

# Surveillance and class in *Big Brother*

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The television series *Big Brother*, for which Channel Four has contracted the rights until 2006, is in fact rather more than a television programme. It is better understood as an evolving multimedia, multiplatform technological experiment, trailblazing free terrestrial television into the brave new world of what Dan Schiller calls digital capitalism.<sup>1</sup> The political economy of *Big Brother* is inseparable from larger institutional and economic trends which have seen huge capital investments in new communication and information technology. Along with the economics of *Big Brother*, as a text, the series is also a cultural mediation of leading developments within capitalism, particularly the increasing importance of surveillance and the capacities it gives elites for further social control and manipulation. Precisely how we conceptualize the relations between different levels of the social – the cultural and the economic in particular – has been the central problematic of the base–superstructure model in Marxism. I want to offer an ‘unpacking’ of that model in the course of a materialist analysis of the techno-spectacle. In doing so, I will clarify, via a critique of Althusser’s notion of overdetermination, the meaning and importance of the concept of mediation. I will also draw on some concepts developed for textual exegesis by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*, integrating them into some of the political economic mediations Jameson is often criticized for neglecting.

## Political economy

*Big Brother* is a format devised by Dutch company Endemol Entertainment, one of the largest independent European producers, which by the late 1990s had interests in more than two dozen production houses in some fifteen countries. The show features contestants who are locked inside a house, cut off from all contact with the outside world and monitored 24/7. In the UK version of the show contestants are nominated

for eviction by their ‘house-mates’ every week. The two contestants with the most nominations are then subjected to a public vote, where their fate is decided. A cash prize goes to the last person left in the house. The Dutch *Big Brother* first ran in 1999. The format was subsequently sold or subcontracted out to local producers in Germany, Spain and the USA. The UK version of the show is produced by Bazal, part-owned by GMG Endemol, the British offshoot of the Dutch parent company. The ‘GMG’ refers to the Guardian Media Group, who also part-own the UK offshoot. *Big Brother* did not come out of a cultural and televisual vacuum but was preceded by *Survivor* (whose makers sued Endemol after claiming that *Big Brother* was a virtual copy of their idea) and other reality TV shows which followed the daily activities of law enforcement officers and public service agencies.<sup>2</sup>

The success of such shows in both Europe and, crucially, the United States generated large demand from broadcasters for producer ideas around what is known as ‘scriptless’ shows involving ordinary people. It is important to note how well reality TV fits into the political economy of television. In terms of the number of editions of such shows that a given outlay can produce, and therefore the airtime they can fill, Reality TV is considerably cheaper than those other staple fares of the schedules, situation comedies (which cost on average \$2 million per episode) and drama (*ER* costs \$13 million per episode).<sup>3</sup> With no actors’ fees and no writers’ fees it is hardly surprising that Channel Four could afford to strip the first series of *Big Brother* across the schedules six nights a week. Moreover, reality TV lends itself to ‘continuous originals’ (with all the attendant publicity that generates) rather than having to show repeats.

Within the UK television industry, the general logic of capitalist production does not unroll uniformly but is instead reconfigured differentially by the various broadcasting organizations: BBC, ITV, Channel Four,

Channel Five, BSkyB. The material conditions of existence for any particular text depend on the broadcaster's identity, public service remit (if any), main audience constituency or target, and the particular problem or gap in the schedule which the programme aims to fill. Thus within UK terrestrial television, there was probably only one broadcaster who could have commissioned *Big Brother* and that was Channel Four. It had the right demographics (a younger audience base than ITV, which tends to be skewed towards an older audience profile) and it was looking for a response to ITV's phenomenally successful *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?*, which was being stripped across the schedules.<sup>4</sup> The success of the programme in Europe probably already made it too expensive a franchise for Channel Five. Meanwhile the programme's competitive elements made it vulnerable to charges of it being exploitative, and the controversies that it had already generated in other European countries made it emphatically not a BBC programme (which instead developed the more public-service-oriented, cooperative and idealistic *Castaway*).

