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Introduction

I want to start out from a quotation that has intrigued me for some time. It comes from Alain Touraine's analysis at the beginning of his book *Can We Live Together?* where he sets the stage for his larger argument about the possibilities of contemporary politics, particularly what he calls the 'politics of the Subject'. As a meditation on some central issues and intense difficulties in the space of the social at the end of the twentieth century, these opening pages of the book are very rich, but let me start by lifting one quotation, that may be particularly relevant for a conference on 'media and belief':

> 'the goal of sociological analysis must now be to discover what freedom, solidarity and equality might mean in a social situation in which the centre . . . is empty, and in which the throne room is full of draughts and has been invaded by bands of speculators and paparazzi' (Alain Touraine, 2000: 11)

How should we interpret this dramatic and vivid image? The throne of the now defunct throne room represents perhaps old versions of the social 'centre' based around a relatively stable hierarchy of defined social classes and a social world organised through membership of defined social groups and the clear differentiation of roles in paid and unpaid work. That world Touraine imagines, metaphorically, as a monarchical society focussed on the throne in its capital's throne room, and that ordered social world is gone for ever, according to Touraine.

Let's leave aside the wider question of whether this account is valid –it is certainly compelling – and let's instead explore other implications of the image. Who are the speculators who have invaded the throne room? What do they speculate in? Should we imagine them as those who claim to speak for a disappearing 'social' by speculating on the 'rise' or 'fall' of this or that 'representative' social phenomenon ('generation X', the 'metrosexual' and so on)? That is, traders in others' lingering beliefs in the self-organising power of 'the social'? Perhaps.

But then who are the paparazzi, or more to the point, who or what are they photographing? Not the speculators clearly. Perhaps they are photographing no one, just the ruins of the throne room and the space where the throne once was, trying to capture this or that trace of a decayed social world. Or, developing the paparazzi metaphor more precisely, perhaps they are photographing celebrities. Are these literally celebrities or is there implicit here some other group that in Touraine's larger image might play a role analogous to celebrities? At this point, Touraine's image is ambiguous – the celebrities we can infer into this image may be either reality or metaphor, or both. And perhaps this uncertainty captures well how we might think about the ambiguity of 'reality TV', a prominent occupier of society's empty throne room that uses the claim and metaphor of 'reality' as its calling-card.

There is a lot more to be said about the absence, or gap, at the 'heart' of the social that Touraine sees. In part it is a contradiction of scale, between our affinities for the objects of global cultural flows and our lack of any space of effective political action at the local level beyond what Touraine dismissively calls 'hedonism' (2000: 5-6). And this notion of a gap in the constitution of the social so profound as to challenge it entirely – what Touraine calls 'de-socialisation' – has of course been a core theme in not only Touraine's work but also the work of Francois Dubet (1994) and Danilo Martucelli (2002); one can also see parallels with anthropological theory, such as Arjun Appadurai's theory of 'scapes' (1990) or Ulf Hannerz's theory of 'cultural complexity' (1992). Evaluations of the consequences of this gap differ of course, but if we stay within Touraine's rather pessimistic reading, it is clear that one would <u>not</u> seek to understand today's social transformations by looking closely at the throne-room antics of either the paparazzi or the celebrities they pursue. The social 'action' for Touraine lies entirely elsewhere in individual subjects' battle to '<u>transcend</u> the decay of the social' (2000: 72, added emphasis) through the development of personal and collective projects (2000: 251-252).

For Touraine, then, the way forward for 'sociological analysis' (as he puts it in the original quote) cannot be to take at face value the entertaining performances in the throne room. It cannot lie in seeing, for example, 'reality TV''s claims as at some level representing a shift in the construction or performance of social reality. The way forward cannot lie, Touraine's metaphor suggests, in studying reality TV at all, perhaps!

In this paper, I want to move outwards from Touraine's image, and explore other ways of relating reality TV to 'the social' which, by contrast, see in this media phenomenon more significance than Touraine's image might suggest, before commenting towards the end on the ethics implied in taking reality TV as a serious object for critical social examination.

