance leads to their gradual elimination by voting. Voters are fellow contestants, viewers (via SMS, Internet), a jury of "professionals" (when the task involves some type of expertise), or a combination of all three groups, though the clear predominance is for decisions made by viewers. Contestants are mostly individuals, but this is not always the case; as in game shows, there may be couples, families, or even mother and child pairs, as in a Greek season of *Big Brother*.

So far, the elements of this definition apply to many game shows, although the duration of each series suggests a special game show that is more show than game. Here, however, lies the crucial novelty: contestants do not only meet during the show, they have to stay together for much longer stretches of time. Accordingly, they are encouraged and, indeed, have to interact in a personal manner. Thus, contestants do not simply exhibit a specific competence or knowledge. Through such inter-personal interactions, and often a variety of ploys, the audience enjoys an intimate acquaintance with the performers. For example, a special location is used where all participant actions are filmed by the unsleeping eye of cameras. Video-portraits, too, are used to introduce contestants to the audience. And, there is extended use of an omniscient voice-over that informs us about "what is actually taking place" between the contestants, especially from a relational point of view, and also orients the narrative ("Will he make up with her after last week's fight?" "Will they be able to. . . ?").

Such "surplus exposure" is connected to producers' specific programming strategies that divide "the real" into layers to be accessed in different manners, with a strong sense of revelation; a kind of baroque aesthetics where one curtain can always hide another curtain. Although televising of the weekly episode is the key moment, exposure continues to take place through a variety of additional channels: a daily update on an Internet site and live, round-the-clock broadcasting on the Web or a satellite channel. Producers also resort to more traditional televisual means: the studio where the star-host interviews participants and sometimes their family and friends. Internet sites also play a major part through official and unofficial Web sites and forums. Finally, the media contribute through massive coverage and debate about reality games. For producers, the amount of comment and gossip generated is a key indication of a format's success.

The rhetoric of liveness[15] is interwoven throughout reality programming. This editing is essential since it is likely that most viewers actually watch little live coverage and that teasers and the weekly summary are not live but rather the result of careful editing. While reality programming might be edited, we are told repeatedly that censorship is exceptional during the action [i.e., during the daily interactions between contestants].[16] This is because participants

have no choice but to expose themselves as they do not know what will be edited from the shooting. Actual liveness is central to the final episode, when the audience decides or contributes to selection of the winner. This final episode has some of the flavor of Dayan and Katz's media events, except that the live broadcasting of history becomes the live broadcasting of a prefabricated, televisual history (or reality). Again, reality games entertain a complex, competitive or substitutive relation with current affairs. And, thus, as in the case of media events, major social values and big audiences are at stake.

The Politics of Evaluation

A radical polarization still dominates public discussions of reality television, despite some academic attempts at a quieter reappraisal. Referring to the pre–*Big Brother* era, Jon Dovey[17] distinguished three major positions in the debate: The *trash TV* position holds that television (as other media before) debases cultural sensibilities in relation with a market-led political economy. The *empowerment* position claims that reality TV gives "ordinary people," who have undisguised genuine preoccupations, a chance of access to public discourse. Finally, the "reality TV as *nightmare*" position considers the genre to be the ultimate example of simulacrum, opening an era of undifferentiation between the real and its representation, with concomitant loss of any anchoring of public debate in a common public reality.

There are many similarities between the "trash" and "nightmare" positions, as both view reality television in a negative and apocalyptic manner. Overall, such a polarized form of debate, between a positive side and a negative dominant side, is a direct derivation from former debates about mass culture, especially about television. For example, in the early 1960s, Umberto Eco[18] opposed the "integrated" and "apocalyptic" positions of intellectuals confronted with mass communication. In contrast, "empowerment" reflects the position of the integrated intellectual, often happy to work inside the system of mass communications and thus limited to support of it, while the apocalyptic tone has been adopted in a seemingly unprecedented manner for reality shows. Another feature of the debate is typical of television: A single genre is identified and treated as the "bad genre" par excellence; meaning, it is the one that demonstrates how deeply corrupting television is as a medium.[19]

What, then, can be identified as specific to reality television? It is not the case that audiences (especially young ones) are attracted to trivial, unmoral topics. Such an argument returns us directly to debates on cinema and comics. The emphasis on general voyeurism due to radical exposition of the private is more specific, although the same claim has been made about some trends of the documentary, as well as, about the U.S. tradition of talk shows. That the audience is manipulated by something that "looks real" but is, in fact, fiction is a long-standing claim about documentaries made later regard-

ing game shows. However, here the reproach is more crucial for reality television because of its specific claim to the real.

