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BIG BROTHER UNDER SURVEILLANCE: INTERROGATING REALITY TELEVISION

...anthropology is increasingly sensitive to the intellectual challenge posed by today's contemporaneity, the forms of which are utterly new...It is abandoning...the mirages of escape, exile, or exoticism...it is learning to confront the world of which it is part (Auge 1994: 39).

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Masters degree of Social Anthropology
Department of Social Anthropology
University of Cape Town
September 2003

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced. Signature:

Signed by candidate

 Date: 21 November 2003

The broadcaster understands the strength this show has to move viewers. But I don't want to be euphoric, I want to be real about it (Linda, content director).

Surveillance cameras are everywhere. You are being watched anyway (Gabriel, content director).

Television is like life, it is becoming more real and immediate. It is that progression of 'now' (Jane, technical director).

It is set up to be real, but with all those cameras it can't possibly be (Niqui, live show producer).

You can't have someone that is not real winning the million Rand (Jamie, archivist).

This is a Big Brother reality (David, camera man).

Big Brother does not have an opinion, Big Brother only watches and show people (Josh, Task Master).

ABSTRACT

I argue against an outright dismissal of so-called reality shows as unreal television set-ups by interrogating how so-called realness is performed within the context of Big Brother 2, a reality-based game show. Research is conducted on the production set in Randburg, Johannesburg, over a period of seven weeks. A variety of research methods - participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations – and informants - are employed. By positioning themselves as objective observers and maintaining a fly-on-the-wall pretence, the production crew attempt to reveal the 'real' people behind the camera-conscious contestants. Paradoxically the Big Brother contestants, who are placed under 24hour surveillance for the show's duration, are expected to behave both naturally (allowing the viewer to adopt the stance of voyeur) and to be continuously entertaining.

The mirroring that occurs between the Big Brother house and the production setting where the crew similar to the housemates have a sense of being watched, illustrates how the off-screen production is equally directed by performance demands, notably that of professionalism and team work. Crew members' techniques for recording and accessing contestants' 'realness' and their frustration about their intensive viewing routines are illustrative of different engagements with the elusive real. Ultimately 'Big Brother's' vulnerability - highlighted by my discussion of the crew's frustration with being outsiders to the house, their limited control over the live and unscripted action, and their forced ascription to 'passive' observing roles - questions the validity of structuring media discourses through a series of oppositions such as production/consumption, insider/outsider, active/passive and control/resistance.

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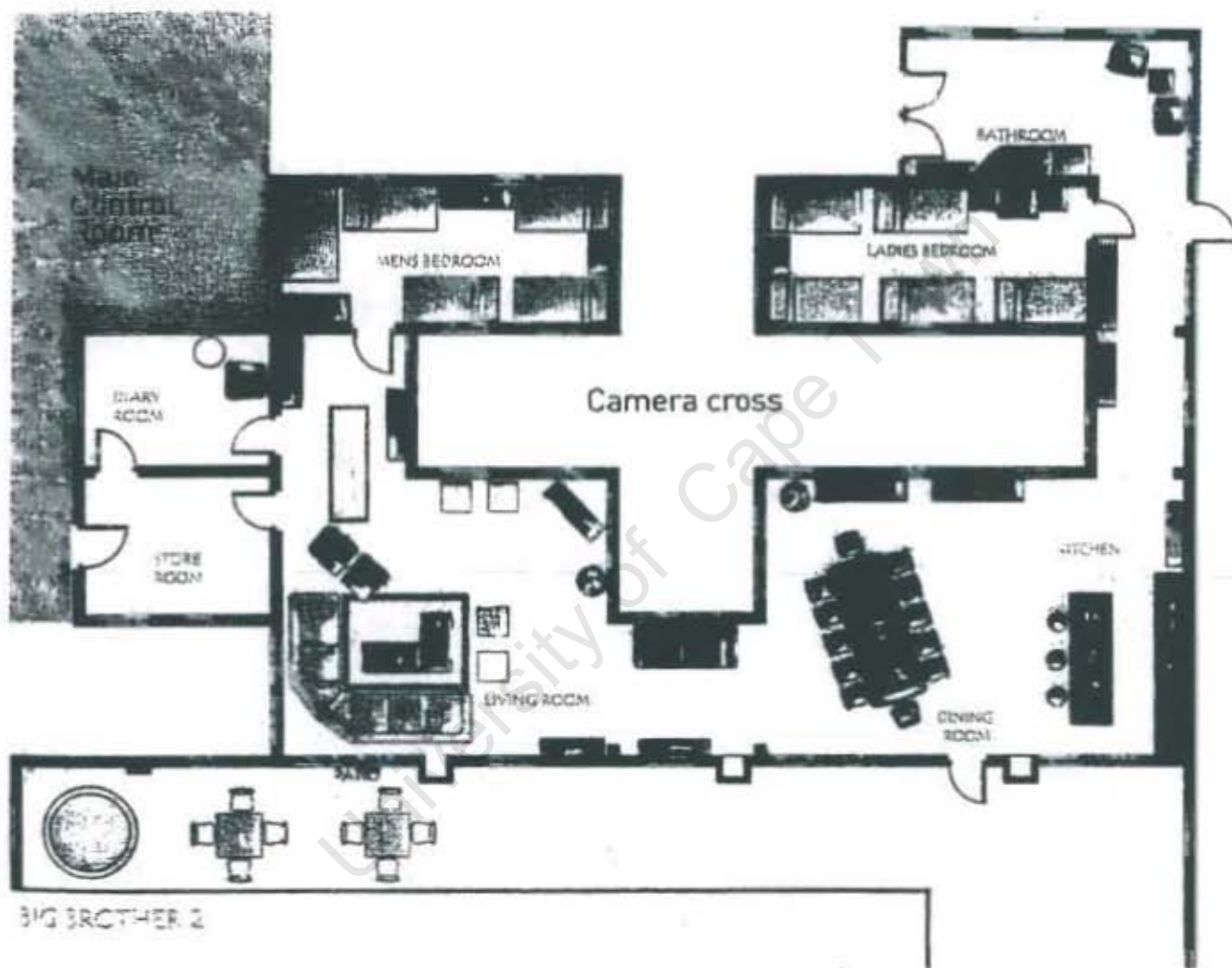
Like the end credits of a visual production, my acknowledgements cannot possibly give adequate commendation to the people that have helped me to realize this project. I owe gratitude to the executive team of Big Brother 2, and specifically the Executive Producer Marie Rosholt, for giving this project the go ahead based on an online proposal from me as an unknown student from the University of Cape Town. Not only was I issued an access card that conferred on me the status of crew member and allowed me entry to almost all the production zones, I was provided with a desk in the Greenroom where I was able to freely utilize the computer, Internet and other office facilities.

To the BB2 crew members: I am indebted to you for letting me experience the backstage realities of such a huge television production. Without any financial incentive crew members, in between tiring shifts, repeatedly set time aside to talk to me. I even received some on-the-spot training in the mechanics of the show. Many thanks also to those BB2 housemates and viewers that offered their ideas on the show to me, as well as the 'fringe' people – most of them M-Net employees, family members and friends – all of whom helped to make my stay in Randburg a memorable one. And to Lesley, my supervisor, who supervised the greater part of this thesis via email: thank you for your insights and well-considered replies.

Finally, to my parents and brother, thank you for becoming devoted Big Brother fans for the duration of the show – voluntarily taping the live shows for me, cutting out Big Brother related newspaper reports, remaining glued to the small screen and phoning me with updates on the happenings inside the Big Brother house that I might have missed.

BIG BROTHER UNDER SURVEILLANCE: INTERROGATING REALITY TELEVISION

An aerial view of the main Big Brother production set:



First day of fieldwork - 22nd of July

Monday morning, 8:45. I took place on one of the only two couches in the Greenroom. Surprisingly the walls are white. The fuchsia and turquoise colored couches are the only decorative pieces that hint at the kind of playfulness that one would expect on the production set of a reality show. There are few clues that this room is in fact the 'brain'¹ of Big Brother; it simply looks like a huge open-plan office. Individual wooden desks have been pushed against each other to create five rows. At the front of the well-lit room there is a wall-sized screen with two much smaller television monitors on either side. Words flash over the screen: *Big Brother will commence in 166 hours and 52 minutes.*

It is the crew's training week and the atmosphere is one of subdued anticipation – telephones are ringing and employees are either transfixed by their computer screens or softly conversing with each other. Behind me against the wall there is a notice board. One paper poster advertises the BB hotline; another shows the different meal times for the crew. Apprehensively I glance at the security camera that is fixed in a corner. I know I am being watched.

There are constantly people entering and leaving the room. I try to be unobtrusive, but they have to notice me, since the couch is right by the entrance to the Greenroom. In fact, I have to pull my legs up a bit to let them pass. But most simply ignore me or just glance in my direction. Megan (the Series Producer who impresses with her friendly efficiency) had introduced me briefly to a few key people, so most crew members would not know I am a research student. I am hesitant to approach anyone since I might

¹ The Greenroom was the production room where all the show administration took place. The Big Brother executive, along with the website crew, housemate liaisons and eviction party organizers were based here (Jones 2002: 31).

interfere in their work performance. I am distinguishing between people according to the signs on their access cards – some have just a green square and a blue dot; others sport a black cross and a red triangle as well². Throughout the morning they gather in small groups inside the Greenroom that disperse quickly.

11:10. I am walking through the Big Brother house³, accompanied by Megan and Rikkie (Series Director). I marvel at the specially commissioned art works which, according to Rikkie, are meant to “encourage self-reflection” amongst the housemates. I sit on the Diary Room chair, try out the fitness machine and explore the garden, all the time imagining what it would be like to be watched by almost a million viewers, trapped in this confined space, as the housemates will soon be. A quick peep into the bathroom reveals that there is still some dusting to be done before the show commences on Sunday.

Day 4 – 25 July

Thursday morning, 10:04. Still no action on the projector in the Greenroom, but the four telescreens have images on them. Those on the left show the lounge of the house whereas those on the right respectively takes a long shot of the patio and a close up of a chair. Some of the crewmembers are parading as housemates to give the technicians a chance to test the equipment. I am captivated when two ‘housemates’, as part of the crew’s rehearsal for the show, have a pretend gossip session in the garden.

² On the production set there were four main areas of access – the Greenroom (indicated by a green dot on the access card); the main control room (a blue dot); the camera cross (black cross) and the Big Brother house (red triangle). Additional sites were the audio booth, the Big Brother booth, the crew kitchen, the amphitheatre for the live shows and the edit suites. I had access to all these areas, except for the house, which was off limits to most crew once the show had commenced. Only certain crew could enter the Diary Room and the stock room via the camera cross when the delivery of food supplies or replacing microphone batteries required them to do so.

³ The Big Brother house was situated in Oak Avenue, Ferndale – a suburb in Randburg.

15:25. I am conversing with Saretha (my fifth interviewee) at one of the coffee shop tables. Every person I have asked so far readily agreed to be interviewed once I have shown them my card and explained the purpose of my study, namely to gain insight into the backstage workings of a reality show. Understandably, given the great secrecy surrounding the identities of the housemates⁴ and the general new look of the show, one or two, suspecting me to be a mole from the press, wanted to clear it with the Production Manager, Adi, first.

Day 7 – 28 July

16:30. The official launch of Big Brother only begins at 18:00, but enthusiasts have been lining up since 14:00 this afternoon to secure good seats. The security personnel have now opened the gates and the crowd is entering the arena. We as BB staff can use a separate entrance. Inside many Big Brother enthusiasts are standing around, some of them waving posters with the printed words '*Big Brother we love you*' on it. On the fringes of the open space are three miniature stadium constructions. These are jam-packed with people sporting blue pieces of paper, indicating that they are VIP guests.

Once the countdown for the start of the show begins I become a bit nervous. I am not cheering like the performing spectators around me and clapping only half heartedly. They are after all only ordinary people I tell myself. I put my tiny notebook in my jacket pocket. It is probably not appropriate for me to take notes at this time. Against my expectations I get carried along with the whooping, hollering crowd when, one by one, the housemates arrive with big fanfare.

⁴ The identities of the housemates were kept a secret until the start of the program. Contestants that were seen in the press before this date were not eligible to enter the house.

Day 14, 10 August

14:06. I am reading up on the Big Brother website. Lena, a content director, is spotting⁵ next to me. Against the wall next to me is a pinup board with notices for attention of the content directors. One memo, signed by Rikkie, has the following instructions⁶ for Big Brother:

- *time to ease off with contact with the housemates*
- *try to keep all house announcements down to a minimum*
- *watch speaking in the first person*
- *be assertive – always know what you are going to say*
- *check the housemates daily schedule – shower hour, etc. have to happen on time*

17:40. Unplanned I find myself in the camera way. Visitors to these blackened corridors are supposed to wear dark capes and leave all personal belongings, including mobile phones, outside with the security guard, but Danny (an audio technician) and I were allowed through without any hassles. It is pitch dark, but as my eyes slowly adjust I can make out the shape of the camera railing. With my one hand I hold on to it, careful not to trip over any of the ground cables. Danny pauses in front of one of the camera windows⁷ and pulls open a set of curtains.

The window looks out on one of the two communal bedrooms. One of the male housemates is lying on the bed, while a female housemate is massaging him. They are less than half a meter away from us and I have to resist the absurd urge to knock against the tinted glass. Somehow I find it surreal – like looking at wax dolls in a museum. Why

⁵ Spotting was the second stage in a content director's shift. In spotting, which lasted three hours, a content director selected the time codes (i.e. footage) that they wanted from what has been entered into Big Brother office, a computer program.

⁶ The significance of these instructions will become clearer through my analysis of the show's construction of a seemingly 'voyeuristic' viewing situation.

⁷ There were 6 camera windows that looked out over various parts of the house - the two bedrooms, the lounge, the kitchen, the garden and the Jacuzzi.

is it that the housemates whom I do not find particularly visually appealing onscreen, can hold such a fascination for me now?

I am reminded of the words of Thandi, an archivist: "When watching from the camera way it feels so close, like you are watching it live, on it's own color, everything is real, it is like watching from a stage" (Thandiso, archivist). I can stand here for the rest of the day, but after Danny has changed the batteries on the housemates' microphones which they have left in the Diary Room, we have to leave. On our way out we pass the dark figure of a cameraman⁸ filming by another window.

Day 38 – 3 September

21:30. I am in the MCR⁹. Tonight, compared to the decorum of former evenings, the atmosphere here is electric. It is Thursday evening - party night for the housemates - and they have received celebratory packs with plenty of alcohol and snacks. The exuberance of the house is mirrored in the MCR where tonight's team is waiting in anticipation for the Jacuzzi love scenes, and possibly sex, that might follow. "Camera one just went off the rail" I hear Marcus, one of the technical directors, exclaim. "Concentrate one!" he warns over the mike.

With the technical problem resolved, everyone's eyes are intensely focused on the screens in front where the ten remaining housemates can be seen moving about in different parts of the house. Lena, the on-duty CD checks with the technical directors:

⁸ Big Brother had 16 cameramen, four of whom were on duty for eight hours at a time (with a break after the first four hours). "There are always four cameras in the cross, fixed on the rail that runs throughout the space. When the camera operators are asked to film from a certain window, they take the camera closest to them" (Jones 2002: 31).

⁹ Main control room.

“There is no one in the lounge hey?” Later she admits: “Guys I am sorry, I am struggling, they’re just all over the place”. Megan, who acts as tonight’s Big Brother, warns the crew that they have to watch out for Ilse-Marie and Rabin, because “Rabin wants to have a chat with her, and I don’t know when, just that it is going to happen”. When they eventually do have a whispered conversation in the Jacuzzi Lena triumphantly announces: “I am going to bust them for that”. Whispering is strictly against the house rules, because Big Brother must be able to listen in on conversations at all times.

A few minutes later a new ‘story’ is developing. Damian, the other technical director on duty, comments to audio: “Jacqui is pushing Richard¹⁰. Let’s do it, let’s push Richard over the edge!” I am frantically trying to record everyone’s words, and keep up with the happenings in the MCR, while simultaneously watching the housemates. Will Richard hit Jacqui? I wonder, now also caught up in the pleasures of the game. “Richard is a ‘wanker’” Lena angrily says under her breath, probably in response to yet another of the male housemate’s sexist comments.

Later I step into the audio booth where an audio technician is telling Megan about the “serious mike abuse – four mikes in two hours went dead, Ilse-Marie’s and Mandy’s mikes must be brought in and now Puledi’s mike is off”. Amidst the frenetic action someone exclaims: “We’re totally losing control over these people”. Gary, the second audio¹¹ mixer who is about to go off-duty, remarks to me that he does not want to go

¹⁰ Richard, a controversial housemate who eventually won the game, had aggressive tendencies that came to the fore when he was under the influence of alcohol.

¹¹ The audio booth was off to the side of the MCR. A large glass window looked out over the MCR so the crew in both could remain in constant contact, both visually and via microphone. Inside the booth there were two audio desks with two chairs and a spare chair that I used to sit on. Adjoining the sound booth was

home: "This is gripping stuff". Gripping stuff indeed. Ilse-Marie and Richard are showering together while Mandy, who is drunk from too much tequila, has to be supported to her room. Everyone in the MCR is revolted when she pukes all over her bag. Rikkie promptly phones Lena to say they must not show anyone vomiting. At this point Wynand, the house production assistant, enters to announce amidst the 'controlled chaos': "This is uncut for the week, we have our uncut show right here!".

a tiny sleeping room with two beds where crew could take power naps, mostly during graveyard (night time) shifts.

INTRODUCTION

My field notes, excerpts from which are reproduced above, were gathered while I was doing field work on the production set of the second South African Big Brother, a reality-based game show. Located in M-Net's¹² Broadcast Center in Randburg, Johannesburg (one of the largest transmission and production infrastructures in Africa) the show was screened 24 hours a day on a pay-television channel over a period of twelve weeks in 2002. Sut Jhally (2002: 335) argues that:

...information about the institutional context of the production and consumption of the image-system should be a prerequisite for [visual] literacy in the modern world...At minimum, we know that they [movies and television programs] are made by lots of people!

Therefore, instead of viewing production as existing somewhere "out there, in the twilight of our culture, manufactured for us" (Himmelstein 1994: 3), my project is designed to provide information on the ground level context(s) of production, although partial and context specific, by foregrounding the crew members on the Big Brother team. Utilizing insights from audience studies to reinvigorate my production research, as suggested by Barry Dornfeld (1998: 16), I will follow in the footsteps of researchers that have set out to examine television viewing as embedded acts of consumption (see Palmer 1986; Lindlof 1987; Lull 1990; Gray 1992; Silverstone 1994; Ang 1996; Seiter 1998).

Initially I also planned to involve the South African viewing public since I believed inquiry into how the show's content was viewed by members of the 'real' Big Brother audience would be crucial to my multi-sited project. Numerous strategies for

¹² The Electronic Media Network Limited was founded in 1985 as South Africa's first private subscription television service. Today (2002) M-Net boasts an array of general entertainment and niche channels and broadcasts to over 1.23 million subscribers in 41 countries across Africa.

involvement included handing out pamphlets on eviction nights, asking for interviewees to come forward; posting an article on the official Big Brother website, setting up an official telephone line where fans could phone me and searching for a fan club in the vicinity of Randburg. Perhaps it was the fact that none of these strategies proved successful - I received only three emails in response to my online posting and no return calls – perhaps I simply became too absorbed with the behind-the-scenes activities on the Big Brother set, but the crew increasingly took center stage.

Producing this thesis quite fittingly presented me with a similar challenge as the Big Brother editors who, in conjunction with a content director, have to cut 96 hours of recorded material down to 22 minutes of highlights every 24 hours. After carefully reading through nearly 600 pages of typed field notes, I selected sections that would provide readers with a brief overview of my time in the field, and from those short-listed passages that in my view represented good content, entertaining snapshots that would help them to visualize my negotiation of the different observation zones on the production set.

While trying to present events as they happened in real time, and operating within the length constraints for my thesis, I edited¹³ out those descriptions that I thought were tedious, repetitive or unsuitable for an academic audience. After storing my work (making use of a computer disc system not nearly as fail safe as the Big Brother archives) and printing it out, I could only hope that my representation was real to the extent that it reflected my own constructed field realities. After all, as Ien Ang (2001: 186) points out:

¹³ In reality my field notes, which alternated between English and Afrikaans were full of jotted observations, grammatical errors and somewhat incoherent ideas.

“...understanding audience activity is caught up in the discursive representation, not the transparent reflection, of diverse realities pertaining to people’s engagements with media”.

Surveillance as entertainment

Although research, especially the writing-up afterwards, might still seem relatively unhindered by surveillance¹⁴ (after all my supervisor had to trust my version of events), modern day monitoring of people is ubiquitous (see Lyon 1994; Dority 2001). Some link the growth of surveillance in modern societies to the imperatives of capital accumulation; others with the geopolitical struggles of competing states and yet others regard it as a response to the complexity of administrative tasks posed by technology (Dandeker 1990). Regardless of the theoretical orientation, there is considerable agreement that ordinary people increasingly find themselves under surveillance in the routines of everyday life.

My proposed research project, while sensitive to the ‘Orwellian’¹⁵ and Panoptic¹⁶ traditions of exploring surveillance, will go beyond the considered spheres of these analyses by focusing on the second South African version of the reality television show *Big Brother*. With the advent of the reality television genre, and a number of films that

¹⁴ According to Dandeker (1990: 37) the exercise of surveillance involves one or more of the following activities: “the collection and storage of information about people or objects; the supervision of the activities of people or objects through the issuing of instructions or the physical design of natural and built environments and the application of information gathering activities to the business of monitoring the behavior of those under supervision”.

¹⁵ Orwell’s prescience was limited to state power and primitive technology, and left a legacy of pessimism (Lyon 1994: 218).

¹⁶ The Panopticon or ‘all-seeing place’ has been used for analyzing surveillance in different settings. It was envisioned as a model prison, based on the principle of the asymmetrical gaze. The inmates had to believe that they were constantly inspected by observers who could not be seen.

glamorize the 'ordinary'¹⁷, the culture of surveillance has been popularized as a recognized act of entertainment. The by-now familiar emblem of the Big Brother show – an eye with a prominent iris – foregrounds the visual dimension of surveillance.

