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## PLAYING FOR CELEBRITY: *BIG BROTHER* AS RITUAL EVENT

NICK COULDRY

Although *Big Brother* in the UK is now two series old, with a third series planned for 2002, there is a special reason for concentrating, as I do here, on the first *Big Brother* series broadcast in the UK by Channel Four (July-September, 2000, hereafter 'BBUK1'). I want to think about *Big Brother* not as production or text, but as event stretched across multiple sites, an 'instant condensation' (Maffesoli, 1993: xv) of participation which was also an insistent representation of participation, in short, a media event. Since media events depend for their intensity in part on our sense of their uniqueness, they are subject to the law of diminishing returns; it is therefore the first of any *Big Brother* series that is the obvious place to focus the analysis.

To analyse media events, we need a broader theoretical framework. Once we accept, with Raymond Williams (1975: 9), that part of television's power is to provide us with 'images of what living is now like', then we must see television as the focus of conflicts over what images of the social world come to seem self-evident (cf Bourdieu, 1990), as the site, in other words, of a massive concentration of symbolic power with all the ritual dimensions that flow from that. Now, more than two decades after Williams wrote, when a significant sector of media production (not only television, but also the Web) is devoted exclusively to the display of 'ordinary' reality, such a ritual-based analysis is all the more urgent. Here, in schematic form, I want to explore the potential of that approach.

The point is not to interpret BBUK1 as text and from there draw conclusions about British society (it is a fallacy to take texts for slices of social action). The aim is to explore how BBUK1, as event, made sense from the perspective of certain theories of the media's ritual dimensions, including my own (Couldry, 2000a and forthcoming, 2002). BBUK1 is simply one test of whether, and how far, such theories are useful.

### *Brief Theoretical Background*

In their pioneering study of mediated public events, Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) argued that only by drawing on the wider field of anthropological theory could media analysis deal adequately with processes as complex as the broadcasting of President Kennedy's funeral in 1963. In such cases, an event that was already of major public significance was transformed in certain analysable ways by being mediated. It was amplified, retextualised, transposed onto other dimensions where its significance could be debated or contested. In short, as Dayan and Katz memorably put it, television 'deepens the play' (1992: 186), where 'play', following Victor Turner, has the serious sense of a process, framed apart from the normal flow of everyday life, in which society can reflect upon itself.

Serious play is, in one respect, the successor to, not an example of, rituals based in organised religion (Turner 1992: 124), but in a broader sense such play – and the media events that focus it – still constitutes ritual, but in another register.<sup>1</sup> It contributes, as Roger Silverstone had already argued (1981, 1988), drawing on Douglas (1984: 63-64), to the ritual frame through which society's members address the central meanings and values that they share. Television's role in our social and

individual lives is above all as the frame through which we gain access to what is marked off as social, from the merely individual. Media events are simply the most condensed and organised instances of a wider process whereby the media (television, but also radio and the press) are instituted and reinstituted as the place where we look for the reality we call 'social': this is the 'framing' dimension of media power (Couldry, 2000a: 42-44).

In this way, through the link to a more pervasive framing process, we can apply the concept of 'media event' beyond the liminal social dramas on which Dayan and Katz's discussion (following Victor Turner) was based. 'Media events' are processes through which society 'takes cognizance of itself' (Turner, 1974: 239), or rather appears to do so. Media events need not therefore comprise major social crises, but that is not to collapse them into Boorstin's (1961) dismissive category of 'pseudo-events'.