One feature of *Big Brother* is that it has become a showcase for developing an evolving multimedia, cross-platform and interactive 'experience'. Continuous live feeds to a *Big Brother* website gave a crucial reinforcement to the theme of surveillance beyond the restrictions of the edited highlights broadcast on Channel Four. (The channel's digital channel, E4, also ran hours of live footage.) Thus *Big Brother* saw the first real convergence between television and the Internet, between a new distribution technology and an old technology's content. The integration of the Internet and the website into the television programme was profoundly attractive to the corporations involved, since it facilitated worldwide marketing opportunities. The *Big Brother* website markets not only the usual books, magazines, caps and T-shirts, but also has links to bookmakers and *Big Brother*-branded gambling games. The Dutch site for the first series generated 53 million online impressions.<sup>5</sup> The UK *Big Brother* website registered 7.4 million page impressions on the night the pantomime villain Nasty Nick was confronted by his housemates.<sup>6</sup> The UK's *Big Brother 3* (2002) meanwhile generated an average of 4 million hits per day.<sup>7</sup> *Big Brother 3* was also important in shifting from free 24-hour web streaming to a subscription service costing £10 a month. Important here was the need to break with the cultural expectations of the Internet distributing free services. 'We always knew there would be a bit of a backlash from the internet community', noted Chris Short, head of interactive

services at Endemol. 'The problem is that they have been used to the internet being free.... By next year people will have got used to paying and it won't be such a big deal.'<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile the continuous nature of the programme generates daily newspaper copy. According to one estimate, the tabloid press ran at least 1,300 stories on *Big Brother 2*.<sup>9</sup> Live feeds to cinema-size screens in public places further spread the *Big Brother* text into every pore of the public sphere. The phone votes are the other important 'interactive' dimension of the programme. This generated yet more cash for Channel Four, Endemol and BT (around another £4 million for the second series). The programme's spin-off series, *Big Brother's Little Brother* uses the discussion format to encourage endless mini-votes and phone-ins. With the third series (sponsored by the mobile phone company O<sub>2</sub>), viewers were able to vote using their mobile phone's text message facilities. On top of this viewers can receive news updates as text alerts on their mobile phones, costing another £5 for 36 'alerts'. What the boosters of interactive television forgot to mention was that it involves multinational corporations aggressively interacting with viewers' pockets. As Chris Short admits, 'We're trying to be increasingly clever about how we move our audience around from one platform to another.'<sup>10</sup>

The accumulation logic of all this interactivity is closely woven into the feedback mechanisms, which increases the levels of surveillance and manipulation of the *Big Brother* audience. For example, phone votes on *Big Brother's Little Brother* not only bring in the cash but also provide data on audience attitudes to both the contestants and the *Big Brother* apparatus itself. The programme producers can then respond flexibly to audience attitudes and concerns as each series unfolds. The multimedia and interactive components of the programme fit exactly into contemporary corporate strategies that have seen Internet companies and content providers, such as AOL and Time-Warner, merging. Thus it is no surprise to find that Endemol was subsequently bought up by the Spanish telecommunications giant Telefonica for £3.5 billion, up from a pre-*Big Brother* valuation of £700 million.<sup>11</sup> This corporate base in turn underpins the technological construction of a multiplatform national experience and national *community*. The society of the spectacle 'is not a collection of images', wrote Guy Debord, 'but a social relation among people, mediated by images'.<sup>12</sup>

An analysis of the political economy of the media can show us the way in which the reality TV genre

is congruent with commercial pressure and strategies, and it can even explain the development of certain features such as the multimedia and interactive components of the show. It begins to shade in some of the crucial mediations at work on the cultural product. In his textual/ideological analysis of reality TV, Bill Nichols notes that it 'has a vested interest in subsuming everything beyond itself into its own support system of circulating exchange values'.<sup>13</sup> We have seen that there is a real economic infrastructure, a web of interlocking financial interests underpinning the hermetic quality of the genre. At the same time, political economy of the media is but one scale of determination we must attend to. Political economy of the media is a blunt instrument when it comes to understanding why *this* particular format has developed now and not some other format equally congruent with the industry's economic priorities. In other words, it cannot account for the cultural origins of reality TV; nor can it explore the particular programme as a *production* of that cultural milieu.<sup>14</sup> For that we have to develop the mediations between the various levels of the social order.

