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From Social Experiment to Postmodern Joke

Big Brother and the Progressive Construction of Celebrity

"Television it is, reality it's not." (Baggot 24)
The invention of Chantelle was a superb piece of casting. (Peter York, quoted in Aspinall 2006, 154)

According to Su Holmes, one of the significant factors to emerge from the growth of reality TV is that it “has made it impossible to escape the fact that we have seen an appreciable rise in the number of ‘ordinary’ people appearing on television” (“All you’ve got” 111). It is this process that this essay will explore, examining the reality TV program Big Brother and especially its counterpart, Celebrity Big Brother, within the context of its transmission in the United Kingdom. Following a discussion concerning the development, nature, and critical reaction to Big Brother, I will focus on the palpable congruence between Big Brother and celebrity discourse and the increasingly discernible “celebritization” effect Big Brother perennially bestows on many of its contestants, particularly in recent years. Indeed, when examined retrospectively, many of the prominent or infamous moments of Big Brother are explicitly connected to this increasing reality TV-celebrity connection. Although the study of media stars has a significant history within film studies and sociology (Dyer; Alberoni; Monaco; DeCordova; Gledhill), recent years have seen the emergence of a solid and progressive body of research dedicated to mapping out the culture and status of contemporary celebrity (Rojc; Turner; Evans and Hesmondhalgh; Cashmore, Beckham and Celebrity/Culture; Marshall; Holmes and Redmond; Redmond and Holmes), much of which pays acute attention to the rise of “fabricated celebrities” created through appearances on reality TV shows. When viewed in retrospect, Big Brother represents a steady convergence between a “people show” narrative and

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the establishment of a particular mode of celebrity, a celebrity type constructed by the Big Brother audience, but more crucially by the show's producers. Drawing on the approach of Erving Goffman, I will discuss the increasing prevalence of individuals reflexively recognizing the potential of Big Brother, a process that serves to undercut the "reality principle" of the format through the adoption of strategic fronts designed to appeal to voting viewers and fellow housemates in order to postpone eviction from the house, with all its risks of anonymity.

Though I will discuss the means by which successive ordinary people can and have become celebrity figures through sustained television exposure on Big Brother, I will also examine a singular case study in the show's history, an event that occurred in the United Kingdom: Celebrity Big Brother 2006 and its winner, Chantelle Houghton. The significance of this case stems from the fact that Chantelle entered Celebrity Big Brother as a non-celebrity, a "fake celebrity" furnished with a script and a specific assignment: to convince her celebrity housemates that she was indeed famous. Not only did she achieve this objective, but she subsequently became the winner of the show and the most mediated figure to take part in the program: a true star. After Big Brother, Chantelle embarked on a celebrity fairy-tale life, complete with her own television show. This deliberately engineered television experiment served to illuminate the manner in which reality TV can direct cultural interest to the various individuals who appear within it, to demonstrate the ways in which the producers of Big Brother strive to reflexively manipulate, or at least foster, the celebritizing process, and to illustrate the degree to which reality TV and celebrity have become steadily intertwined. This symbiosis therefore is the culmination of Big Brother's significant trajectory since its first broadcast in 2000 in the United Kingdom.

I will discuss how, since its first transmission, the U.K. version of Big Brother has progressively and decisively developed away from the trappings of psychological and social experimentation, a game show but one with a socially aware veneer, into an entertainment spectacle, a Boorstinian pseudo-event in which the celebritization process not only is left to external media (newspapers, celebrity magazines) but is increasingly engineered by Big Brother's producers. The sum effect is that, as some commentators state, the radical nature of Big Brother has given way to a battery of gimmicks and the conscious and active creation of celebrity contestants while
they are still contestants. If *Big Brother* has a discernible trajectory from 2000 to 2007, this, arguably, is it.