Big Brother insiders outside the house

Although the housemates themselves and the constant monitoring of their activities inside the house were the basic rationale for the Big Brother show, their actions will only provide the backdrop against which the narrative of my thesis will unfold. By making the backstage (i.e. the production setting) the front stage¹⁸ in my thesis, my whole project is geared towards the deconstruction of what I consider to be mostly unhelpful dichotomies such as real/fake, producer/consumer, insider/outsider, active/passive, and control/resistance that structure many writings on televised media forms.

A deconstruction of specifically the received producers-versus-consumers distinction is enabled by the production practices of the Big Brother crew. Regardless of whether analyzes are labeled as effects research; based on Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model; draw from the uses and gratifications tradition or take on the form of reception analysis – which accords audiences recognition as active producers of meaning rather than passive recipients of messages – most studies remain polarized between audience (see Morley 1980; Palmer 1986; Ang 1996; Seiter 1998) or production considerations (see Powdermaker 1951; Porter 1979; Fishman 1980; Herman and Chomsky 1987; Tunstall 1996). Not only will I position the Big Brother crew as a heterogeneous viewing community, I will also demonstrate how crew members were actively engaging with their

¹⁷ Mainstream movies like *The Truman Show*, *Ed-TV* and the art film *The Contenders* immediately come to mind.

¹⁸ My use of theatrical metaphors here is deliberate.

produced material as consumers.

Screening an 'unmediated reality'

According to John Ellis (1982: 9) the attempt to portray a particular fragment of reality is a basic function of television representations. This ability of the medium to carry a socially convincing sense of the real (Fiske 1987: 21), endows live television with a special notion of an encounter with the 'real'. In this regard 'realness' is defined in terms of the non-fictional subject matter used, an emphasis on lived and unscripted action, the onscreen presence of non-actors and the centrality of firsthand experience.

The executive producers of the live Big Brother show - a production marked by the absence of official scripts and trained actors - also harnessed the power of film to capture actuality as an extension of the observational cinema¹⁹ tradition. As Anna Grimshaw (2001: 17) comments: "There is a tangible sense of discovery, a curiosity and vitality in the camera's attraction to the drama of everyday life".

Fascinatingly, parallel to the raising of consciousness about the constructed nature of the show (evident not only in the number of articles both on the official website and from outside media that highlight the 'behind-the-scenes' aspects of the show, but also in the tours²⁰ that were conducted through the setting) ran what John Fiske (1987) calls "an invisibility of form" in the actual screening of the show that conveyed the impression of

¹⁹ "It was by attending to the world through intense observation, specifically of people's actions within it, that the direct film-makers sought to yield new understandings of the nature of contemporary life" (Grimshaw 2001: 84). However, unlike the Big Brother crew these film-makers acted as witnesses rather than provokers of the live action.

²⁰ Tours happened every Wednesday afternoon between 14:00 and 17:00. Although they were open to the public, the spaces were mostly filled by VIP's. There were 6 people on a tour and they lasted a maximum of 20 minutes. People were shown through the different access zones, including the camera way and the technical operation of the show was explained in layman's terms.

‘unmediated reality’ as if the cameras did not exist. Stuart Hall (1982: 76) refers to such visual techniques as the ‘naturalistic illusion’ – “visual representations appear to involve no intervention, selection or arrangement...they appear to reproduce the actual trace of reality in the images they transmit”.

Unsurprisingly the reality television genre has repeatedly been lambasted for claiming to portray an unmediated reality that is in fact researched, stage-managed, and edited (see Sardar 2000; Larsen 2001; Elton 2001; Hilton-Barber 2002). A major objection against the reality claims of these shows is that most take the format of neatly edited packages which converts hours of dull footage into dramatic sequences and severely distort ‘real life incidents’ for dramatic effect through cut and paste techniques.

In this regard the genre does not present viewers with new viewing at all: so-called reality shows still build on soap opera narrative techniques – multiple characters, an emphasis on dialogue, problem solving, team work, intimate conversation and ‘stories’ that contain the essential elements of drama, conflict, comeuppance, romance etc. that make for captivating television. Before the Big Brother 24 hour live feed had been introduced, Sardar (2000: 27), a critic was of the confident opinion that:

Unmediated Big Brother would mean watching 24 hours a day. What we actually watched was heavily censored, cleverly edited, structured, selected, predetermined vignettes of a structured and controlled situation.

However, the 24 hour broadcast was still not, and could never be, unmediated television, the very term being an oxymoron. One only had to step into the main control room for a few minutes to realize in what a constrained environment the production team and

specifically the content and technical directors, audio mixers and camera technicians, had to operate.

At any given time, only two streams were recorded. So from the monitors a content director had to *select* what story s/he wanted to focus on, pass this information on to the two technical directors in the row in front who in turn directed the camera men via microphones to get the needed shots (e.g. 'get a close-up of housemate x frying onions in the kitchen') and audio so that they knew which of the housemates' mikes to turn up.

Flanked by two 'shaders' who operated the hotheads – fixed remote-controlled cameras inside the house – this was indeed a highly structured environment. And yes, even the vignettes were to some extent predetermined since the content directors met once a week to discuss the recent house events and decide on the stories to focus on in upcoming days. Moreover, the executive producers had to adhere to rules set by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa as well as the Broadcasting Complaints Commission (Kast 2002b: 12); another factor that increased the need for mediation²¹.

Moreover, as the controllers of the advanced surveillance technology, the Big Brother production personnel were in a mighty position to influence how the contestants were portrayed and to determine what was screened and what remained hidden from the public eye. The specially built production setting for one was carefully managed. For example in the MCR scene of my field notes, the housemates were given celebratory packs of alcohol, in the hope that this will lead to the romantic developments, sex, drunken bouts

²¹ Additional tabs on the content of specifically the edited shows included the Publications Control Board regulations which prohibits the screening of sex, bad language, blasphemy, violence and nudity and the rules of the Big Brother game, which did not allow hate speech.

etc. that the viewers presumably wanted to see.

But there was more to the Big Brother production than 'met the eye'. In fact, it quickly became clear to me that the position of mastery and knowledge associated with that of the voyeur, and production personnel particularly, were not constantly maintained in their viewing experience(s). Big Brother (i.e. the production crew), despite the popular portrayal, was not all-powerful, never mind all-seeing²². Technical problems such as a camera going off the rail, and the fact that the unscripted action in the Big Brother house was broadcast live – transmitted and received in the same time that it is produced – posed challenges to the crew who, as illustrated by the MCR scene of my field extracts, had to keep up with the action inside the house to ensure that everything was recorded.

Since crew members themselves were unsure when significant dramatic action would occur inside the Big Brother house they ideally had to be attentive to the programming on a virtually non-stop basis in order to ensure that Big Brother would miss nothing since on the two live streams time could not be compressed and there was no scope for retakes. In the MCR scene for example the crew was anticipating a romantic development between two of the housemates, based on one of the housemate's comments to Big Brother in the Diary Room. This knowledge prompted them to follow those two characters closely, but they were unsure as to how the particular 'storyline' would develop. Linda, a content director, tried to convey to me the pressure of working backstage:

Right now I am deep in the trenches. I must be able to pre-empt long before my shift starts which story I am going to follow. We have to be up to speed in terms of the

²² This was highlighted when in the first Big Brother show outsiders scaled the fencing of the house and nabbed a garden gnome, without any of the crew, security personnel or housemates noticing. It was a rainy night and all the cameras were fixed on the inside.

latest development. They create the script (Linda, content director).

While the house production assistant's exclamation "we have totally lost control over these people" from my field notes might seem a little melodramatic, the Big Brother show arguably involved a situation where producers created the environment and managed a process that the contestants also had control over (Hilton-Barber 2002: 59). Despite the production attempts to portray events around the clock as an 'unmediated reality', the housemates at times did self-consciously perform²³ for the public, thereby drawing unwanted attention to the constructed nature of the show. Ironically the cameras, intended to allow the viewers to indulge their voyeuristic fantasies, also prevented them from 'seeing it all' since the contestants were inhibited by their knowledge of being filmed.

As a so-called reality show the Big Brother production, and by implication the crew, were therefore driven by the desire to uncover an 'essence', to capture a 'realness' in the show's contestants. In the forthcoming chapters, through my discussion of aspects of the show that pertain to production such as the selection of the housemates, the performance requirements that directed the show, the reality television genre and the crew's strategies for dealing with the backstage production demands, I intend to show that diverse individuals, all with varying control over the actual output and divergent ideas about 'realness', constituted the Big Brother production team.

²³ When performance is taken as a kind of activity where the person performing accentuates his or her behavior under the scrutiny of others (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 40) the relationship between performer and audience becomes central as is also the case with my analysis of the viewing patterns. Ervin Goffman's (1959) notion of the performative self which comes alive in a social situation where display to other people is an issue, is especially applicable, since impression management is shown to be intimately related to a sense of being watched, as both the housemates, and the crew by implication, are.

Throughout my narrative the close association between processes of television and stage production – both governed by generic conventions, both aimed at achieving applause (positive affirmation) from a vaguely conceived audience, both attempting at times to remove the theatrical from the performance and to return to unmediated experience; both focused on everyday objects, peoples and situations, both centrally concerned with giving pleasure – inspire my use of theatrical and visual metaphors that will illustrate how the crew attempted to facilitate the housemates' performances of the 'real' backstage.

Chapter one introduces Big Brother as a television show that glamorized surveillance by creating a set-up where complete strangers shared a confined living space for a number of days in the knowledge that their actions were screened to a voyeuristic audience. Despite Big Brother's officious presence that constantly reminded the housemates that they were being watched, housemate were expected to lose their camera-induced self-awareness. The contestants, who have been carefully auditioned to star in the show, were hyper-aware of having to compete for viewers' favor by 'acting naturally'.

Chapter two entitled 'Fieldwork in the back of the house' is intended to shed some light on my research methodology while simultaneously sketching the backstage scenario of the show's production. Ironically the artificiality of the housemates living situation – one of the grounds on which the show was rejected as completely fake - was mirrored backstage where crew members were working closely with divergent people, many of whom they have never met before, in a relatively confined space. I argue that the camera presence which prompted the housemates to 'put on a show' did not necessarily mitigate the 'realness' of their actions, since the off screen realities of the production, where crew

members constantly kept an eye on each other, was equally directed by performance demands²⁴; notably that of professionalism and team work.

In chapter three I provide a brief literature review of material that pertains to the connection(s) between the portrayal of so-called reality in the media and audiences' experiences thereof, thereby foregrounding the concept's ambiguity that is not interrogated by the majority of reality television critiques (see Briscoe 2000; Stengel 2001; Gray 2003; Franco 2003; Benzie 2003). The production crew's attempts to capture authentic performances on film opens up a space to explore the complex relationship between knowledge, vision and realness – issues that are also of central concern to visual anthropology and fieldwork practice(s).

In chapter 4 I will show how the Big Brother crew as a supporting cast to the housemates had to go to extreme lengths backstage to facilitate the housemates' so-called performances of the 'real'. By positioning themselves as objective observers and maintaining a fly-on-the-wall pretence crew members hoped to reveal the 'real' people behind the camera-conscious contestants.

The pleasure crew members derived from playing the game by catching housemates off guard and accessing their so-called realness helped them to deal with the (in some respects) unique pressures of working on a reality show production, such as combating the fatigue that resulted from watching non-professionals perform for hours at a time.

²⁴ The arbitrariness of distinctions between performance and everyday life has been elaborated on by others (see Goffman 1959; Dayan and Katz 1987; Schechner 1988; Phelan 1993; Carlson 1996; Nightingale 1996; Auslander 1997; Silverstone 1999) and I believe it can be extended to the televised and the 'untelevised'.

In chapter 5 I will trace the progression of the show as the rhetoric of objectivity and team work began to break down. While keeping up with events inside the house could be stressful to the crew, broadcasting an entertaining 'reality' round the clock presented an even bigger challenge since it was largely the contestants' responsibility to provide the required entertainment. The pressure of maintaining the fly-on-the wall pretence coupled with the crew's intense viewing schedules eventually lead to a disillusionment (displeasure) with the 'passive acts' of viewing, thus divorcing the uneasy coupling of 'production' and 'control' as it is often conceived in media studies.

I conclude by suggesting that Big Brother's vulnerability - highlighted by my discussion of the crew's frustration with being outsiders to the house, their limited control over content, and their forced ascription to 'passive' observing roles - ultimately confirms both the elusiveness of the 'real' and the futility of efforts to capture it on film.

1. WHO IS BIG BROTHER?

At the end of the day all the equipment is just ways to reach the people in order to tell the story. The show is not about the 27 cameras, it is about the human element (Roux, technical director).

Big Brother, which started in the Netherlands, then moved to Germany, England and other European countries, is a reality television game show that brings twelve willing people from diverse²⁵ backgrounds together for a number of days (78 days in the second South African version), to live in a purpose-built house. The first Big Brother went on air 16 September 1999. It immediately generated enormous interest, shattering Dutch television viewership records and turning many of the contestants into overnight celebrities.

As a copy-cat television format - a television station pays for the right to copyrighted programs and in return receive production 'bibles' which contain instructions and training on how to run the show - to date (2003) more than forty Big Brothers have aired in 20 countries across the world. In 2001 the show, a collaborative project between the production company Endemol SA²⁶ and the South African broadcaster, M-Net, was introduced to South Africa. The country has never produced a show of Big Brother's magnitude and the enormous response it generated astonished even the producers. The second series performed equally well, achieving a 24% overall television market share

²⁵ This emphasis on diversity is interesting, since television shows have often been accused of translating social and cultural heterogeneity into homogenous unity (Hallam and Street 2000: 6). In fact, Kottak (1990: 12) claims that anthropology's late entry into TV research reflects the discipline's resistance to cultural destruction through the worldwide dissemination of television which is seen as spreading cultural similarity.

²⁶ According to official documentation given to me Endemol South Africa is the largest independent television production company in the country. It is jointly owned by Dutch-based Company Endemol Entertainment, KMM Review Publishing Company, a local black investment group, and individual stakeholders. The company's official vision is to be a producer of creative, innovative, and compelling content across a multimedia platform, expanding the diversity of programming in the Sub-Saharan region.

and boasting a million in-home viewers for the Live Eviction Show on M-Net (Kast 2002a: 10).

“In both series there has been a spike in the number of people taking up both M-Net and Dstv subscriptions and acquiring decoders” (Seery 2002: 10). Effective PR, merchandising and an enthusiastic media, fuelling the frenzy through extensive coverage in the press, ensured that Big Brother has become a recognized brand name amongst those members of the public that has access to such popular culture forms as pay television.

Although my focus is on the round-the-clock broadcasts which were available on a satellite TV channel²⁷, the pay television channel M-Net also devoted a quarter of its daily open-time slot to broadcasting highlights from the Big Brother house. In addition to the daily shows, there was a Friday night uncut show, a Saturday broadcast of Headspace after the evening movie, featuring psychological and behavioral insights into the housemates and guest appearances by evictees, the BB2 live Eviction show on Sunday evening (featuring highlights of the past week, new inserts, live crosses to the house, etc.) and a Bonus BB2 show on Sundays.

The name of the show was borrowed from George Orwell’s well-known novel, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, which contemplates the rise of surveillance society where electronic media is used to intervene in citizens’ daily lives. In Orwell’s narrative the figure of Big Brother, who appears on a telescreen in buildings public and private, claims to monitor everything. In this regard the Big Brother figure becomes a useful metaphor for the

²⁷ If a viewer clicked the ‘watch’ option on the web screen s/he could choose between the live feed, featured highlights, the M-Web exclusive feed or M-Net highlights.

popular portrayal of the show's producers as all-powerful; able to plan, structure and control every minute detail of the television broadcast, they purportedly see and hear everything that happen on the artificial set and freely manipulate the depiction of events as they see fit (see Sardar 2000; Larsen 2001; Elton 2001; Hilton-Barber 2002).

On the official South African Big Brother website²⁸ the producers indeed revealed that 27 cameras (including three mini-lipstick cameras, seven fixed indoor cameras and four infrared night cameras) and 68 microphones recorded every move of the housemates. In fact, theoretically there was no place in the house, or the garden attached to it, where the housemates could escape Big Brother²⁹ who communicated with them directly over an intercom or through pre-recorded voiceovers. The show thus literally made the 'home' a site of surveillance. "Contestants are of course under a totalitarian regime: they must obey Big Brother at all times and failure to do so may result in eviction" (Johnson-Woods 2002: 3).

Although the mystical Big Brother was only heard and never seen, the figure (i.e. the executive producers) could influence the contestants' conduct in various ways. Big Brother had the ability to spark creativity by giving the housemates numerous tasks to complete; house and nomination rules were changed as it suited Big Brother; Big Brother praised or punished housemates who at all times had to accord with Big Brother's wishes etc.

²⁸ <http://www.bigbrothersa.com>

²⁹ The role of Big Brother was played by six content directors who have been trained not to speak in the first person.

Moreover, the house schedule was tightly controlled and enforced by 'Big Brother' who, if instructed to do so, could wake the housemates up early in the morning by loudly playing music into the house, or dim the lights in the evening to give them a nudge to go to bed. When an attractive female housemate picked up weight for example in the second series, Big Brother sent in a scale and scheduled aerobics as a none-too-subtle hint to shape up. When another housemate occupied himself with a rugby ball instead of interacting with his fellow housemates, the ball was promptly removed from the house. Nothing was too trivial to warrant Big Brother's attention.

Peeping Toms?

The backstage viewing setting(s), especially the main control room, was reminiscent of the confined space of a cinema auditorium. The scene for watching was set by the relative darkness, the restricted movement, the physical arrangements of the seats – all focused on one point – that presumed a centered viewer (Ellis 1982: 128). According to John Ellis such a viewing setting entices the viewer to adopt the stance of voyeur, a stance that is maintained by a sustained and continuous level of attention.

Despite a technical director's assertion that "the show is not about the cameras", the total lack of privacy from each other and the all-seeing camera eye were key factors in the popularity of a show that promised to be "a window³⁰ into other people's lives and thought processes", as one crew member put it. Decried by the popular press as Peeping Toms³¹ Big Brother viewers were not surprisingly accused of watching a television show

³⁰ Interestingly Ron Burnett (1995: 4) states that the window is a central trope for the activities of seeing in the modern and postmodern eras.

³¹ The audience(s) for popular culture are in fact often negatively portrayed as voyeuristic (Seiter 1998).

that represented the “ultimate culmination of extreme voyeurism” (Gustav, content director for the eviction shows).

Presumably the power and pleasure of surveillance derived from the masterful sense of omnipotence with which watching the Big Brother show endowed the viewer. The cameras moved into and around the action, giving the spectator the sense of being everywhere at once. Big Brother thus created an illusion of ultimate vision by bestowing on the spectator the sense that s/he knew everything the characters did whereas they themselves were left wondering about each other’s motives.

However, the viewing set-up of the Big Brother show differed from ‘conventional’ voyeuristic exercises which are predicated on the victim not knowing that they are being watched whereas the housemates submitted themselves willingly to constant surveillance. Implied consent was thus central to the construction of a voyeuristic contract between observer and observed in the Big Brother context. Ideally the housemates acknowledged their role in the process of construction by agreeing to be seen – filling in an application form, signing contracts before entering the house etc. – without showing an awareness of being filmed once inside the house.

Since visual material only permits moments of pure voyeurism for the television voyeur when the viewer gets the sense of overlooking something which is not designed for the onlooker but “passively allows itself to be seen” (Ellis 1982: 99), it was essential that housemates had to appear to be behaving rather than performing³². If performance is defined as activity “carried out with a consciousness of itself” (Carlson 1996: 4) and

³² The microphones that they needed to wear at all times for example worked to subdue or flatten their speech, relieving it of its theatricality (Ellis 1999: 167).

self-awareness is identified as the “cornerstone of the art and craft of acting” (Bowskill 1973: 1), a loss of awareness was required in this setting.

Some of the negative associations with visual and oral eavesdropping³³ derive from the perception that blatantly watching others is a form of illegitimate privilege; a subtle form of empowerment over the people being observed. The fact that the setting was so minutely controlled by the production crew served as further testimony of the perceived vulnerability of the housemates. Big Brother for example provided all basic provisions, while other foods, cleaning products and luxury items were purchased from a weekly budget (Johnson-Woods 2002: 5) the size of which depended upon the successful completion of the weekly task.

Supposedly³⁴ the contestants had no contact with the outside world (there were no telephone connections, television, newspapers or radio) apart from the interaction with Big Brother and the brief glimpses of the adoring crowds during the eviction nights. By cutting housemates off from their usual surroundings and taking away certain luxuries that housemates might be accustomed to in their daily lives a pressure cooker was created in which it was hoped that tensions would appear quicker and emotions would flare up. As one editor put it: “It is supposed to be that kind of interaction that you see in soaps. On the one day a character hates, on the next day he or she likes and on the fourth day they are in bed with someone. But now it is real, it is not scripted” (Garth).

³³ Although vision is centrally connected to voyeurism, hearing is a constituent part. Whereas the technical directors were more visually focused on facial expressions and body language, the loggers and audio personnel listened intently to the housemates’ conversations, sometimes overhearing things that were not meant to be heard and constantly informing the content director of interesting developments.

³⁴ Producers in successive Big Brother shows have had to come up with more spectacular ideas to combat a fall in ratings. Resultantly outside people like chefs, tattoo artists, hair dressers and even strippers have been brought in to spice up content.

The pressure was increased by continuously reminding the housemates that they were being watched and evaluated by each other and an outside audience through the competitive nature of the show. Every week each occupant had to nominate two fellow housemates for eviction and give their reasons for doing so to Big Brother in the Diary Room. Revelation as a motivation for watching was subtly propagated through the emphasis on the progression of linear time: the passing of days within the house, the weekly introduction of new tasks, the countdown towards the grand finale underscored by the successive evictions of housemates. As Maria, one of only two night writers for the Big Brother website, explained:

Even if they put on an act or decide to play a game, the real side will emerge, because there is no rest, there is no place to hide. Eventually the people will become very transparent.

The involved viewer:

The voting power of the housemates extended only as far as the process of nomination; thereafter the outcome was in the hands of the public. Normally a viewer vote-off system involves the viewing public by asking them to phone in and vote between two of the housemates that are nominated by the housemates themselves every week, but despite the formulaic nature of the show there is considerable variation between countries. In the South African version, there were three housemates left in the house in the final week and the public voted for the winner. The last housemate to remain in the house won a considerable cash prize (the amount was one million Rand).

