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Big brother: reality TV in the twenty-first century

Book

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Chapter 1: Genesis

Introduction

This chapter discusses the ways that Reality TV represents both a development of television documentary forms, and also a departure from their conventions. The argument that can be made in these terms is based on a model of development that addresses changes in technologies, television institutions, the cultural role of the medium, and the relationships between television and its audiences. From this perspective, Reality TV is a recent form of factual programming emerging from the established mode of television documentary. The historical trajectory that leads to Reality TV has a wider scope than its reference to factual programmes, and suggests that documentary has changed because television has changed. Television documentary emerged during the era of scarcity (Ellis 1999a) in British broadcasting when there was initially one, then two, then three, four and five terrestrial channels, supplemented at the end of the twentieth century by satellite, cable and interactive broadcasting. The function of television as public service that was set in place from the beginnings of the medium in Britain has included the aim to draw together a nation and its constituent cultures, social classes and regions by showing to audiences how other people live. This resulted in the imperative to record the lives of others, but not simply to document places, occupations, social groups and classes but also to analyse their characteristic perceptions of themselves and their

environment, in relation to home, work and leisure, for example. These perceptions, as well as being presented for themselves, would be analyzed and subjected to the professional knowledge and potential intervention of powerful individuals and institutions who might be able to change them and the material circumstances from which they emerged. So documentary could be an important contribution to the public sphere of rational debate and democratic participation by enabling the exchange of information and the possibility of vicarious experience for separated viewers: separated by both place, class, education and political outlook. Documentary therefore had an anthropological and political agenda, and this affected the textual form of documentary programmes for television and their address to the viewer.

In a contemporary multi-channel environment, the purpose of television and of television documentary have changed. There are still residual impulses to use factual television as a means of informing diverse audiences about the ways of life and outlook of people different to themselves. There are still factual programmes that investigate social problems, and propose solutions and explanations that may be taken up by institutions, especially political parties and government agencies. But in the context of a widespread disillusionment with the ability of institutions to make essential improvements in national life, where barely more than half of the population votes in general elections and where continual attempts to address the problems of major institutions such as the National Health Service or the education system are seen to fail repeatedly, the ambition of documentary to connect with these large-scale ideological strategies has become significantly less important.

As well as the fact that individual documentaries have less impact because they are surrounded by many more competing programmes and channels than before, thus splitting their audience, television institutions have a different relationship with their audiences than they did in the era of scarcity. While it has always been the case that broadcasters and programme makers are interested in the reactions of their viewers and in the size of the audiences drawn to their programmes, the role of the audience has become less that of a client and more that of a market. Television channels need to sustain substantial audiences in order to generate advertising revenue, and in the case of the BBC to justify the claim for a compulsory licence fee. Individual television programmes occupy their schedule position by virtue of their success in attracting either an audience of significant size or an audience which is composed of valuable consumers. Since television can be regarded as a buyer's market, where institutions act as the gatekeepers controlling access to the airwaves, programme producers attempt to construct programmes that are attractive to those institutions because they will attract audiences to them rather than their competitor. The attractions of risky activities, controversy, entertainment, excitement and identification have become increasingly significant in comparison to information, argument or specialist knowledge. The criterion of relevance to the supposed audience's interests is expressed in the assumption that factual programmes about other nations and unfamiliar cultures will be less interesting than programmes about ordinary people who are recognizable in the context of the generality of British life. Since audiences are imagined as seekers of entertainment and distraction, programmes are also designed to be relevant to the supposed need for relaxation, diversion and fascination. This historical narrative, then, explains the emergence of

Reality TV as the result of a complex of factors. While this history allows the opportunity to critique the situation it explains, showing how alternative histories may have been possible, it is primarily a descriptive and diagnostic discourse.

The documentary heritage

Many writers (see for instance Corner 1995) have explored the development of Reality TV from the tradition of documentary that assumes social responsibility and adopts a mode of explanation and argument, exemplified by the work of John Grierson. Grierson was one of a team of film directors now referred to as the British Documentary Cinema movement, working in the 1930s, making films for institutions such as the Empire Marketing Board, the G P.O. Film Unit, and the Crown Film Unit. Some of their most significant films included *Song of Ceylon* (1933), *Coalface* (1935), *Housing Problems* (1935) and *Night Mail* (1936). This group were interested in developing the language of cinema, not simply as a means of recording reality in some unmediated way, but to explore how the creative interpretation of subjects drawn from real life could result in an art cinema that would reveal society to itself and provide resources for the democratic improvement of British society. The aim was therefore not simply to expose audiences to fragments of the world around them that they might or might not already know about, but also to involve them in an understanding of industrial mass society so that they could participate in decision-making about it. Britain was regarded as a complex and interdependent organism in which work, family, private life and the organization of labour all contributed to the efficient functioning of the nation. Community and the obstacles to the formation of community were significant in the approach to representing

people and their ordinary lives in the films that the group produced. Because of this agenda to inform and educate, the British Documentary movement's participants were willing to make persuasive films that matched the agenda of the bodies that funded them, whether governmental or private institutions. John Corner (1995: 82) summarizes the tensions that this generated: 'Realist in general philosophy yet also interested in modernist "experiment", ethnographically exploratory yet didactic, democratic yet propagandist, egalitarian yet often condescending, analytic yet often celebratory' are some of the terms that he suggests for understanding the complex aesthetic of the films.

