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30. It's life, Jim... but not as we know it (2001)

Carol Morley

In 1994 the trade paper *Television Today* reported a new idea for a TV programme called *Divorce Me*, which would feature real life divorcing couples competing for the contents of their own home. The chief executive of the production company explained, 'We've had reality entertainment shows and reality crime shows. I think the new mood in entertainment will be for reality game shows'.

Reality television (RT) has become a significant part of the television schedules, claiming an authenticity that other TV genres can't match. To appear democratic, inclusive and representative, RT relies heavily on the inclusion of so called 'ordinary people' — those previously outside the TV world. But is RT authentic and democratic? Does it offer possibilities for challenging attitudes to gender, class, race and sexuality, or does it merely reinforce existing stereotypes?

I want to pose these questions in relation to two recently popular reality programmes, *Big Brother* and *Popstars*. I also want to ask how it is possible for us both to revile these shows and at the same time enjoy watching them.

Big Brother and the pseudo-world

The phenomenally successful RT show *Big Brother* is part fly-on-the-wall docusoap, part quiz show, part talent contest, part psychological investigative study; it also has an interactive element where the viewing audience can ring in and vote to evict one of the contestants every week. The reward for appearing is instant celebrity and, for the final survivor, a large sum of money. On the whole the show is tedious, in the sense that nothing of any great significance happens, but that does not mean *Big Brother* as a programme is not significant. If my own and my friends' responses, the TV ratings and press reactions are anything to go by, it is compulsive viewing.

Big Brother can be compared to soap opera, which has often been seen as a 'female' genre. By contrast with 'male' genres such as the western, which are oriented to action and show men conquering the big wide world, soap operas are dramas that unfold in a domestic space. Their multiple storylines emphasize areas that women are deemed to have authority over, such as family, personal

relationships and emotional problem-solving. These genres initially arose in order to locate men in relation to the outside world while keeping women inside in an attempt to disempower them. But research on female spectators has shown that women can gain enormous pleasure from seeing even limited representations of themselves.

One of the pleasures of soap opera is sharing the experience of it with other women. The discussions female spectators have around the plots and characters of soaps are a form of gossip, a culturally gendered activity which many women enjoy. *Big Brother* does some of the same work. In taking us inside the house, into domestic space, into the world of gossip, you could argue that it feminises its audience.

But it also could be argued that the show was constructed with masculine intent. *Big Brother* is premised on voyeurism, on our pleasure in watching the contestants without them seeing us. Constant internet access also offers the spectator a degree of power over what is seen. The cinema has been theorised as reproducing a 'male gaze', and *Big Brother* seems to reinforce this. Even with that post-modern ironic wink, the show is still called *Big Brother*—not just a reference to Orwell, but also a name which underlines the power of patriarchy.

'Real' people?

The spectators of television now have a chance to appear on it, but they are still chosen by TV professionals. They are selected not only on their ability to bring along a realistic model of the everyday world, but also on their ability to play the TV game: it is a prerequisite that they conform to the needs of the programme makers.

The five female and five male *Big Brother* contestants arrived on the show¹ through a rigorous audition process: they had competed with thousands of others to appear. Definable characters emerged that we could follow, just like the characters in soap operas. While their diversity didn't stretch to age or size, we had a black woman (Mel), a black man (Darren), a lesbian (Anna) and a cross-section across class. The programmes were heavily edited in order to achieve a semblance of drama. The hours of footage that were generated from constant surveillance by many cameras all over the house had to emerge as palatable chunks, with a narrative structure, that could find their place in the television schedules. In observing the rules of narrative and character development, stereotypes inevitably arose.

