

Class Observations: 'Intimate' Technologies and the Poetics of Reality TV

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Introduction

For some of us, one of the biggest surprises of the 2006 Big Brother show was not the winner, Pete Bennett, but, according to The Guardian newspaper, the fact that “[a]fter seven years, the BB brand is stronger than ever” (Lawson 2006:3). The fact that cultural critics are wishing the show away at the point at which it has reached its popular cultural zenith of mass appeal is significant in that it is indicative of a widely held position, which readily equates (mass) media culture with bad or low culture, frightening, out of bounds, vulgar and excessive (Skeggs 2005a). At the same time however, Reality TV appears to have developed a major role in what could be deemed a public class re-education project through body politics.

This paper re-evaluates the relationship between Reality TV and our lived experiences and discusses how this relationship re-engenders class(ed) relationships in contemporary culture. At the center of this discussion are what can be termed the body-politics of Reality TV and questions of agency and selfhood. Under examination is its tendency to mimic privacy and shift the dynamic interplay between media strategies and (consumer/audience) tactics (De Certeau 1988; Silverstone 1989). Through this process, existing power structures are masked.

Secondly, it will be argued that the (physical) body is central to a public class reeducation project in that it not only offers a blank canvas for make-over projects, but is increasingly reinvested as a signifier of class difference and transformation. Rather than focusing on a particular Lifestyle TV show, this paper traces the classed body-politics across a range of Reality TV genres and shows and questions the power dynamics and cultural values generated.

Education, Reeducation, Self-moderation

In his Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular’, Stuart Hall (2006) offers a periodic overview and analysis of the development and transformation of popular culture. Historically speaking, as Hall puts it: “[t]he changing balance and relations of social forces ... reveal themselves, time and again, in struggles over the forms of the culture, traditions and ways of life of the popular classes” (p.477). The relationship between capital and the culture of the popular classes was forged through the necessary process of reeducation, in order to accommodate a whole new social order based upon capital. He notes that, “one of the principle sites of resistance to the forms through which the ‘reformation’ of the people was pursued lay in popular tradition” (ibid.). In Hall’s view, ‘cultural change’ in this context is a mere polite euphemism for a process whereby some cultural forms and processes of popular life are actively marginalized. Although we may, today, talk more in terms of ‘struggle and resistance’, “[t]ransformation is the key to the long and protracted process of the ‘moralization’ of the laboring classes, and the ‘demoralization’ of the poor, and the ‘reeducation’ of the people” (p.478).

Hall places much emphasis on the period between the 1880s and 1920s as a period of deep structural change (in relations of forces and in terms of political struggle). With reference to the press, he illustrates how the middle-class press was based on the destruction of the radical and working-class press, followed by “the active mass insertion of a developed and mature working-class audience into a new kind of popular, commercial press” with profound cultural consequences. One of the effects being “a reconstituting of the cultural and political relations between the dominant and the dominated classes: a change intimately connected with the containment of popular democracy on which ‘our democratic way of life’ today appears to be so securely based”; a popular press, “organised by capital ‘for’ the working classes” (pp.479-80). With reference to the post 2nd World War period, Hall then talks about a severe fracture—a deep rupture—with regards to popular culture. This was not just a change in the cultural relations between people and the concentration and expansion of new cultural apparatuses, but a “monopolisation of the cultural industries, on the back of a profound technological revolution [...]” (pp.480-81).

Moving the language of fracture and rupture forward to the 21st century, it is important to track some of the historical (dis)continuities in the struggle over popular culture and its expressions, if only to remind ourselves about its intricate ties with class-systems and class-transformations in capitalist and late capitalist societies. Class analysis has been displaced, marginalized and disconnected through the discourses of lifelong learning, skill development and the creative economy. After the golden years of stratification research (1940s-70s), the sociological project seemed to stall, until the more recent interest in the cultural dimensions of class surfaced (Devine and Savage 2005: 4). Critical of much of the media scholarship during the 1990s, Graham Murdock is very sceptical of studies, “detailing the pleasures of everyday consumption ... [the] great wave of research devoted to uncovering the possibilities for personal liberation and self-expression concealed within the mundane and the circumscribed” (Murdock 2000:8). In his eyes, “it is the refusal to acknowledge that class remains the fundamental structuring principle of every aspect of life in late capitalism, including communications, that blocks a comprehensive view of contemporary conditions” (pp.7-8). The retreat from class analysis is, for Murdock, the perfect academic expression of the “new individualism.” He comments, “It is supremely ironic that the postmodern theoretical ‘turn’, which has propelled questions of identity, consumption and difference to the centre of academic attention, has coincided almost exactly with the neo-revolution in economic and social policy” (p.8).