The most radical critics of reality television have suggested a new argument: Reality television represents new mechanisms of surveillance, a kind of "electronic fascism." This argument has been put forward especially about *Big Brother*. Here, numerous authors have made reference to Foucault and described *Big Brother* as a new form of Bentham's panopticon.[20] The connection with the political is certainly relevant, but actual surveillance is, after all, limited to a small number of individuals who unlike Bentham's prisoners willingly expose themselves for a limited amount of time. Thus, while surveillance is not what this is all about, a new form of social control might be at stake.

As for the empowerment position, the idea that popular media represent a new kind of democracy is not new. In 1930, Ortega y Gasset used the phrase "hyper-democracy" in *The Revolt of the Masses*. Ever since, the rise of new forms of quantified public opinion (polls, ratings) seem to have confirmed how democracy is always evolving into new forms. Beyond the use of ratings, the phrase "hyper-democracy" is apt for another reason. The "heroes" of reality television, popular and middle class youth unconnected with any form of traditional literary and historical culture, have shocked educated, elite audiences. This undoubtedly is the case, especially in nations with (still) a high level of cultural elitism such as France. As anthropologist Marc Abeles, himself not a supporter of the genre, stated: "The language, insinuations, rage, and tears are real. This is what probably disturbs us most: the innocent, insistent and brutal presence of another generation and another social class."[21] While access alone to television does not necessarily mean a radical form of empowerment, it might signal new forms of public interest and citizenship not congruent with traditional democratic ideals connected with traditional and mainly European public service notions of the media.[22]

Hence, the status of the real in reality television is central to this debate. If what is performed is fake (i.e., participants are actors or at least fake the emotions they claim to exhibit), then the whole genre collapses, and the very notion of any form of empowerment is meaningless. On the other hand, in a paradoxical way, the very reproach that reality TV is either an exhibitionist machine or an apparatus of surveillance becomes meaningless as well. Those famous "private moments" are no more private than any such moment performed in fiction films by actors. However, it is not that simple: the reality in reality television is not either true or not. It has a status of its own.

The Real in Reality Television

What is real, then, in reality programs? And what does this tell us about the many societies that have so willingly embraced them? First, let us return to one reason why reality television has taken some time to reach a certain level

of stability: The very promise of the real that it made has changed. In crime and mystery-based reality television, the promise is close to that of news: We are going to see real accidents of life, violence, drama, crime on the spot. In such reality shows, the witness, soon to be the key figure in the reality game, does not take center stage: notably in *America's Most Wanted* (FOX, US, 1988–), itself an adaptation of an old German show, *Aktenzeichen XY: Ungelöst* (ZDF, DE, 1967–).

However, the promise of the real in reality television since the late 1990s is of a different nature: The true self of persons is revealed. And, since the self is invisible, we gain access to it through the *body* that is mobilized in diverse ways: through the face, voice, postures, talk, and contact with other bodies. What has been to date the realm of actors is now performed, live or quasi-live, by "genuine" people. In the Netherlands, where Endemol launched *Big Brother*, Dutch professional parlance coined the phrase "emotion television" to refer to the genre. The emotion, of course, is both that of the contestants as well as that of audiences. Indeed, audience research[23] has shown that audience members experience new feelings while viewing these emotional moments. As Annette Hill stated: "The focus on the degree of actuality, on real people's improvised performances in the program, leads to a particular viewing practice: Audiences look for the moment of authenticity when real people are 'really' themselves in an unreal environment."[24] Such an environment is constructed and controlled in order to allow the inartificial to happen. Audiences take part in this process. The mass audience is neither indignant (like the social critics) nor massively skeptical. The vast majority accepts the "value of truth" of those moments, while a minority of "detectives"[25] is busy trying to find discrepancies that suggest manipulation and acting. However, this too is another way of validating the claim to the real, as they are investing time in attempts to refute it.