## Mediations

When we study or observe a particular thing – a text or institution – it is its immediacy that impresses itself on us most powerfully. In its immediacy we observe and study the text or institution as a discrete thing, cut off and separate from other texts and institutions. This fissure between appearance-forms and the real conditions of existence is a product of the social relations of capitalism. Its competitive property relations, fragmented processes of production and displacement of social control into material things generates its characteristic fetishistic surface forms. Mediation reconstitutes the less visible relations that lie behind the appearance of the object. Its appearance, which strikes our senses so forcibly in the first instance, comes to be seen, once it is mediated, as 'a moment in the movement of consciousness and the *totality*'.<sup>15</sup> Like a brass rubbing, mediation makes visible the (social) patterns and connections that make up the complete picture. As Kellner and Best argue,

The real issue – if one is to avoid an idealism which divorces social levels from one another and from economic processes – concerns the use of adequate mediations, of constructing a sufficiently sophisticated framework which can map the full complexity of cultural texts and social practices in a non-reductive way.<sup>16</sup>

If we 'unpack' the base–superstructure model we can begin to identify the main social levels that require mediation.

*Media texts* Texts must be conceived as a production of existent cultural materials – a point we will come back to later.

*Production process* A text is the product of a specific productive activity by particular people over a given duration.

*Production context* This refers to the companies or organizations in which the production process takes place; its history, strategies and philosophy which predates the production process.

*Industrial context* This refers to the industry (film, television, advertising, etc.) in which the company or organization is operating. As we have seen, there is increasing cross-industrial linkage through ownership and alliances in the age of monopoly, subsidiary and subcontractor capitalism.

*The state* The state has a major impact on the media through its policies and the regulatory regimes it establishes. Although there is no space here to consider the state as a policy organ, much of the commercialization of British television derives from the 1990 Broadcasting Act. I will, however, draw some allegorical connections between *Big Brother* and the bourgeois state, later on.

*Modes of development* This is a category I borrow from Castells to work as a link between the mode of production and superstructure. A mode of development refers to specific social and cultural trends developing *within* the mode of production. Castells uses the term 'informationalism', for example, to capture the rising importance of communication and information technology to capitalism and its resultant social, cultural and political effects.<sup>17</sup> We have already seen that there is a close link between information channels and surveillance.

*Modes of production* This is the master category, mapping out the fundamental social and technological antagonisms and priorities of an epoch. Under capitalism the mode of production is defined by the social relations of exploitation of human labour power. Like modes of development, which this category encompasses, we can also talk in terms of plural modes of production in coexistence with each other, albeit with decreasing frequency globally.

These levels are defined according to a series of increasingly wider contextualizations. The first five levels would usually be located in the superstructure, while the final two levels belong to the mode of production and its internal transformations (modes of develop-

ment). The media are both a business, an increasingly important site for capital investment, accumulation and employment *and* a producer of ideas and values. It is precisely this split between their economic and cultural operations, the relations between them, which is the source of tension and debate between political-economic and Cultural Studies approaches to the media. It may be useful, then, to distinguish between two levels in the foundational category, the mode of production. We can think of the mode of production as a *general* category with no particular concrete content, no particular kinds of production, industry, or services. At this very abstract level, to talk of the capitalist mode of production refers to the *social form* which production takes within a given society. At this level of abstraction the distinction between a mode of production and superstructures holds firm. But then we can also talk of a mode of production in a more concrete sense, referring to actual industries, actual production, actual companies, and so forth. Clearly, a considerable variety of concrete productive arrangements or practices can be housed within the general social form. How the mode of production as a general social form sets limits and exerts pressures on media producers and products<sup>18</sup> cannot be read off from the abstract mode of production category, but requires analysis of the mediations between the general social form and specific media, their institutional and economic relations or ‘base’ and their cultural forms.