This approach to media events in terms of their significance for society's central values, indeed our sense of ourselves as belonging to a social order at all, derives directly from Emile Durkheim's classic work on the social basis of religion (Durkheim, 1995). As I argue in more detail elsewhere (Couldry, 2000a and forthcoming 2002) we can draw on this Durkheimian line of argument without adopting its accompanying functionalism. The qualification I just added – 'or appears to do so' – is crucial. A key point, on which Durkheim is silent and on which in adapting Durkheim we need to place special emphasis, is that in contemporary societies, dominated by mass media, all, or almost all, our experiences of 'framing' are mediated, not face to face, and therefore pass through institutional mechanisms of

representation, that inevitably involve biases, some more serious than others. The media which any society happens to have tend to be naturalised as its ritual frame onto the social, so that the distortions built into that particular institutionalisation are naturalised away, beneath the sight-line of political or social conflict. The media's authority is a construction. This is not, however, to deny that sometimes conflicts can arise about the media's authority to represent 'the world', only that it is rare for this to happen explicitly. So, in applying the language of 'ritual' and 'framing' to BBUK1, I am not suggesting that this media event 'functioned' unproblematically to affirm the social, let alone that it is to be praised for bringing Britain together as a nation! The point of drawing on Durkheim is rather to make clear how high the stakes are when television claims to show 'reality'.

Those stakes have been complicated by recent reworkings of Durkheim that emphasise not so much 'society's' capacity to unite around a single experience of 'the social', but rather more local 'socialities' where people discover what they have in common. This is the seemingly fragmentary, but durably connected social space of Michel Maffesoli's *Time of the Tribes*, cemented by its shared 'aesthetic of the "we"' (1996: 12). According to Maffesoli, the forms of social togetherness are no longer known in advance, but are constantly sought after, and achieved, often in relatively small-scale settings. For all its faults,<sup>2</sup> Maffesoli's vision of a social space dominated, for good or ill, by an 'aesthetic of the "we"' – that is, the search for contexts where we can see ourselves in terms of what we share – is as useful a starting-point as any for analysing BBUK1 the event.

### *Three Lines of Analysis*

#### The 'Live' Event

'Big Brother will be watching, but then who won't?'

Davina McColl, BBUK live presenter, broadcast 18 August 2000

All media events need the quality of 'liveness'. It is their liveness that enables distant media audiences to get the sense that they are following a event from within (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 115). The liveness of an event does not require that every element of it is broadcast live, but rather the belief that, taken together, the media consumption provide shared, but privileged access to the event as it unfolds. (Other media's commentary on what has 'just' happened, or anticipation of what is about to happen, also contribute to the sense of a televised 'live' event.) Indeed liveness is not a simple fact, but a 'conventional expectation' (Saenz, 1994: 576), an assumption of togetherness that the media work hard to construct.<sup>3</sup>

The media's work in constructing BBUK1 as a large-scale 'live' event was apparent. Most obvious were the Friday night television broadcasts when viewers' votes on who was to be evicted from the house that week were announced. These shows were full of claims that everyone was watching, deciding and voting 'now': precisely the 'ideology of liveness' (Feuer, 1983). Important also was accompanying press coverage of BBUK1's progress as news. Most striking, however - as confirmation of how 'liveness' is a construction across a variety of media – was the role of the

BBUK1 Website, where footage from the house was broadcast continuously. It was claimed that live coverage of the series' most dramatic episode, the expulsion of 'Nasty Nick', had the largest ever audience for a Web broadcast in Britain (*Guardian*, 18 August 2000, 1). The Website's 'live' coverage was itself 'remediated' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) and broadcast every hour on the 'Global Media Interface' giant screen in London's Leicester Square; as the BBUK1 Website put it, 'this window on the Big Brother world will open for 15 minutes every hour of the day'.<sup>4</sup> The Website's centrality to the media event of Nick's expulsion was striking (Lawson, 2000), but did not stop the television broadcast later being subsequently billed as one of the 'top TV moments' along with the funeral of Princess Diana (*Metro*, 18 October, 2000, 7). 'Liveness' was here, as elsewhere, a cross-media construction, but BBUK1 was significant in extending the complexity of cross-media links and in particular the centrality of the Web to those links. This process was intensified during BBUK2, when a live feed from the house to the digital channel E4 was maintained.