Anna, who survived ten weeks to become the runner-up, revealed at the start of the show that she was a lesbian, and also an ex-novice nun. Her sexuality was discussed by the group, and later by the male contestants, who thought it was unfortunate that Anna wasn't 'available' to them. The group saw her sexuality as an

area of intrigue but nobody appeared to view it as threatening. Two of the women voiced their positions as bi-curious, but were still very much interested in men. Craig, the ultimate winner, asked Anna what it was like to share a bedroom with four other women, and did she fancy any of them? Anna didn't reply. She had a long-term relationship so was unlikely to show an interest in any of the female contestants while her girlfriend was watching. (It is interesting that the programme makers selected her knowing this.) While sexual tension appeared to brew in the house between the male and female contestants, Anna was seen as doubly non-threatening because she was not going to compete with the other women for male attention. By contrast, the exclusion of male homosexuality seemed very deliberate, as though the presence of a gay man would have been a threat to the other male contestants, who frequently underlined their heterosexual status.

When contestant 'Nasty' Nick was ousted midway through the series for breaking the rules of the game, a replacement was brought in from the outside world. As Claire arrived in the house, we saw a shot of Mel's reaction, which was widely interpreted by viewers and in the press as a look of jealousy. After her part in the show was over, Mel explained that what she really felt at that moment was paranoia, because Claire had watched them all on TV. This 'look of jealousy' is indicative of how Mel was constructed as overtly sexual and flirtatious. She appeared to bond with the male contestants but was wary and competitive with the female contestants. Overall, Mel was continually being presented as devious and manipulative when it came to men. There is a strong racist stereotype at work here. As in the case of Mel B from the Spice Girls, who was dubbed 'Scary Spice', Big Brother Mel, who is also of mixed race, was presented as embodying a threatening 'otherness'.

In all the countries where a version of *Big Brother* exists, the final winner has so far always been a white heterosexual male². Why hasn't a woman won? Anna almost won, probably because she came across as such an unthreatening presence. All the rest of the women were represented as problematic. Nicola, who wore a skimpy bikini almost always, was seen by the male contestants as argumentative and volatile. Sada, author of a book entitled *The Babe's Bible*, was presented as duplicitous, one moment giving a lecture on how she would never kill a fly, the next moment shown swatting an insect between her palms with glee. She was the only woman in the house to have a boyfriend, so was therefore perceived as unavailable by the lad contestants (who spent time speculating about which woman they fancied most). Sada was the first person to be evicted from the house. Caroline was also deemed argumentative and a troublemaker, while Mel was seen as flirtatious and manipulative.

Before Craig won *Big Brother*, it was leaked to the press that he was going to donate the prize money to a family friend, a young woman with Down's syndrome who needed a heart operation. While undoubtedly a charitable act, this had the air of the male saviour and hero about it—further compounded when Craig left the house and walked through the crowds flexing his muscles to waiting photographers. It seemed that unreconstructed masculinity had won the day.

Popstars

Building on the new desire for celebrity, confession and the real, *Popstars* can be seen as the ultimate in reality programming. The premise of the show was the formation of a band from mass auditions: five finalists would be launched into celebrity, given a recording contract and awarded £100,000 each if their first single reached number one. The TV series followed the competing contestants' heartaches and struggles; we were privy to their intimate confessions. When we were down to the last ten contestants, we were taken into their homes and introduced to their families. We seemed to be offered everything that lay behind the scenes.

We witnessed, for instance, the anxieties of 18-year old Suzanne, who doubted she would ever make it into the final band, though ultimately she did. Along the way she exhibited signs of self-loathing. She compared herself with the other women competing, and found herself not as thin or as pretty. When so much meaning

is placed upon the way women look, and thinness is equated with some kind of success, it isn't surprising that she focused on her body, her appearance. Back in the 1970s, the TV talent show *Opportunity Knocks* launched the child star Lena Zavaroni, whose rise to fame, subsequent battle with eating disorders, and early tragic death, have all been well documented. Her eating disorders appear to have been tightly interwoven with her rise to celebrity. In *Popstars*, another young woman who clearly had a very powerful singing voice and impressive dancing style remarked that she would never make it to the final round because she wasn't thin. She was right. Yet the show's emphasis on Suzanne's insecurities seemed to be reinforcing a representation of women as neurotic and narcissistic.