A more recent and more influential heritage for Reality TV has been claimed by noting its connections with the French tradition of cinema verité and the American documentary film makers who developed the mode of direct cinema (Barnfield 2002, Brenton and Cohen 2003, Dovey 2000). These French and American documentary forms are more observational than argumentative, and their aim to produce the impression of intimacy and immediacy resonates with an understanding of television as by nature an intimate and immediate medium. These characteristics are evident in the attempts to capture the real as it unfolds, together with the inevitable lapses in technique, accidents and surprising juxtapositions that such attempts can include. The spontaneity of these American and French documentary traditions suits the characteristic presentation of time in Reality TV as potentially the tedious coverage of minor incidents as they unfold in real time, or the efforts to capture the unexpected and surprising as documentary subjects go about their business. American direct cinema largely did away with analysis and argument, aiming instead to reveal individual and social truths through the camera's witnessing of a situation. Its most prominent practitioners included Richard Leacock and

Robert Drew, Don Pennebaker and Frederick Wiseman. Having been given apparently unmediated evidence, the audience is invited to draw its own conclusions. Since they are necessarily unscripted, direct cinema films use the juxtaposition of editing to energize a sequence of shots into a revelatory and dramatic structure. While the conventions of documentary suggest that the role of the film is to become a document that records actuality, the American direct cinema film makers sought to produce narrative and involvement with their subjects by shaping their films to provide pace, a narrative arc and a sense of development across the period of time that the subject was filmed (Winston 1995: 149-69). The French tradition of cinema verité much more openly admitted the role of the filmmakers in constructing the film as an object and shaping the behaviour of the documentary subject. The ordinary people who they filmed were seen interacting with the filmmakers, being asked questions or interrupted as they spoke, and sometimes filmed as they looked at the rough cuts that had been produced. Whereas the American direct cinema filmmakers attempted to bracket themselves out of the situation they observed, French verité filmmakers saw themselves as participant observers, like anthropologists (and verité's most prominent exponent, Jean Rouch, was himself an anthropologist), taking part in the situation and putting pressure on it and its participants in order to reveal what they saw as a deeper truth.

These two related but very different traditions of factual filmmaking, emerging and having their greatest impact on the documentary tradition in the 1960s and 1970s, exemplify two important components of contemporary Reality TV. The first concerns the subjects of the programmes, who are in general ordinary people, or celebrities who are observed as if they were ordinary, and are either witnessed as if the camera makes no

intervention into their situation (as in American direct cinema), or are put into situations explicitly set up by the filmmaker or the agency of production, and subsequently pressurized, manipulated, or invited to interact with the situation and the production team (as in the French verité tradition). The second key component from these traditions that can be seen at work in Reality TV is the purpose of the programme. Both the French and American traditions emphasize moments of crisis or transformation, seeking to allow the audience to reflect on the forces impacting on individuals and how individuals respond to those forces. They also aim to enable the documentary subject himself or herself to have a space in which to speak about personal transformation.

In British television, this autonomy for the programme's subject developed into the BBC series *Video Nation*, for example, made between 1995 and 2000. Its producers were keen to bring to television the heritage from the 1930s of the Mass Observation project, which collected the comments and personal accounts of a large number of people who kept diaries of their everyday lives and commented on the social and political events of the time. *Video Diaries* continued this interest in ordinary people, and the concept of collecting reports from a wide range of social classes and regions of Britain. But instead of providing a picture of social and political attitudes, it focused on the detail of people's everyday lives, their work and leisure, worries and attitudes. In the last twenty years, in *Video Diaries* and many other programmes featuring ordinary people, the video diary format has been introduced as a component of both conventional documentary (where both the subjects of the programme and also its makers might produce video diary recordings) and also of created Reality TV formats (like *Big Brother* and its diary room). Participants speak privately to camera about themselves, knowing that this private speech

will become public when the programme is broadcast. In contemporary television, the boundaries between private and public, are blurred by the video confessional. Furthermore, the notion of the makeover, and the ideology of self-improvement, are implicit in both American direct cinema and French cinema verité, and are crucial to contemporary Reality TV formats. What people say to the video diary camera is often based in their feelings about themselves, and how these are changing over time as part of a learning experience. While some residue of the aim of the earlier documentary forms to place their projects within a social dimension remains, Reality TV blurs the distinction between private and public, and the relationships between a personal experience that might reveal something about an individual and a more broadly conceived public world involving work, institutions or communities.

The possibilities of production technologies

When television increasingly took on the role of the primary mass broadcasting medium in the 1950s, people associated with the British Documentary Cinema movement and its successors among the film makers who produced propaganda and informational films during the Second World War moved into television production. Developments in recording technology enabled television documentary makers to record sound synchronized with the image, and drew on the achievements of BBC radio's features department in basing programmes around interviews conducted on location and recording the ordinary speech of non-actors. While the shaping of documentary programmes remained the province of directors and production teams distanced from their subject by their class status, expertise and membership of professional broadcasting institutions, the

speech of ordinary people reflecting on their own experience and attitudes became an increasing feature of television factual programming. This notion of the access of ordinary people to the representations of their own lives has become progressively more significant in television documentary, and can be seen in Reality TV as the participants are not always just a resource for the programme maker, but their very presence affects the possibilities for programme construction available to the producing team.

The organization of television programmes into series during the 1950s, with a consistent format, duration, and a regular presenter who might appear on screen rather than being just a disembodied voice, shifted documentary and other forms of factual programme such as current affairs towards increasing recognition of the apparent demands of the audience. The regularity of a format under a consistent title, appearing week after week, with some consistency in its approach to subjects and presentation, allowed for the establishment of programme brands and viewer relationships with them. As a domestic medium viewed in the home, the mode of address to the audience in television factual programming became less formal and more intimate, moving towards a blend of documentary's traditional sobriety with the recognition of audience demands for entertainment. Filming technology contributed to this change and made its characteristic forms possible. When lightweight 16 millimetre cameras became available to the makers of factual television in the 1960s, the possibilities for extended work on location following the activities of ordinary people became greater, and made innovations in documentary possible. Although the recording of actuality was made easier by lightweight equipment, it also gave a measure of creative control to the programme makers on the ground. Documentary could not simply report the real, but intervene in it

as it was being recorded and subsequently shape it through editing. The two most significant forces in this respect were the American Direct Cinema movement and the French cinema verité movement, each of which made use of the greater possibilities for location work that lightweight equipment brought, and also represented important aesthetic experimentation that would affect the expectations of film makers and thus audiences about what television factual programming could be.