**Reality Television, Big Brother, and “Ordinary” Celebrities**

Surveying the history of media and, in particular, television in relation to the subject of celebrity, Tunstall notes: “Personal celebrity pre-dates the modern media, but in recent years general and media celebrity have moved closer and closer and are now virtually identical. ... The television age took further something which radio had begun—the manufacturing of fame largely through appearances on the electronic media” (1). Certainly this trend is manifest in relation to the inexorable rise of the television genre commonly dubbed reality TV, particularly the reality game-show formats such as *Survivor* and especially *Big Brother*. The cultural responses to reality TV initially bore a distinctly Frankfurt School-flavored pessimism and critical cynicism. Contrary to any social experimental “mission statements,” reality TV, for many commentators, was argued to offer no social-psychological insights at all but instead merely to represent “a mixture of banality and emotional pornography” (Barnfield in Cummings et al. 47). For others it was an emergent genre explicitly predicated on turning its “characters’ vices into virtues” (Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture* 189), and in its predictability and set format, it is arguably a mode of television texts that limits and preestablishes “the attitudinal pattern of the spectator” (Adorno 169), based as it is on mass audience participation. Such negative approaches were corroborated in the case of the reactions to *Loft Story*, the French version of *Big Brother*. Although a significant ratings success, *Loft Story* was also subjected to various demonstrations by the protest group Activists against Trash TV, which called for the program to be removed from air, and whose protests included demonstrators outside the television studio brandishing placards that read, “With trash TV the people turn into idiots” (Hill 4).

Conversely, other commentators perceived the development of reality TV as an unprecedented advance in television, seeing it as a medium by which the audience is actually empowered and rendered active. In this analysis, reality TV has represented a dynamic development whereby the masses have actually been granted the ability to actively direct the narrative rather than simply receive transmissions in a docile, passive manner.
(Andrejevic; Tincknell and Raghuram 2002). Furthermore, in relation to the example of Big Brother and its broadcast in Denmark, some politically minded critics viewed it as an incisive and instructive social experiment because of the ways in which the format is fundamentally based on “human relations, intimacy and security” (Biltereyst 100).

The history of reality TV stretches back to at least the 1960s in “people shows” such as Candid Camera and through the 1990s within docudramas and docuseries, including The Family, An American Family, and Airline. Other notable examples include the do-it-yourself (DIY) Webcam experiments in the 1990s (Turner), broadcasts such as that of the American student Jennifer Ringley, who created videos of her everyday life in her apartment, revealing domestic and personal events ranging from brushing her teeth and studying for college, to having sex with her boyfriend, all broadcast on the Web as “Jennicam” to millions of viewers (Bazalgette). Reality TV’s prime exemplar in terms of influence, significance, and popularity, however, is undoubtedly Big Brother.

Big Brother was originally developed by Endemol Entertainment in the Netherlands in 1999 and would be subsequently syndicated in numerous countries, including France, Germany, Italy, Poland, South Africa, Australia, and America. Seamlessly combining television and Internet surveillance (Griffin-Foley), Big Brother was launched in the United Kingdom on Channel 4 in the summer of 2000, becoming “the definitive example of a whole range of programmes which have deployed combinations of the syntactical elements of forced confinement, competitive individualism and emotional conflict as entertainment [such as] Castaway 2000, Survivor, Pop Idol, Fame Academy [and] The Salon” (Tincknell and Raghuram 2006, 255). Big Brother is essentially an “interactive reality TV game show” (Thornborrow and Morris 246), culturally designated by the iconic symbol of an all-seeing eye that knowingly and explicitly referenced George Orwell’s dystopian novel 1984 (the major difference being that the contestants welcomed the all-pervasive gaze of the camera). Its set consists of a specially constructed Big Brother House, which is fitted extensively with cameras that serve to monitor the housemates twenty-four hours a day. Furthermore, “The contestants are given tasks to perform in return for extra food and other treats, and to encourage them to interact in various ways and get to know one another. Every week, they each nominate their least favorite housemate, the two contestants with the most nominations...
are announced and the public are invited to vote one of them out of the house. In this way the contestants are gradually whittled away, and whoever is left in the house at the end of the series is the winner and gets a cash prize” (Cummings et al. xii). Throughout the Big Brother experience, contestants conventionally have no contact with life outside the house, and their social interactants are restricted to their housemates until they are evicted. Their only moments of privacy are attainable within the “dairy room,” where they speak to “the imaginary figure of ‘Big Brother’” (Ticknell and Raghuram 2002, 202). Hence, the process is akin to that of the inmate world articulated by Goffman, by which individuals enter institutions, bringing with them values from a “home world”—ways of life and activities taken for granted—that, on the point of admission to the institution, are subject to curtailment (Asylums 23). The enforcement of mortification is also evident: within the Big Brother house, the contestants are referred to only by their Christian names; shower and toilet areas are communal; they are permitted to bring with them into the house only a limited number of personal items (which are routinely removed if contestants break the house rules); and they must endure periodic humiliation in the form of participation in tasks set by the omnipotent Big Brother to secure rewards and luxuries. Abstention results in group penalization and frequently the failure to complete the task.