By involving the targeted audience members as 'participants' in the Big Brother show, interactive television facilitates interaction between the viewers and the production

personnel through a variety of communicative channels. Broadly defined as media that allow continual motivated choice and response by users (McQuail 2000: 33), the notion of interactivity refines audience measurement as another form of surveillance (see Gandy 1995; Ang 1991).

Apart from the weekly nominations by the public of the housemates to be up for eviction, interactivity manifested itself in other forms as well. On the Gateway channel for example a viewer could choose between three different streams (one that had a two hour delay), listen to the voices of specific housemates on spy lines by phoning a number, click on certain buttons to view housemate profiles etc. Another significant form of interactivity took in the Big Brother context was the SMS banner³⁵ which displayed viewers' textual messages, in which they responded to the show's content, at the bottom of the television screen.

Viewers could also make task suggestions to Joshua Lindberg, the Big Brother Task Master, via email and were invited to send in videotapes to the studio, imitating a housemate's persona. The Sunday night outside broadcasts gave non-professionals the opportunity to get on the airwaves if they were lucky enough to be asked by the presenter for their opinion on a housemate or developments inside the house.

The interactivity rhetoric raised awareness amongst the Big Brother crew members that their show, and by extension they themselves, were being watched. Like the housemates, the crew could never forget that they were implicitly performing for a public and that the

³⁵ Big Brother SA was the first country to introduce the ticker tape at the bottom of the screen, broadcasting viewers' comments on the show. However, BB's filters quelled most of the lewd words and profanities, especially those messages that were dismissive of the show.

success of the show hinged on their collaborative performances. Most crew members were keenly aware of an expectant audience as the following comments show:

We know that there are all these people out there, we know they exist, we can't forget them; we need to give them what they really want (Larissa, Content Director).

The audience is permanently in my mind while editing, because we edit what they want to see. They want to see excitement, conflict, aggression – not level headed, boring television. They don't want to see people sitting around knitting (Kathy, editor).

The production is merely the base with which to curtail and organize the audience's involvement. We are creating live television for them (Anine, Technical Director).

Television is often referred to as the hungry beast, but in effect the viewing public is the hungry beast. They are demanding to be entertained (Suzan, Online Writer).

It is not difficult to conjure up an image of the viewing public as hungry beast, demanding entertainment, if one accepts Neil Postman's (1985: 87) assertion that television has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of experience. In fact, the assumption of pleasurable entertainment (see Mercer 1986; Fiske 1987) is also evident in many writings that pertain to the Big Brother show. Nick Shepherd (2002: 3), writing from a cultural studies tradition, comments on the "palette of pleasures" that the show offers, including "the heady atmosphere of fumbling sexuality; the reek of domestic drama; the allegiances and betrayals between housemates".

Within this context, the overriding concern of the Big Brother crew as a supporting cast to the housemates was to enable the stars of the show to provide the required entertainment, since crew members logically felt the housemates' performances would determine how the production was perceived by the viewing public.

Not scripted but cast

Implicit in the voyeuristic 'contract' between the audience and the housemates was the demand to see performances, albeit natural ones. Aspiring contestants had to undergo an extensive screening process³⁶. As a member of the selection team dryly remarked to me: "We were trying to get real people, people that will give you drama and action. It will still be reality if someone just sits there but who is going to watch it?"

The casting aspect was crucial to the success of the show, because in the absence of an official script, the housemates' bodies, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences and social interactions became the essential content ingredients. Although it was commonly remarked by the crew that the contestants were ordinary (real) people, instead of trained performers – one of the defining characteristics of the reality television genre – housemates were cast as characters. The crew members explained the reasoning behind this:

They are expected to be characters in a soap opera, they need to play at it until the end and win the audience's support (content director).

If you look at the housemates as real people you have lost the plot. They are anonymous objects. I've got to distance myself from these characters... (Tyrell, technical director).

They have to be characters, otherwise they would not be on the show in the first place. It would be dull. However much you want to say it is real, there is still that hint of showbiz to it (audio mixer).

Nadia, an online writer, remarked to me during her shift: "We have to remember that they are human beings, not just entertainers" but later in response to a housemate's antics

³⁶ Although I did not partake in the selection process, I spoke to 7 members of the selection team (five of them were also content directors) and our conversations, guided by an interview schedule (Appendix 3) varied from the very brief to quite in depth.

that she found entertaining grudgingly conceded: "Sometimes as much as you are against a housemate you must be able to stand up and clap for them". Housemates were thus expected to behave naturally (to allow the viewer to adopt the stance of voyeur) and yet be almost continuously pleasing as performers.

The selection panel that processed the applications³⁷ had a list of criteria that aspiring housemates had to score high on. From my discussion with Larissa, one of the selection team members, I learnt that these were aspiration ("someone who has dreams, who has a clear idea of where they are going"); expressiveness and good communication skills, they have to be interesting (i.e. "not run of the mill people"); creativity and humor. To make it you had to be someone that drew attention, that stood out in a crowd. Simply put, "someone the opposite of boring" (Marius, selection panel member). Larissa elaborated:

We were looking for people that were energetic and passionate, people that from the tone of the form you could see that they love life or at least there is an energy in that form. They're not bland, gray people...and they're all very different.

The diversity nevertheless remained a narrowly confined paraded 'television diversity'. The housemates had to be 'mainstream' in the sense that a good command of English^{38a} was a prerequisite; they were all over 21 years of age, from fairly affluent or middleclass backgrounds; none of them had criminal records; they all passed the set psychometric tests and medical screening and were deemed attractive enough for live television. Some

³⁷ For the first show (2001) Big Brother received over 2 700 applications from South Africans hoping to get into the house. The second attracted more than 10 000 entries, so the pool of contestants to choose from was much larger. I could not speak to any of the applicants since confidentiality had to be maintained and their application forms were destroyed after being processed.

^{38a} Statistics are fallible but in 1994 it was estimated that English is only spoken as a mother tongue by 9% of the South African population (McDermott 1998).

selection team members in fact commented on the exclusivity^{38b} of the representation:

The show is about mirroring society, but it does not show the whole of South Africa – the types of personalities on Big Brother comes from a privileged background. It is a little bit elitist...it masks certain differences (Saretha, selection team member).

Apart from its theatrical connotations the reference to ‘masking’ was ironic, since the show was aimed at ‘stripping human nature bare’, making the ‘fronts of the housemates crumble’, revealing their ‘true colors’, etc. And applicants, familiar with the entertainment demands of reality television, went to great lengths to impress the selection team. Marie, the Executive Producer, was filmed as saying:

All the candidates were hyper aware of the situation, they came in and were trying to make an impression. And those who were very loud and brash stood out like sore thumbs, it was really the people who had it in them, who were real about themselves and who acted naturally who impressed us. So yes they tried all sort of things to grab our attention – they sang, they danced, they offered to strip...we could see straight through them.

In contrast to Marie’s outspoken confidence in the selection team’s ability to spot ‘natural star’ quality, another member of the selection team (one of many who as the show progressed became frustrated with some of the chosen candidates’ perceived inability to perform entertainingly) felt that they were wrongly impressed by housemates who “rehearsed [for the auditions] so they knew the right answers, they sort of prepared for it like when you go for a job interview”. His suspicion was confirmed by the few housemates³⁹ that I spoke to, one of whom told me after his eviction from the house: “I knew I had to be myself in the interview to make an impression - very spontaneous, not

^{38b} The show touched on issues of representation that concern post-Apartheid South Africa by selecting applicants from divergent racial backgrounds. However, because my focus was on the Big Brother crew, rather than the housemates, I decided not to develop the theme of multiculturalism as it applies to the South African context further.

³⁹ Although the actual housemates make only rare appearances in my narrative, I interviewed a few of them. Appendix 4 shows the interview schedule that I used.

too bland, but not over the top”.

The use of performance idioms such as ‘impression’ and ‘rehearsed’ are illustrative of the paradoxical nature of the show - the selection team seeking natural housemates with ‘character’ that would not put up a show, but nevertheless ‘casting’ people that have ‘stage’ personalities; Big Brother setting the inmates challenges to ‘perform’; viewers watching how housemates ‘act’ towards each other; crew hoping both for ‘authentic dialogues’ and ‘television moments’, while simultaneously deriding housemates for being ‘fake’ and ‘editing’ their actions.

The incongruous linking of the game show format with reality television, further worked against the perceived naturalness of the set-up, because of the strong perception that ‘people would do anything for money’. Playing is often defined as activity that is not real (Bailey 1996: 3), because from inside the reality of the game that conforms to certain conditions, the “usual ways of living appear as real reality” (Luhmann 2000: 51).

I look at BB [Big Brother] as the modern version of gladiators in Rome; they [the housemates] are pitted against each other for money in a controlled environment. There may be times when the real personalities come through, but they are all ultimately playing a game (Bruno, technical director).

Since the rules of play are not those of ordinary everyday life one crew member likened the show to a cricket game that you need the necessary sports gear for: “If being yourself could earn you a million bucks outside then you would not be in the house, the game necessitates you not to be yourself, you have to do whatever it takes” (Daniel, moderator). A content director, Nathan, highlighted another aspect of the Big Brother game by pointing to the constraints on what was allowable to be said in a context where contestants’ every word could be held against them by the viewing public:

The fact that it is a competition creates an impossible situation because it gives you the perfect reason not to be real, to monitor yourself. It is not a safe space for people to honestly talk without being judged by other people. They are constantly judged for homophobia, racism, cruelty to animals, being insensitive to women's issues, putting on weight etc. and it is not conducive for them to verbalize what they really think

Again the inherent tensions in the show surface. Presumably in the 'private' space of one's home, in contrast to the measures of decorum and restraint that appearance(s) in public usually require, a person can let their hair down. But the crew members who wanted to see "human interaction without any restrictions" (Tyrell, technical director) inside the Big Brother house, also acknowledged that the public/private setting diminished the potential for controversy and drama.

On the one hand a hybrid – identified by its mixing of elements from different genres and subverting the public and the private; the program was coincidentally assigned to the realm of the popular; conceived as purely entertaining, even banal, it remained fixed as 'low art'; separate and distinguishable from so-called higher art forms. Simultaneously emulating a modernist vision of truthful revelation and a spectacle of superficiality and make-believe, the show's rhetoric invited viewers to play along by critically accessing housemates' performances, while functioning within an essentialist framework in the ongoing strive for 'real' television drama.

The crew experienced the inherent contradictions in a production where instigating action and 'storytelling' were coupled with notions of merely uncovering 'real life', firsthand. Because of the complexity of the crew's own engagements with those tensions backstage, I suggest that an ethnographic approach⁴⁰ to media was needed that would enable me to

⁴⁰ Ethnographic methods, as Shuan Moores (1993: 3) points out, facilitate the representation of media consumption practices from the standpoint of actual audiences.

capture the finer nuances of constructing reality shows such as Big Brother.

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2. FIELDWORK IN THE BACKYARD OF THE HOUSE: BIGGER, BETTER, ROUGHER, TOUGHER⁴¹

It is an honor to be part of it and contributing my creative talent in any way. Seeing my name roll up the screen, it is something that is understood by almost every crew member...wearing the crew gear, there is just that thing about it (Buthi, logger).

Partly in response to critiques that audience studies lack a consideration of viewing context (Lindlof 1987; Ang 1991; Morely 1992; Silverstone 1994; Livingstone 1998; Seiter 1999; Jansson 2001), partly an attempt to foreground the 'machinery of representation' behind this ethnographic text, this chapter is intended to shed some light on my research strategies while simultaneously sketching the backstage scenario of the show's production.

To a large degree the production site became an extension of the Big Brother house, the 'backyard' so to speak. Like the housemates, the crew became fairly isolated from the outside world for the duration of the show. In the Big Brother magazine, Leon Otto, Senior Content Director of the Big Brother website, was quoted as saying: "I said to [my family]: I am in the House for 78 days". This feeling of being cut off from the outside world, almost as if they found themselves in the Big Brother house, was reflected across the board in the comments of my respondents:

For me basically, I live around Big Brother. When I get home I go to sleep, I don't do much of anything else really. Compared to my normal life I have less of a social life...(Wendy, digitizer).

They say Big Brother becomes part of your family. You are in their [the housemates'] world with them. We don't watch or listen to anything else like the

⁴¹ As part of the marketing strategy of the second Big Brother show, the 'bigger, better, rougher, tougher' catch cry promised a higher quality production by making the show more interactive; selecting more divergent personalities as housemates; making participation on the show mentally and physically more challenging etc. As the show carried on however, the crew experienced the 'rougher tougher' part personally, since executing their jobs required a lot of physical and mental stamina at times.

Earth Summit⁴². I don't know when last I have read the newspaper. I have not been anywhere, not even to the movies (Linda, technical director).

Feelings of entrapment became more pronounced towards the end of the show:

At the beginning of September [2002] I thought how was I going to get through this, I was ready to say 'thanks but no thanks'. I think because we had been working for so long, I almost felt depleted, I did not know how much I had left to give to this. You know when Mandy [a housemate] said 'this is it, I am leaving', I felt exactly the same (Redford, content writer).

The thing is, I am just tired and I can't wait for it to end. It has gotten to me now. You think of work all the time and the house is so dead. There are only a few people left and a few topics. I don't expect much of them because like me they have been here for a long time so it is 'kinda' boring for them too (Thandi, archivist).

We're all saying that on our off days we're not able to function that well. We tend to sleep and read to rejuvenate ourselves for the next shift. It actually absorbs your whole being (Jardine, content writer).

Similar to the housemates⁴³ crew members' routines, sleeping patterns and sense of time were upset. Most shifts lasted an average of eight hours and because the show was on air 24 hours a day, seven days a week, there were multiple production teams and staff had to be rotated. As illustrated by the comments above, most crew members I spoke to felt that their lives revolved around the show. Big Brother virtually became part of their family. As the show progressed, crew moral went through highs and lows and some claimed that their energy levels fluctuated along with those of the housemates:

I go through stages. It started out as entertaining and now I almost feel frustrated, aggravated, tense at times...almost in unison with the housemates. I have not gotten through this dip yet, but after Sunday's eviction I'll feel better. It is like a cycle... (Jane, technical director).

Like the housemates the crew, many of them freelancers, found themselves working alongside dissimilar people, some of whom they have not worked with before.

⁴² The Earth Summit was held in Sandton, a posh suburb of Johannesburg, during September 2002.

⁴³ The housemates' ordinary routines were inverted – they had to adjust to new living arrangements, their sleeping patterns were disrupted; they eat strange foods; they had to execute different tasks etc.

Understandably tensions and interpersonal conflicts arose. However, unlike the housemates who were almost expected to behave badly, the crew had to remain in professional control of their emotions at all times. Because emotion indicates 'unhealthy' involvement (Barbalet 2002) in the show's content, crew were expected to maintain a professional distance to happenings inside the house throughout the duration of the show. A pro-active, yet simultaneously detached, viewing style was thus prescribed by contexts of viewing in which the maintenance of good working relationships were a priority:

I can handle different people, camera men, directors, etc. You have to control your emotions, your feelings, your anger – even if someone shout at you, you don't lose concentration. You have to prepare yourself mentally and physically (Makhela, shader).

The CD's are a bit of a mix, some characters you love to work with and the whole cut is fun, and others are average. Either your personalities clash or you don't like the way they work, but I learnt how to deal with them. They are all so different. (Antjie, editor).

If you're not a people's person you damn well have to become one. The whole production is about communications and being a team player, because the hours are long (Danny, audio technician).

Throughout teamwork in and out the house was stressed and most interviewees, mentioning how they trust and support each other, revealed a shared pride in the final product. Like the housemates who were expected to work together as a team in performing weekly tasks, crew members' sense of a combined purpose and the team effort to keep the show running positioned themselves as functional 'cogs' in the Big Brother machine⁴⁴. The navy blue Big Brother emblazoned blazers and matching caps handed out to crew members helped to enkindle a team spirit that was especially evident

⁴⁴ Television production teams are often collectively referred to as pleasure-producing machinery (see Flitterman-Lewis 1992).

at the changing of the shifts when crew members would make a point of greeting each other.

Ironically although 'getting in touch' with the audience is stressed in the age of interactive television, the crew (and the housemates) were prevented from speaking to the public about the mechanics or any related aspects of the show. In addition to the confidentiality agreements⁴⁵ the crew became isolated from family and friends (like the housemates) due to their little free time. After the initial excitement about their own involvement, and the novelty of quasi-celebrity status that resulted from a member of the public discovering that they were involved with the Big Brother production, wore off the physical and emotional fatigue that gradually set in made some refrain from even mentioning to 'outside' people that they worked on it.

Crew members working in certain divisions, notably the Underdog online team, had more extensive, and under certain conditions direct, contact with the public. The Big Brother website⁴⁶ with online forum, opinion polls and chat room were aimed at encouraging viewer involvement. Crew involved with online public relations had to manage all the incoming queries and email suggestions from the public, monitor the online forum, chat room and rant and rave line and give the editors feedback on the public's views. The following comment by a respondent responsible for e-PR illustrated another dimension of observation that occurred behind the scenes of Big Brother, apart

⁴⁵ I was also meant to sign a confidentiality agreement but was never presented with the necessary documentation.

⁴⁶ The website was updated 24 hours a day to keep up with the happenings inside the Big Brother house and maintain an evolving interactive presence. Sporting both content and feature articles, visitors to the site could click on the 'watch' option on the web screen to choose between featured highlights, a live feed, a M-web exclusive feed or M-net highlights.

from watching the housemates:

I follow the show through the incoming comments from the public. I think the public is more interesting than the housemates. When I am in the chat room, I only watch, I never participate in the discussions. I also read the online forum postings and listen to the recorded calls (Lorinda, ePR).

Rejecting a conventional production-consumption scheme I would therefore argue that the crew was positioned 'midway' between the Big Brother house and the home audience and as such observers of both. Although we might be moving from a time when the television spectator had "neither point of view nor soul" (Himmelstein 1994: 18) due to interactivity that transforms viewers from mute spectators to individualized subjects with differing points of view, production firms routinely transform the actual television audience into a piece of commercial information called 'ratings' (Ang 1991; Morley 1990).

However, the singular streamlined constructions of television audiences exist only theoretically. In the minds of crew members the Big Brother audience⁴⁷ mostly remained an abstract, and variedly conceived, entity. Unlike me, who had a 'tangible' audience to work with, crew members rarely physical interacted with actual Big Brother viewers.

When asked who they think watches Big Brother crew members gave mixed responses.

Jardine, a content director, believed:

⁴⁷ Despite the limitations of statistical audience data, M-Net's official viewer data is a little more forthcoming. With regards to the BB2 viewer (see Appendix 5), M-Net's statistics show that around half of their subscribers watched the series. Evidently the show had general appeal across all ages and gender categories. The race skew was a function of their subscribers being largely white. Although the show was broadcast in open time – an effort on the part of the broadcaster to reach a wider audience – not all people have ready access to the television medium.

The people who watch the show are a very M-Net audience⁴⁸. They are family and career orientated, Christian, with particular morals and values. It is not your fringe society; it is not your 'dagga'-smoking Rastafarian; it's not your atheist; it's not your loner. The people who make the show would never watch it, although some of them do.

Yet others:

I am surprised by the diversity of the viewers, all ages and races watch it. I have heard of old ladies who watch it the whole day, young people who only watch the uncut version, businessmen who take off from work [to watch]. It is probably widely watched by insomniacs. Televisions in reception areas are now all tuned in (Gustav, Insert director).

Housewives! I am dead serious. The majority of people that stay at home and watch television the whole day are house wives (Nathan, camera man).

It is bored, very bored people that watch it. They are depressed really. People who are depressed in life watch the show (Keith, logger).

There is a large group of people out there who are rich enough to afford Dstv, but don't have lives (Natasha, technical director).

It is an audience that does not like to be challenged. They don't open their minds; they just stick to their favorites [favorite housemates] that they have chosen early on (Claudette, content director).

A number of authors (Altheide 1974; Schlesinger 1978; Ferguson 1983; Cantor 1994; Ettema and Whitney 1994) researching production settings comment on the dismissive attitude towards the audience on the part of the people involved with the production of commercial media. Elsewhere Ellen Seiter (1998: 131) points out that people in general tend to compare their own television viewing to that of the imagined mass audience, one that is "more interested, more duped, more entertained, more gullible than they themselves".

⁴⁸ The M-Net profile of subscribers (Appendix 5) shows that most of the subscribers were based in the large metropolitan areas, namely Gauteng, Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Western Cape. While there was a fairly even spread across all ages, the subscribers were more skewed to the 35+ age group. Most of M-Net's subscribers fall in the higher income bracket categories i.e. LSM 8-10.

Crew members emphasized the importance of professional conduct such as remaining motivated, focused and maintaining high standards of production - goals that might be compromised by a too close emotional attachment to the show. There was a perception that it is unprofessional to fully immerse yourself in a television broadcast. Moreover the watching of certain television products are made out to be a low-prestige leisure activity, "engaged in thoughtlessly by those who do not have the inner resources to do anything else" (Brunsdon 1989: 116).

The Big Brother show specifically had been labeled as what Ien Ang (1982: 94) would call 'bad mass culture'. Such highbrow judging had spilled over to the commonsense of everyday thinking leading many avid viewers to deny that they have an interest in the show, hence the Big Brother anonymous jibe. Quite a few crew members were themselves ambivalent about the show. Marius, a content director, remarked:

The show is simultaneously rubbish and yet quite valuable. It is a very interesting experience for the housemates and the people who make it. It sort of thrives on the kinds of things that make the headlines in tabloids. It is not an intelligent show, it is not evoking finer emotions. It is the same as a soap opera or a woman's magazine.

Many crew members found it difficult to fathom why viewers became so obsessed with the housemates – 'I am the kind of person who does not give a damn about people on television' seemed a typical response – and the public worshipping of the housemates irked them some what. By virtue of working within the industry, they were afforded a critical distance, even cynicism towards stardom and celebrity life in general.