While reality television entails a close monitoring of candidates, not every moment is worthy of attention. There are key, hyper-real moments that are tied to a sense of revelation, of supreme authenticity of the naked self. Much of this takes place in the interaction between selves and culminates in lovemaking and, no less important, in conflict.[26] Those authentic moments are immediately commented upon and become part of the program's legend. Later a collection of legendary segments may be presented, even as a separate highlights show. In France, on February 11, 2007, a leading private channel, TF1, achieved a record audience with its broadcast of *The Hundred Greatest Moments of Reality Television* (*Les cent plus grandes perles de la télé-réalité*). In the UK the press labeled some highlights of *Big Brother* among the "top TV moments." Previously, such an assessment would have been applied to another kind of reality, news and current affairs.[27] If television [at least, hyper-competitive, commercial television] reflects audiences' preoccupations, then we, the public, are now more focused on the revelation of the authentic intimate than we are on the politically or socially newsworthy.

This has been noted by many commentators. Divina Frau-Meigs suggested that such moments of authenticity are akin to the "money shot"[28]: the moment of ejaculation in pornographic movies. She claims that, as in pornographic movies, participants in reality games are paid to produce moments of total exposition with semi-foreigners (the ones they discover on the set) and for total foreigners (the audience is watching through the camera). The analogy does reveal the level of merchandization of resources that are supposed to be private. Accordingly, one could claim that what has existed for sex for centuries has been vastly publicized and extended to other intimate resources. People do for money and glory in public what they had been doing in private. To do so, they *perform* what they simply and unknowingly *did*. Hence, the new art of being convincingly private in public is at the heart of reality television. Participants not only have to convince us they are really themselves, they are also encouraged to produce a reflexive discourse on all such practices of public privacy. Here the host plays a key-part. Many hosts who interview contestants in associated studio programs go beyond obtaining revelations from them. They also reveal their own personality, emotions, personal experiences, and histories. Here, a characteristic of American talk shows has been transferred to another genre, reality television, and globalized.

All reality games have confessional moments when participants talk directly to audiences or answer questions of an interviewer about their personal feelings. In France's version of *Big Brother*, this has taken the extreme form of a dedicated, small room called the "confessional," while in the UK this is called the "Diary Room." This format is related to a key figure of contemporary culture–the witness. More precisely, this is an internal witness, not the external witness, long a key figure in media culture, especially since the advent of television. Indeed, according to John Ellis, "television sealed the twentieth century's fate as the century of the witness"[29] by allowing "direct" witnessing of events from home. However, the witnessing of events from the outside has yielded ground to a new form, internal witnessing, connected to painful experiences; be it the participation in a dramatic event (a terror attack) in the news or, more deeply, in long-lasting experiences of personal or collective suffering. The witness appears as a survivor who talks about his own experience. This account is not a statement such as "I've seen this or another thing." But, rather, "I've suffered but I am able to tell you that . . . ;" or, in the most extreme case, "I've come back from hell, and I've survived to tell you." Thus, internal witnessing is connected to the valorization of the private experience of the individual. Internal witnessing engages the body that becomes "authenticity's last refuge in a situation of structural doubt."[30] It is also connected to a contemporary culture of victimization.[31] Being a victim and telling about it in public space is now a strategy both for identity construction (individual and collective) and for gaining rights in public space. This right grants access to public space as well as public recognition, financial compensation, and so forth.

An evolution has taken place in this culture of internal witnessing of suffering through reality games: The victim must demonstrate an ability to overcome victimization, to become a "winner," sometimes through exploiting what made him/her a victim. Telling a story in the most touching way might bring you a big reward, although this is not said directly as some moral taboos apply.[32] That suffering brings a reward has become widely acceptable. However, what has to remain hidden is the fact that contestants have to eliminate other victims who, too, had suffered but who do not have an opportunity to bear witness.