I am not of course claiming (and it would probably be anachronistic to do so) that Touraine himself was commenting implicitly on reality TV in the passage quoted! But I am suggesting that Touraine's foregrounding of the (problematic) constitution of the social is a useful frame for grasping the latent narratives of 'the social' that lie behind some, in my view unsatisfactory, accounts of reality TV in media research, and so serves also as a useful frame within which to develop alternative, more critical accounts of this phenomenon.

Positive readings of the 'reality' of Reality TV

If we look at the recent history of media research in the UK and US, then the trend has been to take reality TV very seriously as a sign of shifts in television form as well as larger social trends. I will also be arguing that we should take it seriously, but within a rather different account of 'the social' from that latent in most treatments of reality TV in media studies.

Let's accept that reality TV has been a significant production and marketing phenomenon within the media industries in many countries and also internationally (see Hill, 2004, chapters 1 and 2 for useful summary). The possibility of producing high-ratings prime-time TV without expensive cast or (in many, though not all, cases)

expensive locations is clearly economically significant; in Marxist terms we might see it as a shift in the relations of television production since members of the audience now constitute regular but generally unpaid producers of valuable media content (cf Raphael, 2004; Magder, 2004).

So in interpreting this phenomenon we can safely leave aside the industry hype about reality TV's success. Part of the rhetoric of reality TV, after all, is the notion that 'everybody will be watching' (or as the *Big Brother* presenter Davina McColl put it in the UK's first series: '*Big Brother* will be watching, but then who won't?'), although there is often a discrepancy here with actual viewing figures which for example showed 9 million watched the final night of the UK's *Big Brother* series one and an average of 4.6 million watched each weekday episode (figures quoted Hill, 2004: 32, as against a UK population of approximately 60 million) . While these figures are clearly economically significant (because cumulatively they represent a lot of advertising income), their social significance is less obvious. Which makes it disappointing to see industry hype being apparently swallowed whole by some media researchers:

> 'everyone knows that for a time in the summer of 2000 [the year of the UK's *Big Brother* series one] the *only* thing that anyone talked about was *Big Brother*. The amount of comment, discussion, and evaluation that it elicited at the time, in the press, in pubs and buses and households up and down the land was enormous. This talk was not accidental but a structural feature of the show's relational totality of involvements. Involvement showed in talk so that to consider what it was that elicited such a "discursive ferment" is to get at the heart of the program's care-structure as an event invented for television'. (Scannell, 2002: 277-278).

I am not suggesting for one moment that as fine a media historian as Paddy Scannell is naïve about media marketing hype. What is striking instead is how he is inclined (rhetorically at least) to incorporate it, in order to make a larger argument about *Big Brother*'s wider social significance.

Scannell sees the UK's *Big Brother* series one as a paradigm example of television and radio's defining characteristic: sociability (2002: 278, cf Scannell's earlier work, Scannell, 1988 and 1996). These media foreground social talk for its own sake, he argues, so there is nothing surprising about *Big Brother* being the centre of social gossip and also in the show itself foregrounding everyday sociality in the time-filling chatter of the *Big Brother* house. Scannell builds this into a larger social narrative that implicitly legitimates *Big Brother* as, at some level, a presentation of 'the social':

> 'In any society, all members are, and know that they are, open to the scrutiny and assessments of others. . . The knowledge serves to modify and regulate behaviours within the discursively circulating norms of any society. Positively and negatively, gossip is a policing, or self-monitoring mechanism . . . all societies are gossip communities or have gossip networks embedded in them' (2002: 278).

Certainly Scannell makes some useful points about the entertainment attraction of *Big Brother* and about the programme's contents. But note also his appeal to some supposed 'timeless' features of human society ('in any society . . . all societies') and the easy move from here to Scannell's conclusion, which is that *Big Brother* while, of

course, 'just' a television show, is a valuable forum for something very general and of universal human value: a forum for thinking about the pressures of the presentation of self before others (2002: 281).

