

CHAPTER TWO

“POLITICALITY” AND THE INTER-GENERIC SETTINGS OF REALITY TELEVISION

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In this chapter I want to sketch out a context for considering and debating the modes of “reality television” as modes of political articulation, as contributors to political discourse and to political culture. This context needs to connect out to the inter-generic pattern from which multiple variants of “reality television” emerged, to the pre-existing strands of documentary programming in particular, but also to pre-existing entertainment and dramatic formats. In addition, it needs to take into account the broad political and social profile of television as a medium and as a range of aesthetic possibilities for “seeing reality” (and, indeed, “hearing reality”), in the process raising some questions about what we mean when we talk of the “political” and when we focus on the “politicality” of a given discourse or cultural form.¹

I want to begin with some of the wider issues and then suggest some ideas and points of analytic reference within which the political character of reality television can be productively explored.

Framing television as a political medium

Within contemporary cultural analysis it is clear that both “broad” and “narrow” definitions of politicality are at work and that, often, these definitions are at the root of evaluative dispute. It has been an achievement of media and cultural studies, internationally, to push beyond the tighter versions of the political that focused almost exclusively on formal political structures and processes (essentially, politics as a sphere rather than a dimension). These versions, common within Political Science, were exchanged for stronger connections to the “politics of the everyday,” which emphasized the routine experience of power and power-relationships for the majority, including experience in their jobs, in their

homes and even in their leisure activities. This fuller engagement with the contours of political culture, including its relationship to the personal, is a real gain in the re-situating of media-political analysis. It carries the risk, however, of being so inclusive as to fail to provide adequate recognition, within the broadened frame, of the political (one might say the “core political”) in the form of the specific structures and processes of a governmental system. If one of the deficits of conventional political studies’ approaches to the media was a failure to attend to the true extent of the political as lived experience and to the constituents of political subjectivity, the “inclusive” view faces the challenge of retaining an analytic focus on key issues of policy formation, resource management, legislation and institutional structure within the dispersed diversity of its expanded horizons. As I shall suggest and illustrate later, this has become a particularly pertinent issue in the attempt to assess the political profile of reality television.²

Within both “narrow” and “broad” definitions of the political, television systems have routinely been regarded since their inception as the object of suspicion, a suspicion often outweighing any perceived promise they carry. This is reflected in public pronouncements and, perhaps more markedly still, in the academic literature. The play-off, within different national settings and across different political perspectives, between assessment of television as an instrument of passivity, control and delusion and, on the other hand, as a resource for expanded citizenship and an enhanced public sphere, is a variable but deeply indicative aspect of modern political and social history. It connects with a political ambivalence (cross-party in many political systems) about the rise of consumption and consumerism as a major social dynamic and about the forms of spectatorial individualism that most television systems encourage in different ways. From both the Left and the Right, crudely speaking, as well from within the broad and narrow perspectives on politics I indicated above, the weight of judgment has fallen on the negative view, if often for very different reasons (spiritual, economic, moral). Again, research and debate over reality television reflects this play-off of values, although it also displays a strong discourse of affirmation, too. This affirmation evaluates at least certain modes of the “commercial-popular” as reflected and generated within television output to be in many ways politically preferable to the older models of “public” programming that they have often displaced in the television schedules, and as able to generate spaces of inclusion, engagement and participation not found in earlier output. This view is keen not to place the new programming too readily within the “documentary” frame, against whose established values it might quickly,

and perhaps misleadingly, appear to be in deficit—an inadequate, impoverished mutant. Reality television has thus become a significant area of contestation not just about specific program forms and program values but also about the shifting relationship between established modes of public order and emerging forms of popular expression.³