Approaching the subject from a particular interest in the ways in which class and gender become incorporated into embodied selves, Steph Lawler (2005) strikes a similar (dis)cord. She asserts that, contrary to the announcement of “the death of class” in various academic and political quarters, “class divisions, class distinctions and class inequalities have not ‘died’: neither has class ceased to be a meaningful category of analysis. Rather, the drawing of classed distinctions is displaced and individualized. It is displaced on to individual persons (or families) who are approved or disapproved, normalized or pathologized” (p.110). We should just have to consider the latest figures of the tremendous rise in (abject) poverty in the United Kingdom and the coding of the British white working class as backward, “the very antithesis of New Labour’s ‘modernizing’ project” (p.121), to feel alarmed. It seems that whilst many academics have taken their eyes off the ball, the specter of class inequality has further risen, tugged at the heels of the spectacle of Third Wave politics.

The proliferation and diversification of Reality TV genres and products (although by no means originating in the 1990s) has been hot-housed in the climate of neo-liberal politics over the past ten years or so, itself being one of the embers of consumption practices and economic growth. In the British context, it is hard not to translate former Prime Minister Tony Blair’s pledge and rallying call for ‘education, education, education’ into the more true-ringing phrase ‘education, re-education, self-monitoring’. Exactly what we can and should expect from Reality TV in terms of realism, social experimentation, confession, redemption and, ultimately, empowerment and its contribution to our understanding of “ourselves as citizens and consumers” (Palmer 2004: 173), needs to be more overtly seen as the class-re-education project that it (at least in part) constitutes. A question juts from this context: who educates whom at what cost and how are we all implicated in the production of our new selves? How is the observation, judgment and self-monitoring managed in the configuration of an identity? In this sense we are experiencing, through the making of Reality TV, yet another historical period of reform and transformation in which the re-making of class-formations is quite centrally located.

In her examination of the re-branding of class in contemporary culture, Bev Skeggs (2005b) is particularly interested in the processes by which moral value “is transported into bodies and the mechanisms by which it is retained, accumulated, lost or appropriated” (p.46). She presents a strong case for the need to recognise that, in times of neo-liberal governance and trans-national flexible capitalism, we have to think beyond economic factors, and

evaluate culture as the central site for the production of class formation. She identifies the two economic processes that have promoted the de-materialization of commercial production as hypercommodification and industrialization of culture. Globalization, in this context, is bound to increase the production of these nonmatter commodities, because they are so mobile (p.47). In all of this, according to Skeggs, the working-class figure as a culture to be plundered for the expansion into new markets; “the progression and progressiveness of the new middle-class self is predicated on holding in place—fixing—that which must signify stagnation and immobility. So the working-class is both fragmented as a resource that functions in a variety of ways to sustain the modernity of factions of the middle-class but also fixed in place so others can be seen as distant from it” (p.66). In this context, Skeggs asks theorists to remain suspicious of theories of mobility as the “new social condition”, as they reveal “more about the social position of the theorist and the re-constitution of the middle-class than any universal social condition” (ibid.). Although not automatically of universal appeal and success, many Reality TV formats, genres and related merchandise travel indeed well in the global arena, serving as a timely illustration of the mobility of popular culture. It is necessary, then, to look briefly at a couple of examples of the ways in which Reality TV programming evokes and positions certain classes in society, to what effect and under what kinds of technological conditions and forms of governance.