A famous exponent of this use of lightweight equipment for location shooting, producing a string of significant programmes in this history of documentary development, is the British programme maker Paul Watson. He made the observational (or 'fly-on-the-wall') documentary series *The Family* for television in 1974, following the lives and relationships of the Wilkins family from Reading. It was regarded as a landmark programme, as was the preceding US series *An American Family*, made in 1972, because of the detail of ordinary speech and interaction traced by witnessing the conversations in the family home at a level of realistic observation previously absent in documentary. The 'bad language' used by the family attracted attention and controversy but added to the claim of the visual style to document interpersonal relationships realistically. The factual form dealt with a working-class family, followed verbal exchanges rather than physical action, and the family was headed by a strong matriarchal figure, Mrs Wilkins. These factors made *The Family* similar to the social realist dramatic fictions that have occupied British television in the form of soap opera (like *Coronation Street*) and drama documentary, as well as factual television's emphasis on the public representation of the private lives of the working-class. In 1992, Watson made *Sylvania Waters*, named after the well-to-do Sidney suburb in which it was set. As in the case of

The Family, the dominant figure was the middle-aged matriarch of the household, Noelene Donaher, a divorced woman living with her new partner. The daily routines of family life were dominated (as a result of the editorial selection of moments by Watson) by conflict between its members, often caused by their materialistic ambitions. The series was controversial both in Britain and when shown in Australia, mainly because it seemed to expose the day-to-day racism and sexism of apparently ordinary people. Rather than presenting its subjects as victims in need of the kinds of public policy improvement that might be taken on by middle-class professionals and institutions, Watson seemed simply to document everyday life. By suspending the functions of documentary to make an argument on behalf of an apparently excluded or powerless group, these documentary series offered both the fascination of detail and also the opportunity to stigmatize or make fun of their subjects. And very significantly for the labelling of these programmes as docusoap, both *The Family* and *Sylvania Waters* were serials, with each week's episode containing an opening update on the story so far, and continuing the real-life storylines across a run of programmes.

New possibilities for this kind of intimate tracking of ordinary life became possible in the 1990s. Lightweight digital video cameras and high-capacity editing suites for assembling programmes using computer software coincided with what John Ellis (2005) has described as a crisis of public confidence in the inherited conventions of television documentary. In the 1995 to 1997 period lightweight digital video cameras and high-speed digital editing suites became available. The first digital video cameras were introduced by Sony as a consumer format, rather than a professional one. But when equipped with professional standard microphones, these cameras could produce footage

suitable for television, at much higher visual quality than analogue video. As the capacity of Avid editing suites increased, in the same period it became possible to load the digital footage from these cameras into computer memory, and assemble programmes with software that could handle sufficient data to edit a one-hour episode. Television documentary producers were thus able to make the cuts in their films relatively quickly, and have greater flexibility in manipulating the layers of sound that would accompany the image. The recording of the everyday, using natural light and recording synchronized sound, became much cheaper and more convenient, and the resulting footage could be manipulated quickly to produce complete programmes.

At the end of the 1990s, *Big Brother* arrived on television screens, first in Holland and subsequently in other countries around the world (see Chapter 2). Technologically, it combined the digital production system of cameras producing easily-manipulable images with the use of radio microphones attached to the contestants' clothing, and used the high-speed high-capacity editing software that had become the industry standard. It became possible to edit footage very quickly for evening compilation programmes showing the highlights of a day's events in the *Big Brother* house. In addition, the workflow from raw images to finished programmes was becoming increasingly based on all-digital technology that made it easier to broadcast over the Internet as well as by conventional television transmitters. Almost-live streaming of images and sound could be done along the phone lines that carry broadband data to personal computers, as well as in the form of digital broadcast signals that can be received by owners of interactive television sets. *Big Brother* and other specially devised Reality TV formats require complete environments to be built in which the contestants will be sequestered for the

duration of the programme, and where the camera and sound crews, and the production staff working on direction, editing and planning can be accommodated in the same large facility. In this respect, they are like complete mini television studios where production and action are set up to suit each other. But the same kinds of portable radio microphones and digital cameras can also be used on location to make Reality TV programmes that follow action in a location that has not been designed by the production team. In *Airport*, *Wife Swap* or *How Clean is Your House*, large amounts of tape footage and recorded sound can be easily gathered in locations with cramped conditions and low available light, then quickly edited and shaped into complete programmes.

Television institutions

BBC Producers Guidelines (2003) include this general principle which is an important component of the tradition of Public Service Broadcasting: 'The BBC has a responsibility to serve all sections of society in the United Kingdom. Its domestic services should aim to reflect and represent the composition of the nation.' Reality TV programmes claim to reveal insights into human behaviour in general, and attitudes among specific groups linked by age, sex or workplace location, for instance. This claim of representativeness is enhanced by the use of newly developed techniques of live broadcasting and viewer interaction, as mentioned above. *Big Brother*, for example, uses the medium's capacity to relay events live or almost live, and this has been one of the distinctive attractions of the medium since its invention. Television as a medium has always placed great emphasis on the moment of the now, partly because live broadcasting has been so significant throughout its development. British writers in the 1930s who predicted the future of

television emphasised its ability to relay events (like sporting events, Royal events, and General Elections) live across the country, thus keeping people in touch with what happened beyond their immediate experience and neighbourhood. It was felt that television would not compete with cinema as entertainment because of the placement of the television set in the home and the consequent lack of a sense of occasion, and would therefore focus on information. The legacy of these predictions is the continuing preoccupation with kinds of realism in television (see Chapter 3), a relentless commitment to what is new (and the forgetting of television's own past), and sensitivity about allowing disturbing or controversial programmes to intrude into the home. Reality TV develops these factors through its shooting of domestic spaces (like the houses of *Wife Swap*) or creation of spaces that place obstacles in the way of the formation of domesticity (like *Survivor*'s desert island). Some Reality TV programmes are live, and others are based on the recorded observation of ordinary lived time. The institutional role of factual television, especially documentary and its Reality TV variants, both correspond to this emphasis on representativeness and the interest in the present moment, but also raise problems in relation to it.