Television genre and politicality

Across its wide array of program types, television offers very different ways of “watching the world” and “watching people.” These modes of watching, nearly all characterized by the modes of co-presence, intimacy and spectatorial collusion which television has continuously sustained and revised as part of its appeal, relate to different kinds of politicality. Sometimes this is highly self-conscious, as in much news and features programming working within the professional frameworks of journalism, including recognition of its “civic” role as variously conceived and practiced. Often, it is only implicit, carrying “the political” as assumptions within the terms, for example, of its entertainment offer, of what is funny, of what is interesting, of what is exciting, and of what is dramatically engaging. It also carries assumptions about what is not so engaging. However, in both cases, the medium produces an extensive and arguably powerful input into political subjectivity, into the individuated terms in which the audience thinks and feels “the political,” whether openly nominated as such or merged undeclared into aspects of the social and personal. Just how much an influence television exerts upon political and public consciousness is, of course, a longstanding and central question within international research, one with its own history of claims and counter-claims widely advanced and discussed in the literature. My concern with it here is only to note how the “influence and effects” question is unavoidably active in any attempt to assess reality television as a political form and that it is not, therefore, surprising that some of the most illuminating research on it not only refers to this question but attempts to engage with it through its own audience inquiries (Hill 2005 and Hill 2007 are excellent recent examples). Another good reason for doing this, and also one of the reasons why work on production contexts and production intentions is of high significance in this area, is because *manifest political content* is so relatively low in reality television compared to news, feature and documentary programming and even to certain forms of talk show and politically themed drama. To put it crudely, formulating what is “in the message itself” in reality television is often so speculative a matter as to need the regular support of evidence from the

supply and the consumption side. Such a situation might be seen as true of textual analysis across the whole of television studies, but there is a case for regarding the forms of reality programming as raising problems of a distinctly awkward kind (Couldry 2006, discusses some of these problems illuminatingly, including the under-development of a properly *sociological* agenda for research).

In order to investigate this situation more thoroughly, I want to open up a discussion around three terms—the propositional, the indicative and the symbolic—that I think are productive for any exploration of the relationships between television genre and politicality. The terms are particularly relevant for an examination of a form of programming which, however loosely, recognizably relates to the “documentary” mode of representation, as most reality television does.

I want, first of all, to highlight the “propositional” character of some kinds of documentary programming and some strands of reality television, a character that helps differentiate these kinds from other aesthetic and discursive models. This is not to set up another typology of modes alongside those articulated by Bill Nichols (most recently, in Nichols 2001), or those I have used in my earlier work (e.g. Corner 2006), but to bring out sharply a dimension particularly relevant to my present concern with politicality, with how certain television modes of portrayal variously “do politics.”

Propositional accounts within the established documentary tradition proceed by making claims about the world with explicitness and a certain argumentative formality (varying in kind and degree), and they generate these claims mostly by commentary or presentation. Thus, the propositions offered are those of the film or program, and not necessarily those of the participants who speak within them. Work that includes propositional claims from interviewees, from participants in interaction (and many reality shows have a lot of this) or from archive materials, may or may not choose to use this “embedded propositionality” to develop its own claims. It might be left to audience members to work out their relationships to the filmic argument regarding the range of claims made, explanations advanced and judgments offered by participants. However, all films in the documentary mode have various editing and narrative strategies to encourage the taking up of certain general judgments on what is seen and heard without making such articulations explicit. These strategies have been active in reality television formats, influencing audience sympathies, cueing moods, and creating “instructive” ironies and contrasts. Here, it is important to note that, against the sense of “closure”—or perhaps “foreclosure”—that this suggests, there has also been a strong view that

the social significance attributed by audiences to work cast primarily as “observational” is diverse and essentially a product of the multiple viewpoints of audience members working upon the scenes depicted on screen, rather than being a matter of any singular directorial intention and design. This view is sometimes adduced in support of observational approaches, including the newer reality formats which take observation as their primary mode, and yet it is also sometimes cited in critique of their apparent lack of anything “to say,” their apparent refusal to engage directly in communication with viewers about their topic and/or what is perceived as their trivializing commitment to mere diversion. What I am suggesting here connects strongly with Bill Nichols’s continually productive idea of documentary “voice” (Nichols 1983), an idea concerning the ways in which films and programs author their claims and variously signal or suppress this authorship. It is relevant to the debate about current formats that, long before reality television had started, Nichols was using this notion to question the project of much observational film-making, even that which claimed its own lack of voice as a democratic extension of the viewers’ opportunity to “make their own sense.”