On the most generous interpretation, Scannell offers a <u>non-ironic</u> reading of media phenomena such as *Big Brother*. But if we put it alongside Touraine's questioning of the constitution of the social, Scannell's seems to be a positively <u>nostalgic</u> reading of media's role in the contemporary social world, in which we can see the lost social centre being reconstructed around us, even if in fragments, through the serial presentations of television; there is a strong similarity here with the role that television plays in Michel Maffesoli's reworking of Durkheim for late modernity (Maffesoli 1996a and especially 1996b: 55-67). I want to suggest that such readings of reality TV, whatever their historic momentum, are rather unhelpful, precisely because they take for granted the very issue that should be problematised: the relation of presentations of 'reality' to social <u>belief</u> and, through belief, to the regular construction of social 'order'.

A similar neglect of the deeper sociological questions at stake in reality TV can be found, but without the implicit nostalgia, in accounts of reality TV's significance as a shift in television genre. John Corner has offered an influential reading of *Big Brother* in the UK as a symptom of a new 'post-documentary era' of television. As a comment on issues of style and format, this is very useful. But it is interesting how Corner in commenting on the significance of his argument mobilises the term 'real'. The greatest challenge of contemporary TV documentary, he argues, comes not from media digital isolation and the like, but from:

> 'the requirement to reorient and refashion itself in an audiovisual culture where the dynamics of diversion and the aesthetics of performance dominate a greatly expanded range of popular images of the real' (Corner, 2002: 267).

Corner ends his article on 'post-documentary television' by drawing on John Hartley's notion of 'popular reality' (Hartley, 1996), speculating that 'perhaps [reality Tv] marks a shift too in the nature of [a] broader sphere, a sphere where vectors both of structure and agency combine to produce experience, that John Hartley has suggestively dubbed "popular reality"' (Corner, 2002: 268). But not only was Hartley's original notion of 'popular reality' based on no detailed evidence about audience interpretations (as I have argued elsewhere: Couldry, 2000: 79), but Corner's speculation repeats Hartley's notion of 'popular <u>reality</u>' without asking about its empirical foundations. In fact there are two types of assumption being made here by both Hartley and Corner: first, an assumption about how audiences actually interpret such programmes, and second, an assumption about the reality of the correspondence between the forces that structure forces cultural productions such as *Big Brother* and social experience itself. While the first assumption has since been addressed by research into the audiences for reality TV (see below), the second assumption is more subtle and represents a Trojan Horse of much current media research, which smuggles in (under cover of notions of generic shift and audience sophistication) a reading of television's social consequences that, once again, fails to address explicitly questions of social belief.

In fact, the debate in media studies about reality TV seems often to go on without reference to other debates, more widely in the social sciences, about the constitution of the social and various substitute constructions ('community' - Rose, 1996 – or the responsible self within neoliberal discourse: Rose, 1999). It is true that Annette Hill's recent book *Reality TV* (2004) now provides a useful analysis of the complexity of audience discourse about reality television, which brings out how the authenticity of reality television remains an issue for audience, without them in any way naïvely taking 'reality TV' literally as reality. A virtue of Hill's work is that it avoids any explicit allegiance to wider positive readings of the consequences of reality TV for social reality, except perhaps in her (to my mind generous) reading of the 'ethics of care' at work in British reality TV programmes (Hill, 2004: chapter 7). Equally however Hill does not develop in detail the possibility of different readings of reality TV's consequences which challenge precisely the assumption of social centrality that is at the heart not only of much media industry hype but also, as we have seen, some academic commentary.

In various ways, therefore, there is a sociological deficit in some prominent accounts of reality TV within media research. How can we remedy this? First, perhaps by simply noting how many layers of social construction tend to be obscured by what we might call the 'realist' readings of 'reality TV' that I have been considering:

1. The selection of the range of themes for reality TV programmes in general, affected clearly by market and audience dynamics, but also by industry assumptions about what audiences might want as entertainment
2. The selection by media professionals of participants for particular programmes (often with very high levels of application)
3. The organization of 'natural' action in any reality TV show, and most interestingly reality-based games, such as *Big Brother*, which create claim a new social process for television to observe (involving the design of setting, challenges for participants, and so on)[1]
4. The subsequent editing of all or most of the footage for the television audience
5. Each reality TV show's rhetorical claims to its audience about the show's significance and social resonance
6. The overall context provided by the interaction of 1.-5. in any particular case for future reality TV shows in the same or other series, leading to a broader cycle of expectations about the social 'reality' that reality tv produces.