As Barry Dornfeld (1998: 16) notes the conventionalized occupational practices and practical knowledge of production personnel, together with their experience and training,

invest them with an insider's competence and perspective. As a type of studio audience, situated at the 'other side' of the screen, the crew was able to experience the show 'in person' in the proximate space and the same time as the events inside the house unfolded. Despite the rhetoric that they 'hide nothing', the crew still felt that they somehow saw more than the general viewing public, partly because of their intensive viewing regimes. Distancing themselves from those adoring Big Brother fans, simultaneously bound them together as crew, while positioning them vis-à-vis an 'outside' audience.

The intensive training, relieving of each other through standby shifts, the coffee-making and group meals, the crew parties, the adherence to production etiquette and the fact that they were all involved in the media industry served as boundary markers that distinguished them as Big Brother insiders. Naturally over time a sense of community evolved around the act of monitoring the housemates. As one of the online editors for the website phrased it: "Walking past someone and seeing that they're exhausted and knowing exactly how they feel, it creates a bond".

Maintaining a sense of coherency, and a high morale, were indeed crucial to the smooth functioning of the show. There was constant communication within and between production zones - technical directors had to let content directors know when they changed streams; CD's had to ascertain with loggers what they have missed while handling Diary Room sessions; CD's had to take over from each other in the midst of a 'story'; editors needed to work on the same cut; tapes had to be digitized; archivists had to ensure effective storing and labeling of tapes etc.

However, despite the official emphasis on teamwork - exemplified by the metaphor of the

crew as Big Brother machine – and the accessibility of the executive, the set-up was not egalitarian. Although all were involved in the production in an overall sense, out of the 130 strong crew there were only ten ‘storytellers’ that shaped the content of the show. For example in the MCR there was the single content director on duty who, as pointed out before, acted as ‘program scheduler’ for the rest of the viewing team; the online writers’ work were checked and edited by an editor; the Dstv writers awaited the cutting down of the articles that were being written by the online writers and passed on to them; then there were the digitizers and archivists that only worked with already recorded footage, etc.

The crew’s segregation into various sub-units with delimited tasks further circumscribed their engagements with content. One of the editors for example referred to their group of editors as the ‘basement crew’, because they were located in the edit suites away from the other main production spheres. Similarly some technical directors would ask me the names of loggers; online team members would confess to not knowing any MCR crew; there was a general lack of knowledge on how selection of the housemates proceeded as well as the devising of the tasks and other general production concerns such as the monitoring of the SMS’s; conspiracy theories circulated when voting outcomes were not as expected, etc. Partly attributable to an ‘I am only part of the machine’ attitude, partly due to the specified and structured nature of their jobs, such examples testify to the heterogeneity of television audiences even on a single production site where their organizational roles in a complex management chain determined their content engagements.

The factors discussed here shaped the context(s) of viewing, framing both my observations and that of the crew. The disruption of their daily routines, the prolonged shifts, the codes of professionalism, the comradeship, the segregated, highly pressured working environment - all of these elements constrained and enabled my fieldwork in one way or another as the following section in which I discuss my field methods will demonstrate.

Research Methodology

Gaining prolonged access to the field in principal was not a problem but the logistics of temporarily moving to a different province (I am based in Cape Town), finding accommodation, organizing transport, fitting fieldwork in between compulsory coursework etc. required meticulous planning. Research was conducted on the production set in Randburg, Gauteng, over a period of seven weeks, one of which was the final training week for the crew. The show ran for a total of twelve weeks, but unfortunately financial, time and academic constraints forced me to leave the field while the show was still in progress, only to return for the wrap-up week at the end.

Although my exiting in the field mid-way meant that I missed a substantial part of the production, my absence accorded me a fresh perspective on my return, and the fact that I achieved some distance enabled me to pick up on subtle changes that had occurred in my absence. After my period of leave I felt confident to approach crew members anew (see Appendix 2), and my experience was that it was relatively easy to pick up the relationships where we left off.

Besides the regular television production team of editors, producers and camera crew, the

show required the services of lawyers, security personnel, an extensive marketing and public relations department, etc. Since my main focus was on the core production crew, interacting closely with the live show crew members who only came in on Sundays, for example, was not a priority.

A possible weak point of my study is that I had little contact with the executives of the show, partly because of structural constraints, partly because of my own conception of what was 'off limits'. I never attended any of the HOD⁴⁹ meetings and believed sitting in on the optional group therapy sessions that the crew had with the resident psychologist, Jacques Schutte, would be inappropriate. Some missed fieldwork opportunities also resulted from my flimsy knowledge of the workings of a production environment; an initially 'exotic' location which I had to maneuver by myself.

Not only was the Big Brother production setting a work environment, it was also the highly stressed environment of live television. Moving from the Greenroom to the MCR to the edit suites I got the impression of frenzied activity. Like other researchers (see Dornfeld 1998) attempting ethnography in a working context, I have discovered that setting someone down in this location for a formal interview is attempting the near impossible. Moreover, for the first two weeks my biggest research obstacle was locating interviewees. After the training week, which facilitated some interviews because crew had free time in between 'rehearsing', everyone dispersed for the working of the shifts.

Consequently I devised sundry ways of scouting for interviewees. Crew meal times represented plenty of opportunities to approach people. After I obtained a crew contact

⁴⁹ Weekly production meetings were held in which Endemol, various divisions of M-net, DSTV, Underdog and M-Web met to track the development of the show.

list I used text messaging to arrange interviews via cell phone. Especially in the early days of fieldwork a snowball sample technique also worked well. I simply asked interviewees to spread the word amongst their own divisions and this occasionally led to crew members approaching me of their own accord.

I often interviewed crew members around shift changes⁵⁰ so interviews were being conducted at odd hours. Once an interview was set-up, a structured interview schedule⁵¹ (see Appendix 1) was essential, because of the severe time constraints. Interviews were often temporarily interrupted by ringing cell phones or colleagues (not exclusively Big Brother employees) joining us for a smoke/coffee. Sometimes the interview had to be finished another time altogether which I did not mind since initially it was valuable to me that other crew members became accustomed to my presence.

Most interviews were conducted at the local coffee shop in the M-Net building, which although quite public, afforded us a degree of privacy and was close on hand. As my fieldwork progressed, and I became more familiar with negotiating the different production zones, I realized that my initial angst about finding interviewees was unfounded. Standby and graveyard shifts presented me with ample opportunity to informally converse with crew.

Eventually as I familiarized myself with the different zones I had many conversations 'on site'. On a single evening I might have had an interview with an editor in an edit suite, followed by a quick chat to a logger⁵² in the MCR when nothing was happening on her

⁵⁰ Shift changes happened around 6/7 in the morning, 3/4 midday and 11/12 midnight depending on the subdivision's time schedule.

⁵¹ Interviews conducted in semi-structured form has "much of the freewheeling quality of unstructured interviewing" (Bernard 1988: 205) but is based on the use of an interview guide.

stream and end of the evening by popping in at the audio booth. Although I participated by 'watching' the show with them, because I wore no earphones I was cut off from many of the conversations in the house, and in that sense remained on the periphery. The fact that I was at times jokingly referred to as either 'Little Sister' or the 'thirteenth housemate' reminded me that they remained conscious of my presence, and that I was a mere observer among many. However, the television screens functioned as a social distracter (Lull 1990: 39), lessening the demand for the manufacture of talk by providing a sustaining focus for attention, and making unobtrusive note-taking easier.

Throughout the research process I was hyper-aware of the correspondence between the anthropological process and performance – I was after all performing the role of investigative spectator to achieve certain research goals. The realization that performance is "not only a subject for study but an interpretive grid laid upon the process of study itself" (Carlson 1996: 190), made me more self-conscious about doing fieldwork. And the fact that I was surrounded by professionals similarly engaged in observing practices, in a setting where the boundaries between observer and observed were continually renegotiated, gave a reflexive twist to my research activities that I had not anticipated at the outset.

My tabular data depicted below, although revealing little about the diverse backgrounds and social connections of the crew, is helpful in that the statistics position the crew as viewing community. Due to the short time frame and limited scope of my study, 'social

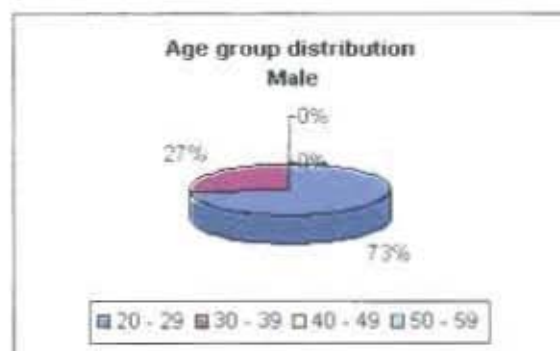
⁵² The logging staff would record information for the archives by using a logging system that labeled nearly every scene according to time codes under headings such as names of housemates and topics. In this way the relevant material could easily be retrieved and collated to create a narrative should the need arise (Johnson-Woods 2002: 38).

facts' such as the respondents' levels of education, income, place of residence, lifestyle etc. could not be considered. Rather my focus was on the subject positioning of the crew as members of an interpretive community, whose media experiences was guided and filtered by among other factors, a sensitivity to generic conventions and their working relationships with each other, in the structured relational context of the production setting.

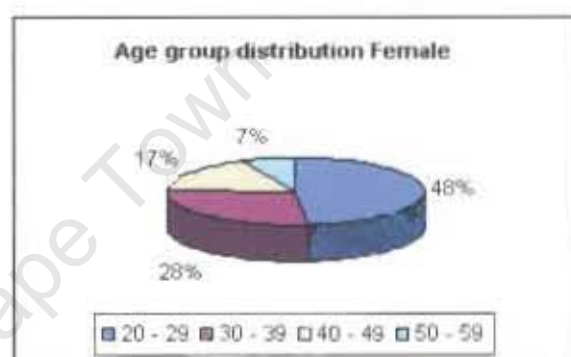
From Table A one gleans that the majority of respondents were in their twenties (62% of the respondents in total), followed by thirty 'somethings' (27% of the respondents). The older generations (40+ years) were poorly represented both in my sample and in the crew at large. Coincidentally I interviewed more male than female respondents (38 males compared to 28 females).

TABLE A

Age group distribution	Gender	
Age Cohort	Male	%
20 - 29	27	71%
30 - 39	10	26%
40 - 49	0	0%
50 - 59	0	0%
Totals	38	



Age group distribution	Gender	
Age Cohort	Female	%
20 - 29	14	50%
30 - 39	8	29%
40 - 49	5	18%
50 - 59	2	7%
Totals	28	



Age group distribution	Total	
Age Cohort	Number	%
20 - 29	41	62%
30 - 39	18	27%
40 - 49	5	8%
50 - 59	2	3%
Totals	66	

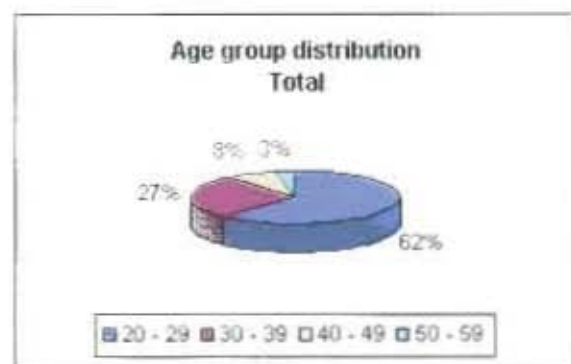
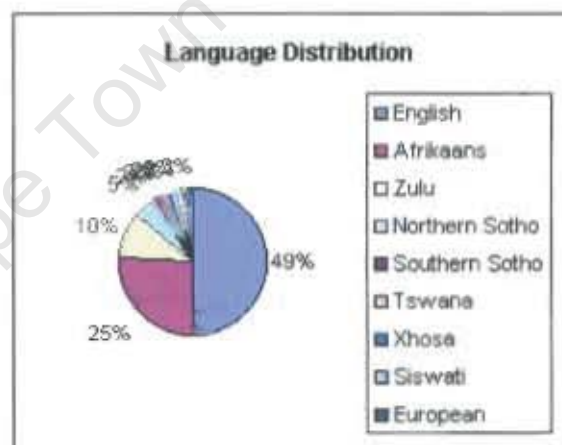


Table B indicates the language distribution among my respondents. Like the Big Brother house, the majority of my respondents cited English as their home language (50% of the respondents), followed by Afrikaans (26% of the respondents), Zulu came in third (11% of the respondents), then Northern Sotho (5% of respondents) and European languages (3% of respondents), with the remaining equally divided between other South African languages.

TABLE B

Language Distribution	Number	%
English	33	50%
Afrikaans	17	26%
Zulu	7	11%
Northern Sotho	3	5%
Southern Sotho	1	2%
Tswana	1	2%
Xhosa	1	2%
Siswati	1	2%
European	2	3%
Total	66	



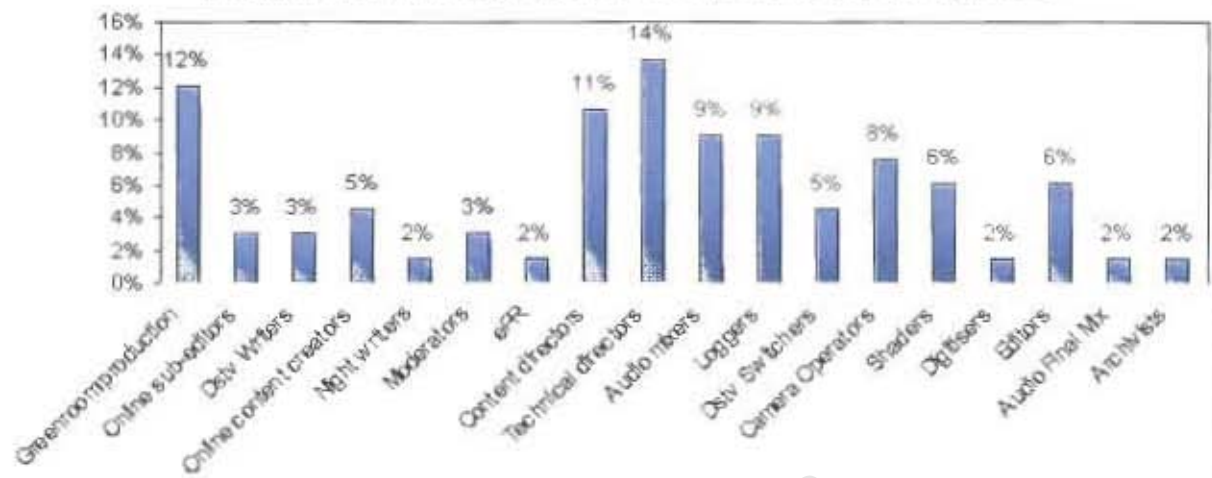
If one looks at Table C one gets a sense of the different positions on the Big Brother production team. I have attempted to interview at least one crewmember from each division. The total of 66 interviewees, many of whom I continued to engage with in follow-up conversations, represented roughly half of the 130 strong crew.

TABLE C

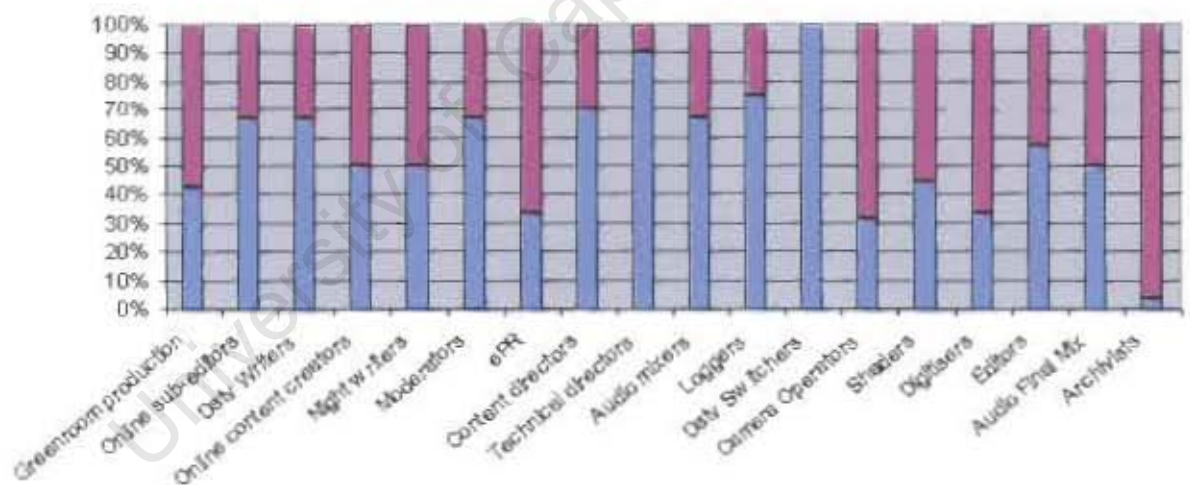
Production Occupational Distribution

	Number		Total	% of Total
	Interviewed	%	Complement	Interviewed
Greenroom production	8	12%	19	42%
Online sub-editors	2	3%	3	67%
Dstv Writers	2	3%	3	67%
Online content creators	3	5%	6	50%
Night writers	1	2%	2	50%
Moderators	2	3%	3	67%
ePR	1	2%	3	33%
Content directors	7	11%	10	70%
Technical directors	9	14%	10	90%
Audio mixers	6	9%	9	67%
Loggers	6	9%	8	75%
Dstv Switchers	3	5%	3	100%
Camera Operators	5	8%	16	31%
Shaders	4	6%	9	44%
Digitisers	1	2%	3	33%
Editors	4	6%	7	57%
Audio Final Mix	1	2%	2	50%
Archivists	1	2%	4	3%
Total	66		120	

Distribution of interviews across production occupation



Percentage of each Occupational Category interviewed



For the majority of my respondents (61% of respondents in total) working on Big Brother II was a new experience but a substantial number of them (39% of respondents) were previously employed on Big Brother I.

TABLE D

Previous Big Brother Involvement

	Number	%
First time involvement	40	61%
Second time involvement [employed on BB 1]	26	39%
Total	66	



In the next chapter, I will argue that the longstanding tradition in media research of evaluating televised products by juxtaposing so-called 'real' world realities with the filmic representations has been revived by the reality television genre which skillfully (re)constructs viewable television realities. Reality television critiques, unified in their dismissal of the prefix 'real' in these shows, add their voices to a plethora of authors who historically have observed the complex relationship between television representations and the so-called real world, evident also in the recent ethnographic turn in audience research that attempts to locate the 'real' people behind the audience statistics of media firms (see Sorlin 1994).

A non-reality?

Due to the artificial setting, the producers' attempts to stylistically capture the drama of life as it unfolds, the narcissistic self-awareness of the ordinary people in the starring roles and its competitive format – all the elements that I highlighted in the previous chapter – the Big Brother show, and reality television shows in general, with their penchant for the sensational are routinely dismissed as nothing more than a television set-up, appropriating a 'real-life' feel (see Briscoe 2000; Stengel 2001; Gray 2003; Franco 2003; Benzie 2003). Some (Mufweba, Mahlangu, Makgalemele, Tsedu 2002: 13) even label the Big Brother show a 'non-reality' since in real life "we do not live with cameras around, we do not have directors who consciously direct us, we do not play up to cameras".

But such denunciations of the Big Brother show are one-dimensional and inadequate to deal with the complexity of lived realities (both inside and outside) the Big Brother house. The fact that reality show contestants live in an 'unnatural setting' does not necessarily mitigate the 'real' as the backstage production was clearly also experienced as unnatural, and yet very real (a Big Brother reality), by crew members.

The mirroring that occurred between the house and the backstage production setting, evident from the isolation of the housemates, the upsetting of their daily routines and the fact that they needed to interact closely with others within fairly confined production spaces, that I discussed in the previous chapter stresses this point.

And, although the Big Brother crew working backstage were not 'playing up to cameras' in a literal sense, they were constantly aware of having to perform professionally as

members of the Big Brother team. Like the housemates who self-consciously projected themselves onstage, the crew could never forget that they were implicitly performing for a viewing audience and that the success of the show hinged on their collaborative performances. Plaatjies, an audio technician remarked:

I don't know if you have ever spoken over a mike, but you just have this twisted vision of 1000 people watching you. It has to do with professionalism. There is a lot of pressure and concentration when you go into a mix.

Arguing that the Big Brother show is a contrived non-reality because of the housemates awareness of being under surveillance is therefore to lose sight of the fact that everyday life also constitutes performances of the kind where behavior is accentuated under the scrutiny of others (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 40)⁵⁵.

But reality television critiques that measure the construction of the Big Brother show against a presupposed external Reality, resuscitate the long-raging debates on whether the media offers a faithful reflection of the 'real' world or an one-sided distortion. Starting with a group of European social theorists known as the Frankfurt School, adherents believed that the media were powerful instruments of social control that offered the masses false pleasures (Lorimer 1994). A similar argument is posited by the cultivation hypothesis which holds that television, among modern media, has acquired such a central place in daily life that people substitute its (distorted) message for personal experience (Rivadeneyra and Ward 1999; McQuail 2000; Lull 2000).

⁵⁵ Here the notion of the performative self (see Goffman 1959; Schechner 1988; Carlson 1996; Nightingale 1996) which comes alive in a social situation where display to other people is an issue, is especially applicable, since impression management is shown to be intimately related to a sense of being watched, as both the housemates and the crew were.

Theories of media effect came into being as a way to explore these deterministic formulations by examining the actual effects of viewing on people's conception of social reality. Feminist cultural criticism of the later 1960s and 1970s specifically drew extensively from effects theories and/or content analyses in explorations of sexism and sex-role stereotyping in media forms, including television. But as McQuail (2000: 323) points out the assumption made by media effects research that "media ought to reflect the real world in some direct and proportional way has been the basis for much criticism of media performance".

The major criticism against the 'reflection or mirror model' (Walters 1995: 40) is the assumption that the media has a "direct and unmediated relationship" with the reality it either distorts or reflects. In subsequent years the recognition of media's potential for defining social reality gave rise to new analyses of the ideological structuring of media messages that allowed an exploration of the subtleties of audience reception by theorizing it as a continuous negotiation between audiences' construction of social reality and the symbolic constructions offered by the media; partial and particular accounts grounded in the taken-for-grantedness of 'the real' (Hall 1982: 65).