It is well known that Louis Althusser, in his attempt to purge Marxism of Hegelian traces, rejected the notion of mediation and instead developed the concept of overdetermination. The problem with the concept of overdetermination, however, is that it separates the various superstructural determinants from the mode of production in order to give them due autonomy. But the effectivity of superstructural forces is not the same as their autonomy. The latter conception is ultimately indistinguishable from liberal pluralism. Althusser argued that in the Hegelian model of how the different parts or determinants relate in the social whole, we have not multiple determinants but the ‘cumulative

*internalization*’ of a general contradiction.<sup>19</sup> This is the crucial concept: internalization. It is clear that if all parts of the social whole are simply internalizing a general contradiction (the economic base in ‘vulgar Marxism’), then all we need do is devote our critical and practical energies to that general contradiction. And yet without *some* conception of internalization, the superstructure disengages from the mode of production entirely and we are left with Althusser’s concept of overdetermination in which the superstructural factors converge from disparate sources, apparently unrelated to the economic relations which remain rigorously



external (until the ‘last instance’ which never comes) to these other determinations. We appear to be in an impossible bind, caught between crude reductionism and liberal pluralism.

Althusser is in fact only half-right on the question of mediation. If internalization is one side of the mediation process, linking the particular to the general, the other side involves a process of *reconfiguration*. The mode of production does not pass into the other levels



of the social formation unhindered and in a uniform and homogenous manner. Mediation involves a double process of internalization *and* reconfiguration, so that the logic of the mode of production – which itself must be internally differentiated by categories such as social class, productive forces, commodification, use-value and so forth – pervades the social formation but gets reworked according to the practices, agency, institutions and technologies of a differentiated social whole. To take one small example: live web streaming for television increases in cost the more people log on to use it, in stark contrast to the way costs fall per negative copy for every consumer of a film. Here the particular technology of the Internet and web broadcasting reconfigures the general logic of the mode of production which it internalizes, thus calling forth, in turn, particular responses and strategies from the social agents involved. All that the mode of production dictates is that social phenomena take up *some* relationship to the socio-economic antagonisms of production; but it does not dictate that all phenomena take up the *same* relations to it.

### **The cultural contradictions of surveillance**

Thus far the analysis of *Big Brother* has operated at the level of the industrial and production contexts. To link the political economy of the media to more general social and cultural contradictions, we need to move both ‘down’ towards the modes of development and production, and ‘up’ towards the production process and the signifying practices of the text itself. The development of technologies of representation, communication and information such as video, the Internet, mobile phones, computer software programs, global positioning systems and so forth, has massively expanded the capacity to generate, store, access and analyse data. There is an inextricable link between surveillance and the cutting-edge mode of development Castells calls informationalism. The technological forces of communicative production thus become the site and stake of the class struggle. New technology allows the individual unprecedented access to a plethora of information, data and communication channels, but it also allows corporate and state agents unprecedented access to consumers and citizens. Thus the *meaning* of surveillance – think, for example, of the debates around closed-circuit video monitoring of public space – whether it is essentially benevolent and protective, or whether it is malevolent and directed by interests inimical to those who are observed and classified, acquires the multi-accentuality of a sign

being pulled in different directions by the conflicts and contradictions of class division and struggle.

Surveillance can thus be ‘textualized’ as an example of what Fredric Jameson calls an ideologeme. An ideologeme is any signifying unit around which the antagonistic dialogue between classes is conducted. Surveillance as an ideologeme is the means by which we can articulate the modes of development and production to a cultural text such as *Big Brother*. An ideologeme within a particular text thus counts as a ‘move’ or stratagem in the ‘ideological confrontation between the classes’.<sup>20</sup> Jameson sees the cultural text as a ‘symbolic act’,<sup>21</sup> which is to stress that the text is a *production* of preexisting cultural and ideological materials. Seeing the text as a ‘production’ is vital if we are to move away from the more passive notion of a text simply ‘reflecting’ the wider society. If it is a production, then the task is to investigate it as a reconfiguration of existing materials, a combination of those materials which has some element of uniqueness about it no matter how generic or formulaic its materials and operations. And one of the things that the text produces is its own imaginary resolution to real social contradictions. The resolution is imaginary because the social problems that the text diagnoses can only in fact be resolved through social practice. When that practical resolution is blocked (by the dominant social relations), culture performs a mythical reconciliation. Cultural texts use formal strategies such as narrative oppositions, imagery, and particular points of ‘entry’ or focalization on the action, in order to manage and contain problematic social content. This implies that strategies of containment are a complex process in which problematic social content simultaneously surfaces, only then to be repressed by the formal strategies deployed. Jameson’s interpretive model is, then, like a Geiger counter passed over the text; the distinctive clicking of the Geiger counter here picks up not just what is emitted but what is omitted by the text, what has been repressed.<sup>22</sup> Jameson aims to decode the political unconscious (the repressed mode of production) that haunts the text, leaving its mark on its forms and content.