In this vein, Endemol, the main format factory of reality television in the Netherlands used a remarkable marketing ploy in May 2007.[33] They publicized a new reality game in which three persons in need of a transplant try to obtain the needed organ by convincing a potential, dying donor. This announcement received indignant international coverage worldwide until Endemol, at the end of the first episode, revealed that "of course" the program was not "for real." Rather, they claimed that this was a staged event that enabled the company "to do its part" by exposing the crucial need for transplants. While such could be denounced as hypocrisy and pure marketing, the event also shows us that talking about the politics of reality television is not only a metaphor or a loose use of the term politics: reality television programmers have entered the "hard realm" of public policy. Again, they deal with current affairs (and create current affairs) in their own specific way. Despite the indignation, the show was broadcast when everybody was still persuaded this competing victimization was genuine. Nobody actually tried to stop the broadcast. And victims had to learn to exhibit their bodies and pain in order to win. What is it, exactly, they have been learning, and how?

Social Skills in Reality Television and the New Spirit of Capitalism

What is the kind of capacity needed to participate or to win in a reality show? This has been a key point for critics. They first noted that if age and appearance were the key criteria then only certain parts of the population could participate. Critics lamented the fact that self-exhibition or "moral striptease" (if not actual striptease) had become a key resource and could bring popularity and money.[34] What participants do in reality games does include exhibition of the physical and moral self, but actually goes way beyond. They exhibit relational capacities at every stage. This starts with the casting (originally disguised, but now used as footage material in some programs). It continues on camera with other participants (seduction and deception alike), with the jury, with audiences (often involved in the choice of the winner), and never stops if they achieve celebrity status (see below). Participants must manage their image within a stressful environment, under the eyes of the camera, and

detached from their homes (in most formats, they are entirely cut-off from their daily environment). They must engage their bodies, an act which is not only the touchstone of the authenticity of the show, but their main resource.

In many reality games, participants must also be willing to improve these relational capacities and to work on their bodies and emotions. Even in *Big Brother*, where no formal training takes place, participants comment on how they have changed and learned to change during the show. Other shows explicitly involve relational and personal capacities. The ability to seduce is central here, both as a general overarching capacity and in a more specifically sexual version in couple games. In one case, participants must both seduce and show they can resist seduction (*Temptation Island*, Fox, US, 2001–, has been sold in at least seven countries). In another program, contestants seduce an unknown partner using the whole grammar of "dating" (*Blind Date*, Universal Television–NBC, US, 1999–2006, sold worldwide). In a third case, fifteen young men compete for the favor of a (supposedly) ideal young woman who eliminates them one by one (*Take Me Sharon*, Channel 2, IL, 2003). Contestants must also learn how to change looks (through apparel, make-up, or new bodies after dieting or undergoing plastic surgery), change mothers or spouses, overcome their fears and aversions (*Fear Factor*, NBC, US, 2001–2006, originally created by Endemol in the Netherlands), or learn to return to the countryside (*The Farm*, TV4, SE, 2001–, sold in more than forty countries). Even in more traditional talent shows (*Pop Idol*, ITV, UK, 2001–, adapted in more than twenty countries), contestants are encouraged to show the whole gamut of their relational capacities. The list is endless, as are the needs of commercial television to renew its formats.

"Self-marketing" might be the best way to sum up the core reason for the success of reality shows. What Eric Macé suggested about the French version of *Big Brother* (*Loft Story*, an allusion to the "Loft" where the game took place) can be easily generalized to "reality games":

> *Loft Story* is very much a mythical representation of the experience of job seeking and work for many individuals. Here what is involved in getting a job, being promoted, or being fired has less to do with traditional qualifications and diplomas than it does with the relational and subjective capacities to engage your own personality (or to pretend doing so) to the benefit of the firm for whom you work.[35]

In many ways, contestants in reality shows produce precisely what the service economy of capitalism is supposed to produce–interactions, contact, relations; and, they have to do it in a public way, even more than in the workplace. This is connected to what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiappello[36] described as two major characteristics of the new spirit of capitalism: the project and the network. Individuals must adapt to an unstable and uncertain market. They can no longer rely on diplomas to provide them (suppos-

edly) with a lifetime of work, so they constantly move from one "project" to the next, expanding their network of relations through the engagement of their personalities.