Although propositional accounts most frequently structure their discursive work through their speech, the propositionality thus developed often extends to the visual design. Nichols’ idea of “evidentiary editing” is pertinent here (developed in Nichols 1991), since it is as evidence and also (in a manner involving a wider sphere of reference) as illustration that images and actions become significant within a propositional system. We do not merely look at the depicted world, gathering visual information from it, we are directed towards the ways in which specific aspects of what we see support a developing series of claims and judgments. This is frequently sustained both in localized shot sequences and in the overall expository and narrative system itself but, in most cases, it is grounded and advanced by speech. We might think here of an example from a reality series on, say, “extreme engineering” (the idea of the “extreme” has, of course, proved an indispensable adjective in the production and marketing of many reality shows!). Unlike reality formats grounded in watching social encounters and interactions in variously managed environments, such a series is likely to be driven largely by commentary descriptions and propositions (e.g. about scale, risk, cost, skill, consequences) around which the visuals will make sense and carry their impact.

A recent if perhaps rather too obvious example of propositionality in popular and political documentary (one not far removed from reality television in some of its strategies) would be Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit*

9/11, with its strong speech performance by Moore himself, creating a political propositional frame for a diversity of visual and narrative sequences as well as for a diversity of archive and interview speech.

Of course, as I have already indicated, not making things explicit is in some cases a way of giving an account enhanced suggestive power, contributing more strongly to audience members’ sense of “quietly coming to their own conclusions” in a way that, for instance, Michael Moore’s work does not usually seek. He wants to make a “loud” case about an issue and to *be seen* to making it, supported by his assembled evidence. Certainly, a good deal of reality television has not sought to make a direct case to audiences about the implications they should draw from what they are watching, although programs have often been keen to have a commentary voice regularly stressing the magnitude, excitement and fun of what is being viewed and pointing out aspects of the developing “story” that might not be interpretable from the visuals and overheard speech alone.

We can perhaps usefully talk of “indicative” rather than “propositional” approaches as a way of clustering rather loosely those many films and programs of different structures and styles, including those with extensive dramatization, which stop short of making explicit propositional claims but nevertheless, at points, “cue” the audience to respond in certain ways. Usually, nothing can be pointed to with anything like the sharpness allowed in “propositional” models by the use of a commentary or a presenter’s account, one “illustrated” with the images that its own claims have served to select and organize. Being “indicative” rather than “propositional” will place tight limits on the discursive range of claim-making, however skilful the mechanisms of suggestiveness might be. What is communicated by way of implicit guidance on how to interpret the portrayal may become much more a matter of mood, feeling and tendency rather than anything approaching the specific “moves” of explanation and judgment advanced by commentaries, presentations and interviews.

Finally, within this simplified scheme, we might think of how the “symbolic” figures in documentary-style ways of being political (in passing, it is worth noting here how important this mode can be as a level of the political in dramatic fiction).⁴ When employed as a primary mode, the symbolic is not grounded in explicit, speech-based claims, nor is it ingrained within the versions of sustained visual “realism” deployed by indicative approaches, including observationalism. It is a mode of discourse rather than a mode of representation as such, and it only works for those audiences who take a particular shot or sequence to be operating in a marked way, not necessarily exclusively, as *figure*, as metaphor, or

metonymy, rather than simply as direct portrayal or as direct portrayal at all. Although widely used in kinds of independent film-making for its suggestive power and its eschewal of realist conventions, if pursued too far it carries the risk of limiting viewer accessibility and has therefore been employed sparingly in work designed for broad, popular audiences, including reality television projects. As we have seen, such projects tend strongly towards “literal” rather than “symbolic” depiction. The latter, where used at all, is employed largely for the generation of mood and tone and not of ideas, within a formal range often dependent on figurative cliché.

As I have noted elsewhere (Corner 2008), recent debates over reality television have, across documentary studies in general, reinforced an analytic tendency to concentrate on observational/indicative/performative factors when examining shifts in audio-visual culture. Meanwhile, such debates have also reduced attention given to questions concerning the “propositional.” However, it is important not to see the relation of audio-visual portrayal to the localized realities of the physical world (both the origin and organization of the image and of the “overheard” speech) as the exclusive, or even major, variable in play within the possibilities of factual television. This will result in an under-recognition of propositionality, a key dimension of seeing television as an epistemological project, and a dimension that we need to have in mind when attempting to gauge how reality television, across its varieties, goes about the work of politics and might develop and perhaps revise its political character in the future.