How, then, is the ideologeme of surveillance both articulated and repressed in *Big Brother*? In relation to the housemates, surveillance is deliberately used to generate some of the negative signifiers associated with a remote institution (the set design of the house, the motif of the mechanical camera eye, the capricious tests and surprises which *Big Brother* sets for the contestants) in order to generate a certain dramatic frisson. In relation to the audience, the programme works very

hard to develop strategies to contain and manage any anxieties which might cause them to distrust the *Big Brother* apparatus. There are, for example, the strategies of inclusion (the public's vox pop commentaries on the contestants, the 'fans' gathered around the house on eviction nights) and presentation (the performance of Davina McCall, or even the Northern accent of the narrator, Marcus Bentley – market research for call centres has found that the Northern accent connotes a trustworthiness and honesty which helps contain anxieties around the remoteness and anonymity of such



consumer services).

The tension within the ideologeme of surveillance between representation for public good or observation for some private (or state) interest runs back to the aesthetic origins of reality TV itself. Where once the extension of representation to the ordinary in documentaries or social realist films was a subversion and critique of professional codes of representation, now the ordinary is co-opted as a badge of professional authenticity, a sign of the proximity of the professionals, including their stars and celebrities, to the vernacular and the plebeian. This is one master strategy of containment in which class is simultaneously acknowledged and conjured away at a stroke: the ordinary is

valued precisely because of its difference from the elites, but then we discover that since the media elites and their codes of representation can adopt the style of the ordinary at will, there is no class difference of any note. Reality TV's production of this cultural tension has its roots in the camcorder revolution which made it economically possible and aesthetically legitimate for the ordinary to break into the fortified bastion of broadcasting. Video technology is obviously central to the feasibility of *Big Brother*'s 24-hour surveillance, but it is also central to the rationale of the form, the aesthetic of reality TV. For reality TV at its purest (and *Big Brother* is reality TV at its purest) is premised on the myth of real time, where both the gap between action and representation is closed by the eternal presence of the cameras and the gap between the recording and audience consumption (and feedback) is narrowed by technologies of rapid assemblage (digital editing) and dissemination (Internet, satellite, broadcasting).

*Big Brother* produces a surprising twist on earlier 1970s debates concerning the illusionism and pseudo-transparency of dominant audiovisual discourse. In *Big Brother* the authenticity and spontaneity of the events are paradoxically confirmed by the very visibility of the representational apparatus. For Nichols, reality TV offers a 'richly constructed sense of contingency a vital element in the pervasive "now" of tele-reality'.<sup>23</sup> Thus in *Big Brother* all those banks of monitors recording the events unfolding in the house, which we see when the programme cuts to the inside of the control room, or when Davina quietly watches the inmates behind the two-way mirror, are signifiers of catching reality on the run. This was the explicit and conscious intention of the executive producer, Ruth Wrigley, who tells us: 'I wanted viewers ... to see the control room, to get an idea of all the behind the scenes work.... We were filming it for real, and it was a virtue of the programme that viewers understood that.'<sup>24</sup> But the contradictions of the surveillance ideologeme – and the class divisions that underlie it – nevertheless resurface via this selfsame strategy of containment. The show is caught between flaunting its elaborate apparatus and trying to persuade us that they are not really in control. In the *Big Brother* book accompanying the first series, the writer is at pains to convey the producers' sense of not being able to control the events going on in the house. But, rather like the base in relation to the superstructure, the producers have already determined the parameters within which their lack of control will run. The contradiction between displaying the apparatus as a sign of authentic connection with the ordinary and its display as a sign of the apparatus's