In fact, from a purely constructionist stance like that of Jean Baudrillard (1983), a television program can only be understood by its relationship to other television programs, not by any relationship to an external 'real'. For Baudrillard the difference between an image and so-called reality is therefore immaterial, because the mass media provide an inexhaustible supply of images of a pseudo-reality that serves instead of experience and becomes for many hard to distinguish from reality itself.

3. BACKGROUND ON REALITY TELEVISION: RESUSCITATING DEBATES ABOUT FILMING 'REALNESS'

We are trying to bring reality to television which means we try to have less interference or influence (Nkosi, content director).

Given the recent flurry of reality-based television shows⁵³ and the many Internet articles that describe reality television as a recent phenomena that only dates back a few years, it may come as a surprise that one of the first shows that approximates what we came to understand as reality television today, actually began in 1973 (Schechter 2002).

The show, 'An American Family', was aired on the American channel PBS and quickly became a national phenomenon. The twelve episode series captured the most intimate details of a Californian family's life, including the parents divorce proceedings, on film. Others claim the genre dates back to 'Candid Camera' which made its debut in 1948; yet most (Miller 2000; Podhoretz 2000; Levine 2002) associate the birth of the genre with the more recent MTV show, 'The Real World'⁵⁴.

Just like locating its birth date, any attempt at outlining the boundaries of the genre is hindered by the mixing of elements that is so characteristic of it. Reality television is regarded as a hybrid and Big Brother for one has been classified as anything from light entertainment to non-drama production. In fact, Johnson-Woods (2001: 51) argues that reality television is an umbrella term for shows that utilize generic markers from other genres such as documentaries, 'docu-soaps', soap operas, talk and game shows.

⁵³ The list of recent reality shows that appeared on the small screen in South Africa include Survivor, Temptation Island, The Amazing Race, Sanlam Money Game, Eco Challenge, Coca-Cola Popstars, Fear Factor, The Amazing Race, Pop Idols and The Bachelor.

⁵⁴ Premiering in 1992 it installed a number of college-aged youngsters in a home and recorded their interactions for four months.

This idea of a hyper-reality in which the real is artificially (re)produced as real spread like wildfire in the postmodern age where “images exist in an infinite chain of intertextuality” (Fiske 1987: 116). Ultimately some claim, the “real world gives way for a realm of postmodern simulation” (Jansson 2001: 60).

Today many authors, not exclusively on the subject of visual media, address the tensions between reality and representation in a continued search for a deeper understanding of the ‘real’(see Spretnak 1999; Franks and Lyng 2002). Ien Ang, in her seminal work *Watching Dallas* (1985), for example illustrates how it is an emotional resonance which makes the fictional content of the program real and pleasurable for viewers, and thus she argues that they are expressing a recognition of the real at a connotative level – as opposed to the level of denotation (Moore 1993: 44). Robins (1996), to single out another author, examines how modern image technologies allow us to monitor and survey the ‘real’ world while maintaining a distance that somehow denies its reality.

A popular tack (see Press 1990; Jansson 2001) is to couple the production side of media with ‘representation’ (read ‘distortion’) and to position that portrayal vis-à-vis an audience that seem to find themselves aligned with so-called real reality. Albert Borgmann (1999: 6) in this regard writes of the “breathless glamour” of television that numbs audiences’ ability to confront and endure the “gravity and pressure of reality”. And Niklas Luhmann (2000: 52) also distinguishes between the realms of “real reality” and “fictional reality” that media audiences skillfully negotiate.

The third eye:

Ben Elton (2001: 50), in a satirical take on Big Brother refers to the television camera lens as the “deceiving eye...that false friend, so convincing, so plausible, so real and yet, so fickle and false”. Many anthropologists’ relationships with the camera – what Kirsten Hastrup calls the “third eye” (Hastrup (1992: 9) - have been similarly ambivalent. From the 1960s to the early 1980s debates focused on whether visual images and recordings could usefully support the observational project of social science (see Pink 2001).

Whereas Margaret Mead, one of the most famous exponents of a positivist anthropology with an emphasis on so-called objectivity⁵⁶, neutrality and transparency, believed in the ideal of capturing ‘everything’ onscreen by precisely and scientifically recording events with as least distortion as possible, others rejected the camera as too ‘subjective’. In visual anthropology - a distinctive sub-discipline within academic anthropology that arose during the 1970s - the question whether the camera can “correct the possible bias of the eye in the human observer” (Collier 1988: 76) often guided debates.

Covert use of video recording was assumed by some to enable ethnographers to better observe an undisturbed ‘objective reality’ (Pink 2001: 40), especially if a video camera was left running continuously for several hours. Like the current critiques which claim that Big Brother distorts ‘reality’, the departure point of the observational approach is the problematic assumption that reality is visible, observable and ‘recordable’ in video (Pink

⁵⁶ The importance of “objectivity as being rooted in reality” (Frank 1965: 33) will become clearer in the next chapter in which I elaborate on the premium that Big Brother crew members placed on so-called real performances by housemates.

2001: 23).

Gradually since the 1980s, partly driven by demands for greater reflexivity, it was recognized that ethnographic records (visual or otherwise) could never be exhaustive (Hastrup 1992: 15) accounts of plural realities, and anthropologists became weary of claiming to portray a definite 'reality' to which only they had privileged access. But because of the 'visual bias' of fieldwork, the image of the ethnographer as an observer committed to penetrate beneath the surface appearances of things in order to reveal their essential interconnectedness continue to suggest a detached voyeurism (Grimshaw 2001: 6).

Within the context of the Big Brother show metaphors of sight, signifying that an investigational activity had taken place (Soltis 1966: 30), were also frequently employed by crew members to describe their observation practices. The activity of viewing was framed in terms such as 'looking beneath the surface', 'scrutinizing', 'peering', 'taking a narrow focus', 'showing different outlooks' or 'points of view' (of housemates), 'keeping an eye on housemate x or y', etc.

Interestingly, many ethnographic filmmakers inspired by an observational cinema tradition adhere to certain ways of seeing as methodological strategies that presumably facilitate the capturing of the 'real', not unlike those of the Big Brother crew as the upcoming chapter will show. These strategies, as outlined by Marcus Banks (1992: 123), include following action, rather than provoking it; guarding against the fallacy that the camera and crew can ever become invisible; filming everything rather than just the perceived highlights; a concern with the minutiae of daily life and awaiting revelatory

moments when a character being filmed “drops his or her carefully constructed persona and bares his or her innermost soul”. But like reality television shows, these films have often been critiqued for their ‘staging’ of so-called reality:

Claims of authenticity butt up against evidence of story telling; claims of objectivity confront signs of dramatic intensification; claims that what we see belongs to the...world of actual occurrences come up against indications that the act of representation shaped and determined the event in fundamental ways (Nichols, 1994: 10)

The recognition of recording technologies’ pivotal role in the shaping of realities has by no means rendered the ‘real’ unproblematic. In the context of the Big Brother show where the “provocation of reality”(Levine 2002: 8) or to phrase it differently, the influencing of the lived action in the Big Brother house might have been obvious, as is highlighted by the meticulous planning and strict control backstage, notions of ‘realness’, and the crew’s engagement with actuality, were not.

Crew members, themselves ambivalent about the show, were remarkably frank about its constructed nature, a topic that I initially felt would be taboo. Rikkie (Series Director) described it as the “most real reality show there is”, another felt it measured 99% reality on the scale. Some crew members even proclaimed the only real thing about it was that “you’re watching it with your own eyes”.

But crew members also highlighted aspects of the production that lend to their experience of it a quality of ‘realness’, most importantly the fact that the production team was unable to ‘fast forward’ relationships inside the house...ultimately it was up to the housemates to determine the plot and the pace of the show. As Bruno, a technical director, told me:

“Here on the show the relationships drag out. We show the reality of human behavior, it

is not like in a movie where the plot has to develop quickly.

Evidently some reality-based television programming, among them the Big Brother shows, take the 'open' text notion as developed by audience-centered theorizing a step further. The 'reality' show text might be open⁵⁷ in the literal sense of the word - not only are there no scripts and no trained actors; at times even the production crew do not know what to expect next. Clearly the unpredictability of life could make for good entertainment in a show that approximates 'real' human responses⁵⁸. As Tanja, an online writer, phrased it:

I like the idea that you never know what is going to happen next. Like in a soap opera they'll drink tea from an empty cup, but here they do it because they are thirsty, not to add to the whole scene.

Arguing along similar lines, a member of the Oracle exposure analysis team⁵⁹, who watched only the Dstv channel (satellite) and had to log time codes for when he saw a sponsor's products remarked: "It is all reality, you can't tell the housemates to use the product and you can't control what they say about it, positive or negative". Like the outside Big Brother audience the crew was invited by the show's live format to experience the suspense and anxiety as less mediated and more direct; the attraction of which was enhanced by the promise of the unforeseeable.

⁵⁷ According to this theorization, audience members' reading of a text is dependent upon their particular cultural and historical situation(s) and thus subject (open) to contradictory readings. However, Hamm (cited in Hendy 2000: 143) cautions that the 'moment of reception' is never an entirely open, polyvalent event since it is "shaped by the cultural capital of the listener".

⁵⁸ A similar statement is made by Levine (2002: 2): "the experiences of the 'performers' are real in the sense that what we see are, presumably, nothing less than real responses to contrived scenarios...".

⁵⁹ The company Oracle negotiates the sponsorships for the Big Brother show. Members of the exposure analysis team have to continuously watch the Dstv channel to log time codes for the duration that the sponsor's products are displayed.

Thus, while by no means trying to deny the limitless possibilities of editing⁶⁰ – often also seen as a creative and not necessarily destructive process – my belief is that some critics of the genre in their pursuit of the ‘real’, exaggerate their point. Many crew members felt that the Big Brother show could not simply be disregarded as “contrivance” or “appearance”, as Anderson (1994) would have it, because events on Brother were in fact happening in real time (i.e. when it rained it rained) and the contestants’ reactions could be perceived as real in the sense that it was not rehearsed or scripted. Moreover, arguing that reality shows are a contrived non-reality is to lose sight of the fact that all media products are manufactured in a culturally encoded, socially determined process.

Despite a widespread belief among the crew that “with all those cameras it can’t possibly be real” (Niqui, live show producer), the concurrent belief persisted that if only the housemates’ awareness of the cameras could be stripped away, the real people would be revealed to viewers by means of the very same visual technology. As one crew member told me: “The show is about 12 people going into the house trying to be themselves but not really being themselves. Everybody is curious about the cameras. If they can forget about the cameras, it can become a great show”.

Since “you can’t have someone that is not real winning the million Rand” the Big Brother production was structured around the performance of so-called realness⁶¹. The Big Brother crew as supporting cast to the housemates had to go to extreme lengths backstage

⁶⁰ Although the daily thirty minute highlight broadcasts are a crucial component of the show, a fuller consideration of editing procedures falls beyond the scope of my thesis.

⁶¹ Although foregrounded here by the expectations of the genre, a preoccupation with ‘realness’ in its contemporary media manifestations is embedded within a humanist, Cartesian view of the world. Philosophical arguments rooted most importantly in Aristotle, for example, pursued identity in terms of the relationship between ‘essence’ and ‘appearance’ (Calhoun 1994).

to facilitate the housemates' so-called performances of the 'real'. By positioning themselves as objective observers and maintaining a fly-on-the-wall pretence crew members hoped to reveal the 'real' people behind the camera-conscious contestants

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4. PERFORMING THE REAL

We see ourselves as kind of parenting. They are not created characters. They have their own traits and it is up to them to play it out, but we entice them through tasks and Diary Room sessions. Big Brother listens with a capital L. We are a listening and watching machine (Gabriel, content director).

While I do regard these words of the highly articulate Gabriel with some caution – parental metaphors was an effective way of justifying the control that the main producers had over the living environment of the housemates – the paradoxical nature of the show, that I have been careful to highlight throughout my narrative, is again evident. The Big Brother crew is described as a “listening and watching machine” that simultaneously “entices the housemates through tasks and Diary Room sessions”. But here the machine metaphor extends to the ‘objective’ recording/reporting of an external, material world.

‘Objective’ observers

As one of the introductory extracts from my field notes show, the ‘Big Brothers’ had been warned to ‘watch speaking in the first person’ and to ‘be assertive’ since the created persona of Big Brother was supposed to exude confidence. Ideally, Big Brother should not display any human fallibilities of speech such as searching for words, retracting statements or hesitating when interacting with housemates during Diary Room sessions. Although Brother was presented as all-knowing and all-powerful, the figure was simultaneously alleged to be a neutral presence that the housemates could trust with their personal confessions.

The organizational rhetoric built on the notion of Big Brother as distanced observer, by conceiving the productive activities of the crew as looking and listening as ‘pure

perceiving beings'(Ellis 1982: 44) For many part of their performance on the production necessitated being objective⁶², an objectivity that was linked with the notion of a 'technical eye'; the ways of approaching a televised image through the conventional codes of representation⁶³ that any crew member, directly involved with the screening process, presumably have internalized.

In this regard the eye emblem, so characteristic of the show, did indeed seem to "symbolize the emotional detachment necessary for hoisting the disembodied observer...into a terrain...in which the world [is] 'there' for all to see" (Jones 1995: 74), premised on the notion that an 'objective' eye, like the camera lens, does not lie.

Watching objectively was believed to be directly tied to the quality of the production as the following comments by respondents from various divisions illustrate:

It gives you so many emotions if you think the person that will win does not do what you think they should. Then you lose the motive. It's like when you're watching soccer and your team is losing. So you better be neutral and just watch the game (Ernest, camera man).

When I'm talking to them [the housemates] in the Diary Room, I don't want any likes or dislikes. I just see them as people and I try to be there for them. I must be completely open and receptive towards them, I have to put aside any judgments of any sort (Magnus, Big Brother voice).

I just put myself away, I am just there to check what they're doing, I can't share their feelings with them... (Enoch, shader).

I see myself as a writer when I walk into that MCR and I remove my view of the world. I just look for the best in these people, whoever they are. That is how I put my story together (Chris, content director).

⁶² Objectivity is the "ascetic capacity to achieve some distance from one's own spontaneous perceptions and convictions, to imagine how the world appears in another's eyes..." (Haskell 1998: 149).

⁶³ These include considerations of framing, focus, distance, movement (of the camera or the lens), camera placing, or angle and lens choice (Fiske 1987: 6).

My understanding of reality TV now is that the story tells itself. You get footage and obviously there is some kind of interpretation, but you must not impose on that. Then the story or the game is lost (Macy, content director).

It is hard sometimes but I don't allow my own feelings to get through when writing an article. I'll just tell it like it is, although I surmise... (Tanja, online writer).

The house is almost virgin territory, because no one except the housemates are allowed in. They create the script. We tell what we see in innovative and cutting edge television. We are not here to pass judgments. If we do that, we have lost the point of telling stories which is to let people live who they are (Gabriel, content director).

You can't be involved, you have to be impartial. You can't develop bonds with anybody, you're putting out a product. You are giving the viewers at home a fair choice to choose from. It's the same like when a policeman becomes too involved, they take him off the case (Jerry, audio mixer).

By 'putting myself away', as one respondent put it, crew members attempted to bracket their attitudes, opinions and personality in a type of self-overcoming that rationalized their viewing experiences. However, a minute later the audio mixer quoted above, told me: "But I can tell you now who the crew hates... We are impartial, but after five hours of being here... That is the difference between humans and robots!" While on the one hand acknowledging that objectivity was an unobtainable ideal, many crew members still strived to distance themselves from onscreen happenings while actively anticipating and following the action inside the house and transmitting it to an outside audience.

Objectivity as a measurement of performance⁶⁴ for professional mass media communicators has been well documented (see Smith 1973; Goodwin 1990; Sorlin 1994; Lichtenberg 1991; Croteau and Hoynes 2000). Within the Big Brother context, however, the concept had enormous rhetorical power in justifying the voyeurism inherent in the crew's observation practices. In contrast to the subjective, biased, illusory and

⁶⁴ The linking of objectivity with performance extends theatrical 'staging' notions backstage in order to show how a great deal of performance happens in everyday life, whether in working relationships or otherwise.

'unreal' visual perceptions that were believed to be the antithesis of objectivity, the term connoted a visual achievement i.e. the realistic and accurate visual recording of events.

For the crew objectivity thus presented a specific strategy for recognizing "what is really out there" (Newell 1986: 19) as a means of assuring the validity of their visual constructions. As Kenneth Gergen (1994: 167) points out "one who is objective sees things for what they are, is in touch with reality or takes a good look at things".

In contradiction to reality television critiques' overemphasis of the sensationalized portrayals of contestants in these shows (see Briscoe 2000; Stengel 2001; Benzie 2003) that imply that objectivity is attainable, it was my experience that crew members took their tasks as observers very seriously, and placed a high premium on 'fairness'. Gabriel, a content director that I frequently conversed with, told me:

People caricature the Big Brother figure. We definitely play a caring role. It would be vampirism if we just created sensation. It is definitely for me a more intricate and sensitive relationship with all the moral constraints that we have.

Apart from a strong conviction to follow chronology, editors and content directors usually had differing opinions on a housemate, thus acting as a constraint on highly biased, one-sided depictions. Moreover, there was a balancing in the portrayal of the housemates and attempts at giving them equal airtime. For example if a female housemate had been seen as sexually overt by the viewing public, a decision was made to 'show the other side' of her; a concerted effort was made to highlight the more serious side of the housemate commonly regarded as the comic inside the house; after an emotionally draining episode, a decision was made to 'look for lighter moments in all housemates' etc.

Nevertheless, the notion that 'Big Brother does not have an opinion, Big Brother just watches and show people' was clearly problematic, particularly given the technical requirements of the Big Brother production with its emphasis on sharp, focused, purposive and concentrated viewing in physically draining shifts. And it is likely that the more intense the audience attention, the more involved the attendees will be in the performance and the greater will be the impact (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1997: 42). Moreover the crew had an unique stake in the process, a vested interest in the success of the show, that made 'neutrality', impossible to maintain.

Insisting alternatively on the creativity inherent in their involvement and the giving of balanced impartial visual accounts (Collins 1986: 131), the Big Brother crew thus uneasily managed the contradiction between their active crafts of program-making and their conception of their roles of non-intervention on the other. Ironically in this setting where there was such a privileging of sight, extensive measures were implemented to minimize the interventions specific to the recording process in order to aid a loss of awareness among the housemates that they were being watched.

Hide the camera: The fly-on-the-wall pretence

Great care was taken so that the housemates could not hear outside noises such as drilling backstage; announcements into the house were kept down to a minimum; the 'Big Brothers' were reminded never to refer to specific incidents that have taken place in the house – "it just reminds them that we are always watching them"; access to the camera way was restricted; flashlights and cell phones were forbidden, etc.

In the middle of the show for example a decision was made by the executive producers not to move the hotheads anymore since the housemates were too aware of them. If a housemate looked directly at a camera lens or knocked against one of the mirrors behind which the handheld cameras were positioned as sometimes happened, the technical directors immediately cut away from them. When I enquired about this tactic, a technical director remarked: "If they believe that we're not watching them they're more likely to do crazy stuff, we'll get more natural behavior".

Similar to fieldworkers that hope a long stay in the field will diminish the intrusiveness of their presence, amongst the crew members there existed the persistent hope that the contestants would let the production's fly-on-the-wall tactics succeed by eventually forgetting about the cameras. "At this stage the housemates are pretending – they are not so naïve as to give everything away, they still have a bit of a mask on" (Wim, House Production Assistant). The words of Wim are remarkably similar to that of Albert Maysles who, when interviewed in the 1960s, explained the rationale behind extended camera exposure of subjects in the direct cinema tradition:

Within the long run or long take of the camera, if it is continued, it works to the filmmaker's advantage in that the person has to break down and reveal himself within that long run. Whereas, in a short take, the person can put on a mask (Albert Maysles, cited in Cousins and Macdonald 1996: 262)

On numerous occasions crew members confidently told me that "you can only be fake for a limited period" (crew members disagreed over the actual time limit) and supported their claims by pointing to occasions where housemates clearly had forgotten that they were being watched. Situations such as an extremely shy housemate undressing unselfconsciously or housemates having to be reminded to take their microphones off

before entering the Jacuzzi were taken as testimony that they had either grown used to Big Brother's recording apparatus, or simply stopped fretting about it.

As if the initial period of the show was only the performance warm up, crew members hoped that the housemates would grow into their roles. Jona, an online website editor, said: "The façade is going to drop sometime, and then we will see more of the real people, but they first have to reach the 'gatvol' (fed up) stage. The 'I don't care anymore, I want out' stage". The following comment by Finnegan, one of only two night writers on the crew, illustrate how they awaited dramatic disclosures:

Groschaan [a housemate] seems to have a lot of problems. I want to find out what is wrong with him. The longer he stays, the more interesting it will get. He does yoga, but he is hiding behind himself. He tries to be this psychologist to the other housemates, all calm and everything, but I can just imagine him breaking down one day.

As a so-called 'listening and watching machine' the ability to suspend disbelief, to engage in the 'as-if' offered by television (Silverstone 1999: 47) meant that so long as the force of the voyeuristic illusion prevailed, even crew members could disavow what they knew about the extensive planning and construction (microphones for example were framed out in the shots) behind the scenes and allow themselves to be absorbed in the pretence that they were watching an unmediated reality.

The housemates, however, also had to play their parts in the upholding of this illusion. Since it has become conventional wisdom that the cameras diminish the 'realness' of what is recorded, starring in a reality show entails acting as if you are unaware of the cameras, pretending that they are not there. In the Big Brother show specifically the

cameras had to remain unmarked and unmentioned, in accordance to the conventions of the genre, except when the set-up dictated⁶⁵ otherwise. As Robert Allen (1992: 117) remarks with regard to television appearances in general:

...one of the cardinal sins of acting is looking directly into the lens of the camera, because doing so threatens to break the illusion of reality by reminding viewers of the apparatus that intervenes between them and the world on the screen.

Seemingly the 'ordinary' routines of life are only worth watching, provided "we can look without being looked at" (Yi-Fu Tuan 1990: 238). Unfortunately the cast of housemates did not always accord with this voyeuristic contract to the utmost frustration of the crew. By performing for the camera and showing themselves off, housemates drew unwanted attention to the show's recording instruments:

I definitely pick up on a lot of playing to the cameras, always being aware that there is an audience out there watching. Sometimes the performing is as blatant as glancing or speaking at a camera (Macy, content director).