None of this, however, explains what was the content of BBUK1 as media event. Here, unlike in the cases studied by Dayan and Katz, there was no antecedent event of public significance: ten people locked in a compound competing for money is not itself of public significance! The only starting-point for analysing the significance of what happened in the *Big Brother* house was that television cameras were present. Hence the importance of television's presentation of those events underplaying that fact, and insisting that, in all their details, those events were not directed for media presentation. Ruth Wrigley, BBUK1's Executive Producer, expressed exactly that strategy: 'I wanted it to look live and exciting . . . this was not meant to be a polished drama. We were filming it for real, and it was a virtue of the programme that viewers

understood that' (quoted in BBUK1's official book, Ritchie, 2000: 11, added emphasis). Filming it 'for real', paradoxically, meant ensuring that audiences did not believe that what they watched was just ten people performing for the camera. The psychological discourse of the programme (with its resident psychologists) had a role here, since it affirmed the idea (hardly uncontestable!) that submitting ten people to national surveillance for two months would reveal their human 'reality'. As Wrigley put it, 'nobody can keep up an act all the time in front of the cameras – the world was going to see them [the participants] as they really were' (quoted, Ritchie, 2000: 26), a 'truth' curious enough to need underwriting by the psychologists' 'expert' opinion. As the programme's official book put it without irony, the aim was that BBUK1 'should not just show what went on in the house, but should explore human relationships with the help of top psychologists' (Ritchie, 2000: 9).

So both BBUK1's 'liveness', and the idea that its liveness mattered, were complex constructions, and both constructions depended in different ways on mediation (the presence of cameras and the presence of a large national audience). It was not surprising, therefore, that representations of BBUK1 as media event ('tonight the whole nation will be watching and deciding')<sup>5</sup> were a significant part of its content.

### Media/ordinary

'All that's left [after the end of the series] is the door through which the ten contestants arrived as unknown faces and left again as Britain's latest celebrities.'

*Heat*, 23-29 September 2000, 10

None of this is to deny that BBUK1 had content beyond its self-confirmations as media event. It was entertaining and intriguing to watch the contradictions in contestants' performances, as they passed from mediated front-stage (in front of the other contestants, that is) to mediated back-stage (in the diary room, nominating the next evictee, but before a deferred audience of millions), and then returned to the general house space once more. But, we might ask, so what? None of this would justify treating BBUK1 as a media event.

There were two further factors, however, contributing to BBUK1's event-like status, each distinct from the details of the programme's footage: first, the media's underlying authority to represent reality and, second, the hierarchy between media people (including celebrities) and non-media ('ordinary') people (on their interrelationship, see further Couldry, 2000a, chapter 3).

The first factor has been implicit already. The idea that BBUK1 revealed something important about the realities of human interaction without the camera was clearly a central claim of the programme, as of all reality television. As the producer of the UK's most recent success in this genre, *Popstars*, put it: 'it's not just an entertainment show, it's a real life drama'.<sup>6</sup> Yet this idea - that a highly artificial mediated setting such as BBUK1 could reveal something significant about human interaction off camera - is not obviously plausible. What underwrote this belief - in so far as it was held (on which see below) - was not only the 'expert' psychological opinion already mentioned, but something more fundamental: the naturalised belief that the media are the frame through which we normally access social reality. Without that wider framework of belief, the narrative authority of the programme would, I suggest, have

collapsed under its own weight. Paradoxically it was the very 'ordinariness' of what the Big Brother cameras showed us that confirmed the wider authority of television to represent 'our' reality: in so far as it was 'ordinary', this was the reality that would exist without the media being there.

'Ordinariness' is indeed what the media frequently claim to show us: indeed, BBUK1's was 'the first time in Britain that ordinary people had been observed right round the clock' (Ritchie, 2000: 8). That is why it was so important for BBUK1's producers to claim that those entering the world of the show carried no prior traces of the media world. This is the best explanation for the otherwise draconian rule that anyone who even mentioned to the media their forthcoming appearance on the programme was automatically expelled from it (Ritchie, 2000: 28). How else could the 'ordinariness' of the show's reality be guaranteed? (It was for the same reason, paradoxically, that the charity fundraising *Celebrity Big Brother* series, also broadcast in 2001, seemed less successful to many. With celebrities, not 'ordinary people' as inmates of the house, it was much less clear what was being 'revealed' during or at the climax of the game: we know, of course, that celebrities are in fact 'ordinary', and there was no excitement in seeing a celebrity confirm their existing celebrity status by winning the game.