Bethany Ogdon (2006), writing from an American perspective, explores what she calls *The Psycho-Economy of Reality Television*, by looking at the relationship between a nation caught up in “the age of overwork” (p.26) and Reality TV throughout the 1990s and across all sub-genres. Particular parallels can be drawn here with regards to the British context, not least on the basis that it is being repeatedly cited that the working hours in Britain tower way above those worked by the rest of Europe. Ogdon argues that “[t]he chronic condition of the [middle-class American wage earner] subject in “the age of overwork” is the body’s registration of stress, fatigue, and, at the bottom, estrangement from what is commonly referred to as ‘real life’” (p.28). What she suggests then is “that reality TV’s ‘real people’ were consistently offered up as extraordinary, as a kind of televisual lumpenproletariat, a non-productive underclass, distinctly at odds with notions of the average, (exceptionally) hard-working American.” Furthermore, she claims that “all reality television programming formats worked to expose these ‘real’ people that populated their environment in ways that produced a constant stream of images of passive enjoyment (‘enjoyment of self in man’) for use by reality TV’s overworked national viewing audience” (p.30).

Somewhat universalizing in her claims and, therefore, losing some (sub) generic nuances, Ogdon’s argument has credence, particularly with regards to Talk Show TV and certain forms of Docu-Soaps. What she aims to demonstrate is not that Reality TV’s ‘real people’ all belong to a nonproductive underclass. Rather she suggests “that these ‘real people’ were emphatically embodied through the conventions of the genre and [...] put into situations guaranteed to produce images of ‘inert passivity’” (p.39). Importantly, anyone who participates as audience member can (temporarily at least) position her- or himself as a member of a hard-working nation. “[R]eality TV’s ‘lumpenproletariat’ other becomes the doppelganger of the properly active subject” (ibid.) of late capitalism.

Not overtly pitched as an analysis of class-formation, Barry King’s study of the ontology of reality as a form of governance, nevertheless reveals how Reality TV is part of a general cultural condition (which he terms ‘modularity’), producing settings (or colleges) for affective moulding—“the learning of dispositions, habits and interests that reproduce a larger cultural formation” (2006:43). Importantly, as he points out, Reality TV does not just simply reflect those trends, rather, it plays a part in codifying them as a form of life. With reference to a little known Australian/New Zealand program *The Resort*, he interrogates two types of modes of interpersonal control: the externally imposed (as perhaps best seen in *Big Brother*) and the other, seemingly more ‘fun’ oriented but ultimately even more invasive form, typified by *Survivor*.

In the context of this paper, it is significant to note that King identifies the *Big Brother* format (incorporating a closed, surveillance-saturated mise-en-scene) as “an expression of the culture of low skill end service work, so called MacJobs where the performance is highly scripted and subjected to constant scrutiny” (p.54). On the other hand, the *Survivor*-type format with a loser mise-en-scene and more synoptically grounded pattern of interaction, “addresses the upper end of service team-work, or the high skill, high wage IMacJobs implicated in the maintenance and support of management systems” (ibid.). He concludes that, as “[a] network society is marked by a structural split between a core labour force of service employees and managers and a larger ‘peripheral’ disposable labour force [...] this distinction between those who are programming and those who are programmed is replicated—imaginatively—in the world of reality TV” (p.55). The *Big Brother* scenario then puts the body into prison, whereas the *Survivor* scenario “evolves into a more finely grained concertive control, in which the body becomes the prison of the soul”

(*ibid.*). These bodies are then effectively classed in the specific ways in which they are disciplined. Such affiliations raise questions about how audiences are aligned with consumers.

Audiences, Agency and Consumer Politics

Mark Baynes, in charge of the team who produced the very first Big Brother UK website in 2000 discussed the UK BB1 success in terms of the simplicity of the format and the technological possibilities:

Back to basics, this is what Big Brother is all about [...]. It worked well here [because] basically you walk down the street and look into people's front window with the curtains half closed. We've got the technology to do it. [2]

The issues being raised here are threefold. Firstly, an assumption is being made that there is a universal appeal and desire to peek into and learn more about other—ordinary—people's private, even intimate, lives generally speaking. Secondly, it is through technological means that we are ultimately enabled to enter the lives of others. Finally, there is the notion that, through the use of a new and enhanced technological looking glass, we, the public, will graduate to become (engaged) participants of other people's everyday lives, rather than remain mere audience members.

Discourses surrounding genres like reality TV as well as technological delivery formats/platforms such as enhanced/interactive TV and live video streaming on the Internet (amongst others) produce expectations of 'reality' and interactivity that arch beyond more traditional mediated experiences. We are to think of ourselves not as simple onlookers. Rather, what is being presented is part of our everyday reality—and we become implicated in what is being represented. However, the question remains—what kinds of self(hood) are we being invited to construct and negotiate.