It is not that realist readings are naïve about the dynamics of media production, but that their concern with those dynamics is overridden by a broader social narrative that short-circuits analysis of the complex relationships between media and social belief. The 'short-circuit' takes the form, paradoxically, of crediting audiences of reality TV with a sophisticated appreciation of the artifice of such programmes. Of course, at some level, audiences are likely to be well aware of that artifice, if only because it is so often highlighted by reality TV programmes themselves (it is a major theme of *Big Brother* after all); I suspect no one believes that a game-show, whether 'reality'-based or not, is reality! The short-circuit occurs when we think that questions about media and belief stop here, at the absence of literal belief in reality TV and the presence of various degrees of sophistication and irony among audiences. But as Slavoj Zizek in his discussion of ideology notes, this is only the start of the investigation: we can be ironic about something (denying that literally we believe in it), yet we may still go on

acting as if it was significant to us. As he puts it (and we don't need to import any Lacanian model to see the force of his analysis): 'the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the [we] are doing. . . Even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them' (1989: 32-33) (cf also the very interesting discussions of Zizek in Andrejevic, 2004, especially 215-216 and 222-223). In thinking about the relationship between media and belief, we have to look more widely at how people's actions, thoughts, beliefs, and words are oriented towards media beyond the simple case of literal (dis)belief.

If we want to do this for the case of reality TV, it is dangerous as researchers to commit ourselves in advance to a position on the 'reality-status' at any level of such programmes, and yet it is just this that some commentaries on reality TV appear to do, as we have seen. Better instead to start from a suspicion towards the practices and claims of social construction at work in reality TV, a suspicion supported by Ernesto Laclau's proposal that contemporary societies 'are required by their very dynamics to become increasingly mythical' (Laclau, 1990: 67, added emphasis).

Reality TV and the reality of myth

There is no question that we need, as Raymond Williams (1975) put it three decades ago, some 'images of what living is now like'. But this tells us nothing about how we are to judge particular claims to offer such images, let alone the new industry for producing such images that is 'Reality TV' (as I write there are newspaper reports in the *Financial Sunday Express* of the planned London Stock Exchange flotation in late 2005/ early 2006 of Endemol, the corporation that owns *Big Brother* - anticipated stock market valuation, £2 billion!).[2] How should we think about the implications of reality TV on the relations between media and belief outside a realist perspective?

At least two moves are crucial. First, to seek to analyse reality TV not as a set of particular texts but as a related set of social processes, incorporating production, distribution and direct programme consumption of course, also the mass of secondary texts and merchandise around programmes, and (usually neglected) the social processes of recruiting participants, their behaviour within and outside the programme, and social discussions about the show. We need in other words to see reality TV as a process of mediation that extends far beyond the programme texts themselves, and here the questions concerning belief get complicated. My own work on reality TV (in the course of developing a different argument about ritual: Couldry, 2003) only very partially addressed this terrain. For a much fuller account, we have to turn to Mark Andrejevic's (2004) recent book which combines historical analysis, industry analysis, textual analysis, interviews with participants and interviews with fans. Through this wide-ranging approach, significant insights are gained into the complex questions around belief raised by the reality TV phenomenon.

One such insight (and this constitutes the second analytic move we need to make) is to avoid assuming that the only way belief might be worked upon by reality TV programmes is through a direct rhetoric that induces people to believe literally in the presented reality. This cannot be right because, of course, a major feature of recent reality TV such as *Big Brother* is to foreground the artifice of the camera at one level, and the process of surveillance that it enables (cf above). But, as Andrejevic argues

discussing the American version of *Big Brother*, this does not lead to a denaturalisation of that artifice, only its deeper embedding into everyday beliefs and practice oriented towards the 'real':