Given the ubiquity of cameras, the dominant motif of Big Brother is surveillance; watching is at the heart of the narrative. Consequently, personal space is at best restricted, if not entirely removed: “Big Brother’s title connotes entrapment, restriction and control, and Big Brother was marketed at first as an experiment about how human society works, with the contestants like rats trapped in a laboratory maze. As if in a psychology test, the selfishness of desiring the first series prize of £70,000 conflicted with the contestants’ need to gain loyalty from their housemates” (Bignell 118–119). Such control evokes Foucault’s conception of the idealized “disciplined society” (and its primary institutions—the military, factories, hospitals, and prisons): “the gaze is alert everywhere” (195). Big Brother is Foucault’s (or, rather, Bentham’s) “panopticon” in idealized form (with shades of Zimbardo’s 1971 Stanford prison experiment), constructed and utilized for purely entertainment purposes, but reflecting the primary effect of the panopticon: “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility” (Foucault 201). Big Brother, however, arguably represents a three-step panopticon: the contestants are subject to the gaze
of the media and related professionals—from the producers, presenters,
and psychologists to the newspapers and magazines that constantly dis-
cuss, dissect, and speculate on the various housemates; the contestants are
subject to the scrutiny of the viewing public, and they must subsequently
strive to project favorable and entertaining impressions of themselves if
they are to forestall premature eviction; and finally (and most directly),
the housemates constantly observe each other, forming alliances, trying to
second-guess other contestants, analyzing, and developing appraisals on
which they will ultimately base their decisions to nominate or not nomi-
nate others for eviction. Such internal surveillance is the staple of diary
room discussions with Big Brother. And it is this combinatory panoptic
process that confers a peculiar glamour, an aura conducive to an emergent
celebrity status.

For many commentators, the intrinsic appeal and distinctiveness of
Big Brother is that it specifically involves real people, individuals who
have been “plucked from obscurity and turned into stars, not because of
any special talent, but just because they seem personable” (Cummings et
al. xii). Thus, reality TV is a genre predicated on the erosion of discrete
borders, actively blurring “the conventional boundaries between fact and
fiction, drama and documentary and between the audience and the text”
(Roscoe 474). It is a televisial experience “located in border territories,
between information and entertainment, documentary and drama” (Hill
2). As Barnfield states, “Our collective willingness to watch such material
indicates an erosion of the distinction between public and private, an end
to intimacy” (Cummings et al. 63); Big Brother is an environment in which
the contestants freely make “themselves into a spectacle” (Scannell 276)
and as such become, to lesser and greater degrees, celebrity figures.

For Holmes the development of reality TV, and Big Brother in particu-
lar, has resulted in a palpable rise in the number of “ordinary” people who
now are able to appear on television and who, by being on the program,
are inevitably granted the status of “celebrity in process” (“All you’ve
got” 119). Yet it is a very novel form of celebrity because “celebrity in Big
Brother is lacking some of the fundamental discourses of the success myth,
largely the emphasis on work and traditional conceptions of talent” (“All
you’ve got” 119), although it may be argued to accord to some extent with
the “discovery narrative” (Turner), in which an anonymous individual
suddenly finds fame and media attention. In Big Brother, however, there is
rarely any sense of “achieved celebrity”; it is, rather, an “attributed