Biressi and Nunn (2005), for example, have pointed out that the politics of Reality TV is about social difference, rather than the working class. It is about the politics of identity, rather than the politics of collective action and group solidarity. Although they observe that Reality TV can be “conservative, retributive and judgemental” (p.3), they consider programmes such as *Wife Swap*, *You are What you Eat* and *Neighbours from Hell* “no less valuable as a social document of classed identity, social hierarchy and status anxiety than, for example, the acclaimed television drama documentary *Cathy Come Home*” (*ibid.*).

I do not wish to take issue with their representational value as such. However, I would like to take issue with some of the representational forms they produce, an example of which is (female) symbolic violence. As Angela McRobbie (2005) highlights in her discussion of *What Not to Wear*, Reality TV programs such as this “actively generate and legitimise forms of class antagonism particularly between women in a way which would have been socially unacceptable until recently. That is, the rules of television were such that public humiliation of their failure to adhere to middle-class standards in speech or appearance would have been considered offensive, discriminatory or prejudicial” (p.100).

We have to ask ourselves what mode of empowerment Reality TV offers to the 'ordinary people' featured, as well as to the audience, or 'public',—and what kinds of (TV and civic) democracy this generates. To put it crudely: where is the self-empowerment in being rendered 'the new you' when this transformation is based on symbolic coercion (to adhere to a fictitious middle-class ideal). Ideals of a class-less society are also being called into question when we, with Wood and Skeggs (2004), ask—do “all people have access to the right resources for the making of the self” (p.205).

Positioning this discussion in the context of everyday life and audience agency, and taking into account the concept of 'interactivity', we also have to consider to what extent we can still coherently speak of Reality Television as an experience.

Drawing on the work of cultural historian and ethnologist Michel de Certeau, Roger Silverstone (1989) suggests that “television is everyday life” (p.77, my emphasis). He states that: “To study one is at the same time to study the other” (*ibid.*). By extension, we can argue that, increasingly, in certain parts of the world, new mobile and Internet technologies and their texts are part of the fabric of everyday life—enabling and providing much currency for everyday conversation.

Unlike early critics of the culture industries and mass society, de Certeau (and subsequently Silverstone) makes a case for everyday life, which demonstrates its dynamic and creative essence: “Daily life is not the domain of the manipulated mass, inert and passive; and consumption is not 'something done by sheep progressively immobilized and 'handled' as a result of the growing mobility of the media as they conquer space.' The world of everyday life is a

world of consumption certainly, but consumption has to be understood as productive. Buying, using, reading—none of these activities leaves the subject, the object or even the system untouched” (pp.78-79).

De Certeau talks about the poetics of everyday life in that, rather than simply being mundane, it is where strategies and tactics of power are constantly being actualized. As Silverstone explains this in relation to television: “Television is both strategic and tactical [...]. It displays in its narratives both the forms and the force of a moral and political order, and it provides in its rhetoric the raw material for the heterogeneous and indeterminate practices of the everyday” (p.85).

My question then is: can we, in the event of the proliferation of ‘interactive’ modes of address and technologies and in the knowledge that “[m]ediated communication [generally] is no longer simply or even mainly mass communication” (Livingstone 2004:75) witness shifts in the dynamics of the interplay between media strategies and tactics (with seemingly more emphasis on tactical input)? Or, to put it bluntly, are we kidding ourselves, and existing power structures are merely more imaginatively disguised and complicity also takes on another dimension?

As Tincknell and Raghuram (2004) argue, new kinds of ‘interactive’ media texts make the question of the ‘active’ audience of renewed interest. Audiences may go beyond just responding to the text, but actually help to change it (voting, setting tasks in BB, questions and public ‘feedback’ on lifestyle shows). But, while shows like BB actively inscribe the idea of agency (“Their fate is in your hands”), the actual range of opportunities available to the audience are actually fairly limited (pp.262-63). “[A]udience research,” according to Tincknell and Raghuram, “must take account of the processes involved in ‘becoming’ an audience, as well as the meanings produced once the audience has been solicited. It may also mean that the idealization of the ‘active audience’ must be tempered by a recognition that discourses become hegemonic because they are often able to incorporate and recuperate resistant elements” (p.267).