The political spaces of reality television

Across its generic range, television has in most countries penetrated ever more deeply, sometimes more intimately, more intrusively, into the “lifeworld,” often theatricalizing it in the process. The dynamics of reality television have been at the forefront of what can be seen as a kind of “colonization” of the everyday, a process from which a number of web initiatives have been influenced in their language and tone. To enter localized private spaces, including occupational spaces, with such intensive projects of surveillance, observation, audit, display and reportage might itself be considered to have a “political” character within the broader definition I gave earlier. This character derives not only from the revised relationships between public and private, between society and self, which are put into play as part of “watching,” but also from the “micropolitical” patterns of power exposed, if only partially, within the structures and behaviors displayed on the screen in the diverse settings of

job, home or competition. These have generated new kinds of imaginary relationships which lived politicality, albeit indirectly and under conditions in which the play-off between naturalism and artifice is often heavily (and sometimes self-consciously) weighted towards the latter.

It is worth reflecting here on a point touched on a number of times above—the increasing range of programs now included under the “reality television” label. There is an extensive literature on this point, variously tracing the lineage through earlier television formats and attempting to identify the proliferating sub-generic types.⁵ In recent presentations, I have worked with my own, simplified, model of developments and of generic spread. Essentially, one finds a range of series formats mixing “observational” approaches with various content, format and stylistic features, in effect producing entertainment-based programming from “real life” resources. Such resources are similar to those of documentary programming, which emphasizes location rather than studio settings and focuses on “ordinary people” in ordinary circumstances. Alongside the label “reality television,” terms such as “docusoap,” “docutainment,” and (the usefully broad) “popular factual entertainment” have been employed to categorize such work, sometimes highlighting particular variants within the spread. All of the alternative categories signal what is demonstrably true across the range—it is the priority and weighting given to the entertainment element in the program mix which marks out as distinctive what in many cases, though not all, might otherwise be classified within the generous borders of documentary/features output.

I think we can identify three main lines of development from the late-1980s to the mid-1990s:

The “action” route—chiefly, about police and emergency services. This was perhaps the “first wave” of programs that attracted the “reality television” label, some of the series being placed as such only retrospectively after they had been running for several years and when a broader sense of generic shift had developed in writing about television. We can identify as forebears and early examples here Germany’s *File Number X...unsolved* (1967), *Crimewatch UK* (BBC, 1987) NBC’s *Unsolved Mysteries* (1987). *Rescue 911* (CBS, 1989) *America’s Most Wanted* and *Cops* (Fox, 1988, 1989), and *999* (BBC, 1992).

The “daily life” route—narratives around occupational and domestic routines. Here, the European “soap opera” template was important and the term “docusoap” was quickly employed in description and criticism. Formative examples, using different types of program design, particularly in relation to the scope of location shooting, would include *Driving School*, BBC, 1997), *Vets in Practice* (BBC, 1997) and *Castaways* (BBC, 2000).

There are even earlier forebears in Paul Watson's *The Family* (BBC, 1974) and *Sylvania Waters* (BBC, 1992), although Watson has been emphatic in denying any role in the development of "reality" formats, instead placing himself firmly in the tradition of observational documentarians.

The "game" route—narratives of competition and testing (including of "talent") presented within controlled yet often ambitiously expansive locations. Here, *Castaways* (see above) has to be noted, despite its more extensive commitment to naturalistic observation, while *Big Brother* (Endemol, 1999) and *Survivor* (CBS, 2000) are clearly major and very different examples.

We should not forget here other stands of programming, including wildlife, geographic, popular science, motoring and cooking series, which have been around since the 1950s as a staple form of presenter-led popular television. Such programming is not strictly "documentary," although it has often drawn on documentary production skills. These have seen a strong makeover in format and style recently as a result of the inter-generic influences and pressures stemming from the more self-conscious "reality" formats and they are often now included by TV critics in the "reality" category. One example is the current and highly successful BBC celebrity competition series, *Strictly Come Dancing*, despite its huge difference in every respect from a show like *Cops*.

Given this spread of programming developments, some closely interconnected, some not connected at all, what kinds of formal shifts can be discerned as part of the rise of reality styles? Here, the very heterogeneity of the label inhibits tight specification, but the following elements seem to be extensive, if varied, in their application. In all cases, the primary comparison is with conventional forms of documentary and feature programming in the "pre-reality" period:

- Increased pacing of shot changes
- Increased use of music as stimulus and cue
- Regular "hits" of intensity—possibilities of action, speech and circumstance here.
- Emphasis on aspects of the "ordinary" but mixed with the quirky, the freaky and the extreme.
- Avoidance of detailed exposition, sometimes with no direct exposition at all.
- Very strong storylines, with avoidance of complication, and a narrative structure often resembling that of scripted drama.