By 1999, public and press confidence in the veracity of documentary was challenged by a series of controversies about 'faked' footage and manipulation in factual programmes (Ellis 2005). The emergent television form deriving from both documentary conventions and drama, the docusoap, provided a ready way out of this crisis for television institutions. Docusoaps never aspired to the same sober respect for actuality as conventional documentary, and were less subject to criticism for that reason. The lessening ability of documentary makers to gain access to locations like workplaces,

because once there they might cause trouble for the hotels, hospitals or other institutions they featured, meant that conventional documentary was becoming more difficult to make. If situations were constructed by the programme maker, these problems of access were much less significant. The arrival of *Big Brother* in Britain from 2000, in which the artifice of the format is central to its structure and appeal, added another impetus for factual programming to rely on material under the control of the programme maker, rather than subject to the constraints of found subjects or locations. But before *Big Brother*, it was the BBC docusoap *Driving School*, originally produced under the aegis of the BBC's Education department, that brought the format to significant public attention. The series was planned to focus on the driving instructors rather than their pupils, but in the process of making the programme, the pupils were more interesting and the emphasis of the programme changed. Docusoaps like *Driving School* 'offered new subjects, new relationships with those subjects, a new visual system (both framing and editing), new forms of narrative construction and a novel place in the schedules. It is not surprising, then, that the nature of factual television was suddenly thrown into question, especially as it happened alongside other developments like the enfranchisement of everyday argument and opinionated speech in daytime talk shows' (Ellis 2005: 346). Programme makers accustomed to working in inherited documentary forms had good reasons to shift their activity towards the more easily-produced, more easily-defended and more audience-pleasing form of the docusoap. For example, Chris Terrill, maker of the BBC docusoap *The Cruise*, had first made observational documentary such as the BBC series *HMS Brilliant* (1995), but achieved remarkable success as *The Cruise* audience rose to a peak of 11 million, approaching the maximum audience for *Driving School* of 12.5 million.

The fact that Reality TV in its docusoap form, with its emphasis on personal stories and relaxed attitude to documentary's claim of veracity, seems to be based around entertainment rather than the sobriety of documentary is not in itself a reason to devalue it as a television form. Its blending and blurring of genres, and its dramatisation of the real, can be just as effective for the working through of the stakes of social life and its strictures as the sobriety of conventional documentary. What is different, and this is a significant rider to that point, is Reality TV's lack of acknowledgement of itself as social commentary except in the most basic ways. Once the docusoap had proven its ability to gather very large audiences throughout the 1990s, broadcasters developed a bandwaggon mentality that led to the BBC, for example, putting twelve docusoap formats into production by 1999. The ethos of early documentary film makers such as John Grierson in the 1930s was grounded in an attempt to enlighten the audience about their society, aiming to produce change driven forward by the state after the public ventilation of knowledge that pointed to a need for social betterment. The historicising comparison between this documentary tradition and its Reality TV successors enables several derogatory evaluations of the more recent formats to be made. *I'm A Celebrity*, *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *Fear Factor*, *Fame Academy* and *Temptation Island* are premised on a controlled environment, which is rendered free of poverty or other social determinants, and which therefore sidesteps the agenda that Grierson set for British documentary.

However, this argument neglects the evolution of genres and the historic lineage it proposes is only partially accurate. Reality TV formats may have drawn on some of the generic components of documentary, but they occupy a schedule position and audience address associated with entertainment more than documentary. So it is invidious to

compare them with something to which they are related but from which they are distinct. In some of their manifestations, Reality TV shows stage elaborate stunts, are presented by established television personalities, and have much larger budgets than documentary programmes. The schedule positions they occupy have been in many cases vacated by entertainment and variety formats which are perceived by the industry and by audiences as dated and tired. Documentary films such as Five's *9.11: The Tale of Two Towers*, and the BBC2 series of speculative documentary dramatizations *If...* retain the engagement with social issues and critique of state policy in the Griersonian tradition. Multi-channel television, including genre-specific satellite and digital channels have given greater opportunity for traditional documentary to be screened, though it tends to appear at later times in the evening schedule and on minority channels such as the History Channel, BBC2 or Channel 4. The prime-time slots in the 8.00 pm to 10.00 pm period on terrestrial television are more likely to be filled by docusoaps, gamedocs or Reality TV programmes about ordinary people placed in contrived situations.

The changes in the ecology of television in Britain place pressure on major television institutions to outsource production of a significant proportion of their programmes to independent producers, and the small crews, lightweight and relatively cheap equipment, and location shooting of many Reality TV programmes makes them an attractive programme type to buy in rather than produce in-house. For example, the BBC reduced its staff by 7,000 between 1986 and 1990, and since the 1980s the use of temporary contracts and the outsourcing of production to independent producers, and the introduction of an internal market at the BBC shifted decision-making powers from programme makers to schedulers and commissioners and made the career paths of

programme-makers much more unstable. The BBC sold off many of its programme production and technical facilities in the early 1990s, and increased the proportion of programmes commissioned from independent producers. It increasingly resembles Channel 4 as a commissioning rather than programme-making organisation. The setting up in 1982 of Channel 4, was the result of a combination of inherited and traditional views of broadcasting with the new imperatives of the 1979 Conservative government and its allies. From the past came a commitment to public service, to educational and cultural programmes, and to programmes for minority audiences. But Conservative policies in the 1980s attempted to introduce the principles of the market into all aspects of British life. So Channel 4 bought programmes from independent programme-makers who were forced to compete with each other for commissions, and Channel 4 itself made no significant investment in production facilities or training. The channel's funding derived from advertising revenue through a levy on the ITV companies which sold advertising time on Channel 4 in their regions, and was therefore reliant on the buoyancy of the British economy. The Broadcasting Act of 1980 which established Channel 4 required it to 'encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes', and to provide 'a distinctive service'. Channel 4 introduced significant changes to several programme forms, as well as opening up the independent production sector in Britain. It was empowered in 1993 to sell its own advertising slots, freeing it from ITV but encouraging it to compete with other channels more fiercely for audiences of sizes and types which are attractive to advertisers. The channel was intended to have a social responsibility, providing an outlet for non-mainstream programmes and airing unconventional ideas, thus extending the public service remit of television in Britain

since its inception. This mix of a commitment to innovation and a dependence on attracting valuable audiences set the stage for Channel 4's acquisition of the *Big Brother* format, which promised to fulfil each of these two imperatives.