A characteristic of the new spirit of capitalism is its ability to reincorporate much of the critiques of the late sixties and early seventies. According to left-wing (but also some right-wing) critics, capitalism confines individuals to narrow social norms and leaves no room for imagination, individual fulfillment, freedom to create and to "discover oneself." Delivering what it once deprived us, capitalism now promises to free individual fulfillment and independence. And, this is an integral part of the rhetoric of reality games that is directed from the start at would-be participants: They must be ready for "a new adventure"; be free of attachments; willing to "try something new"; to engage all of their personality—body and soul—into the adventure; and to break with social conventions, an act that seemingly was the privilege of artists.[37] We find would-be participants reproducing such a view in explaining why they applied to be a contestant, beyond material and symbolic gains.[38]

Biopolitics

This phenomenon might be read from a different historical perspective, that of Foucault's history of sexuality, reread by Agamben. Starting from the end of the seventeenth century, according to Foucault, the modern state has been involved in a new form of politics. Termed biopolitics, Foucault called this the passage from "territorial state" to the "state of population."[39] Biological life, health, hygiene, productive bodies all have become a central concern for sovereign powers. This change is considered by Foucault as neither positive nor negative, but basically ambivalent as it becomes possible "both to better protect life and to authorize a holocaust."[40] No longer involved in regalian repression, state power deals with management of daily life: "One could say that the old right to cause to die and to let live has been replaced by the power to make people live or to let them die."[41] Foucault directly connected new biopolitics to the development of capitalism. Such would not have been possible without the disciplinary control achieved by biopower that creates the needed docile bodies.

While this approach can be seen as central to much of Foucault's work, it became explicit only in the latter part of his research, and much remains to be done in this direction. For us the key questions are: What kind of bodies does the new spirit of capitalism need and what do reality games have to tell us about this? What I want to suggest here is that reality television exemplifies a new form of biopolitics, one busy disciplining the body in new ways. Beyond proper execution of work, bodies must learn how to present themselves adequately in order to perform in the new capitalistic world. Bodies become the support of new types of performance. It is not enough to be healthy, to go to school on time, to work a lifetime of work. One must be willing to perform

oneself on the stage of social life (and the stage, either real or symbolic, is central in reality programming).

In addition, this new form of biopolitics is no longer initiated by the state; it is connected to the needs of globalized capitalism. Connected with global media conglomerates and using globalized formats, private television stations act as its promoters. By no means a coincidence, it is the European country where state power is the weakest–Italy–that has initiated (although not succeeded in commercializing) many ideas of reality programming. And, it is in Italy where television producers have had the most leverage in exposing private lives and emotions to audiences, as early as 1987. Italy is also the only country where a state broadcaster, RAI3, was the first major exponent of "reality television," labeled "verity television" (Televisione Verita).[42]

Audiences: Celebrity and Beyond

Although my analysis is mostly based on textual characteristics of reality games, the implication for audiences is crucial. I have claimed that much of the text of reality programming is about the new subject of capitalism. How do audiences connect with this? We know about this directly through a specific part of the public: the candidates who apply in throngs to participate in the program.[43]

Many of these candidates are questioned by the press. Their motivations have also been researched. It has been mentioned, repeatedly, that beyond the specific prize the quest to become a celebrity is central to applicants' motivations.[44] This is true especially for the winner(s), but other candidates can expect to benefit from participation in the show, at least momentarily. In the case of the French *Big Brother*, one of the first participants became a regular member of a talk show panel; an Algerian participant was a focus of media attention (albeit quite critical) when she came to visit her home country; another participant was recruited by a local radio station . . .

Reflecting on this phenomenon in the UK, Nick Couldry suggested that the "transition from ordinary [non-media] person to celebrity [media] person" was the main purpose of *Big Brother*. I doubt that there is a "main purpose" to a show that is so multi-faceted and complex, but celebrity certainly is the ultimate reward for candidates, the reward that includes all rewards. Hence producers' emphasize, repeatedly, that candidates do not have celebrity status nor have they been in contact with the media prior to their participation. They are truly "ordinary people"[45] Hence the extreme excitement of the winner(s) during the final episode: Beyond the prize, he/she is also about to be coronated, to begin the transition to celebrity status endorsed by the presence of "older" celebrities (that is, former winners). Achieving some sort of celebrity status after the show is the ultimate reward for participants. This is a prize that engages their whole personality and requires that they learn to perform themselves in new ways. This is what makes reality

games more than a game and something similar to the job market. The new celebrities can now feel they are, and will be, protected from vicissitudes of the market. One social dream has replaced another. Lacking a safe position as a lifetime employee of a well-known corporation (or, in Europe, a civil servant), one can dream of becoming a celebrity, and, even better, in talent reality games, a famous artist.