ability to control and manipulate is the mediation, the *internalization–reconfiguration*, of the more general contradiction already discussed around the ideogeme of surveillance. It is a contradiction that surfaces when ex-contestants complain about how they were represented by *Big Brother's* editing decisions. As one ex-contestant Josh Rafter from *Big Brother 2* noted:

The producers tend only to show on TV what they want the audience to see. I was constantly shown reading books. But I only read one book in seven weeks. I don't mind that they made me look intelligent like that, but it wasn't what was really happening.<sup>25</sup>

The contradiction between authenticity and manipulation also surfaces in this passage from the *Big Brother* book on the computer software used to log and retrieve actions by the contestants:

For example, if a producer was trying to put together a film package on two contestants, he or she put their names into the computer and it would deliver every instance when they were filmed together. By adding the keyword 'touching' this would be refined to any sequence of them making bodily contact with each other.<sup>26</sup>

These contradictions at the level of form between the authenticity of the ordinary and manipulation are also played out in relation to the content of the show. Despite the postmodern qualities of *Big Brother*, it mobilizes powerful utopian desires which would be left untapped in a more thoroughly postmodern artefact (given that utopianism implies some desire for those very concepts that postmodernism tends to eschew, such as progress and transcendence). Within the utopian promise of the ordinary there lies a desire for transparency in our relations with individuals and institutions that the capitalist mode of production is structurally quite unable to deliver. So the hope that 24-hour observation will reveal through emotional revelation, confession and action, such transparency, and thus provide the viewer with the basis on which to judge and vote for the contestants, is cancelled by the very structure and premiss of the show. The competitive relations between the contestants, coupled with the monitoring of their every move, means that they must instrumentally calculate their performance both to each other and to us the watching audience. Under such circumstances, every action and gesture and confession becomes tainted with some hint of perception management. The spectator is thus cleaved in two, torn between credulously wishing to believe in the emotional honesty of the interpersonal relations or the revelation of their falseness (and on that basis

cast their votes) while also suspecting, like the most burnt-out cynic, every word, gesture and edit. The electoral element of the show thus now stands revealed as something of an allegory of the crisis of legitimacy bourgeois democracy now confronts. Like the *Big Brother* inmates, the political class is trapped in a system it cannot control and so perception management becomes a central activity of politics when management of pretty much everything else is subcontracted out to the private sector. And the sceptical citizens, like the *Big Brother* spectators, still cast their votes (although in declining numbers) hoping against hope that *this time* their elected representatives mean what they say and say what they mean.

## Programming

The crisis of bourgeois democracy, operating within increasingly narrow margins, increasingly defined by failure (rather than the self-realization of the world of consumption), by remoteness, by elites, is both offset and highlighted by media representation where a more authentic participation and representation without representation (that is, elite mediation) *appears* to be on offer. People tune in for *Big Brother* because the media speak the language of the ordinary so much more convincingly than the political class, while at the same time appropriating a simulation of participation and collective representation which the political realm is supposed to represent, but which it has evidently lost, particularly for the age group (18–35) *Big Brother* is appealing to.

The world of *Big Brother* is very similar in many ways to the world of work: along with the instrumental calculation of performing for colleagues and superiors, there is the tension between cooperation and competition, the rules and conditions already imposed, the futile tasks and the boredom. Once again, reality surfaces only for its potentially troubling antagonisms to be recontained, not least by the fantasy compensation of mastery and control offered to the spectator by their alignment with the all-seeing *Big Brother* eye. Furthermore, while there is class, ethnic, gender and sexual diversity in the selection of the contestants, this only becomes converted into elements of their media performance (working-class contestant wins because he does not seem bright enough to be dissembling; gay man wins because he embodies emotional honesty). For the audience, this social diversity works in a contradictory fashion. On the one hand, it offers multiple points of identification; on the other, the text encourages the social or political basis for that identification to be converted into an individual's