The first two days Mandy was walking around with a Hunter's dry bottle; the next two days she constantly held a Lipton ice tea can. The housemates have recognized the potential financial gain of being a celebrity, they are playing up to the camera (Sarel, Oracle team).

I feel they are holding back, they are too aware of the cameras. They are expecting too much and using their heads too much. They think they can go into the house and just exist and leave and become celebrities (Josh, task master).

Instead of playing along in the suspension housemates sometimes openly flirted with the cameras, even using the house as a platform to market themselves, thereby undermining the voyeuristic illusion. When the audience was directly looked at, such as a housemate glancing or speaking at a camera, the security of the voyeur was threatened since direct address undermined the construction of voyeurism and put the character (housemate) in a

⁶⁵ During Eviction Nights for example everyone – crew and housemates alike – were forcibly reminded of the cameras' extensive presence when a housemate was evicted from the house.

position of 'power' over the audience (Stockbridge 1990: 102).

And because the housemates were aware of their public-ness and invoked it, they became the "subjects of their own gaze (Stockbridge 1990: 113), defying the kind of voyeurism in which the spectator, aligned with Big Brother, felt as if s/he was in total control. So initially the crew members, despite their initial assertion that they were uninvolved observers, were caught up in this game of 'catching life unawares'. Pieter, an experienced technical director who was also involved with the production of the first series, enthused:

I play the game just as hard as those guys inside the house. I constantly have to be one step ahead of them. They interact a lot with the cameras so if I am ahead I can anticipate what they are going to do and prevent it. This is the trick to Big Brother – to catch them out in a situation and to make them believe that we are not watching them.

Although by the 'looks' of it, housemates and the crew, despite their physical separation, all seemed to be Big Brother insiders, the surveillance technology became the mediators of their peculiar relationship that was both supportive and competitive. In this version of the Big Brother game, the crew team recognized the surveillance technology's potential to "delve more into the privacy of those exhibiting their private lives" (Alexander 1991: 16) if they could be caught off-guard.

But the camera lenses also interposed between viewers and the onscreen action. After her meeting with Groschaan, one of the evicted housemates, Sarinda (moderator) told me: "Many of the housemates are different on and off [screen]. Groschaan is so calm and tranquil when you meet him in person. You can't grasp that energy onscreen, the screen stops you from actually feeling it". From Sarinda's statement it is evident that what was

perceived to be 'real' off screen, could not necessarily be observed visually (Pink 2001: 23) onscreen.

On the other side of the screens the housemate team, as objects of shared attention, were vulnerably exposed in a site where their every move was filmed, but they had the advantage of being able to play with the cameras, teasing those eagerly waiting in the wings for revelation. Given the self-consciousness of the housemates in their starring roles, Larsen (2001: 51) is one among many that accuse these reality-based television programs of being "sickeningly self-aware" in the sense that the contestants reflectively display their individuality and sense of style within the confines of the house's living space.

Big Brother's performance demands:

But the Big Brother house was after all laid out as a stage – a homely public performance space – that had to accommodate the necessities of filming. Open-plan living might be hip but it also made filming easier, therefore the house was built around a so-called camera cross. Although all cameras and the 54 ambient microphones that hang down from the ceiling were designed to be as unobtrusive as possible they were still strategically and inevitably visibly placed in order for Big Brother to catch the unfolding events.

The house was illuminated around the clock, except for the two bedrooms, which were fitted with infra-red cameras which could film in the dark (Jones 2002: 31). Most of the material aspects of theatre were present – a carefully planned and laid out setting, controlled lighting, funky décor, blocking, costumes (housemates were given a clothing

budget before entering the house and some of the tasks also entailed dressing up) - and utilized as facilitators of performative action.

Of all the living spaces inside the house the lockable and soundproof Diary Room perhaps highlighted the performance requirements of the show the best. While staring into an unblinking camera eye, housemates were expected to open their hearts to Big Brother in their daily Diary Room sessions. In a time where people are expected to be more in touch with their own and others' feelings (Williams 2001: 117), indeed where feelings have been commercialized to a great extent, an emphatic, but distant, Big Brother's routine questions such as 'describe how the group is getting along' and 'can you see strong bonds developing' were therefore intended as emotional reaction sparks. Most of the crew members that I spoke to enjoyed the housemates' emotional displays:

Richard is my favorite, because he is facing his demons inside the house. He has cried, he has laughed, he has showed every gamut of emotion. He has verbalized his anger – at times he had said I hate you Big Brother... (Miriam, night writer).

A main producers' expectation of the housemates therefore seemed to be to 'act out' their ordinariness through their inter(actions) inside the house, but also to share with viewers on an intimate conversational level in their Diary Room sessions in which "the intimate depths of personality were plumbed" (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1997: 94). In many respects the show thus required housemates to expose themselves to a public audience in ways that went deeper than the superficial exhibitionism of entering the house.

So for example, older people were selected as Big Brother contestants, because "life experience gives you a little more worn-ness, like having worn a shoe that has the shape

of your foot. You give more and are less inhibited” (Gabriel, selection team member).

Housemates were hailed by crew members for giving viewers the ‘inside’ story, ‘pouring out their hearts’ or coming ‘out of their shells’:

Unlike some who has just flown under the radar, Jacqui has revealed some of herself – her upbringing, incidents in her life that hint at sadness that makes her real” (Julie, online writer).

It is important that they must be honest. You can’t act for the rest of your life. The audience will love or hate you for who you are (Nikiwe, Production Secretary).

Rabin has issues that he is sharing with the public. His father has been shot. He shares his pain. That is why I want to see more of him (Linda, technical director).

Bill Nichols (1994: 72) with regard to ethnographic filmmakers point out that they often seek out those who ‘naturally’ reveal or expose themselves, allowing their performance to engage a viewer’s curiosity... In the Big Brother house, which I have likened to a theatre stage, the success of the show also hinged on housemates’ ability to act in ways that were ‘self-revelatory’, ‘honest’, ‘truthful’ (Auslander 1997: 29) – critical performance standards that earn (stage) performers acclaim.

According to Jerzy Grotowski (1996: 188) the theatre, and I would add any stage production, indeed provides an opportunity for a “breaking down of barriers”, the “discarding of masks” and the “revealing of a real substance” where both actors⁶⁶ and spectators, without hiding anything, can emerge from themselves to discover what is ‘real’. The Big Brother show was driven by the same conviction. When I enquired about the function of the tasks that Big Brother sets the housemates to do, Josh the Big Brother task master, answered: “I want them to play⁶⁷ more, have more fun, be more creative,

⁶⁶ In theatre, the actor’s ‘real’ self has been designated by many theorists (see Stanislavski 1936; Brecht 1964; Grotowski 1996) as that which precedes and grounds performance.

more expressive". Josh, who has been a director in theater, wanted the housemates to "play like children" since play enables people to develop and express aspects of their characters that would otherwise remain hidden:

I have designed the tasks⁶⁸ carefully; they are there to add entertainment, calm, attention, intimacy, excitement and interest for the housemates and the audience. The tasks must never whitewash the show... The housemates are performing, they all came in with strategies. Through the tasks we have to break down all those protective barriers and get to the real people.

Backstage Big Brother was thus pushing the contestants physically and emotionally, with the aim of metaphorically unclothing them in front of the audience(s). Big Brother was aiming for self-exposure, because in the words of a crew member "Big Brother [and the viewing public] has to find out every single thing about them. They have no secrets whatsoever" (Graham, technical director).

But in a situation where the (unscripted) events portrayed had an existence partially independent of the cameras, the Big Brother crew's strategies for evaluating the housemates' performances in terms of their visual convincingness, which I elaborate on below, was not only an attempt to elude control, as is often claimed for 'regular' audiences, but also to exert control over their own viewing practices.

⁶⁷ The word 'play' suggests an "absence of rationality, of calculation, a kind of mindlessness in which emotions are giving free play" (Bailey 1996: 4).

⁶⁸ The tasks which included having the housemates chained together, completing an obstacle course in the garden, participating in a fashion parade and a talent competition required all the outer shows of performance – dress, undress, exhibition of skills etc.

Big Brother is playing - judging housemates' performances:

John Fiske and John Hartley (1978: 146) argue that game shows in their competitiveness characteristically invite the viewer to "share the high status role of judge, and in this to involve his/her real and culturally faculties of discrimination and assessment". As Jerry, an audio technician, phrased it:

There are certain characters that start working on you, then you start looking into the game and looking for strategies and stuff, who is playing what. I think most of them have a game plan.

Just like the housemates presumably had game plans, the crew's strategies for accessing realness, were a way of leveling the playing field, of further entering into the game with the housemates and of actively participating in the show. As one of the crew members put it: "The housemates must never win the game, they must remember that Big Brother is playing with them and that Big Brother always wins" (Joshua, logger).

The crew's strategies for evaluating so-called realness centered mostly around the housemates' *consistency*, particularly with regard to daily rituals and speech patterns; their perceived *lack of inhibition*; their *transparency* (i.e. not hiding their less attractive qualities) and their *verbal and physical expression of emotion* (gestures cannot lie)⁶⁹. The witnessing of the incidental and the unmotivated moments became the route to the essence of the star's personality.

Similar to the performances of professional actors that are evaluated according to their physical appearance, body language, voice, movement etc. the crew members as audience

⁶⁹ I have already established that the expression of emotion is a main performance standard within the context of the Big Brother show, therefore I will not treat it as a separate strategy here.

reflected on the performances of the housemates throughout the duration of the show.

Because of their high intensity watching routines they were familiar with the intimate details of the happenings inside the house, quickly picking up on inconsistencies in a housemate's behavior as the following comments show:

I don't want Ilse-Marie to win, she is not herself, not at all. At the beginning, every night before she went to bed, she would go outside to the garden and pray, but now she doesn't do that anymore (Lara, technical director).

I think Jacqui is pretending, because of the drastic personality change when she drinks. She came in and pretended to be this 'moerse' [very] conservative person, but now every second night she becomes miss 'walking Tequila', it does not make sense. And she is not showing Andre her true feelings, she turns hot and cold with him.

All of a sudden Rabin stopped with the jokes whereas before he made an effort to be the joker inside the house. I think he ran out of fresh jokes because he was on stage 24 hours. So anyone that is a real person will stay in because the public can see their honesty.

Holding back, or appearing inhibited, was another distinct sign to the crew members that a particular housemate was not being 'real'. Unsurprisingly the housemates that showered partially clothed were some of the most unpopular among the crew. Contrary to moralistic denunciations that the popularity of the 'shower hour' only points to society's desire to see nakedness, for many crew members not showering naked represented one of the clearest deviances of being real. Covering up was an open admission that the housemate in question was aware of being watched and hence, self-conscious.

The fact that certain housemates altered their clothes a number of times during the day, flexed their muscles or 'showed off' their physiques, spent prolonged time in front of the mirrors, tried to sing well when they were alone etc. were all taken as evidence of the

housemates trying to 'please' the cameras; a type of unconvincing performance that was not valued in this setting, because it went directly against the voyeuristic grain of the show.

Although on the one hand contestants in Big Brother were expected to "perform themselves, to display their personalities" (Whannel 1990: 105), on the other hand there was general dissatisfaction among the crew with housemates that did not enter solely to play the game, but also to promote themselves or housemates that appeared "terribly scripted". As one of the 'Big Brothers' complained to me: "What I miss about quite a few of the housemates is that they never allow themselves to show their vulnerable side. And if a character can't do that, then it is not real, then it is not a rounded character".

Others made similar observations:

Dominique never lets her guard down. She is always concerned by how she is perceived by others. Even her beauty routine is planned, it is all very orchestrated (Jane, Dstv switcher).

Some of the housemates look where the cameras are and if they see it pointing to them they act differently. If they were sitting quietly in a conversation, they will suddenly start talking (David, camera man).

It is no fun yet, they are all trying to please each other by being kind and polite and trying their best. I don't think that is who they really are. Puledi behaves as if he is in a principal's office when he is in the Diary Room (Peter, logger).

With Andre it is like pulling teeth, trying to get him to answer but he never gives you a straight or a direct answer. The thing is, he is a nice guy, but he is playing it safe, he does not tell rude jokes or behave sluttish in the Jacuzzi, he is being very cautious (Big Brother voice).

According to Anders Johansen (1999: 162), analyzing media coverage of election campaigns, the secret of the authentic expression on television for public speakers is a lack of style and form. "Talk that is elegant and striking is used to hide oneself or make

an impression... From the quotations above it was evident that crew members defined inauthentic expression in a number of ways that included: forced discussion between housemates because they knew the cameras were on them; polite and overly formal conversation and the avoidance of direct, and presumably truthful, replies to the questions of Big Brother and fellow housemates. Although the housemates were hardly political candidates, they were also competing for the public's favor. Interestingly, it was often those housemates that made no attempt to hide their less attractive qualities, that were liked by the crew:

I think Carol of all people was real. She is that boring, irritating, particular, nagging, forever complaining type of person. She was just being herself. She never went out of her way to make anyone like her (Moloisi, Studio Production manager).

Within the context of the Big Brother show incomplete words, hesitancy, non-fluency and self-interruptions thus conveyed the impression that the (transparent) performer was not fully conscious or in complete control over his/her self-presentation. This explains why Richard, a controversial housemate who eventually went on to win the second series, despite being accused of being sexist, racist and egoistic were applauded as entertaining by many crew members:

Of course Richard is sexist and racist, but that is what gives him character. You know what, this is reality television, so it is all about real people, right. So if Richard had to pretend not to be a chauvinist then it would not be reality (Julie, online writer).

Crew members could count on Richard to do the unexpected and his erratic behavior kept the observing crew on their toes. The moment a housemate seemed to lose control of his/her emotions as often happened with Richard during his numerous drunken bouts, anger outbursts and romantic encounters with female housemates their behavior became

visually convincing. Improvisation was therefore highly prized because it enforced the sense of immediacy in a setting that was so carefully controlled. Often the performance of so-called realness centered around excesses of the body such as drunkenness, rowdiness, promiscuity and idleness:

The only person that is truly honest and does not hide anything is Mandy. Her laziness, her greediness... She is open about everything – she has no bones about telling us she has false hair and nails, that she shaves her body. I like Mandy because she does not play games. You always know where you stand with her (Dana, Dstv switcher).

Ironically a housemate's frankness about her false hair and nail extensions, became a testimony of her perceived 'realness'. It is debatable whether this openness of the housemate Mandy was not in fact part of her game strategy, and crew members were often unsure where they stood with housemates. Moments of intimacy between housemates and/or Big Brother or spontaneous action that conveyed the raw and physical excitement of human experience were after all rarely attained in a game show that encouraged contestants to conceal their 'true' thoughts and motivations in order to outmaneuver fellow contestants.

For the crew their own performances therefore centered around catching the housemates in their unguarded, unrehearsed moments; exposing their vulnerability in actions that were perceived to be genuine. This entailed betraying a discrepancy between the inner and the outer, making them transparent so that viewers could see what was 'really' going on inside housemates' heads. In the television close-up for example that catches eye twitches or drops of sweat on the speaker's forehead, the fleeting, ambiguous and inadvertent expressions are far more conspicuous and significant than in any off screen

performance (Johansen 1999: 166).

As I have shown the crew, by paying attention to particular gestures, expressions, forms of dress and images – what I call codes of realness⁷⁰ - arrived at their perceptions of performance through their recollection of the same housemate in different situations, their underlying awareness of the setting's artificiality and general living knowledge. Crew members frequently altered their perceptions about a given housemate, sometimes downscaling or completely abandoning a former assessment.

Despite a certain uniformity in how realness was registered, more often than not the same housemate would be singled out by different crew members as an example of being real or holding the contraposition of “cardboard cut-out” to use a crew member's term for a housemate that was perceived as ‘unreal’. The crew's varied perceptions of ‘realness’ in this sense were not concretely given, but had to be discriminated, recognized and registered as actually present (Frank 1965: 4) in diverse ways. The ambiguity of notions of realness is in line with audience research that illustrate the contradictory dynamics of media reception and refutes the notion of an essential ‘real’ that can be captured on camera.

More important the investment of the notion of ‘realness’ with different content illustrated for me their partial knowledge and their own lack of foresight into what was going to happen on stage. In fact, the performances of ‘realness’ onstage and off were marked by a constant struggle between authorial control and a sense of an unwritten, unruly set of events that resisted control (Fiske 1989: 68)

⁷⁰ Although a deeper probing of standards set for realness falls beyond the scope of my study, the notion that a performance is marked in order to be recognized and experienced as such can credit another study.

Many experienced the playing of the game through the catching of life unawares and accessing realness as intensely pleasurable⁷¹; it represented an active, creative response to the strictly enforced and confined conditions of watching. Thus the crew's strategies for accessing 'realness', presented themselves as ways of dealing with the demands of being the people 'behind the magic'⁷²; contextual constraints that are often overlooked in reality television critiques.

Interestingly the performance demands of the Big Brother crew differed markedly from those of the housemates. The production personnel rehearsed extensively for the show, whereas housemates had to appear unrehearsed. Housemates were expected to interact unselfconsciously; crew members on the other hand were hyper aware of having to maintain good working relationships with each other. While housemates were praised for emotionality, losing control, and acting out, crew members were trying to objectively engage with content, while remaining emotionally uninvolved. However, in the following chapter I will show how the 'unrealistic' performance demands in the long run took their toll on both the housemates and the crew as both teams tired of playing the Big Brother game.

⁷¹ As Roger Silverstone (1994: 154) points out, many theorists have suggested that television offer the possibility for truly active engagement of the kind that involves great pleasure. Indeed the concept of pleasure or 'plaisur' has become central to the dialogue around the 'gaze' and spectatorship (Walters 1995: 89), especially in the reception tradition of audience research (see Morley 1980; Hobson 1982; Radway 1984; Ang 1985; Brown 1994; Silverstone 1999; Mulvey 2001).

⁷² 'We won't stop the magic' is the official catch cry of M-Net, the channel on which the daily edited episodes were screened.

5. THE ELUSIVE 'REAL'

A lot of the stuff that the housemates say are fake. It's all words and no action. I just want to shake them and say 'get real' (Finnegan, night writer).

Sometimes the crew becomes frustrated and bored and they just want reaction from the housemates. They want to poke them like a bear on a pole, but that is not how it works (Graham, content director).

Actively passive: pleasure denied

According to Ellis (1982: 84) the voyeuristic activity of inquiring is active or experienced as such where "the spectator's position is one of balancing and rebalancing, of achievement and loss of a position of knowledge and vision" (Ellis 1982: 84) as was aptly illustrated by the crew's game playing strategies that I discussed in the previous chapter.

The frequent use of phrases by the crew such as 'turning up' the heat inside the house; 'hunting' stories down; 'finding' and closely 'following' interactions, 'tracking' the progression of this or that relationship, 'pushing' housemates' buttons, 'rattling' their cages, 'drawing' a housemate out, 'pre-empting' action, 'steering away' from certain stories, 'altering' housemate 'portrayals', 'giving' specific housemates airtime; 'highlighting' certain qualities of housemates, etc. consistently conveyed a sense of their active⁷³ participation in the shaping of the show.

At times the action inside the house was frenetic and correspondently the crew's intense

⁷³ The concept of activity that is utilized in audience research has become more broadly defined in recent years. Extending beyond the behaviorist switching on and off of the television set it now includes cognitive processes of perception and knowing and spans both the periods before and after viewing in which viewers select programs and then selectively recall what they saw. The active viewer, drawing upon different interpretive resources, makes sense of programs "relatively unconstrained by the structure of the text" (Livingstone 1998a: 63).

cinema-style viewing ('seeking mode' as one called it) and directing/writing, depending on their division, could be physically tiring. However, at other times the housemates were asleep or idly occupied and the crew was left with nothing to do but observe.

So in this setting where activity was conceived in terms of physical actions such as listening to, examining, moderating, checking and adjusting content, interspersed by the main task of watching the onscreen action, where there was little for the average crew member to set up or to plan, where they "only followed" events as they occurred, viewing at times was experienced as quite passive. Despite their physical contributions to the production, and their strong commitment to a shared goal – creating the best production possible – I discovered that many crew members who initially claimed it to be a creative endeavor actually lacked a sense of control over the shaping of actual content.

It feels like we're in the house with them, you're so close, but you can't participate, you just have to stand in the dark and watch (Sarel, camera man).

I am kind of in the show, but I am still on the outside (Roux, technical director).

I would rather be throwing a rugby ball with them than watch them play sports (Jerry, audio technician).

Apart from the organizational structure that circumscribed the expression of creativity, speech inside the house occurred in such a way that there was no possibility of a direct return on the side of the crew members, regardless of their position on the crew.

Although Big Brother communicated with the housemates through the daily Diary Room sessions and by giving them various tasks, announcing surprise events and reprimanding a housemate for conspiring, the average crew member had no communicative access to the house. Caz, a Dstv switcher, verbalized her frustration about this when she said:

This evening Richard was having a sexist discussion about women and then we [in the MCR] just screamed out of frustration, because there is nothing that we can do. You have to internalize all that frustration because you can't talk to them. You feel defeated in a sense.

Unlike an off screen stage performance which is usually open to immediate public acceptance or rejection (Bennett 1997: 68) crew members were hostage to the whims of the housemates and the viewing public. The crew, unlike the television viewer who could get up at any moment or switch off their television sets, had to stand vigil for the unexpected that could happen any moment.

In contrast to the confident Big Brother insiders that they proudly claimed to be, crew members thus ended up feeling like outsiders to the house. And despite the control that is often attributed to the show's producers and to the position of voyeur, the average crew member resented having to (passively) observe the onscreen happenings. Because the show was in place and it ran its course, there was little left for the crew to set up or plan. As Markus, a content director, put it: "The only thing we can do is to support the housemates as best we can by making it a slick and seamless show. In that way the housemates can provide the entertainment that they need to" (Markus, content director).

Unfortunately, as Johnson-Woods (2002: 71) points out the "domestic confines of Big Brother limited its potential for action...many of the days the contestants...performed the many mundane activities that constitute normal life". The crew, by virtue of their prolonged and enforced viewing regimes, became acutely aware of this. Resultantly handling boredom became one of the biggest challenges for crew members who were continually waiting and searching for 'television moments'.