In addition to this emphasis on celebritism, much remains to be learned about participants' motivation to participate in such shows. In itself, "being televised" does matter very much in our society and has mattered since very early in the history of television, even if it does not lead to achieving celebrity status. In the case under discussion, candidates do mention among their motivations their desire to become famous, but they also emphasize: the importance of the experience in itself and being cut off from their familiar environment in the company of strangers as a way of surpassing themselves through a specific project. They also agree, explicitly, with the ideology of the program, in terms reminiscent of Boltanski and Chiappello's new spirit of capitalism.

It is difficult to know if mass audiences actually accept this ideology. We have, however, several indications of this in the program. First, as mentioned, the spectacle of reality television is not fictionalized by audiences. They actually believe that contestants exhibit the best of their relational capacities. The Internet-centered fan culture that has developed around some participants confirms that audiences also greatly appreciate the contestants. Indeed, for some shows, social practices of self-image management are not only exemplified on television, a whole culture develops around such practices, from home improvement to dieting and even so far as plastic surgery.[46]

Extension or Regression of Democracy

Finally, we return to the question that initiated this discussion: What is the connection between reality television and the history of democracy? Elaborating on Foucault, Agamben suggested that democracy is a deeply ambivalent social form that involves a contradiction that has existed from the beginning of modern democracy: Each period in which citizens gained more control, when there was an extension of democracy, has been accompanied by the gaining of more control by powerful social bodies on citizens—a concomitant regression of democracy. This takes us back to the question of evaluation, as now we see how both claims can be sustained. Undoubtedly, reality games entail some sort of submission: submission of the candidates to the rules of the games, first and foremost to the casting that radically excludes the vast majority of applicants; submission to the new forms of training and apprenticeship that take place during the game; finally and more deeply, submission to the new social norms at work in the new spirit of capitalism. The most extreme example of this process has been the use of plastic surgery in the American "extreme makeover" show *The Swan* (FOX, US, 2004). This

show has been adopted in a limited number of countries and has triggered resistance even among other producers of reality games, who claim that even they would not go "as far as that." But, as often is the case, this apparent rejection dissimulates a significant truth: the deep level of subjection of the body that has been reached, not only inside the show, but outside. This was possible because the market for plastic surgery was steadily expanding in the United States or in Israel, one of the few countries where the show has been adapted where, entitled *The Mirror* (Channel 10, IL, 2006), it has achieved "respectable and steady viewing rates."[47]

However, reality games can also be analyzed as a deepening of democracy, not in the sense of traditional representative democracy, but more along the lines of John Hartley. Following Thomas Marshall, Hartley described how three forms of citizenship that currently coexist evolved historically: civil (involving rights and freedoms), political (involving representation), and social (involving welfare). The third form is obviously connected to Foucault's biopolitics. Hartley adds a fourth and a fifth form: cultural citizenship, involving identity politics and "do-it-yourself citizenship" based on difference rather than identity. The latter involves the "practice of putting together an identity" as a "choice people can make for themselves."[48]

In what sense can reality games illustrate this affirmation? We have analyzed them as a new stage in the history of biopolitics, involving not the state but new social institutions that are deeply and directly involved in developing the new capitalism, such as private television stations. Reality games are also connected to a form of "do-it-yourself citizenship" that is reminiscent of the new spirit of capitalism.