media performance. Indeed, were the *Big Brother* contestants actually drawn from a more homogenous group – say, white men or the upper middle class – the show would be much more political, more evidently about a social constituency. The social diversity of the contestants is depoliticized in the editing out of any reference to the social reality from which the contestants are drawn, partly through fear of libel action (even the web feeds have a ten-second delay to provide enough time for controllers to stop broadcasting should libellous material be produced), but largely because of the nature of the programme (premissed on isolating the group from any contact or stimuli from the outside world) and the narcissistic contestants selected.

This strange abstract social unit masquerading as a social microcosm is projected by the techno-spectacle as the raw material of relatively risk-free ‘national conversation’ in the interstices of work (so called water-cooler television). An ethnographic study of the reception of the programme would very likely find the ghostly traces of the social and political basis for judgement and evaluation beneath the surface reduction of opinion to the merely personal, but it can hardly be said that the programme itself encourages this. Similarly, an ethnographic study would in all likelihood find an intermittent awareness within such conversations of how the production apparatus of *Big Brother* manipulates and controls the events and warrants ethical judgement on *their* role. But, again, it can hardly be said that the programme itself encourages this.

Instead *Big Brother* is a symptom of certain regressive trends within the public sphere whereby the foundations for making rational and informed decisions about socially constituted persons and events are eroded by a welter of mediatized interests (both corporate and individual). The first series of *Big Brother* ran at the same time that mobs were being whipped up by the *News of the World* around fears concerning listed paedophiles. At least one newspaper commentator made the link between *Big Brother* and ‘a season of media witchhunts and the opportunistic exploitation of “ordinary” people, of fake intimacy and knee-jerk emotional outpourings’.<sup>27</sup> When everything becomes reduced to perception management, the postmodern subject dissolves, as Jameson argued,<sup>28</sup> into a fragmented series of intense experiences with little rational continuity and prone to powerful feelings of either exhilaration or fear, love or hate. Thus the public narrative of *Big Brother* is characterized by a series of displacements in which many of the contestants eventually – particularly once on the cusp of eviction – become the focal point

of dislike and public condemnation orchestrated by the media. This reached hysterical proportions in the tabloid press during *Big Brother 3* with the vilification of Jade Goody. The triple determination of her being poorly educated (i.e. working class), female and of mixed-race parentage underlay the press coverage in which she was described as a pig, the Elephant Women and a ‘foul mouthed ex-shoplifter’ (*Daily Mail*).<sup>29</sup> Such tabloid hostility to Jade and the other contestants rarely broadens out into a critique of the programme’s producers and certainly never widens further into an understanding of the industrial conditions shaping reality TV. Those conditions of commercialism, corporate alliances and the synergies of cross-promotion are very similar to those determining the press itself. Thus the real determinants of the mode of production remain repressed, only symptomatically evident in the cultural contradictions around surveillance, authenticity, and the symbolic overloading involved in the judgement of the performance of individuals.

In *Big Brother* we see one possible future direction of television: the thorough penetration of commodified information and communications technology into our rapidly shrinking public spaces and public services. Such public spaces are perhaps best understood as the residual traces of an older, still present, but embattled mode of development that was characterized by nation-states regulating national markets and capital. New information and communications technology has been one important element in the globalization of capital that has undermined that old order. The new political economy of the media evidently has parallels with globalized economy more generally. This is the reality of reality TV. In *Big Brother* we see the cultural contradictions of this political economy manifest themselves around the closely connected question of surveillance. The tensions between accessing the ordinary and being ‘spun’ by the media performance, between the authenticity of representation and its manipulation by the technological controllers, between participation in an event and being a mere object to be controlled and exploited, are all swimming around the programme as a reconfiguration of the class struggle. In offering a materialist analysis of all this, I have sought to unpack the often monolithic and immobile base–superstructure model and show that its problematic is of continuing importance for media analysis.

## Notes

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