Risking Reality TV

Historically, the fact that Reality TV formats make economic or institutional sense for the channels that commission them or buy them in from outside does not explain their success as a television form, nor which examples of Reality TV will be perceived as successful. For instance, *Big Brother* was a risky proposition in its early days, because no directly equivalent programme had been made. It was a huge risk for Channel 4 to strip *Big Brother* across the week in one-hour prime-time slots before they knew whether British audiences would like it. For a programme like *Big Brother* which is acquired as a format from elsewhere, and made at great expense by its British purchaser, the management of financial risk is crucial and is carefully specified in the contracts that govern the transaction. The buyer of the format is responsible for capital costs (like building the *Big Brother* house) and production costs, and is thus putting considerable money on the line, especially in a relatively expensive case like *Big Brother* where considerable resources of equipment, settings and personnel are involved. On the other hand, the buyer of the format gets the income from the merchandising, tie-ins, charges for telephone voting, and advertising slots sold during the broadcast. The seller of the format does very well because they do not have any of the on the ground costs of making the programme, and are in effect selling the future profitability of an idea. In this respect it is important for format sellers to build up a brand reputation for themselves that can raise

the prices they charge on the basis of their success with certain kinds of programme. In the Reality TV market, companies such as Endemol (devisers of *Big Brother*) and RDF Media (makers of *Wife Swap*) are established brands and the risk of buying a new format is to some extent offset by the track record of its deviser.

For the creators of a Reality TV format, there is a significant risk that it will be imitated by a competing business, and of course the presence of very similar programmes in the schedules that are passed off as different might dilute audience interest in the original and threaten the programme brand that format devisers have invested in creating. *Survivor* was the first Reality TV format to be a must-see prime-time programme, beginning in the United States. After the success of *Big Brother* in Europe, the owners of the *Survivor* format initiated a legal case against Endemol, arguing that it infringed the *Survivor* format. While ideas cannot be placed under copyright, formats are regarded as property and can be owned and therefore their ownership can be legally defended. The key components of the *Survivor* and *Big Brother* formats are certainly similar. They consist of a group of contestants who are strangers to each other and drawn from among the ordinary public. The series takes the form of a game or competition in which there is a winner and a prize. Periodically during the run of the series trials and challenges are set for the contestants, who are rewarded or penalized accordingly. Continuous 24-hour observation of the contestants is undertaken, and episodes consist of edited selections from that material. The programme is shot in a restricted location that the contestants are unable to leave and into which outsiders cannot penetrate. The series are time limited, and the aim of the contestants is to win by surviving the complete run of the series.

A similar situation occurred over the allegedly derivative premise of *I'm a Celebrity*. In the American court case brought by the CBS network against its competitor ABC, CBS claimed that *I'm a Celebrity* infringed the copyright of *Survivor* and sought an injunction to stop ABC screening the US version of *I'm a Celebrity* in February 2003. However, ABC successfully argued that *I'm a Celebrity* was original. The court battle was significant because ABC had spent about $15 million on *I'm a Celebrity* and had made provision for 17 hours of programming in its schedule (Lamont 2003). Copyright law does not explicitly protect a format itself, but instead there is copyright in the work of the people who devised it. Charlie Parsons, the owner of the rights to *Survivor*, said in court that he had begun work on the programme in 1992, pitched it unsuccessfully to ABC in 1994, and sold the programme to CBS subsequently. Expert witnesses watched the programme and identified similarities between *I'm a Celebrity* and *Survivor*, such as the challenges in which contestants ate live worms. However, James Allen, one of the people behind *I'm a Celebrity* at Granada television claimed he thought of the idea for the programme in 1996 after watching a documentary where Joanna Lumley was stranded on a desert island for nine days. These disputes are clearly pursued more vigorously when large amounts of investment are at stake and where major corporations are involved. But expensive formats like *Big Brother* or *Survivor* are not the only way of making Reality TV. The time from pitching an idea to a commissioning producer to shooting a Reality TV programme can be very short. It could be possible to make this period as short as about five weeks, since a programme about householders competing over their interior decorating, for example, could use volunteers with existing houses, a small crew of only a handful of people, no script, no stars, and no capital costs. This

makes some kinds of Reality TV programming a very useful way of responding to sudden ups and downs in television markets, audience interests or competition environments, and much easier to plan than drama or another scripted format.

For the producers of the more elaborate and costly Reality TV programmes, the opportunities to make money not only arise from fees paid by broadcasters to the production companies. Supplementary services add value to the programme in economic terms, through phone lines, spin-off products, tie-in books and DVDs, mobile phone text updates, and sponsorship of programmes. One of the advantages of an eleborate competition format like *Pop Idol* is that a whole range of branded products can be created, all of which are owned and controlled by the television institution. *Pop Idol* is a programme that can attract audiences and also make money through spin-offs and licensing agreements to third-party companies, who might create a range of chocolate bars, soft drinks, tee shirts and other products. The merchandise associated with the first series of *Pop Idol* included predictable products such as a tee shirts, book, video and a cover for a mobile phone. The second series had a much larger range of branded products including a song book, a game for the Playstation 2, an interactive recording studio and a perfume. Interactive services included voting by text message and downloads of songs from the programme. In Britain, retail sales generated by licensed products of all kinds was worth £3 billion in 2002, and across the world the licensing business as a whole generated £110 billion (Bulkley 2003). In the case of *Big Brother*, nearly 30 percent of the revenue to Endemol comes from the merchandising and licensing of branded products associated with the programme.