In her examination of the promise of interactivity in Reality TV programming, Su Holmes (2004) focuses on *The Salon*, less well known than ‘event TV’ such as *Big Brother*, in order to explore the “space for audience intervention in, and negotiation with, contemporary cultural production” (p.214). Staged as a hairdressing salon and beauty spa in South London, the program emulated a traditional workplace environment with gossip and drama ‘naturally’ occurring; blending the ethos of observational documentary and docusoap (p.215). Aiming at a younger audience, *The Salon* established an interactive framework between TV, the Internet and the audience that set it apart from most of its precursors. From e-mailing the manager with views on staff and events, voting on plot developments, *The Salon*’s web forum “became a crucial discourse in the text, given that it was often read (and hence discussed) by both staff and clients in the programme itself” (p.219). Furthermore, the viewers themselves could become clients, after phoning in for an appointment (giving the concept of audience ‘in’ the text another meaning). This blurring between production and consumption, participants and televisual narrative, then, raises the question of the relative ideological openness of such a text. As such, Holmes points out, ‘texts’ like *The Salon* problematize traditional approaches to textual analysis. However, as interactivity between TV, internet and the viewer/user “point to the more porous nature of these programs, when it comes to the spatial, temporal and technological relations between viewer and text [...] the concept of audience ‘in’ the text may suggest less the need to ‘radicalize’ or jettison textual analysis [...] than the need to retain the TV text as an analytic category all the more urgently, providing, as it does, its own commentary on the power relations between text and audience [...]” (p.229).

Placing ‘ordinary’ people into Reality TV contexts is less about the about observation, than about display and performance (p.217). As Abercrombie and Longhurst suggest, “Life is constant performance; we are audience and performer at the same time; everybody is an audience all the time. Performance is not a discrete event [...] people are simultaneously performers and audience members” (Cited in Holmes 228). This ‘display and performance’ is generated and marked on and off screen to a great extent through what can be deemed as the body-politics of Reality TV. As the (gendered) body has become the icon of late capitalism and consumer society as well as a symbol of popular postfeminism, the last section aims to tentatively examine and give some examples of how the body is invested in and classed through particular (re-educational) discourses in and beyond the Reality TV experience. In this context I argue that ‘resistance’ is inevitably caught up in expressions of ‘complicity’ or conformity.

Body - Classifications

In the United Kingdom, the Reality TV season 2006/07 surely provided some very overt representations of

class antagonism, subsequently causing wide spread debates in the media and in public. Standing somewhat out from the crowd of the usual suspects of Lifestyle and Makeover programs—the seventh season of *Big Brother UK* [3] and the more recent ‘Shilpa-Jade’ controversy generated by the show *Celebrity Big Brother UK*. The British audiences also saw the arrival of the first series of *ASBO Teen to Beauty Queen* [4] as well as Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine’s new venture *Trinny and Susannah Undress* [5].

In all of these examples, the body is quite literally figured as a site of class-struggle through the performance of ‘doing looks’ (Frost 2005) and is, therefore, judged and/or adjusted according to what is deemed acceptable and respectable (in relation to middle-class standards and expectations). To be more precise, it is (still) the female body that affords foremost attention.

As Liz Frost points out, “[c]oncerns with the self, the well-being of the self, the ‘actualization’ of the self, including the body and appearance, have developed in relation to the needs of consumer capitalism to produce individualized consumers with a whole range of personal wants and needs” (p.67). Drawing on Goffman, however, we have to understand selfhood not as an intrinsic, individually located, essence in control of its relationship with its environment, “but a surface-located interactive, in-process personhood” (p.66). In this sense then, the self and the presentation of self become blended and the depiction and construction of identity inseparable: appearance constitutes gendered subjectivity. By conceptualizing visual aspects of the self, ‘doing looks’, as integral to the production of gendered social identity, and as an interactive process, binaries such as agent/victim can be avoided (p.67).

It is by now well documented how bodies and looks can be understood as a form of ‘cultural capital’ not just for young people. Bourdieu’s work informs our understanding of how appearance and related consumer practices are divided, divisive and damaging. He, for example, argues that: “[...] the proportion of women who consider themselves below average in beauty falls very rapidly as one moves up the social hierarchy. It is not surprising that *petit bourgeoisie* women,—who are almost as dissatisfied with their bodies as working-class women [...] devote such great investments and self-denial and especially time to improve their appearance” (Cited in Frost 76).