After Kym was selected to be in the band, we learnt that she had hidden from the programme makers the fact that she was the mother of two young children. She defended her omission to judge Nigel, saying that it would have prevented her being chosen. It had always held her back in the past and had often been the reason she has not landed a job. Nigel chastised her; he spoke of his disappointment in her and assured her that her status as a mother would in no way have prevented her from being picked. The words rang hollow: just as one woman was not selected because she wasn't thin, so it is clear that Kym's status as a single mother would have raised a number of issues for the judges. They would have discussed the criticism the programme might receive for taking a mother away from her children. They would have discussed her desirability to fans if they were to find out she had two children. They would have talked about the ramifications of a single mother being a role model for younger fans. Her commitment to the band would also have been questioned (this has since played out in Kym's ranking at the betting shops as odds-on favourite to be the first band-member to leave).

Kym's decision to withhold information about herself reinforces the point that people seeking celebrity status and the material rewards that accompany it will do all they can to fit in. Before they are even at the point of having 'made it', the female wannabes are already conforming to a stereotypical image of women: they reveal flesh, they wear high heels, they are thin (weaker and taking up less room), all for the sake of appearing sexually available to men.

Last week in a restaurant, I caught a glimpse of Emma Bunton, a.k.a. 'Baby Spice'. I noticed she was scanning the room to catch the discreet glances, to make sure that everyone in the restaurant recognised her. I was reminded of another celebrity-spotting some months before. I was going into a clothes shop when the woman in front of me tripped and turned around in embarrassment. It was Mel from *Big Brother*. I kept her in my sightline while I circled the shop; she was looking

to see who was looking at her. Her status depended on people knowing who she was. She had performed her television role, and here she was seeking her reward—recognition. Mel, famous for being on a reality TV show, famous for being famous. The self-consciousness that goes with celebrity status is just a logical extension of what it is to be a woman, constantly objectified and constantly surrounded by unobtainable images of who we are supposed to be.

The contestants on *Big Brother* and *Popstars* are freely participating in the shows, but not without manipulation from a variety of sources. They are constructed and marketed, and at the end of the day their purpose is to make a profit for those who manufacture them. The contestants are so desperate to be celebrities that they will do almost anything, and the female participants do appear to be more vulnerable. We only have to look at the myriad female stars that are becoming thinner and thinner, their earning power growing in inverse proportion to their diminishing bodies. I worry about Suzanne from *Popstars*: will she get too thin? I worry about the contestant from *Big Brother* described in a recent article (written by a man) as ‘opening her legs, showing all, desperate to cling onto any celebrity status she’d got left’.

Watching TV: getting what we want or making do with what we get?

Reality television claims to be a testimony to our ‘real’ lives, and the way we want to live our lives. In fact, though, reality shows are not democratic, and they reproduce prevailing stereotypes all too easily. So what accounts for the pleasure we find in them?

As women, we have a history of interacting with TV and film genres that may not have our interests at heart, and of celebrating the images of women they present, from the *femmes fatales* of *film noir* to the prisoners in Cell Block H. Anna from *Big Brother* may not have had much of a voice in the show, but she became, arguably, a lesbian icon: the London lesbian hang-out Candy Bar urged patrons to ‘vote to keep Anna in *Big Brother*’, and built a night around her final appearance. Lacking more varied and complex representations, it seems we are prepared to make the most of what we get.

Notes

1. This piece discusses the first UK series of *Big Brother*, which was broadcast in 2000.
2. It is no longer true that all *Big Brother* winners have been male, heterosexual and white. Of the nine UK series broadcast to date, straight white men have won four, but winners have also included one gay man, one black man, two white women and a contestant who was revealed to be a male-to-female transsexual [Eds.]