celebrity" (Rojek) status because for those who participate, celebrity is ostensibly achieved through leisure, by frequently doing nothing. Ultimately, Big Brother deliberately places "ordinary people in an extraordinary situation... a world in which anyone can feel the glow of celebrity" (Holmes, "All you've got" 131-132). Moreover, like most categories of celebrity, it requires constructing agents. As Rojek states, although it may not always be apparent, celebrities are by and large "constructed": "Their impact on the public may appear to be intimate and spontaneous. In fact, celebrities are carefully mediated through what might be termed chains of attraction. No celebrity now acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries who operate to stage-manage celebrity presence in the eyes of the public. 'Cultural intermediaries' is the collective term for agents, publicists, marketing personnel, promoters, photographers" (10). Although agents and related media (newspapers, magazines, and television) are significant players in the celebrity-construction process, in Big Brother the television audience becomes a key agent in ensuring the continuing visibility of the contestants because it is the viewers who control the fate of the housemates. Although primarily a television event (Kilborn; Scannell) on both terrestrial and satellite channels, Big Brother is also streamed across the Internet, a factor that grants the audience a distinctive "idea of agency" (Tincknell and Raghabram 2002, 2006), and as the motto of Big Brother consistently proclaims regarding the fate of nominated contestants: "You decide." Such apparent viewer freedom, however, is not always so clear-cut. Big Brother, with its apparent trappings of psychological experimentation, is broadcast on commercial television, and thus entertainment is a crucial factor. Viewed retrospectively, Big Brother has steadily become a larger spectacle, and the original "reality" concept has increasingly been eclipsed by the game-show dimension. In this sense, reality TV and Big Brother arguably fall within Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of popular television, a field significantly influenced by the dual forces of commercial and economic constraints. As Bourdieu argues: "On the whole the management of television is determined by the channel owners, by the agencies which pay vast amounts of money to have their commercial clips screened or by the state which raises public money to fund it" (quoted in Marlière 2003). The recent history of Big Brother in the United Kingdom supports this contention and displays the way in which the Big Brother format has changed and has been periodically embroiled in media and social debates. For example, the influence of advertising that Bourdieu...
identifies was graphically demonstrated by the withdrawal of Celebrity Big Brother's commercial sponsor, Carphone Warehouse, in the wake of the racist bullying controversy involving Jade Goody (and to a lesser extent the model Danielle Lloyd and former S Club 7 pop singer Jo O'Meara) and the Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty. The contretemps dominated its 2007 broadcast and generated some 44,500 viewer complaints (Tryhorn), marking this edition of Celebrity Big Brother as the most problematic in the show's history. This transmission would see the Goody-Shetty storm reach a national and international level of media coverage and even involve the British police. Thus, Celebrity Big Brother became not merely a media event but the grounds for an international incident between the British and Indian governments. Yet, for all of the uproar, the controversy was a primary contributor to the success of the show; indeed, 23 percent of the available TV audience tuned to Channel 4 to see the housemates nominate for eviction Jade Goody and Shilpa Shetty, the two people at the center of the storm (Brook), and 7.4 million viewers watched Goody's post-eviction interview (Tryhorn). A controversial broadcast thus resulted in a massive upsurge in viewing figures.

For Bourdieu, contemporary television has been marked by an increasing emphasis on ratings and the steady replacement of potentially politically divisive and problematic programs with more universally appealing entertainment formats, particularly soap operas. Although Marlène points out that Bourdieu's position is rather sweeping and polemical, Big Brother nevertheless conforms to his cultural assessment of television formats; consequently, although a democratic ethos seemingly informs Big Brother through audience participation, this is supported by acute production control. But the direction and codes of Big Brother are, like other forms of media, the subject of negotiation. As Golding states: "The term mass media and mass communication should not obscure the variations within the audience and the vastly different ways in which people use the media. Even television, the mass medium par excellence, has by no means a homogeneous reception" (9). Yet, though Golding refers to television per se and is referring to different age groups, classes, and genders, this assessment is equally valid when applied to the varying receptions of Big Brother as expressed in Internet discussion forums. The integration of Big Brother with its Web site constitutes a primary and potent example of media convergence within popular television and the media industry (Bignell), and Big Brother is thus argued to be a key exemplar of "a new
symbiotic relationship between television and the Web” (Deery 171). This convergence includes Webcasts that, unlike the edited television program, is a live, unedited version in which fans can engage with the Big Brother text, and an important aspect of this mode of consumption is the way in which it generates debates about the “reality” of reality TV. As Jones’s ethnographic fan study of Big Brother revealed, “Undoubtedly the role of technology will offer a window onto a totally new world of fact-based television, but, audiences may well continue to ask themselves, the fundamental questions, ‘Is it fact?’, ‘Is it fiction?’, ‘Is it real?’, or ‘Is it faked?’” (419).

This sense of ontological uncertainty is a central aspect of Big Brother for the contestants also. As Holmes states: “The concept of who is ‘being themselves’ or who appears to be performing for the camera is a crucial criterion in how the housemates judge and perceive one another, and equally in viewer discussion of the programme—Adele Roberts in series three persistently nominated fireman Jonny Regan for eviction because he isn’t being true to himself—he’s putting up a mask, being a joker. I don’t think I’ve met the real Jonny yet” (“All you’ve got” 128). The perception by the viewer that a participant is putting on a front is more likely because of the degree of visibility the housemates have, via television transmission and Internet live streams. Hence, the presentation of self is an intrinsic aspect of forum debate and illustrates a further connection of Erving Goffman’s articulation of social interaction to Big Brother. A prominent component of Goffman’s analysis is the idea that social actors can be interpreted as being manipulative performers always engaged in creating a front in their relations with other social actors. In the process of social interaction, individuals are continuously communicating (giving and giving off) self-impressions in all they do. Goffman explicates such social process by use of the metaphor of theatrical performance. Onstage, actors have the task of presenting themselves to the audience as particular characters in a play, and they must make it manifest exactly which role is being played, an effort assisted through the use of costume, props, scenery, and movement, as well as dialogue. They are also aided by other actors on the stage and those behind the scenes. When individuals enter a setting or occasion, they are faced with the task of communicating to others who and what they are. The only way others can judge what type of person another individual is comes initially through that person’s conduct and appearance. Consequently, social actors use the resources at