Applicants explicitly define their participation in the game as a specific project deeply related to their quest for identity. But, in a strikingly global manner, reality games are related to identity politics. They have given the highest form of social visibility, prime-time television, to groups altogether neglected beforehand, especially by the European public service media tradition. I am not referring here to uneducated youth, but to ethnic and sexual minorities who have found it difficult to be incorporated in the national fabric. Accordingly, it is not surprising that an Arab girl won the first season of the Israeli version of *America's Next Top Model* in 2003, while Arab minorities' slow access to French television has been initiated largely through reality games. In the United States, in March 2007, *Project Runway* (Bravo, USA, 2004–), a reality game involving wishful fashion designers was nominated for a GLAAD award. This award, from the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, "recognizes and honors mainstream media for their fair, accurate and inclusive representations of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community." While reality television may have contributed a decisive impulsion to identity politics worldwide, television in the United States has long been recognized to be a site where minorities can gain a previously denied or restricted access to public space.[49]

We have noted that candidates for reality games have a variety of motivations: eagerness for new experiences, a desire to become a celebrity, or minority members' pursuit of entrance into public space. Some may claim that they are manipulated by producers, but making the case for mass manipulation of uncoerced social agents is problematic. Candidates return time after time in order to be seen on stage, on the island, in the loft, the farm, the bar . . . In doing so, they amass followers, admirers, audiences willing to share their dreams of social transformation and transition to celebrity status.

Accordingly, it is ultimately impossible to give a final answer about the politics of reality television without analyzing the transformation of democracy we are experiencing, without understanding the ambivalence that remains at the heart of democracy, the self-subjection that democratic citizens seem willing to impose on themselves. This is what Tocqueville, as early as 1848, dubbed "soft despotism." It seems that reality programming heralds precisely a form of soft despotism that I suggest be called self-despotism, where the self is both the subject and the agent of despotism.

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Notes

1. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 9.
2. Veronica, NL, 1999–.
3. Originally *Expedition Robinson*, SVT1 then TV3, SE, 1997–.
4. Kirsten Drotner, "Modernity and Media Panics," in *Media Cultures: Reappraising Transnational Media*, ed. Michael Skovmand and Kim Schroder (London: Routledge, 1992), 42–62.
5. Guy Lochard and Guillaume Soulez, ed., "La télé-réalité, un débat mondial," special issue of *Médiamorphoses* (Paris: INA et Presses Universitaires de France, 2003).
6. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiappello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 255, 324. English translation, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).
7. The best transnational analyses of the debate are to be found in Daniel Biltereyst, "Reality TV, Troublesome Pictures and Panics: Reappraising the Public Controversy around Reality TV in Europe," in *Understanding Reality Television*, ed. Sue Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (London: Routledge, 2004); and in Lochard and Soulez, "La télé-réalité, un débat mondial."

8. Sue Holmes and Deborah Jermyn, ed., "Introduction," in *Understanding Reality Television* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

9. Richard Kilborn, "How Real Can You Get?: Recent Developments in 'Reality' Television," *European Journal of Communication* 9 (1994): 423.

10. Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

11. Holmes and Jermyn, "Introduction," *Understanding Reality Television,* 3–5. Lochard and Soulez, "La télé-réalité, un débat mondial," passim.

12. This is a reference to Wittgenstein's "family resemblances," with *Big Brother* as the prototype in the family.

13. Note the oxymoron: a game is, after all, an artificial situation which might ape reality but does not claim to be "for real." In the British context, Annette Hill has proposed the phrase "game-docs." Annette Hill, "Big Brother: The Real Audience," *Television & New Media* 3 (2002): 323–340.

14. Lochard and Soulez, "La télé-réalité, un débat mondial." Hill, "Big Brother: The Real Audience," quotes the very high ratings of the first editions in many European countries.

15. On *liveness as rhetoric*, see Jérôme Bourdon, "Live Television Is Still Alive: On Television as an Unfulfilled Promise," *Media, Culture and Society* 22, no. 5 (2000): 531–556.

16. There is a small amount of censorship in many places, for nudity, sex, and in some cases (the UK), language. This could be analyzed as part of the "layered realities" programming strategy: there is still more to be revealed, there is another layer to be accessed.

17. Jon Dovey, *Freak Show: First Person Media and Factual Television* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 83–91.

18. Umberto Eco, "Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals: Mass Communications and Theories of Mass Culture," *Apocalypse Postponed* (London: Flamingo, 1995), 27–52 (original Italian edition of the article 1964).

19. Marie-France Antona, "Reality-show, critique de télévision et lieux du genre," in *Lieux communs: Topoï, stéréotypes, clichés,* ed. Christian Plantin (Paris: Kimé, 1993), 133–144.