As the show progressed more and more crew members complained about its insipid nature, and the lack of stimulation, both visually and aurally. Many, specifically located in the MCR and camera way production zones, felt that they, in their supporting roles, were forced to sit and watch a bunch of people which were about as interesting as “watching paint dry”. Their dissatisfaction, which intensified as the show progressed, was reflected in the following comments:

We have to stand there [in the camera way] for eight hours a day. In the beginning it was very exciting to be in there when they were new. But now you are basically doing nothing, you are tired and it is dark, dingy and isolated. The less action there is inside the house, the more hectic it becomes for the camera men (David, camera man).

All the exciting people have left, it kind of put a damper on everything, I mean look at it. These [housemates] are just riding it out, they have no real life in them. We have two weeks left that we have to keep ourselves going... (Danny, audio technician).

Sometimes we sit here for two hours, without an article coming up. They're doing nothing really, unless you give them booze on a regular basis (Isaac, Dstv writer).

Nothing is happening, to make a 22 minute episode is quite tough. You have to go through the tapes and look for shots (Roger, editor).

There are only a few people and a few topics. I don't expect much of them [the housemates], because they've been here for a long time so it is boring for them too (Lina, archivist).

Some of the housemates shut down because of the stress of being in the house which does not make for good content. I am disappointed by the lack of serious conversation inside the house. There is little personal probing (Fiona, selection manager).

In an attempt to cope with the slow passing of real time inside the house crew members as viewers deployed different modes of attention (Morley 1986), switching from high (rapt) to low attention and back again during shifts, as their will and capacity to give attention wavered. Even whilst monitoring the activities of the housemates, some managed to ‘disengage’ by just mechanistically performing their duties without actually ‘listening’ to what was said as is illustrated by the following comments of respondents:

Like what's the fun about this [he points at the screen where two housemates are busy in the kitchen]. I don't find fun in cooking. I just tune out or I watch the clock. I make it through my shift somehow (Jacob, logger).

I don't watch the show, I don't listen to the show, I only work here. Initially I was interested in it, but now the housemates irritate me. I don't want anything to do with them (Christiaan, shader).

Instead of the vigilant and attentive viewer 'listening with a capital L' that I initially befriended in the MCR, an indifferent Christiaan was now mechanistically performing his duties as shader, with his earphones hanging loosely around his neck. I could sympathize with the crew, because observing them at work behind the scenes also tested my abilities as an observer to remain alert and interested, especially at times when there was little happening.

Note taking for me often entailed jotting down simple observations such as 'Thandi (logger) is typing/ Josh enters MCR/ He's holding plastic cup of coffee/ He walks out again' in settings where crew members' attention were focused onscreen rather than off. Thus, in contrast to John Fiske (1989: 67) who claims that television's 'nowness' set up empowering viewing relations, I found the crew's experience(s) of displeasure that derived mainly from their frustration with the slow passing of time inside the house and the lack of interesting conversation between the 'inmates', many of whom remained inhibited, formed a marked contrast to the routine discussion of television reception along an axis of pleasure.

While I am by no means devaluing the pleasure crew members derived from their participation in the game through their strategies of catching life unawares and evaluating the 'realness' of housemates, I maintain that a uses-and-gratifications model, implicit in

viewing pleasure analyses⁷⁴, was inapposite for the Big Brother team of observers. After all, all the kinds of gratification identified by those studies (see Hendy 2000; McQuail 2000) were absent.

Crew members had little choice in watching, selectivity (choice) in viewing was restricted, moreover viewing instead of being a diversion of life's routines, became the routine; instead of relaxing the viewing experience was emotionally and physically draining; emotional release was prohibited; involvement discouraged; companionship was to be found off screen rather than on; and few of the crew members that I spoke to found the housemates' conversations enlightening or informative.

Most importantly the voyeuristic need to satisfy their curiosity about watching 'ordinary people' perform in a way that contrasted to everyday realities, remained largely unfulfilled. Instead of waiting for revelation, the emphasis shifted to counting the remaining days to the end of the production. Clearly one can not meaningfully decide about the entertainment value of television outside of specific articulations of television-audience relationships (Ang: 1996: 70).

Handling displeasure: ranting and raving

Backstage I found that a devotion to the craft, a similar technical orientation (as illustrated by the strive towards objectivity), the codes of professionalism and team work and the high premium placed on putting forward a quality product that required

⁷⁴ There is an important convergence in views about audience pleasure and an earlier social scientific approach to audience gratifications (Tulloch 1990: 196). Both take popular television seriously as a socially involving and significant activity, taking into account the multiplicity of subjectivities for the differential reading of texts. However, for cultural studies media consumption is a site of cultural struggle over meaning and pleasure (Ang 2001: 184), emphasizing more how relations of power are organized within the heterogeneous practices of media use.

cooperation, helped to reduce conflict. However, as the show progressed, and the hype around the crew's involvement died down, working on the show became more of a 'reality'. Similar to the housemates for whom the 'honeymoon phase' inside the house was over, the backstage tensions gradually began to show:

In the beginning it was still a new unit, there was all that hype and stuff around the show, but then it wore off and your present problems started coming through. The TD's took out their personal problems on the camera men and they took it out on us [audio technicians]. At the HOD meeting all they did was fight (Gareth, audio mixer).

Whereas crew members in previous interviews made a point of referring to the 'excellent vibe' among the crew, I became aware of the small irritations that arose in their daily interactions and respondents themselves willingly discussed underlying frustrations. Usually conflicts arose because of a breakdown in communication between divisions. The cameramen felt that the technical directors required shots that were not there; the TD's believed that their creativity was stifled by content directors dictating which 'stories' had to be followed; CD's accused the sound technicians of using music insensitively; certain TD's and audio crew nagged CD's to enforce house rules; CD's felt pressurized by editors wanting to cut immediately, etc.

In addition, maintaining the fly-on-the-wall pretence combined with the ultimately frustrating 'actively passive' modes of watching made the strive towards objectivity and the team work rhetoric increasingly difficult to maintain. The notion of the crew as 'listening and watching machine' contrasted sharply with my later observations of crew members who seemingly had given up on the ideal of approaching content in a rational, dispassionate, and evenhanded manner.

Instead, crew members were involving themselves in the show, allowing themselves to be held in suspense by the unpredictability of the action. Despite the emphasis on concentrated viewing, and an initial reluctance to discuss the housemates too openly – factors that restrained talk backstage – crew members found time during shifts to speculate about the psychological motivations of the ‘characters’ and frequently analyzed their conduct inside the house. The following comments reflected the crew’s recognition of their own emotional investments in the show:

Big Brother puts you on a roller coaster ride. It becomes significant just because you are in it. You do get affected by the housemates (Marius, content director).

I find it difficult to be objective, you definitely get involved emotionally. It is difficult to step back and to separate yourself from these characters (Linda, technical director).

For me all the eviction nights are low points. I always get the person who is going to be evicted wrong and you get taken up in the housemates’ emotions because it is so emotional for them (Ramephela, archivist).

It is hard getting used to the fact that you can’t avoid getting involved in it. Everyone [in the crew] is dreaming about it. At home I hear their voices before I fall asleep and sometimes I dream I call the cameras. Out of everyone in South Africa, we’re the only ones watching 8,9 hours a day (Lara, technical director).

It is a very emotional experience being on the crew. You still get swept up by the concept, you are an audience member even though you’re on the crew. You think it will create distance but it does not, you are just as involved and maybe even more so (Pumi, logger).

The crew’s exasperation, and even open dislike of the housemates, increased with time. Remarks such as that ‘you can count the topics of the housemates’ discussions on your one hand’, that ‘they don’t have intelligent insights’, etc. became commonplace. In marked contrast to the initial empathetic, but distanced, parental stance crew members claimed to hold towards housemates, I found that housemates were increasingly labeled

in reductive, often derogatory, terms. Thus Ilse-Marie became the 'slut', Richard the 'sexist farmer', Zlatko the 'two-faced Croat', etc.

Moreover, not only were many crew members openly expressing their resentment of certain or all housemates, some were also actively voting for housemates that they particularly despised to be evicted from the house. Ranting and raving manifested itself also in an extreme exaggeration of their own experience(s) of boredom and the perceived boringness of certain 'characters':

Big Brother does not live up to my expectations of what a reality show should be. It is just too boring. I know people can be interesting just in the things they talk about, but you can count these housemates' topics on your one hand. They don't even have arguments.

Puledi contributes nothing. I am considering going to the executive producer and asking his mike back, because he is wasting battery power (Jerry, audio mixer).

It is like you are looking for someone to take your frustrations out on. Zlatko is definitely one – how he eats, how he sits, how he lies, how he walks (Christiaan, shader).

When Dominique was evicted, the whole crew cheered, because we did not like her. Since she came into the house she was a sourpuss. She never smiled and she did not talk to anyone (Mbuto, logger).

At times the 'ranting and raving' took on the form of overt ridicule such as crew members pretending to throw up or strangle themselves when a certain housemate came into view or making crude hand signs at the screens. Since rising from their chairs and walking out was not an option, their resentment was expressed in a variety of physical gestures such as turning their heads away from the screens, shielding their eyes, insisting on focusing on another housemate etc. Avoiding looking at the screen, became a means for the crew of 'engaging' with the housemates by rejecting their performances, refusing

them the attention, and control, that they presumably craved.

Crew members' engagement with content was partly determined by their awareness of their co-viewers. Like the housemates crew members were self-consciously projecting themselves, clearly 'performing' for each other and often jokingly remarked that the cameras should be centered on them rather than on the house. On more than one occasion I noticed that they also checked to see whether I was watching them. Bruno, a shader, explained how the surrounding viewers influenced his experience of a particular housemate:

During a shift where Ilse-Marie irritates everyone I would also be irritated but when the shift is over your emotions change, you're a changed person again .

Although on the face of it, it might appear as if the crew indeed loathed the people they were charged with watching, their contempt was mostly functional. The 'othering' remained playful and was often reflexively and openly recognized as a strategy to cope with work demands and the intensity of the viewing experience. Despite their physical proximity to the house, the spatial distance effected by the television screens or quite literally the windows of the Big Brother house permitted a level of criticism that would not be appropriate for other forms of social interaction. One crew member remarked that "Television creates that level where you can judge" so the spectators, even though they were emotionally involved, remained separated from housemates as 'objects' of vision.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS: A SELECTIVE REALITY

Day 70 - 5th October

10:21. I am in the Greenroom. The placard on the wall reads:

We're into the final stretch of the show, we have more content happening than in the final four weeks of BBI.

Cd's: be clear in your directing and storylines

Td's, camera men and shaders: get the superb shots and pre-empt action

Audio: stay focused on the story being followed and anticipate action

The confident tone of the words surprises me; after seventy days on the set almost all the crew members are suffering from cabin fever as they resort to counting down the seconds, minutes and days in conjunction with the remaining housemates, willing the time to pass quicker. Resisting the urge to jump up excitedly when I see Rabin, one of the ex-housemates entering the Greenroom, I casually slink over to where he is sitting on the couch and take place beside him. About his approach to the selection process he has the following to say: "I was definitely natural, my personality was switched on all the time". I ask him about his strategy inside the house: "I suppose I did not have a sales pitch, but it being a reality show, you have to be real. And sometimes that is the hardest thing to do. You are already consciously aware of having to be that".

23:45. In the MCR the shader in the seat in front of me is flipping through a magazine, while the logger next to me is fidgeting with her mobile phone, her ear phones hanging loose around her neck. Someone put a scribbled note up on the content director's control panel that reads: 'please speak softer into the mike'. I am on the verge of leaving for home, but the possibility that something might happen prevents me. Three of the four remaining housemates are sitting in the living room, chatting. When one housemate

suggests that they play Yakaboo⁷⁵ everyone in the MCR sighs.

Saretha (CD): Oh please go to sleep.

Roux (TD): Perhaps we can pump sleeping gas into the house?

Pumi (Logger): I am going to need a cigarette soon.

Tomas (Shader): There is only seven hours and 45 minutes left of my shift.

Saretha (CD): I wanted to go to Andre. I thought he was going to say something deep and meaningful but he is talking about the cats.

Roux (TD): Can't we get new housemates? I am bored with these ones! [Everyone laughs]. Do we have to watch Puledi brushing teeth?

Saretha (CD): No, but there is nothing else. Do you prefer to see Jacqui making tea?

Roux (TD): Yes. We need to change windows camera four.

01:15. Moses, the security guard, is half asleep by the entrance to the Greenroom, but nods in greeting when I walk past. On the Greenroom monitor I see the sleeping figures of the housemates. Usually they are still up and about at this time of the night. At the front of the room the solitary figure of Miriam, one of only two night writers, turns around and calls me closer. She wants to interview me for the Big Brother website⁷⁶. Although it feels awkward to change places now and be in the seat of the interviewee, our conversation gives me a valuable opportunity to reflect on some of my BB experiences.

Day 77 - 12th October

17:50. I am 'sitting' in for Dana as Dstv switcher. I suppose it is quite fitting that the day before the show ends I am finally fully initiated as a crew member, but I have butterflies in my stomach. Working in single shifts, the Dstv switchers ensure that

⁷⁵ The official Big Brother board game. It was hoped that the housemates would forget about the cameras, microphones and "anything else that might be bugging them" when playing the game.

⁷⁶ See Appendix 6 for the article that was published online on the Big Brother website.

Big Brother is on Dstv 24 hours a day by putting out the streams that the viewers will be watching. They also put out the crawls – words flashing past the bottom of the screen promoting a sponsor's product or encouraging viewers to send in SMS's or vote for their favorite housemate. In principle this sounds simple enough, but activating the crawls means managing the 'delta' – a machine that looks like an old-fashioned computer with similar erratic moods.

18:00. I activate the crawl by pushing the crawl button and 'dynamic' to line it up. Making sure that I am on air, I let it roll. The words '*less than 48 hours left to vote for your Big Brother winner*' glide past the screen, directly followed by '*surveillance cameras supplied by Panasonic*'. I quickly push the stop button to pause the crawls until 18:15 when the next batch rolls out. In 5 minutes there is an advertisement break, so meanwhile I am listening over the earphones for when I need to switch streams. In the row in front of me Chelsea, a technical director, turns around to show me a thumbs up sign. It seems I have my duties figured out.

Last day of fieldwork - 13th October

Sunday morning, 8:45. I am in the Greenroom reading up on the Big Brother website at 'my' desk. Because of the rotating shifts I have started saying my goodbyes a few days ago. I have already packed my notebook away when Thabuko, one of the Dstv writers who is sitting next to me quietly comments:

People in the [Green]room are wearing masks, I tell you. It is a strategy to get along with others. People are aware of always being watched, that is why they are putting on the friendly face, the I-like-my-job face, even though at eight o' clock in the morning they would rather be sleeping like the housemates. If you leave the building, you will be more of your real self...

Months after the show has ended I have 'replayed' my experiences in my head when reading through my field notes. Just like Big Brother I sometimes painfully realized that I have missed something, that there was so much action in a particular setting – whether it be the Greenroom, the MCR or an edit suite – so many voices resounding simultaneously that I could not capture it all. Since having a total transcending view of what is happening is impossible, some crew members stand out and feature more prominently in my field notes, just like certain housemates draw more attention inside the house than others.

While I have been careful throughout to avoid an 'easy realism' descriptive prose which maintains the pretense of 'looking at the world directly, seeing others as they really are' (Geertz 1988; Atkinson 1990) I want to stress once more that my textual account is one of many possible (re)constructions of the social realities that I encountered.

Like most crew members for whom working on the production was a learning curve, I have come under the renewed impression that it is my notebook and my pen that staged the events on which this thesis is based, even though much of the content was unmediated (i.e. not filmed) and happened in real time. And like them, I have tried to remain 'objective', even detached, while simultaneously acknowledging my own emotional involvement in both the backstage and front stage aspects of the show.

Similar to Big Brother's tasks and Diary Room sessions my questions were designed to elicit content in the form of answers from my respondents (housemates if you like), and like this elusive figure I was sometimes elated, and at other times exasperated by the generated responses, especially when some of the interviews in the first phases of

fieldwork, felt nearly as artificial as the Diary Room set-up inside the Big Brother house. After all, in my attempt to construct an 'authentic' ethnographic account, I was digging beneath surface meanings and appearances, trying to uncover the 'real' people behind their masks of professionalism.

Moreover, like the content directors of the show, I was searching for a connecting thread to string the multitude of events (field observations) together in a coherent argument. All the time performing my role of unobtrusive field researcher (and voyeur) as I saw fit. And despite becoming a Big Brother insider by establishing close connections with many crew members, like them I paradoxically remained an outsider, witnessing from the inside.

Although I moved around freely in a highly structured environment, I had certain ethical codes to adhere to; keeping the field open for researchers that might want to follow after me being the most important. For me doing fieldwork ethically started by being transparent (yet another visual metaphor) about my goals and objectives in the research proposal (see Appendix 7) that I sent to Endemol SA and continued on the production set by being frank about the fact that I was there in an observing capacity, highlighted by me continuously taking notes.

Like the Big Brother executive, I have tried to keep to the guidelines of anticipating harm to informants, avoiding undue intrusion, obtaining informed consent and respecting respondents' rights to confidentiality and anonymity. In writing-up I tried to transform informants from 'paper people' to the real three dimensional people that they were, by often giving them cues to 'talk'. Things said to me off the record remained so. However,

because I did not receive clear instructions from the executives on what could be said and what not, I had to use my own discretion when writing up.

Clearly Big Brother as a show was aligned with a genre that, although proclaimed to be new, merely reworked many conventional televised practices. The intrusion into people's privacy for one is not novel, nor is game show contestants' projection of themselves. While the show in some senses drew attention to the observing mechanisms of the media production, claiming legitimacy for televised voyeurism, I have shown how in order for the constructed voyeurism to be effective, the recording technology was not supposed to be alluded to in the actual 24 hour screenings of the show.

My description of the crew's training week; the selection process; the firm grip that Big Brother kept on the housemates through the control of the house's schedule and the introduction of new house rules and tasks; the mediation of events on the 24 hour channel etc. all illustrated the 'staging' of lived 'reality' for which the show was heavily critiqued.

The view of Big Brother as being actively in control corresponds to the "image of an appearance network used to manipulate the masses, to conceal from them the way things Really Are" (Seitz 1990: 198), but the all-powerful and omniscient image of 'Big Brother' turned out to be just as much a façade as the notion of an 'unmediated reality'. Apart from the constant struggle against the limits of the recording technology, the live action inside the Big Brother house defied the careful control that re-enactments involving scripts, professional actors and directors presumably would have given the executive producers.

The scenes from the main control room that I included in my field extracts, highlight two extreme viewing situations that confronted the crew. In the first, close to the beginning of the show, the crew members, adrenaline pumping, were desperately trying to keep up with the housemates' action(s) inside the house. It was in scenes like these that the Big Brother viewer, instead of a well-rounded visual product, might have had to face unaesthetic framings – like the action caught halfway through by a hidden pan shot – and television images that were blurred, wrongly lit or unstable.

But this grainy footage and the dubious quality of the sound at times, were a testimony to the immediacy of the unfolding events; a central allure of reality television. And it was these challenging scenes that helped to keep the crew committed to the screening of the show. Unfortunately for those involved with the production the unpredictability and spontaneity so characteristic of 'untelevised' encounters were offset by the downsides to 'lived reality' that no amount of constructive planning 'backstage' could control such as the slow passing of linear time, the gaps in between moments that were perceived to be entertaining, and the lack of star quality in the non-professional performers.

The second MCR scene, which I witnessed close to the end of the show, presented another scenario; one where the housemates' performances did not satisfy the performance requirements of the crew. In the scene it was close to twelve in the evening and the on-duty crew members were suffering from 'reality' fatigue. They were willing the housemates to go to sleep, but the key performers were controlling the course of events, leaving the crew members with nothing to do but observe. Clearly the technical set-up did not guarantee that there would be anything 'worthwhile' seeing/filming and the

technical, structural and moral constraints limited the power of the Big Brother executive to freely influence all aspects of the show's production.

Therefore I argue that notions of observer and observed have to be "recast as instances of oscillation between the control implicit in acts of seeing and the parallel loss of control in every act of watching" (Burnett 1995: 6). The crew's frustration with having to forcedly watch the mundane behavior of the housemates, like sleeping, meant that working on the Big Brother production, despite its obvious construction, did retain a strong element of 'realness'.

My modest aim with this project was therefore to confront reality television critiques with their generally restricted focus on the superficial 'constructedness' of these shows; partial accounts that do not allow an exploration of how the 'real' is always performed within a particular context. By setting up a relation of television versus Reality, potential dialogues about notions of 'realness' and the relationship between so-called reality, vision and observation which are so central to the projects of anthropology are summarily closed down.

Instead of adopting the position that television is "clearly different from our real social world" (see Fiske and Hartley 1978: 24), I have attempted to offer a sharper sense of how everyday life involves continuous movement across thresholds: between the public and private; between front and back stages; between different realms of the 'real'.

The crew's strategies for accessing realness after all derived from their everyday life social interactions, illustrating how the world is clearly not 'outside' of television⁷⁷.

⁷⁷ The televised informs and contributes to the 'untelevised' and vice versa (Seitz 1990: 202) and television becomes a significant and determinative part of so-called reality to the extent that our knowledge

Grounding my argument in the actual viewing practices of the Big Brother crew members, I simultaneously attempted a deconstruction of dichotomies that continue to structure many audience analyses today; illustrating how a viewer can be both producer and consumer, insider and outsider, engage with a show by 'disengaging' and experience apparently active and pleasurable viewing acts as passive at times.

Masking the camera:

Like the end quote by an informant illustrates, 'masking' has become a metaphor of devaluation. People are accused of masking their intentions or feelings, or 'hiding behind a mask'. "The tendency is to speak of the mask as an impediment to expression, protecting and hiding the individual, corrupting understanding and disfiguring truth" (Emigh 1996: 7). But while the camera is regarded as an instrument that can capture truth, the knowledge of its presence encourages masking which obstructs its mission.

Therefore the Big Brother show was literally driven by a search for the 'real', and the figure of Big Brother becomes a metaphor for knowledge; a conflation of seeing with knowing. But as one of the housemates pointed out to me, the moment you think about having to behave in a 'real' way, this introduces a consciousness that gives your actions the quality of performance.