> 'it is the comprehensive and pervasive character of the round-the-clock surveillance [on reality TV] that stands as the guarantee of authentic reality. Thus the gaze of the viewer comes to stand as the litmus test of whether characters are being "real" or not . . . [after quoting some fan comments in AOL's online Big Brother chatroom] the standard of authenticity was, for the viewers, provided by their own omniscience' (Andrejevic, 2004: 124-5)

In this context, *Big Brother*'s interactivity does not constitute a liberating form of participation, but a cooption into the process of production that is strictly tied to the surveillance mechanism of the programme (Andrejevic, 2004: 130). In the US case, Andrejevic argues, a contradiction resulted between the programme's claim to transcend commodification (through audience interactivity and 'ordinary people's' participation in television) and its reality of renewed commodification, causing difficulties for both programme and producers; in the UK the same problem does not seem to have occurred.

Which raises the question of how far, in considering the relationship between media and belief in reality TV, we need an international and comparative dimension. Even if it is true (as I believe it is) that reality TV everywhere 'naturalises contrivance as a necessary tool' for generating social truth (Andrejevic, 2004: 138), particularly the contrivance of surveillance technology (cf Palmer, 2002), how that naturalisation is worked out depends on the context of particular states, cultures and broadcasting territories, each with a distinctive history of state-market-media relations (cf Hallin and Mancini, 2004). But it is one thing to compare systematically institutional relations in different countries (crucial though and long-overdue though Hallin and Mancini's work is here) and quite another to try and compare, in a rigorous way, the patterns of naturalised belief oriented to media, as embedded in practice in different countries. That is a huge task whose beginnings we can only imagine today.

Starting-points might be to consider how in a range of countries the implicit reality-claim of reality TV is mobilised in different ways:
- Through the status of programme participants both within and outside the programme
- Through the discourses used to justify, or reject, the extension of reality TV into new formats
- Through the ritualised practices around reality TV programmes and the linkages (if any) to other forms of practice (a nice example here was the auctioning of the otherwise entirely 'ordinary' chair in which the most notorious character in the UK's first series of *Big Brother* sat when confronted about his lying, auctioned not on e-Bay but at one of London's longest-established auction houses).

It would be interesting at this conference to discuss how such a comparative research agenda in relation to reality TV might be developed further as part of thinking about what it means to compare different national 'media cultures' (in so far as they exist).

Conclusion: Towards a Critical Ethics of Reality TV

I want to conclude, however, by turning to the question of ethics. A curiosity of media research is that, while it has for decades had a strong tradition of criticising media and analysing media's power implications, rarely has this developed into an explicit framework of ethical debate about media. I do not myself believe we can avoid the question of ethics in media research much longer, which is not to deny that this area is extremely difficult and uncertain.

By 'ethics', let me emphasise, I do not mean the specific codes about sources, confidentiality, objectivity, and so on, that the journalistic profession has adopted in most countries. This is the type of media 'ethics' that for example Claude-Jean Bertrand (2000) calls '*déontologie*' which he contrasts with an individual sense of morality or ethics 'based on a vision of the world and an experience of life' (2000: 23). It is the latter in which I am interested. More specifically, I am interested in returning to Socrates' famous question (that became the basis of Aristotle's virtue-based ethics), namely: how should I live? A question that, since it can be asked by and to anyone (cf Williams, 1985), implies the more general question - how should any of us live? – and from that, since we have no choice but to live with each other, implies the further question: how should we live together? (where 'we' is not a particular or exclusive group, but literally any collection of people to whom the question happens to be addressed, whether a group of friends or the global population).