The *Pop Idol* format is owned by the production company Fremantle, which had sold it to 20 countries by 2003. Fremantle predicted that up to half of the company's total revenue would derive from income from licenses and merchandising by 2006. The entry of merchandising and licensing into the television business, as opposed to Hollywood films, for example, was marked in 1998 with *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, when revenue from merchandise exceeded the value of sales of the programme format itself. The Millionaire board game sold one million units in its first two years, and the personal computer version of the game sold the same number in only seven weeks, becoming the biggest selling game in Britain. *Pop Idol* has the obvious attraction of a core audience of 16 to 34 year-old men and women, who comprised 72 percent of the 14 million viewers of the final programme in the first series. The programme's sponsor, the food company Nestlé, was able not only to feature its name at the opening and closing of the programme and of its individual segments, but also created animated chocolate characters representing pop singers performing songs in the advertising breaks. Viewers could vote for their favourite chocolate pop idol, merging the audience's relationship with the sponsor's products into the format of the programme as a whole. Although it is not yet the case that television programmes have budgets based on the future income expected from merchandising and licensing, as is the case in the film industry, this development may happen in the near future as Reality TV formats pose the programme as a loss leader whose profitability depends on the brand extensions and spinoffs it may generate. In the case of *Pop Idol*, the very structure of the competition ensures that it will produce a person-commodity of one or more pop stars who has at least a partly-guaranteed market appeal and the prospect of getting to number one in the charts and achieving major record

sales. However, there is a significant risk of consumer exhaustion with such a blanket product range, so when one of these series becomes a hit the companies rush into producing the next one, sometimes straight after or just a few months later, so the ball can be kept rolling for as long as the series has a prospect of being profitable. That is why there are so many quickly-appearing sequels like the various series of *Pop Idol* and *American Idol*, for example, because the format can only maintain momentum for a limited time. New variations on the Reality competition format have to be created to refresh the market.

In the more costly staged Reality TV series, production risk is ever-present during shooting because of the multitude of things that can go wrong. The scale of productions such as *I'm A Celebrity…Get Me Out of Here*, first shown on ITV in 2002, 'involve a level of ambition and scale more at home in the movies than television', according to the executive producer of the fourth series, Alexander Gardiner (2004). The crew of *I'm A Celebrity* amounted to about 400 people, including the transport, catering and security teams that supported the people behind and in front of the cameras. The on-site edit suites worked around the clock, and there were about 40 preview screens showing the output of the various cameras that almost continuously recorded the behaviour of the contestants. An art department was needed, responsible, among other things, for the bushtucker trials where contestants were enclosed in tanks of cockroaches, for example. The hosts, Ant and Dec, had a big responsibility for linking and presenting the programme, and this extended not only to the conventional smoothness of professional programme presentation but also to humorously deflating any problems caused by technical errors or unexpected contestant behaviour. This unexpectedness is crucial to the

planning of Reality TV programmes and also to their appeal, since the continual possibility of their collapse due to some kind of catastrophe is always potentially present in the minds of their viewers. Contestants on the second series of *I'm A Celebrity*, led by the chef Antony Worrall Thompson, rebelled against the production team because of late and insufficient food. With eight episodes to go, they threatened to leave all together as a group, which would stop the series. They confronted the producers on camera and were rewarded by being given steak. In another example of this risk that Reality TV formats involve, the Irish series *Cabin Fever* involved participants sailing a boat around Ireland, and placed amateurs together on the boat sailing into a storm, putting them in great danger. The boat later ran aground and broke up, and the contestant-crew had to be rescued by helicopter.

For the fourth series of *I'm a Celebrity*, Alexander Gardiner (2004) reported that the health and safety team on the series had to deal with a surge in the mosquito population that made simple preventives like citronella candles ineffective. The institutional requirement to protect the celebrity contestants (known as the 'talent') and follow regulations meant that different and more complex problems occurred than would be the case for holidaymakers, trekkers or other non-professional people going into the series' jungle setting. Members of the production team had been breeding rats to take part in some of the challenges the contestants would face, but their population got out of control and the males had to be separated from the females. Like a scientific experiment gone wild, the breeding of the animals for this purpose needed to managed and controlled just like the management of the contestants for the programme and the management of the crew. In each of these anecdotes, the governing narrative form is one of a conflict

between control and excess. There were too many mosquitoes, too many rats, and an overall impression that the risks and problems in producing the series were parallel and equivalent to the challenges that drew audiences to want to watch the series.

Reality TV as the end of documentary history

Television institutions, programme makers, audiences and commentators arrived at this moment of interest in Reality TV out of a past comprising other moments and different kinds of television. This raises the question of Reality TV's place in television history. From American programmes based on footage from the emergency services, the term Reality TV then referred to docusoap as a more widely-used and public term for serial programmes about ordinary people that gained large audiences throughout the 1990s. Reality TV has gradually emerged as a designation that describes programmes characterized by a controlled environment, lacking documentary's heritage of interest in social action. It is closer to entertainment, and increasingly replaces entertainment in the schedules. Before the advent of Reality TV as a significant programme type in its currently accepted form, John Corner (1996: 55) noted that: 'It remains to be seen what further modifications will, or can, be made to the vérité approach as documentary attempts, within an increasingly competitive context, to renovate itself both as "good viewing" and as "socially significant television"'. The question of whether documentary even had the possibility to renovate itself opens up the issue of whether documentary was playing a dangerous game with its own death, putting some kind of end to its distinguished twentieth-century history.

The advent of Reality TV has been an occasion for commentators to lament the death or terminal illness of several television forms and traditions. These include the death of variety, where in the past a programme form comprising a mix of performances from comedians, singers, magicians and dancers and anchored by a celebrity such as Cilla Black or Bruce Forsyth would form the core of an evening schedule. The argument here is that Reality TV supplants light entertainment programmes in prime-time schedules and fills those prime-time slots with light factual programmes. Reality TV has also been claimed to signal the death of documentary, and killing off a great tradition of observational and socially concerned programme-making. The arguments about Reality TV as the end of documentary are part of a larger postmodernist argument that Western society is in a condition in which history ceases to move forward in a progressive way (Bignell 2000b), with the consequent impossibility of improvement of social conditions by the rational means which the documentary tradition has espoused. As in Fredric Jameson's (1984) conception of postmodernity, the present is supposedly an epoch in which representations, forms and aesthetic codes from the past are perpetually reworked, with their distinctiveness and cultural contributions blunted. For factual television, this would mean that the Reality TV of the present absorbs the programme formats of the past and that documentary's discourses of social and historical analysis are relativized and disempowered, with the consequent loss of an authoritative means for television to contribute to social betterment.