The effort of facilitating 'genuine' social interaction inside the house, guided by the entertainment demands of showbiz, took its toll on the crew. Their growing disillusionment with how much Big Brother actually allowed one to see, not only due to

of the world portrayed by television can not be strictly separated from knowledge of everyday life (Livingstone 1990: 6).

the technical constraints, but also the performativity of the housemates, combined with the unnaturalness of their enforced viewing routines, demythologized the experience, leaving them to deal with the backstage realities and tensions of producing the show. The disjunction between the initial claim to objectivity and the eventual backstage 'ranting and raving' of the crew, was illustrative in this regard. Perhaps their pursuit of the 'real' only made it more elusive.

Nevertheless, in a time where the televised and the 'untelevised' have become inseparable, although not indistinguishable (Seitz 1990: 189), the attempts to cordon off, and indeed to capture the 'real', remain significant. And although some pundits are predicting a rough patch for reality shows, simply because of the sheer glut of such programs, viewers are probably just approaching a new phase in the evolution of the genre which will continue to metamorphose into ever new and different forms which rework familiar television fair.

True to the transience of media productions the television colossus that is Big Brother will probably soon pass, immediately to be replaced by yet a new spin-off. However, debates around audience engagements with televised representations will retain their relevance and perhaps become increasingly pronounced as the technological means of capturing live events evolves.

According to Leigh Bennie, a Big Brother housemate from the first series, the saying "the show must go on" is the Big Brother evictee motto. "You may no longer be on television, but you are still constantly being watched" (Bennie 2002: 10). The life as a stage metaphor will continue to punctuate television viewers' lives, not least those of the

housemates who are briefed about appropriate dress and conduct for interviews once they have left the house; the crew members who have to apply for work on new productions and need to present themselves in interviews and the real audience members out there. All of them are confronting life's theatricality on a day to day basis as they tailor their conduct to suit their immediate social surroundings, while simultaneously critically accessing the impression management of others.

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GLOSSARY

Archivist:	Division on Big Brother team responsible for the storing, labeling and retrieval of recorded Big Brother footage.
Big Brother website:	Sporting both content and feature articles, the website was updated 24 hours a day to keep up with happenings inside the Big Brother house and maintain an evolving interactive experience.
Content Director (CD):	Division that acted as program schedulers for the rest of the Big Brother team by selecting storylines to follow.
Crawls:	Words flashing past the bottom of the television screen, promoting a sponsor of the show's product or encouraging viewers to vote for their favorite housemate.
Diary Room:	A lockable and soundproof room where housemates, while looking at a camera lens, were expected to discuss their feelings with Big Brother (and viewers) during their daily sessions.
DSTV:	Round-the-clock broadcasts of Big Brother were available on a satellite television channel devoted to the show (see Gateway channel).
DSTV switcher:	Division on the Big Brother crew ensured that Big Brother was screened 24 hours a day by putting out the streams that the viewers would be watching. They also put out the crawls.
Editor:	The editors, in conjunction with a content director, had to cut 96 hours of recorded material down to 22 minutes of highlights every 24 hours for the daily highlight broadcasts that were screened on M-Net.
Endemol SA:	Independent South African television production company, jointly owned by Dutch-based company Endemol Entertainment, KMM Review publishing Company, and individual stake holders.
Eviction Show:	Television program featuring highlights from the Big Brother house, new inserts, live crosses to the house and the weekly live eviction of a housemate.

Gateway channel:	Satellite television channel devoted to the Big Brother show.
Grave yard shift:	Night time shift usually stretching from 12:00 am to 08:00 am. Known as the 'graveyard' for the slow passing of time.
Greenroom:	The production room where the Big Brother show administration took place.
Headspace:	A television program featuring psychological and behavioral insights into the Big Brother housemates and guest appearances by Big Brother evictees.
HOD meetings:	Weekly production meetings were held in which Endemol, various heads of department M-Net, DSTV, Underdog and M-Web met to track the development of the show.
Hotheads:	Fixed remote-controlled cameras positioned inside the Big Brother house.
Logger:	The logging staff recorded information for the archives by using a logging system that labeled nearly every scene according to time codes under headings such as names of housemates and topics.
MCR:	The Main Control Room. The content and technical directors, shaders and loggers were based here.
M-Net:	The Electronic Media Network Limited is a South African, private subscription television service that boasts an array of general entertainment and niche channels. It broadcasts to over 1.23 million subscribers in 41 countries across Africa.
Online writer:	This division was responsible for maintaining the Big Brother website by writing articles and managing the online forum.
Oracle:	The company responsible for negotiating the sponsorships for the Big Brother show. Members of the exposure analysis team have to continuously watch the DSTV channel to log time codes for the duration that the sponsor's products are displayed.
Shader:	Operator of the fixed remote controlled cameras inside the house.

- SMS banner:** Ticker tape that appeared at the bottom of the television screen, broadcasting viewers' comments on the Big Brother show.
- Spotting:** A content director selected (spotted) the footage according to time codes from what has been entered into Big Brother office, a computer program.
- Task Master:** The weekly tasks that Big Brother set the show's contestants were designed by the Task Master. Tasks included having the housemates chained together, completing an obstacle course in the garden and participating in a fashion parade and a talent competition.
- Technical Director (TD):** This division directed the camera operators via microphones to get the needed shots, as dictated by a content director.
- Yakaboo:** The official Big Brother board game.

APPENDIX 1

INITIAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: CREW MEMBER

NAME:

SURNAME:

AGE:

GENDER:

HOME LANGUAGE:

POSITION ON PRODUCTION TEAM:

DATE:

- What is the Big Brother show about?
 - Capture the essence of Big Brother in one/two sentences
 - Where does the show fit into the reality television genre?
- In terms of what do you distinguish the South African Big Brother from the Big Brother shows in other countries?
 - How do you give show a distinctly SA flavor?
- What do you think worked/failed in the previous series?
- What do you plan to improve on with this show?
- Why is the Big Brother show so popular?
- What did you learn about the audience in the first series?
 - What type of research has been done on the Big Brother viewers?
 - To what extent are audience response taken into account?
 - Why do people watch the show?
- When does a Big Brother spectator become a fan?
- Why do the chosen housemates attain instant celebrity status?
- To what extent is there interaction between the production team and the audience?
- Do you enjoy watching the show?
- What have you learnt from your involvement with the show?

APPENDIX 2

FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: CREW MEMBER

NAME:

SURNAME:

- In general what do you think of the housemates that have been selected?
- Do you have a favorite amongst the housemates?
- Any housemate that you dislike?
- Is there anyone in the house that you can identify with?
- What are their strategies, if any?
- How can you tell if they are acting/pretending or not?
- What do you think of how the voting is playing itself out?
 - Does the popularity polls and the voting results say anything about SA?
- What does it take to win this show?
- How objective do you have to be?
- How involved do you become with the housemates and/or the show?
 - Have you voted for anyone to
 - Have you send in sms's?
 - Have you gone to an eviction party?
- What effect does the show have on you, if any?
- Have you met any of the housemates personally?
- How do you find working on the production team?
 - How would you describe the production team?
 - How is the crew morale at this stage?
 - Did it go through a dip/peak?
 - Has there been any fights/debates/disagreements?
- Have your perceptions of the show in general been altered at all?

- What has been a highpoint/low point for you of working on the show?
- Can you comment on how this show compares to Big Brother 1?
- Do you think the housemates are so-called new South Africans?
- What is your view on how the voting develops?
- What does it take to win this show?

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APPENDIX 3

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: SELECTION TEAM MEMBER

NAME:

SURNAME:

AGE:

GENDER:

HOME LANGUAGE:

POSITION ON PRODUCTION TEAM:

DATE:

- What were the core selection criteria?
- What were you looking for when interviewing/selecting a candidate?
 - Modeling new housemates on the images of previous ones?
 - Physical features like sex appeal, an 'ugly duckling', conventions about beauty?
 - Stereotypical characters like the bad guy etc?
 - Breaking free from stereotypes, i.e. perceived 'unconventional' people?
 - Entertainers?
 - Balancing introverts and extroverts?
 - Which personality traits were important?
 - Were you looking for people that somehow personify what it means to be a South African today? Was the house meant to represent South Africa?
 - Were you looking for 'good' representatives of a specific group/subculture?
 - How did you bring in the demographics if at all?
- What influenced you when deciding not to choose somebody?
- Once a candidate had been selected, did that person influence the following selection of candidates?
 - Did you also choose people in terms of what they might have in common?
 - Did you attempt to bring potential soul mates/arch enemies/best friends/lovers together?
 - What kinds of conflicts/relationships/friendships were you trying to set up?
 - How did you succeed in doing that?
- Was the housemates briefed before they went into the house?
 - Did they receive any guidelines on what was expected of them?

APPENDIX 4

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: HOUSEMATE

NAME:

SURNAME:

DATE:

- What is the Big Brother show about, i.e. how do you view the show?
- Why did you apply to be on the show?
- Tell me about the selection process:
 - describe the other people that applied
 - how did you find it – the group tasks, etc
 - how did you 'sell' yourself
 - why do you think you were chosen
 - how were you briefed before you went into the house
- Did you feel that you had to 'perform' your identity?
- In what way(s), if any, were you different inside the house than on the outside?
- How aware were you of being monitored?
- What do you think the public wants to see, i.e. what is content?
- How did it feel coming backstage once you were evicted?
- Have you interacted with members of the production crew?
- How does it feel watching the show on television, specifically clips of yourself?
- So far, how do you experience the fans?
- Do you see yourself as a new South African?
- What does the term rainbow nation signify?
- Does the Big Brother house represent South Africa?
- What does the voting results say about the viewing audience, if anything?

APPENDIX 5

Source: AMPs 2002AT - Main, All Radio + TV A02AT
Weight: Population

	Total	Receive full-Terrestrial Service from Mnet
Total	29583	1587
16-24	27	19
25-34	25	20
35-49	27	31
50+	22	29
Western Cape	10	25
Northern Cape	2	2
Free State	7	4
Eastern Cape	15	8
Kwazulu-Natal	21	17
Mpumalanga	7	3
Limpopo	11	1
Gauteng	21	39
North-West	8	3
Men	48	51
Women	52	49
Up to R499 HH	11	0
R500-R999 HH	22	1
R900-R1399 HH	18	2
R1400-R2499 HH	15	3
R2500-R3999 HH	11	8
R4000-R9999 HH	12	21
R7000-R11999 HH	9	31
R12000+ HH	6	33
English/Other European	11	46
Afrikaans/Bilingual	15	47
Zulu/Xhosa/Swazi/Ndebele/Other	42	5
Sotho/Tswana/Tsonga/Venda	32	3
Universal LSM 5	13	1
Universal LSM 6	13	4
Universal LSM 7	6	7
Universal LSM 8	6	18
Universal LSM 9	6	31
Universal LSM 10	5	41
Blacks	75	9
Whites	14	71
Coloureds	9	15
Indians	3	5

Average Share of Viewership	
Everyone	17
Men	17
Women	17
Children	14
7-12	12
13-15	17
16-24	18
25-34	14
35-49	19
50+	17
White	35
Coloured	16
Indian	25
Black	3
DStv Subscribers	44
M-Net Subscribers	47

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APPENDIX 6

IN THE BELLY OF BIG BROTHER

Those who stalk the corridors behind-the-scenes at the BB House are a motley lot. Among them is Esther van Heerden, a Cape Town University graduate, who is writing her thesis on the BB phenomenon. She gave an account of both her trials and perceptions.

IN THE BELLY OF BIG BROTHER

Esther (22), a petite Cape Town university graduate, has become a familiar figure in the outer corridors of the House. For her Anthropology master's she is writing her thesis on Big Brother. It was no surprise when she called in at the Green Room at 3am to speak to us of her experiences.

She remembered arriving at the BB entrance in Oak Avenue, Randburg, in the week prior to the show. 'It was daunting,' she told us, 'I couldn't even find the entrance to the building.' Despite her challenging start, she was duly whisked off and introduced to the 'hub of activity' in the Green Room. 'There were rows of desks and all these people were busy typing away,' she commented. She decided to hang out on the couch and observe. As in the case of many Housemates, her greatest concern was that she would be evicted before she could glean sufficient material for her thesis.

From the very beginning, she had her notebook ready. The 130-something crew members, who were focused on the Housemates, suddenly found that someone was watching them. As an outsider, she was viewed with some suspicion initially and received a few curious stares. It took her time to work out what was going on. Coffee mugs lay around and various groups of people constantly moved about.

She finally summoned the courage to interview the crew and moved from the couch to a desk. Once she'd ventured from the Green Room into the corridors, she discovered the audio booth. 'That's when I became hooked on reality TV,' she said, 'I sat with the two people who manage the sound and heard everything that was going on in the House.'

newsimage('021013_jacuzzi.jpg', 'The setting of so many entertaining Thursday nights', 'right') One Thursday night, while she watched activities in the Jacuzzi, she realized that the mood on the screen was being mirrored behind-the-scenes. The lively spirit in the House had rubbed off on the crew and there was almost a party atmosphere </backstage>.

She also found that no matter how much the crew tried to stay detached and objective, most became emotionally involved with the Housemates. 'It's not surprising,' Esther added, 'because the visual investments the crew make in the show are greater than even the most avid fans.' During her spot interviews with fans, she discovered that they felt the show was 'company' and that they only watched intermittently, whereas the crew would focus intensely for the duration of their 8-hour shifts.

Esther thought the show was emotionally draining for the crew because the situation in the House was mirrored in the production setting. Many crew members remarked on how isolated they felt since their lives had come to revolve round nothing other than Big Brother 2. Additionally, their diverse throngs of colleagues were not necessarily people with whom they would associate outside the production.

newsimage('021013_toe.jpg', 'Could this be Big Brother's toe?', 'left') There is also something surreal about interviewing a member of the crew at 2 or 4am,' Esther said, grinning. She managed to complete 70 semi-structured interviews and had follow-up conversations and informal chats. Initially, she had to use different strategies to get the attention of interviewees. When the Housemates were asleep, it was easier to get crew members talking. 'It was a hectic experience,' she enthused, 'but the crew were eager to let me into their world.'

Now, Esther feels she is a crew member. The fear of eviction has evaporated. Her thesis will interweave various themes such as multiculturalism, use of metaphors like the Rainbow Nation, performance theory, identity construction and how BB is situated in the genre. 'The Housemates will be the backdrop against which my thesis will unfold,' she concluded.

Having collated 400-typed pages of field notes, she is leaving the BB environs, impressed by its sense of camaraderie. When the show has closed and viewers have switched to other programs, she will be re-living BB again and again, as she sorts and edits her writings.

APPENDIX 7

Dear Terja,

CONCERNING PROPOSED RESEARCH PROJECT ON BIG BROTHER

It was such a relief when I spoke to you on the telephone on Friday without having my idea for a research project on Big Brother simply dismissed! I value this opportunity to argue my case via email. In the following email (please excuse its lengthiness) I will provide some background on myself and sketch an outline of my proposed research project¹.

I am a twenty-two year old, female, Afrikaans-speaking student who is currently enrolled as a postgraduate student at the University of Cape Town where I am set to do my masters degree in *Social Anthropology* during the following two years. Anthropology – the study of humankind in all places and throughout time – is a discipline that I feel passionate about, because it is diverse and dynamic and revolves around people.

At the heart of the anthropological enterprise lies the practice of *fieldwork* which entails spending anything between three weeks and three years at a specific field site. Traditionally field sites were located in remote places where pioneering anthropologists encountered cultures which were radically different from their own. In recent times this approach has been abandoned in recognition of the fact that cultures are not static, bounded wholes; rather culture(s) are continually constructed, heterogeneous and fluid. The fact that subfields now include urban and even cyber anthropology is an example of how the discipline has evolved. Last year I did the fieldwork for my honours thesis in a cyber café in Claremont where I investigated both the online and offline relationships of the cyber cafés' patrons².

However, this year I want to do something radically different. My topic choice is crucial since the thesis component of my degree counts for fifty percent of my final mark and I will devote a considerable amount of time to planning and executing my research and the process of writing-up that follows afterwards. I am required to spend six weeks in an identified field site, armed with a rough problem statement that guides the execution of my research. Key to the process is that the 'anthropologist' (me) must develop a rapport with the research subjects, identify key informants and get an insider's perspective of what is going on. Although interviews and statistical analyses of data forms part of the research enterprise, an anthropological research project is mostly a micro-study that employs qualitative rather than quantitative methods.

¹ I have only done a preliminary literature overview and my ideas are sketchy to say the least. Once I obtain permission to conduct my fieldwork I will be able to develop my problem statement and conceptual tools more fully.

² Attached is a reference letter written by my previous supervisor, professor Andrew Spiegel in support of an exchange program that I applied for. If everything goes according to plan I will be going on the exchange next year (2003). Hopefully this letter will help to convince you that I take my studies seriously and that I am committed to honoring the high academic standards of my department by doing decent research.

While searching for possible research topics in January (2002) the idea of doing my thesis on the reality television show Big Brother popped into my head. I discussed it with one of my lecturers who believes it can be a fruitful subject area, provided that I am able to gain access to the 'behind the scenes' part(s) of the show.

Despite television's huge cultural significance, anthropologists have not yet paid much attention to it. Reality television specifically is a relatively new and unexplored genre³. Much of the research that has been done on film and television focuses on actual content and it's relation to reality, but such analyses are not applicable to reality television where the action is unrehearsed and filming continues 24 hours a day.

Furthermore, television's worldwide dissemination is usually seen as spreading cultural similarity and thereby reducing diversity. Therefore it would be fascinating to explore the making of a show which revolves around diversity – getting a group of strangers with different backgrounds to live in the same house for a period of time – and reflect on some of the contemporary realities of the new South Africa as they come to the fore during the making of the show.

I would like to conduct my research on different levels and if possible, I would need to interview all those involved with getting the show off the ground and creating what I think one can call "the Big Brother phenomenon".⁴ Although I realize that I can't speak to every single person who is involved, I would like to interview some of the producers, the technicians, etc. and even those people who are only marginally involved with the show. One of the assertions that I plan to challenge in my thesis is the labeling of television producers by much of the academic writing on film and media as propagandists, influencing and even exploiting the 'powerless' viewing public.

I have not thought about it before you suggested it, but perhaps my being present at some of the selection rounds is a good idea. My attendance will provide me with an opportunity to interview some of the applicants and will help me to position my study contextually. Again, I must admit that I have no knowledge of how the selection procedures work, the time frame or the location. As a result it is impossible for me to describe the ways in which I will conduct my research.

What I can say, though, is that one of our prime research strategies is *participant observation* which entails becoming part of a setting, almost to the point of not being noticed. Here I suspect those who are in charge of the production of Big Brother will have reservations about my presence as onlooker, because I will need to 'hang around' with my notebook, make observations and ask an array of sometimes ignorant questions⁵.

³ I am aware that psychologists and other behavioral analysts are involved with the show and I think the show can gain from having an aspiring anthropologist 'on board'.

⁴ The ethnographic effort is a social rather than a solitary experience and my social relationships with the television crew will be central to my project.

⁵ It is difficult for me to anticipate the problems that may arise from my presence in the 'field' since I have only a vague conception of what actually goes on behind the scenes at the making of a television program. Ironically it seems that conducting research within your own country can be just as 'foreign' as traveling to a culturally foreign location!

As part of the ethical obligation that rests upon me as researcher I am aware of the fact that I will be entering a privileged site and I will fully respect the rules, regulations and demands that come with gaining access to the backstage(s) of the show.

However my main concern is not the production of the show itself or the evaluation of the show as a cultural product. I am interested instead in the themes of a socio-political nature that come to the fore from the show and that have a particular relevance to the South African situation. I am thinking of exploring how categories of difference and sameness manifest themselves – including gender, language, religion and what they reveal about South Africa today. Among other things, I would like to examine how 'Big Brother' decides on projects to give to the occupants of the house, the interaction between Big Brother and the individual housemates, the amount of consideration given to themes of nation building and contentious South African issues like Aids, crime, child abuse etc.

At another research level I would like to become a 'fan' myself by attending at least one eviction night and an eviction party. I believe attendees of eviction nights and other events display ritualized behavior, and I will examine this by conducting informal conversations and/or brief informal interviews with bystanders.

Furthermore, I would like to also involve the South African viewers public since inquiry into how the show's content is viewed by members of the audience is crucial to my 'multi-sited' project. Perhaps I could do this by administering questionnaires via the Internet. Such an approach will produce a clear bias towards the more affluent viewers who have access to Internet technology. Nevertheless it will yield valuable information on the viewers themselves, their motivation(s) for watching the program, their attitudes and perceptions with regard to the show, their level of 'involvement' with the housemates etc. One aspect of viewing that particularly interests me is the values and norms held by the viewers and the effect that breaches of these norms by the housemates have on them. The debacle that surrounded Janine's performance at the talent competition during the previous show and the resultant public indignation was a prime example of the public debate that events on the show ignited. Research on the viewing public can be valuable to the production team as it may provide insights that might even contribute to the development of future reality television programs.⁶

Most probably asking for an interview with one of the evicted housemates is overstepping the line but it would be interesting to get an even 'closer' insider perspective. In any case, although the housemates themselves and the constant monitoring of their activities inside the house are the basic rationale for my project, their actions will only provide the 'backdrop' against which the narrative of my thesis will unfold.

⁶ I am open to all kinds of suggestions and will gladly structure the questionnaire in a way that ensures the collection of 'usable' data for the producers of the show.

Unfortunately my time schedule is not as flexible as I would have liked it, because I have course work throughout the year. Officially my mid-year break commences the 22nd of June and ends on the 15th of July. However I will be able to miss the first week of the third term and continue my fieldwork until Sunday, the 21st of July. This adds up to four weeks of fieldwork, leaving me with another two weeks of fieldwork which I can complete between the 30th of August and the 13th of September. I suspect that the selection process falls outside of these periods, but I will definitely be able to take another week off during April or May. Ideally I would like to spend four of the six weeks doing fieldwork on the 'set'.

I know I am asking much, but I would appreciate it if you can get back to me with an answer as soon possible. Our research proposals are due in a month's time and I would be forced to look for an alternative if you and other decision makers reject my idea. I wish I can find heroic words to convince you of my honorable intentions, but since I lack those I can only hope that you will recognize the potential of my proposed project and the valuable insights it might yield.

Kind regards

Signed by candidate

Esther van Heerden