Leaving aside all the questions about the status of 'ethics' versus other ways of thinking about morality, let me just pursue some implications of this deceptively simple question (how should we live together?) in relation to the process of media, and particularly the process of reality TV. The type of question that I would call 'ethical' in this broader sense is the type of question that the late Susan Sontag raised in her celebrated essay 'What have we done?' on the photos that emerged in 2003 from Abu-Ghraib jail in Iraq. For her article addressed not specific journalists, not the torturers, not the US government, but 'us': 'to act is to share in the community of actions recorded as images . . . ours is a society in which the secrets of private life that, formerly, you would have given nearly anything to conceal, you now clamour to get on a television show to reveal' (Sontag, 2004: 3-4). Whether or not Sontag's connection between the ethical numbness that enabled soldiers to circulate images of torture as if they were holiday snaps and the wider televisual culture is a useful one in this specific case (clearly the link is a controversial and speculative one), the type of question Sontag was raising is of general value. She is addressing 'us' as members, potentially, of 'the community of actions recorded as images' implied by the Abu-Ghraib photos and the huge web of media-oriented practices in which the act of taking and circulating those images was embedded. So we might ask, in our less controversial example, how can we think about the 'community of actions recorded as images' constituted by reality TV? What is, or should be, the ethics of that implied community? Or, more simply, and returning to a version of Socrates' question, how would we evaluate the contribution of reality TV to how we do, and should, live together?

Here, having gestured to a large terrain, I have space only to make two points, one about truth and the other about imagination. One does not have to believe in some readily accessible standard of objectivity in social description in order to argue that issues about truth and truthfulness are at stake when behaviour <u>on camera</u> that most successfully gives the impression of a consistency that would have been there even without the presence of the camera is then equated with behaviour that is <u>real</u>. But this may be one truth-residue of the undoubted sophistication people show in interpreting people's performances for the camera and the formal artifice of reality TV. Take this US fan's talk in an AOL chat room dedicated to the US *Big Brother*, as observed by Mark Andrejevic:

> 'Eddie [on US *Big Brother*] should win, he is the only one in the house that is willing to be honest enough to play the game,, the way it should be played, has no fear nor concern about what the others in the house think of him, he is always true to himself and his own beliefs. . . . Eddie is "The Real thing"' (quoted Andrejevic, 2004: 125).

The embedding of a camera within the practice of evaluating others' personal authenticity is surely a significant shift in how institutions and individuals are articulated with each other. The philosopher Bernard Williams when discussing the virtues of truthfulness (Williams, 2002) argues that it is never enough to pretend to tell the truth (that is, to have a disposition to give the impression of telling the truth), since this is insufficient to ground social trust in the way that the disposition to actually tell the truth does. Reality TV, however, seems to imply a shift in another direction, away from a disposition to be truthful and authentic, and towards a disposition that can be judged authentic by distant 'all-seeing' others through the medium of televisual surveillance – with what long-term consequences for trust we can only imagine

Turning to imagination, I suggest we should consider the long-term consequences of institutionalising a format of social imagination which relies not on skill in fictional narrative (the novel, the television drama or film) nor on skill in investigating hitherto hidden aspects of everyday private or public life (documentary), but instead on imagining <u>artificial situations of constraint</u> in which observers can 'test' (that is, see) how real individuals turn out to interact with each other and those constraints. The aura of scientific experiment about some reality TV (such as the UK's *Big Brother* with its resident psychologists) is entirely spurious of course, but as a rhetorical tool, hardly trivial. But my point here is less about science and more about imagination. If we regularly start to count as 'imagination' simply the observing (from a safe distance) of what other individuals do (sometimes unpredictably) under particular conditions of constraint that media institutions have set for them, then we have not just a distorted account of social 'reality' (if we are inclined at some level to buy into the notion that this is 'reality' television) but also a debased notion of social imagination, which is simply a naturalised form of control.

We need, in other words, to raise some broader questions about the long-term consequences of living with 'reality TV'; without (to return to Touraine's image) taking what goes on in the decaying throne room too seriously, we must be ready to think about the long-term ethical consequences of a fascination with what happens there so great that it ignores most of what is happening outside. While reality TV

might appear to offer us an 'exemplary centre' (to borrow Clifford Geertz's (1980) phrase about the 19th century Balinese theatre state), there is no more reason to believe in such a construction now than in the past.

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[1] For the obstacles faced by participants if they challenge such organization, see Couldry (2004).

[2] Endemol UK's Chief Executive, Peter Bazalgette, closely associated with the development of *Big Brother* was reported by the *Guardian* (12 August 2005) as having earned £4.6 million in 2004 alone.