The theoretical discourse about the present as an end of history is most well-known from Jameson's influential essay 'Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism' (1984: 53), which begins with the assertion that the late twentieth century was

characterised by ‘an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that’. In this formulation of the end of history, contemporary culture has ceased to innovate or move forward. An especially conservative version of the end of history thesis was articulated by Francis Fukuyama (1989). His 1989 essay and his subsequent book argued that events were still occurring, ‘but History, that is, history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process’ has concluded (1992: xii). Fukuyama argued that ideological conflict is now outdated, and the idealisation of a different model of social organisation than consumer capitalism is impossible. Consumer capitalism is the model toward which all societies aspire, he argued, because capitalism promises the attainment of material desires, and utopia can be practically attained through the accumulation of commodities. But the resulting culture of consumption, although it offers the attainment of material desires, has its own inherent dangers. The ‘Last Men’ which it produces are in danger of becoming secure, self-regarding, and passive, with little incentive for productive effort. So the end of history threatens to be an end of masculinity, and ‘Last Men’ become feminised both by lack (lack of masculine productiveness) and by their compensatory activities (shopping, gazing, and other forms of consumer behaviour). This seems to amount to a feminisation of society, in the sense that shopping, consuming, and passivity or non-productivity are practices and identities conventionally attributed to women. The positive feature of this situation is the possibility of play with and in identity, measured against what are regarded as former monolithic identities (like stereotypes of masculinity). In watching Reality TV, for example, with its apparent lack of a rational project of social betterment and mastery over a reality that can be understood

and mediated by documentary conventions, audiences are getting pleasures previously understood as feminine. The implication is that constructions of masculinity or femininity as ways of characterising television forms and the pleasures of television audiences may therefore become less fixed. The case study which follows analyses *Wife Swap*, which is concerned directly with gender roles as its subject. But furthermore, the programme also offers pleasures of judgement that might be assimilated into a masculine discourse of rational evaluation, together with a focus on appearance, style and emotional dynamics that conforms to conventional definitions of the feminine. *Wife Swap* is a suitable location to consider whether Reality TV might enact the end of (masculine) documentary at the same time as it participates in the transformation of documentary into (feminine) lifestyle programming.

The function of arguing that Reality TV has put an end to something that came before it is to establish a sense of historical progression and to stabilise the thing that Reality TV is being contrasted with. As part of the same process, contrasting Reality TV to the tradition that goes before also has the function of drawing boundaries or giving a focus to the sense of what Reality TV itself is. So the creation of a history in which Reality TV sits is also the creation of an identity for Reality TV. One reason for writing this book was to respond to the assumption that Reality TV matters as a distinctively new twist in programme-making, and that the emergence of this new phenomenon needs academic attention. However, on the other hand, Reality TV can also be seen as a probably short-lived digression from a larger tradition, perhaps of documentary or factual television. From that point of view, Reality TV is not something distinctively different, but an elaboration on something that remains essentially the same, and that has a

persistence through time into a future beyond the current moment. There are persuasive arguments on each side of this question, namely that Reality TV is both new and also that it marks a continuity with earlier conventions and traditions, particularly in factual television. If television history is understood as this kind of evolving process, it becomes possible to define the present in distinction and contrast to the past. The moments that have gone before become apparently stable objects for discussion against which the present can be contrasted, and the present also starts to look like a stable object. Historicization establishes a past which enables the production of a present as a distinct development from or contrast to it. However, this means that the past is defined in terms of the present, and the present in terms of the past. Each of them is dependent on the other, but when closely considering anything in historical terms it does not emerge as the stable entity it might appear. As this chapter shows, Reality TV is not an entity, but a rather loose and distinctly debatable collection of possible convergences. This line of argument matches the point made by John Corner (1996: 55) that Reality TV has 'staple and converging elements' or 'ingredients' that have been mixed up into 'a new and eclectic symbolic economy, where the very assumptions carried by the idea of a "mixed form" might quickly come to seem naively inappropriate.' The case study that follows analyses an example of this kind of convergence, and leads to the chapter's conclusion.

Case Study: *Wife Swap*

Whereas the first phase of Reality TV used found footage provided by the emergency services or by camera operators following policemen, ambulance drivers or firemen, more recent programmes have shifted their focus from the observation of action in public

space and towards an interior and private dramatic world. This corresponds to the increased significance of home decor programmes, programmes about property and gardening, and makeovers of individuals' dress, makeup or personal fitness (Piper 2004). The combination of a focus on the family, and especially central women in it, with questions of class and lifestyle that formed the foundation for comparisons of participants who viewers could find both fascinating and repellent, was the basis of *Wife Swap*, first shown in the UK in 2003. In contrast to earlier observational documentary programmes such as Paul Watson's *The Family* or *Sylvania Waters*, *Wife Swap* added a competition structure where one wife was transplanted from her own family to one with very different cultural and class expectations, to see whether she would be able to change her new family or would be remodelled by it herself. The wives exchanged places for two weeks, and attempted to lay down rules for their new family in the second week, after living according to the expectations of the new family in the first week. Editing was crucial to the format, since each one hour programme had to condense the results of observation of two families for two weeks, as well as brief introductory information about the participants and a concluding segment in which each family (but primarily the wives) could confront and comment on each other. Across the episodes, it was obvious that the women carried out the vast majority of domestic work, and that different families lived by a strongly contrasting roles of schedule and hygiene. While a conventional documentary treatment might use this material as the basis for arguments about gender roles in contemporary Britain, and about the effects of differences of income, class status and educational expectations on private life, *Wife Swap* focused its interest on individuals, and the power struggles between the transplanted wives and their unfamiliar

family environments. In this way, the strength of character of the wives and the families, and the competitiveness involved in attempts to change other people by persuasion, negotiation or tantrums took the place of analysis of the politics of either public or private space. While the programme had value in ventilating the surprisingly great differences between ways of living in contemporary British family life, it withdrew from evaluating or commenting on these differences, appearing simply to present them as personal challenges.