In this context, it is not surprising that a considerable amount of time was spent by the *Big Brother 7* contestants on evaluating, comparing, discussing, falling out over and indeed on the fondling of breasts. The size, shape, plasticity or ‘originality’ of the breasts of the female contestants commanded attention—from themselves and the rest of the house. If, as Palmer explains, a lot of lifestyle programming seems to suggest that class is eradicated, something to be overcome by learning middle-classness (a task doomed to fail because it constitutes an acquisition, rather than ‘knowing’ without ever having been learnt) (Palmer 188) then the ‘breast-wars’ of *Big Brother 7* represent of course only one fraction of a much more fundamental struggle over class-positions and positioning of the female body.

Cut off from the usual entourage of experts supplied by lifestyle programming, the contestants took the ‘judging’ into their own hands, therefore demonstrating their own classed ‘expertise’. As such we could witness the struggle to debunk and, at the same time to reinforce class stereotyping. It was the women of the *BBHouse* themselves who were most literate in the evaluation of the self through the body.

How vulnerable classed subjectivities based on aspirational consumerism are, and how much effort and renegotiation is indeed necessary in the up-keep and maintenance, played itself out over and over again through contestants such as Lea, Nikki, Imogen, Aisleyne and Suzi. As cosmetic breast alteration itself appears to be less and less a ‘fool-proof’ signifier of classed status, the *BB 7* women did not only establish who ‘has’ and who has not, but spent considerable time on re-establishing rules of ‘distinction’ in terms of size and look.

Former porn actresses Lea, for example, alternated between exclamations of ‘I like my boobs, I think they are great’, defending her choice of large implants,—and very downcast moments, signifying possibly her recognition of difference. ‘Promo girl’ Aisleyne walked a tightrope between trying to maintain her ‘street-cred’ and, at the same time, justifying her aspirational ‘boob-choice’ (i.e. along the lines of ‘lots of women these days have them done, it doesn’t mean what it used to’). Golden ticket winner Suzi’s entry into the House clearly complicated matters further with her ‘posh’ accent, demeanor AND cosmetically enhanced breasts. Reading her as ‘posh’ (that is, upper-middle-class), model Nikki regularly burst out into tears of anger: ‘who does she think she is—she thinks she is better than we are’. Henceforth, the lines of distinction were assessed and re-considered and performances adjusted.

In the wake of the more general *BB 7* press coverage, and seemingly less fooled by Suzy than Nikki, Shane Watson from the *Sunday Times* passed social judgment upon all of them to reestablish ‘order’ in the *BBHouse* so to speak:

As class indicators go, you can’t beat a pair of breasts. Accent used to be the big one, but that’s no longer

foolproof (see Suzie on Big Brother). Wardrobe was also once a reliable gauge of provenance, but that has ended when glam trash became the preferred look for everyone from Posh Spice to Liz Hurley. Run through the old standard tests—manners, postcode, lifestyle choices, bidets—and you realize that, these days, none of them is anywhere near as revealing as breasts. The size and shapes of boobs are sure-fire ways of placing someone on the social spectrum (2006:58).

I would like to finish off with reference to what I find a particularly pertinent attempt of class positioning and ‘reeducation’ of the body (and, ultimately, the mind): the case of the U.K. reality show ASBO Teen to Beauty Queen.

In her reflections on young women and consumer culture, Angela McRobbie (2004) comments on “the encroachment of commercial forces that threaten to supplant the role and authority of the various institutions which have, in the past, presided over the lives and conduct of young women and girls”—such as family, education, medicine and law for example. She argues that “consumer culture, riding the wave of U.K. governmental off-loading of social responsibility through de-regulationist policies, has grabbed hold of this terrain, turning it into the most profitable of opportunities.” ASBO Teen to Beauty Queen is relevant in this context in that it is one of the growing numbers of reality shows explicitly featuring teenagers (in this case from Manchester—the ASBO capital in the UK), attesting Reality TV’s rising stakes in taking on the role of public institutions. Unlike *Brat Camp* [6], it is concerned specifically with the betterment of young teenage girls, by teaching them how to become ‘beauty queens’—in other words, teaching them disciplinary practices of femininity (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006:257) through bodily performance.