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their disposal to communicate an impression to a given social "audience"
to effectively put on a show "for the benefit of other people" (Goffman,

_Presentation_ 28). Moreover, much like theaters, social settings can be
divided into front and back regions. The front region is where the perform-
ance is given, whereas the backstage area is conventionally cut off from
public view, usually physically, so that the audience is unable to witness
what is occurring there. **Big Brother** potently, deliberately, and _visually_
lifts this dramaturgical curtain to provide near-total spectator access to
the housemates' lives in the various zones of the _Big Brother_ house: "The
private space of the _Big Brother_ house becomes public" (Bignell 1.57).
This arguably is the show's primary source of fascination. Therefore, the
audience, spread across various media outlets, _sees_ the various dramatic
deployments: the confrontations, interactions, and donning and discarding
of furs as the various contestants interact and express their "true feelings"
in the solitary sanctuary of the diary room. Consequently, as part of the
process of becoming a successful housemate the contestants confront a
paradox: because they are the subjects of such pervasive inspection, they
must strive to put on a show in order to survive. If they do nothing of
note to endear themselves to the viewers and their housemates, eviction
is a risk; however, too much of a performance risks denunciation—on the
grounds of being a fake—by spectators and contestants alike.

This process rapidly became evident following the success of the first
U.K. broadcast in 2000 and has become a clearly visible trend: reflexive
constants are fully aware of the rewards that can be obtained as a result of
participating. In essence, since 2000 _Big Brother_ has retreated from reality,
or real people being themselves, in favor of a parade of larger-than-life
characters steadfastly engaged in the maintenance of an entertaining front.
As Holmes states, in the wake of such unprecedented exposure and the
possible rewards of appearing on _Big Brother_ (the original winner, Craig
Phillips, released a pop single and is still something of a U.K. television
personality, appearing on a number of DIY shows), the contestants on the
second and third seasons of _Big Brother_ began to exhibit a self-conscious
awareness of the conventions of the format. As the _Big Brother 3_ winner,
Kate Lawler, stated, "It's amazing to think the whole nation is watching
_us_" (Holmes, "All you've got" 118). One of the key examples of this
phenomenon was another instance of celebrity reflexivity in which the
process of becoming a celebrity though exposure in the _Big Brother_ house
was a subject of conscious producer-led experimentation in 2006. In this
instance, fakery became a virtue and the key to both Big Brother success and the achievement of celebrity status. It illustrated the ways in which the Big Brother format was undergoing transformation.

Celebrity Big Brother 2006: Twisting the Format to Construct a Star

On leaving the Big Brother house, numerous contestants have forged careers in the media industry, whether working as a model (Gelaith McAllister), radio DJ (Richard Newman), or television presenter (Brian Dowling). In some cases, most notably that of Jade Goody, a contestant in the 2002 Big Brother, celebrity status stemmed from effectively just being oneself in public and in media spheres; for others the glare of celebrity rapidly faded with the end of the Big Brother narrative. But regardless of duration, the equation is invariably Big Brother = celebrity status, however temporally limited this status may be. In the United Kingdom, however, Channel 4 transmitted the first edition of Celebrity Big Brother in 2001 as a means of turning this process on its head: well-known faces would elect to live in the Big Brother house and subject themselves to the viewers’ gaze. This represented not merely a significant moment in Big Brother’s history and development, but also a distinctly novel one, by which the dramaturgical curtain was visually raised to expose celebrities’ lives and their private behavior. As Hill states, unlike the conventional Big Brother, which deals with people drawn from the general public, Celebrity Big Brother “takes celebrities and turns them into ‘ordinary people,’ before releasing them back into the world of the media” (38).