Yet, and here we move to the second factor which underwrote BBUK's status as media event, it was precisely the transition from 'ordinary' (non-media) person to celebrity (media) person that was the purpose of the game. This was the master-fame without which the game made no sense, even if during the game contestants tended not to talk about it. Most contestants were explicit about wanting to enter the media

world (Ritchie, 2000: 34, 36, 40, 44, 77); and no one who watched the Friday night shows when the evictee emerged from the studio to a tunnel of cheering fans – let alone the final night of the series with its large stage, live video links, press photographers, celebrity endorsements, and so on – was left in any doubt that the transition to celebrity was the culmination of the programme’s plot.

Celebrity – the hierarchy between media people and non-media people – is more obviously contestable than the media’s status as the authoritative source of social representations. Celebrity entrenches the boundary between those in the media and those who aren’t: that boundary was vividly acted out when on BBUK1’s final night the winners during a celebrity-style interview were linked live to friends and acquaintances at various locations. Darren (who came third) was shown the ‘lollipop lady’ who helped him across the road as a child. He couldn’t remember her, which was perhaps the point: to show the stereotype of social ‘ordinariness’, viewed from the stage of celebrity, and thereby confirm the distance which Darren had crossed.

At least two strategies, however, were adopted to ‘soften’ the media/ordinary hierarchy: first, to insist that all participants had become celebrities (all appeared in the final programme on stage); and, second, to highlight other narratives which masked the transition to celebrity, in particular the touching story of the participants returning to their family and close friends. Yet it would be strange to conclude from this that the series simply affirmed ‘ordinary life’. Even a quick glance at the contestants confirmed that they had been pre-selected for their conformity to the conventions of media people’s appearance. Once again the BBUK1 official book is disarmingly candid. Anyone aged 45 or over was excluded, or rather, as one

psychologist employed by the programme put it euphemistically, ‘they weren’t ruled out, but we had to examine their motives with particular care’, why this was ever necessary remaining unexplained. Those with what were judged psychological weaknesses were also excluded. The crucial rule was the tautologous one of media-friendliness: ‘we simply went for people we liked, people who were charismatic, interesting . . .’.<sup>7</sup> The actual discriminations on which the media’s picture of the world is based (particularly, the hierarchy between ‘media people’ and ‘ordinary people’) are here smuggled in by the word ‘simply’, one of the ‘small words’ which, as Michael Billig (1997) has argued, do so much ideological work. And, on a larger scale, it was precisely those discriminations that were affirmed by the series as a whole.

### True Fictions or Fake Truths?

I am not, however, assuming that BBUK1 did convince the majority of its audience that it provided access to an aspect of our social ‘reality’. What people believe is particularly difficult to research, and there may be a significant gap between the assumptions on the basis of which they generally act (without which, much discussion of the programme is difficult to explain) and the explicit beliefs which, if asked, they would ascribe to themselves. Janet Jones’ early research into the fans of the BBUK1 Website (Jones, 2001) suggests that a clear majority valued the truthfulness and honesty of the games’ contestants, which implies that the programme was read at least partly as a revelation of underlying character, not simply as a game to be won. This insight is confirmed, and made more complex, in Annette Hill’s more wide-ranging research on audiences for reality television (see her article in this edition).