20. One example among many from a former editor of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*: Jean-Louis Comolli, *Voir et pouvoir. L'innocence perdue: télévision, fiction, cinéma, documentaire* (Paris: Verdier, 2004).

21. Marc Abeles, quoted in Biltereyst, "Reality TV, Troublesome Pictures and Panics," 91.

22. See Elisabeth Jacka, "'Democracy as Defeat': The Impotence of Arguments for Public Service Broadcasting," *Television and New Media* 4, no. 2 (May 2003): 177–191.

23. See Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London: Routledge, 2005), and Dominique Mehl, "Le public du *Loft*: Distance et connivance," in Lochard and Soulez, "La télé-réalité, un débat mondial," 132–138.

24. Hill, 325.

25. The term "detective" is used by Gamson in his interesting typology of celebrity audiences. As we will see, reality television culture borrows from celebrity culture. See Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1994).

26. Examples from different countries: The night love of X with N–in almost every version of *Big Brother*; the moment where she started beating him up (Spain); the time when she confessed having been raped and cried (Portugal); the moment where the host herself cried when telling a candidate that she "had to go home" (Israel).

27. Nick Couldry, "Playing for Celebrity: Big Brother as Ritual Event," *Television and New Media* 3, no. 3 (August 2002): 286.

28. Divina Frau-Meigs, "Pornographie et télé-réalité," in Lochard and Soulez, "La télé-réalité, un débat mondial," 138.

29. Quoted in John Durham Peters, "Witnessing," *Media Culture and Society* 23 (2001): 708.

30. Peters, "Witnessing," 717.

31. Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La concurrence des victimes: Déportation, identité, reconnaissance* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998).

32. Although in a Russian reality game broadcast in 2004–05, each of three candidates told their dramatic life story (losing job or house) to a jury who then decided to award a modest cash prize to the most convincing victim.

33. "Aux Pays-Bas, la télé-réalité joue avec le don d'organe," *Le Monde*, May 30, 2007.

34. As if to confirm their fears, the winner of the French edition of *Big Brother* was a barmaid who had performed half-nude in disreputable places.

35. Eric Macé, "*Loft Story*: Un *Big Brother* à la française," in Lochard and Soulez, "La télé-réalité, un débat mondial," 129.

36. Boltanski and Chiappello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, 164–167.

37. On the artist as a model for the subject of new capitalism, see Boltanski and Chiappello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, third part.

38. Annette Hill, *Reality TV*, in Lochard and Soulez, "La télé-réalité, un débat mondial."

39. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 3.

40. Agamben, 3.

41. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité: 1. La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 181 (my translation).

42. Liliane Latanzio, ed., "De la télé-vérité au reality-show" Special issue, *Dossiers de l'Audiovisuel* 55 (May–June 1994).

43. The highbrow press has never ceased to wonder at this appetite for "the trivial," just as it did in the past for other forms of popular entertainment (television, game shows). See Biltereyst, "Reality TV, Troublesome Pictures and Panics." For example: on July 4, 2007, the highbrow, right-wing Argentinean daily *The Nation* published a photograph on its front page of two thousand people who had queued for hours in cold weather to audition in a provincial selection for the fourth edition of *Big Brother*.

44. See for the UK, Nick Couldry, "Playing for Celebrity: *Big Brother* as Ritual Event," 289. For a "global view," Lochard and Soulez, "La télé-réalité, un débat mondial."

45. A claim that has launched enthusiastic attempts at debunking it by skeptical viewer-detectives.

46. I am aware that there is a speculative side to my argument. Here research can develop in two directions. While traditional audience research (focus group, interviews) is important, analysis of larger cultural contexts for the purpose of

understanding the commonalities between television representations and society at large matters no less.

47. Omri Herzog, *The Swan/The Mirror*, unpublished paper, "Ethics and Media" conference, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, May 10, 2007. It is not known yet if the channel will launch a new season.

48. Quoted in Jacka, "Democracy as Defeat," 185.

49. Larry Gross, "Minorities, Majorities and the Media," in *Media, Ritual and Identity,* ed. James Curran and Tamar Liebes (London: Routledge, 1998), 87–102.