Although the meta-narrative of the Celebrity Big Brother format is more or less the same as that of Big Brother (though the running time is much shorter, usually three weeks), the major divergence is that in the world of Celebrity Big Brother, the viewer (ideally) “knows” the contestants who enter the house. But, unlike earlier versions, Celebrity Big Brother 2006 would take the form of an unprecedented media experiment, an experiment designed to act as a cultural barometer charting who could constitute and, crucially, be accepted as a celebrity within contemporary British society. The setup for this incarnation of Celebrity Big Brother was as follows: joining the likes of the pop performers Pete Burns, Preston, and Maggot; the actors and entertainers Traci Bingham, Rula Lenska, and Michael Barrymore; the model Jodie Marsh; the former Football Association secretary

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Farica Alam (famous for a relationship with Sven Göran Eriksson, at the time the England National Football Team manager); the basketball star Dennis Rodman; the controversial Respect politician George Galloway; and the "pop singer" Chantelle Houghton. There was a twist, however. A failed applicant for Big Brother 6, Chantelle Houghton was actually a non-celebrity. She had been selected by the show’s producers and set a special task on entering the Big Brother house: to maintain a front in order to convince the rest of her housemates that she too was a celebrity, a pop singer with a girl band who had had one minor U.K. hit single. If she failed in this project, she would be instantly evicted from the house. But her tenure in the house was sealed when she survived a Big Brother task that compelled the housemates to organize themselves in a line in order of their famousness. Out of the lineup of eleven, Chantelle came ninth, and her position in the house was thus secured. Moreover, as Paul Flynn notes: "She pulled off the deception with casual aplomb, warming to her fake ID as a pop star in the imaginary five-strong girl group Kandy Floss ("With a K!"); and it was Chantelle who would survive the voting process and who would become the eventual Celebrity Big Brother winner in a finale that attained a record 7.5 million viewers (Plunkett).

Evaluating this outcome, Peter Bazalgette, chairman of Endemol, which produced this Celebrity Big Brother, concluded: "It was a very clever joke by the production team... Nobody thought for a moment she’d end up winning. It’s hilarious. It’s very Channel 4—that’s where you’d expect to find this kind of slightly postmodern convoluted joke" (Aspinall 147). Hence, Chantelle would be dubbed "the celebrity who became a celebrity by pretending to be a celebrity" (Aspinall 49-50). Chantelle’s numerous appearances after Celebrity Big Brother in mainstream U.K. celebrity and lifestyle magazines, from Heat and Star to OK! and Hello, represented a form of media-driven "Chantelle-mania" that focused on numerous aspects of her life, such as her fashion tastes, her shopping trips that exhibited her conspicuous consumption in the wake of her newfound fame, and her changing hairstyles and hair colors, a process Rojek refers to as the media "frenzy of reportage and cod punditry" (150).

Furthermore, Celebrity Big Brother 2006 emphasized the way in which gimmicks and twists beyond the surveillance brief were now a staple of the format. Although claims are made about the unedited and real nature of Big Brother, the Chantelle edition served to highlight the degree of producer-led orchestration that dominates reality TV. Especially in regard
to the Chantelle joke, reality TV exemplifies Daniel Boorstin’s concept of the pseudo-event. Boorstin (a theorist whose analyses are especially cogent in the era of reality TV) argues that pseudo-events represent a “synthetic novelty,” the prefix pseudo having derived from the Greek meaning “false, or intended to deceive” (9). Pseudo-events are purposefully produced by the media to fulfill a constant demand for ever more spectacular diversions from reality. They are not spontaneous events but occur because someone has deliberately planned them. Moreover, they are planned and staged “for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced” and arranged “for the convenience of the reporting media” (Boorstin 40). Ultimately, a pseudo-event is planned to achieve the maximum publicity, drama, and public interest (Merrin 54–55). The concept of the pseudo-event is therefore particularly applicable to reality TV and specifically to Celebrity Big Brother. The invention of Chantelle was a deliberate marketing tool to differentiate Celebrity Big Brother from its non-celebrity counterpart, to maximize public interest with the fake celebrity twist. Moreover, as Boorstin argues, celebrities themselves represent “human pseudo-events.” So, with regard to Chantelle, Boorstin’s analysis manifests itself at two levels: she was a pseudo-event created within a pseudo-event. The event was the transformation of Chantelle from ordinary and everyday into a star, a process transmitted as a live event. On leaving the Big Brother house, Chantelle Houghton had effectively become “Chantelle,” going on to live a life that would exemplify and epitomize Boorstin’s now classic definition of celebrities, those individuals who are “well-known for their well-knownness” (57). Moreover, although it is by now a well-worn definition of celebrity, it is especially apt in relation to reality TV because, for many other Big Brother participants, “well-knownness” by way of television is invariably the primary qualification. As Turner contends, the various Big Brother housemates who have achieved some degree of media renown are the very “epitome of the fabricated celebrity” (60).