More important may be precisely the ambiguity of the programme and the event. BBUK1, like all successful collective games, traded on an ambiguity: yes, it was only a game, but wider 'truths' were revealed through the way it was played. Take for example the treatment of the programme's anti-hero, universally known as 'Nasty Nick'. His 'offence' was not to play the game badly, but to play it too effectively in the short term, by influencing other contestants' choice of evictees; he was also the contestant who tried hardest to control how he was represented to the general media audience. The depiction of his machinations by the tabloid press was one factor in generating dramatic 'depth' to the programme's early weeks. Considerable moral censure was heaped upon him, which was matched in his treatment in the house itself: reflecting this, he acknowledged 'I've made a mistake, I have to live by that mistake' just before he was evicted. Yet, a few days after the eviction, one of the same tabloids that had vilified him, affirmed his celebrity, staging a meeting between him and Brad Pitt, who professed interest in meeting him (*The Sun*, 24 August 2000, 1 and 4).

The strangest ambiguity perhaps was over what the experience of being incarcerated in the *Big Brother* house meant. Craig, the show's eventual winner, suggested in the Diary Room (reported in Ritchie, 2000: 108) that it meant confronting one's own life: 'the hardest thing for me in the house, maybe [sic] a lack of freedom to watch a bit of telly and walk my dogs. TV stops you thinking about your own life, it's a distraction and it stops me going down'. The meaning of others watching the programme, then, was ambiguous: both distraction (mere secondary reality) and learning experience (watching others discover themselves). The media were both fictional space and window onto reality. There is no need for the media to resolve such ambiguities, since

it is precisely on such ambiguities that the media's symbolic authority relies (Couldry, 2000a: 50-51, Meyrowitz, 1992).

### *Conclusion*

It is striking that so much effort should now be expended on television's representation of the ordinary, the close-to-hand, rather than the spectacular; we have reached, it seems, the opposite of the society of the spectacle. But the contradiction is only apparent. Even leaving aside the other factors involved (economic pressures, more broadcast time to fill), the self-effacing presentation of everyday 'reality' arguably constitutes the purest form of legitimation of the media frame (Couldry, 2000a: 16-17). That this legitimation generally works is quite consistent with scepticism about the truthfulness of particular programmes, and equally important: for it is the general practice of making and watching 'reality television', and its persistence in spite of occasional scandals,<sup>8</sup> that we need to explain.

A crucial part of this practice, at least from the evidence of BBUK1, is the constant play on the ambiguity of its claim to present 'reality'. At different times, the programme and the discourse associated with it portrayed it as mere distraction (as fiction) and as social learning (as 'reality'). It is just such as ambiguity, and the unresolved switching between two incompatible positions that it involves (what Roland Barthes (1973) called the 'turnstile effect') that characterises myth more generally.

This is one reason for the abiding interest of reality television, which needs to be pursued through international comparisons of the cultures which surround them. *Big Brother*, at least in its UK versions, adds a further twist by suggesting that sociality can be affirmed through watching a game in which individuals competed on the basis of their desire to be liked by each other and by media onlookers. Suppose this format endures: it is unclear whether this would tell us more about today's 'saturated individualism' (Maffesoli, 1996: 64) or the need to shore up a perceived crisis in the media's authority as our 'exemplary center' (Geertz, 1980: 13). Perhaps both. Whatever our wider speculations, it matters what theoretical framework we choose to guide us in this tangled territory; I hope to have shown one possible way forward.

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<sup>1</sup> There are problems with the overuse of the term ‘ritual’ in relation to media (Corner, 1999), but they are not, I would argue, decisive here.

<sup>2</sup> Above all, its argument that the momentum of such sociality has replaced ‘class’ as an organising principle: the effacement of public expression of ‘class’ does not mean it has ceased to matter (cf Couldry, 2001). Generally Maffesoli’s argument lacks grounding in an analysis of contemporary capitalism, and the media’s role in it.

<sup>3</sup> Paddy Scannell (1996) has contributed a great deal to the analysis of how this construction is sustained.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.bigbrother.terra.com/links/links\\_001.htm](http://www.bigbrother.terra.com/links/links_001.htm), consulted 18 August 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Davina McColl on BBUK 15 September 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Nigel Lythgow, quoted *Guardian* 10 January 2001, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ritchie (2000: 23, 25, 26).

<sup>8</sup> See Couldry, 2000b.