Wife Swap was made by the independent production company RDF. Its director of programmes, Stephen Lambert, was trained as a documentary producer at BBC and made the critically-acclaimed documentary series *Modern Times* for BBC2. RDF is the second largest independent production company in the UK, with an annual turnover of £53 million. The genesis of the series was at a creative meeting at RDF's headquarters, as Lambert explained: 'We were looking at an article in the *Daily Mail* about how a nurse on £15,000 lived, compared with a barrister on £200,000. What about them swapping lives, then what about a wife swap?' (Brown 2004a: 10). Lambert rejected the criticisms from within and outside the television industry that Reality TV 'dumbs down' society, and also the view expressed by Paul Watson that his closely observed documentaries presented actuality whereas contemporary Reality TV is artificial. Lambert argued that there were good and bad examples of all genres, including Reality TV: 'As a genre, reality television is one way of telling us stories about human nature and in many ways it is more honest than observational documentary'. His evidence for this view was that Reality TV does not pretend that it is observational, and thus comes clean about its manipulation, whereas observational documentary does not: 'look at how people's nature

is revealed because of the situation we've put them in'. He drew attention to the pleasures of Reality TV formats for audiences because of their basis in a narrative structure that makes satisfying viewing, in contrast to the less obviously narrativized observational documentary form. Referring to RDF's *Faking It* and *Wife Swap*, he argued that these 'are formats that give you those narrative structures, but there's still an enormous variety and unpredictability about what will happen in them'.

Episodes of *Wife Swap* usually set up the conventional domestic routine of each household, then follow the difficulties encountered as each woman deals with the differences between her expected routines and those of the partner family. As tensions and crises build up across the period of filming, an established pattern of paralleling segments shot in each house builds towards the return of the women to their original homes and discussions among the members of each household about what they have loved and hated, learned or repudiated from their experience. As Helen Piper (2004) has shown, much emphasis is placed on the details of the mise en scene in each house, as revealing evidence of the class and cultural expectations of the participants. The kinds of furnishing, level of cleanliness and tidiness, and the repertoire of items kept in the fridge and in kitchen cupboards become key signs of definition for the two households and shorthand ways for the programme producers to indicate potential contrasts and differences between them. Having established this visual evidence of what each household is like, the dialogue between the new entrant into the household and its existing inhabitants focuses on what the household norms might be, according to the explanations that each person gives. There are many opportunities for statements to the

camera, or statements made by one participant to another, to be confirmed or undercut by the evidence that the visual representation of the house provides.

The narrative pace of *Wife Swap* can vary extremely, notably from the very short montage of shots introducing the participants and their houses at the beginning, to the often lengthy conversations, usually in the kitchen, between the newly arrived woman and her new family. Occasionally music cues are used to sharpen a dramatic incident, but both sound and voiceover more usually allow action to speak for itself or simply frame an incident. This places the opportunity to identify with the participants and to judge them squarely with the audience. Since the programme has identified the houses and the people both through what they say and how they look, social codes of behaviour and class and cultural codes of homemaking are made readily available for the audience to use as its criteria. As Piper (2004: 281) points out: 'The text incorporates a tacit invitation for the audience to judge, not what is necessarily best for the participants, but the degree to which their relationship measures up to a societal ideal, and *ergo* it presumes society's right to know.' Nevertheless, the degree of detail presented even in a single episode about the attitudes and lives of the different families makes it difficult to establish preferred ideological standards for individuals or families. Although *Wife Swap* assumes the possibility and even the desirability of television's intervention into the home and the family, Piper shows that 'the text collapses together ethical choices (the division of roles, childcare) with matters of taste and consumer preference' (2004: 281), so that an easy identification of a norm becomes impossible. So *Wife Swap* offers a concrete example of a format devised by an independent production company, which combines an observational style with highly controlled and structured episode form. It does not make

an argument about its subject, though it does invite its audience to evaluate its participants and might offer resources for comparing the viewer's gendered and familial roles with those on the screen. It draws on video diary form, a kind of competition, and an emphasis on lifestyle and consumer choices about food and décor, for example. In many ways, *Wife Swap* instantiates the conjunction of historic traditions of television and the blurring of boundaries between genres, gender roles and modes of address to the audience that this chapter has considered.

Conclusion

Placing Reality TV in a historical narrative that emphasises its divergence from documentary leads to the conclusion that it threatens a loss of the seductive mastery over the matter of reality that the documentary tradition posed, through documentary's relationships between programme makers as subjects of knowledge and the objects of knowledge that featured in their programmes. In terms of the internal structure of recent Reality TV texts, audiences are not offered a viewing position that moves progressively towards the resolution of an explicitly posed social problem, and programmes are not structured by the multiplication of arguments and a process of investigation which invites both the programme's investigative look and audience into an adventure of understanding. This tension between documentary's claim of mastery and the apparent incoherence of Reality TV as a television form that does not take on the role of a social agent of change can be read as a destabilisation of documentary's masculine discourse. The anxiety about Reality TV as putting an end to documentary includes the assertion that contemporary television inhabits a perpetual state of being at the end, without the

revelation or judgement about the world that documentary is seen to have involved, and therefore without hope for the fixing of meaning. This argument for an apocalyptic end of television history is dependent on comparing Reality TV to documentary's past but differentiates Reality TV from that past and makes it seem like a separate development. And yet, because Reality TV continues to focus on the moment of the present and on recognizably actual people, places and events, sometimes through live or nearly-live transmission, it is also relentlessly in the here-and-now. Unlike earlier kinds of documentary, Reality TV is not a form that attempts to mould the future by intervening explicitly in the world of its viewers. In these respects, Reality TV seems to float free of history, existing in a continuous present, and thus looks to its critics like an irresponsible television form. However, these value judgements can only operate on the basis of the comparative and developmental narratives that this chapter has explored. The remaining chapters in this book focus on different ways of conceptualising Reality TV, in order to argue that it should instead be understood as a nodal point or conjunction of the temporally shifting traditions in television production, perceived audience demands, and in critical discourse. The argument developed in subsequent chapters is that Reality TV is a space where influences and needs converge and diverge, producing an understanding of Reality TV as dynamic and contingent.

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