Big Brother, Celebrity, and Staving Off Format Fatigue

In defining contemporary celebrity, Rojek points out that “although God-like qualities are often attributed to celebrities, the modern meaning of the term celebrity actually derives from the fall of the gods, and the rise of democratic governments” (9). This is appropriate because, as Andrejevic claims, a major consequence of the development and popularity of reality
TV is the "democratization of celebrity" that it has apparently produced. In the era of reality TV, Andrejevic argues, it is no longer presidents, prime ministers, and pop, rock, or movie stars whose lives are open to public debate: "Now it will be the private life of the person on the street—of anyone who trains the webcam on him—or herself—or anyone who makes the final casting call for "The Real World!" (268). But what exactly is being celebrated? In trying to answer this question, Holmes, using the example of the eviction moment on Big Brother, argues that it is the "staging of the physical encounter between the televisual/screen self and the media. Until this point the contestants have surrendered all power over their image, allowing Big Brother and the media to make of them what they would. It is at this stage that the participants can exercise an element of discursive control over their image. They comment on their representation in the programme and their experiences in the house, and describe events in the first person" ("All you've got" 131). But in the face of a potentially celebratory active relationship between reality TV and audiences, the blurring of distinctions between the celebrity and the non-celebrity, Bourdieu's cultural pessimism remains. Gray cynically concurs: "Mass consumption is maintained by breaking up consumers into a multitude of shifting niche markets, each catering to a carefully crafted and continually refined illusion of individuality. This strategy is most highly developed in interactive television programmes such as Big Brother, which instil the illusion that celebrity is a universal entitlement that everyone can enjoy if they are lucky enough to be selected by everyone else" (207–208).

On Celebrity Big Brother 2006, Chantelle was the lucky person. Her success was not implicitly linked to any inherent charisma, nor would one assume that the public was necessarily projecting any charismatic attributes on her. Instead, it was her very non-celebrity status that was the primary attraction and key marketing aspect and that marked her out from a very early stage as the likely winner of the event because of her novelty factor. Because Chantelle was selected by the producers and given her script, the setup was carefully engineered, and she subsequently received the majority of the media publicity surrounding the show. Thus, like many Big Brother contestants, she was effectively a celebrity from the first day of transmission. And this is the fundamental aspect of Big Brother—it is a narrative. In terms of the official rationale of the show, with its apparent "liveness" and reliance on the authorial and dynamically active audience, Tineken and Raghuram cite Ruth Wrigley, executive producer of the U.K. version,
stating that the *Big Brother* team does not seek “to impose their own perspective on the show—they want it to be as truthful as possible...reporting] facts without editorial comment” (2006, 257).

Yet, as Tincknell and Raghuram point out, reality TV is as dependent on narrative as any other form of media; the key difference is that a sense of narrative structure is imposed after the footage has been recorded. Thus, a story is constructed through editing and the pervasive use of voiceover, all of which help produce a “preferred version” of events (2006, 257). Hence, *Celebrity Big Brother* 2006 was dominated by the Chantelle narrative, and her success was the logical conclusion to the series. This was the point of the exercise, “postmodern joke” or not, and she helped ensure that this edition would serve as an appealing and entertaining quirk in the conventional format. Other than being personable and forging a chaste and furtive romance with a housemate, Chantelle exhibited no latent star quality of any discernible kind. And this was enough, as she did become the star of the experience, despite not being a “genuine” celebrity.

Nonetheless, this is, for some commentators, the key problem in the history of *Big Brother* and its progressively dynamic interface with the discourses of celebrity, and it is the prime mover in the progressive degeneration of the format. From 2000 to 2007 *Big Brother* changed radically; Chantelle-type gimmicks and radical changes to the format increasingly came to the fore. As Ramchandani argues, alternative reality TV shows in the wake of *Big Brother*, such as the talent-singing contest *X Factor*, encourage people to make the most of their abilities, to become famous and achieve celebrity status through the showcasing of a genuine singing talent that is endorsed by the voting public. But for Ramchandani, *Big Brother* has steadily but decisively retreated from the process of rewarding virtues:

> When it first came to our screens in the summer of 2000, *Big Brother* was a thrilling high-concept idea: a live human zoo, a Milgram or Zimbardo-style social experiment brought to national television, a real-time version of *Lord Of The Flies*. Seven years after lovable Craig beat Anna and donated all his prize money to fund his mate's heart and lung transplant, the programme has lost its charm, having been twisted and twisted again by Endemol and Channel 4 in a desperate attempt to combat inevitable format fatigue. *Big Brother* has become a manipulative piece of broadcasting that takes advantage of the worst side of everybody.
In 2000 "ordinary" was acceptable and unique as a televi- 
sion experience, as it enabled viewers to immerse themselves in the minute-by-minute 
lives of people just like themselves, but as the format has developed dra-
matically and decisively since 2000, the ordinariness of contestants has 
progressively developed into something else. The ways in which Big Brother 
has developed and has represented its various contestants is radical. The 
first U.K. transmission of Big Brother was characterized by its avowedly 
low-key, minimalist Big Brother house and comparatively inconspicuous 
presentation of contestants. Although it would become the media spectacle 
of that summer, initially Big Brother was implicitly focused on the group 
dynamic of the ten housemates and on how they dealt with the social isolation 
of the experience: the emotional crises, tensions, conflicts, and sexual 
attractions that emerged in the course of the project. Moreover, the social-
psychological aspects of the experiment were in the central foreground. 
Big Brother was always intended to be a game show, but it was arguably more 
than this; it was an extraordinary televi- 
sional exercise in surveillance and psychological coping strategies of those living under such prolonged scrutiny. Celebrity status for the contestants was a potential and eventual by-product. It came after appearances on Big Brother.

As the format has continued on a yearly (sometimes biennially) basis, 
however, subsequent editions of Big Brother (in the United Kingdom at 
least) have progressively and strenuously emphasized the spectacle of the 
program. This is evident in the scale of more recent editions, now lasting 
some three months rather than the original ten weeks, and the star factor. 
This is a component that is accentuated by the producers and is palpable in 
the mode by which contestants now enter the house. Rather than the 
original en masse entry, the various contestants now go into the Big Brother 
house in a manner that deliberately serves to perpetuate the entrance seg-
ment and that self-consciously mimics the red-carpet aesthetic of the movie 
premiere. In recent editions of Big Brother, the "ordinary" contestants 
enter the house before a carnivalesque multitude of raucous spectators 
and a host of media personnel (television cameras and photographers), 
accompanied by the animated officiating of the host, Davina McCall. This 
process serves not merely to introduce the various contestants to the audi-
ence by providing a basic biography (which it does), but more explicitly to initiate the process that will watch these anonymous individuals become characters in the media landscape and media discourses. Moreover,
contestants now frequently amplify this, stressing celebrity connections or a celebrity “aura” upon entering the house—whether it is personal or family relationships with celebrities or, in the case of Big Brother 8’s Chanelle Hayes, a self-proclaimed physical likeness to a celebrity, Victoria “Posh Spice” Beckham, coupled with a determined aspiration to be “just like” Beckham and to live a similar “celebrity life.” In the space of some eight years, it is this aspect that constitutes the fundamental transformation that has occurred on Big Brother. Now, for many of the contestants, the experience of Big Brother is secondary to the celebrity status they will obtain by participating.

Therefore, if, as Boorstin maintains, the development of “the Graphic Revolution gave us the means for fabricating well-knownness” (47), then reality TV and its epitomizing example, Big Brother, have arguably perfected the process, constituting as it does a perennial media spectacle complete with a new generation (or cast) of “everyday” but carefully selected embryonic celebrities who will (the producers hope) provide a good story, romance, controversy, and, above all, entertainment.

Yet, as Ramchandani intimates, this ever more palpable quest for entertainment and increasingly marketable (and self-reflexive) contestants, controversies, and scandals, aligned with the twists and convoluted tinkering with the program’s structure to enhance its spectacle, possibly indicates that Big Brother may soon be nearing its end as a viable, attractive, and popular format. Consequently, where it once made television history as a revolutionary and daring televisual form at the forefront of an entirely new television genre, Big Brother may soon be consigned to history.

Note

1. The U.K. 2008 version of Celebrity Big Brother saw yet another format twist. Billed as Big Brother: Celebrity Hijack and broadcast exclusively on the cable/satellite channel E4, this show saw a collection of non-celebrity housemates live under the surveillance and direction of a number of celebrity figures, such as Matt Lucas, Kelly Osbourne, Roseanne Barr, Alan Cumming, and Joaquin Phoenix, who variously adopted the mantle of Big Brother and set a number of tasks for the contestants to complete.

Works Cited


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