As *Ladette to Lady* [7] puts what is considered ‘wayward’ young women through the ‘old’-school drill of posture, deportment, manners,—‘re-educating’ them in the art of food, drink and dress—in order to, for a short while, mix with the English upper-classes, ASBO Teens undergo an American style makeover by former U.S. beauty queen Michelle Fryatt. The aim: to compete in the Miss Teen International beauty pageant in the United States. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer have pointed out that in the original Miss America pageant, the contestants perform the abstract character of liberal personhood—white and middle class—within a particular national imaginary. Importantly, as a televised event, it has dramatically declined in audience ratings over the past few years and, effectively, been replaced in the United States by the post-feminist texts of cosmetic surgery makeover shows such as *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* (p.258).

The ASBO Teens provide us with a TV interpretation of the British under-class: trapped in their lives with no aspirations—immobile in other words. Drink and drug fueled, mentally unstable, ungovernable, they signify bodies out of control. The program goes through some lengths to confer particular identities on them in order to mark abnormality: shots of the teenagers roaming council estates guarded by CCTV, individual breakdowns, paranoia and screaming fits, which are in most parts ‘bleeped out’. Beauty treatment and moralistic paternalism rather than social justice and public responsibility are the suggested ‘medicine’ in late consumer capitalism.

As bodies are being modified—groomed, tied into shape, bullied into submission and expelled from such programs if noncompliant, it is hard not to perceive Reality TV, as an expression of popular culture, to be working on, rather than through the lower classes. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to suggest that even these products of the culture industry work in a straightforward oppressive manner on ‘cultural dupes’ on and off screen. As Steph Lawler asserts through Bourdieu and Wacquant, “[p]eople are no fools; they are much less bizarre or deluded than we would spontaneously believe precisely because they have internalized, through a protracted and multisided processes of conditioning, the objective choices they face” (p.121). In this sense: resistance may be alienating and submission may be liberating; “there is no resistance that is not some way complicitous with power” (Bar-On cited in Lawler 122). Interestingly, both programs, ASBO Teen and *Ladette to Lady*, turn into a form of comedy when the British teens ‘take charge’ and increasingly mock the (American) beauty system they are being subjected to, and when the *ladettes* send up the very aristocrats they are groomed to socialize with. However, the fact that Reality TV so easily and knowingly absorbs and reproduces certain forms of resistance and complicity signifies the increasing sophistication of the genre and its sub-genres to blur the boundaries between them, hence fostering (for example, through setting certain body-politic agendas) a sense of resistance that is always already accounted for and therefore complicitous with the project itself.

Reality TV, through its technical and rhetorical forms of governance as well as its emphasis on (audience) participation and incorporation into its texts plays an increasing role in the formation, self-moderation and maintenance of capitalist consumer society. As a cultural product, it arguably works on as well as through the popular classes, reasserting distinction on the basis of constructing a fantasy of social mobility through reeducation and

bodily transformation. We actively look on as bodies of difference turn into bodies of indifference, molded and cut into shape, constituting particular projects of self-expression as part of life in consumer democracy.

The poetics of Reality TV is always already part of the poetics of everyday life. As the old 'agent/victim' binary no longer holds, it is paramount to assess the mechanisms and consequences of the banality, boredom, boob and body-politics of contemporary Reality TV and to firmly place this analysis within its specific historical, political and economic parameters. In this context, postmodern accounts of social change, suggesting an increase in flux and fluidity in social life and identity formation based on consumption and consumerism are somewhat at odds with the "real social, material and economic constraints on the capacity to express our identities through consumption and other means that are structured by relations of age, class, gender and ethnicity" (Phillips and Western 2005:168). As the (female) body has been gaining increasing importance in 'high modernity' as a site of labor and power struggles, the 'body-classification' project articulated through the poetics of Reality TV is illustrative of the fact that we would be ill advised to add 'post-class' to the mantra of post-work, post-fordism and post-feminism.

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Tara Brabazon and Julie Doyle for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
2. Personal interview (December 19, 2000).
3. Endemol; Channel 4, UK.
4. North One Television, Channel Five, UK (November 15-December 20 2006).
5. ITVProductions; ITV1, UK (October 3, 2006 -).
6. Channel 4, UK/ABC (Original run: July 13, 2005-August 24, 2005).
7. RDFMedia; ITV, UK (Original run: June 2, 2005-October 26, 2006).

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