Many critics of reality television have seen the emergent imaginary modes and relationships as essentially those of “non-friction,” to use Bill Nichols’ pointed phrase. In this view, any productive connection between what is on screen and historical circumstances and conditions is strategically “thinned down” or precluded altogether. In Nichols’ comments on emerging developments, made during what I have described above as the “first wave” of reality television in the mid-1990s, he remarks:

This ebb and flow of detached consumption, distracted viewing and episodic amazement exists in a time and space outside history, outside the realm in which physical, bodily engagement marks our existential commitment to a project and its realization ... Here we have disembodied but visceral experience, a freewheeling zone in which the same set of emotional responses recycle with gradually diminishing force until the next raising of the ante in the production of spectacle. (Nichols 1994, 53)

While this may be fair comment on some kinds of reality output, particularly those “action” formats dominant at the time Nichols was writing, its account is clearly less adequate to the many different types of reality programs that have emerged in recent years.

A far more complex sense of the values, viewing satisfactions and social functions of at least some reality work has come from other writers. Two recent instances can be cited here. First all, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay (2008), drawing on the work of Foucault among others, explore how many formats, including those with a strong participatory and perhaps voting element, relate to changing rationalities and technologies of politics, citizenship and self-governance, a term now carrying a strongly neo-liberal emphasis. Rather than judge programs against some abstract and stable notion of “democracy,” they suggest an investigation prompted by the question “what is it that government rationalities ask or require of particular members in order to perform democracies?” (Ouellette and Hay 2008, 208). Their account distances itself from direct critique, although it makes several negative observations about current economic and political contexts. Instead it favors a close analysis of the changing relations between governmentality and modes of self-actualization that Reality TV both indicates and performs. Program invitations to “develop” and “improve” are taken seriously within their broader social setting, and not dismissed as practices of imposed delusion.

In an approach that shows some similarity with this thesis, including a certain, final ambivalence about political values, Sue Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (2008) engage with the experiential characteristics of “watching,” examining how the social themes of the hugely successful series *Wife*

Swap (initially, Channel 4, 2004) may finally connect productively with its clear intention to entertain as well as to inform. They note at the start that their intention is to explore:

[H]ow *Wife Swap* lends itself to oppositional and ambivalent readings, offering up the promise of a thoughtful and provocative insight into contemporary gender roles and class identities in the context of what appears to be the cynical and deliberately incendiary manipulation of its participants. (Holmes and Jermyn 2008, 233)

This careful, indeed guarded, sentence (“lends itself,” “ambivalent readings,” “offering up the promise,” “what appears to be”) shows a wish to make contact with all the main points in dispute, however much in tension they are. The qualified affirmation of the series that the authors offer in their conclusion is convincing partly because of this declared wish to transcend over-polarized polemics and the limitations both of those accounts that simply “dismiss” the kind of television they discuss and those that celebrate it without feeling the need to pursue questions about its ideological positioning and consequences.

Giving even stronger emphasis to formal factors, Stella Bruzzi (2000, revised 2006) identifies in the “performative” style of observationalism found in many new formats a welcome refusal of the naïve naturalism of many earlier documentary accounts in favor of a more open recognition of the viewing relationship and of the framing terms of “display” within which “observation” occurs. She sees this as part of a broader movement in documentary culture away from some of the conventions of “public” discourse that limited both its appeal and its integrity. However, much reality television attempts to engage its audience with the “rawness” of the reality it depicts. It trades heavily on the sense of direct access, so any sense of a shift towards more qualified, self-aware and self-reflexive terms of depiction needs to recognize just how far the older appeals are still in place in much of what appears on the screen and, indeed, are sometimes intensified in their ways of being “pitched” to viewers. Moreover, quite what is meant by “performance” and “performative” requires close scrutiny given the tendency of the latter term to become too fashionable a way of freshening up arguments about cultural change, one that does not always achieve the clarity and analytic illumination that is implied.⁶

The problems of generalizing too freely about “reality” output are internationally evident but they are particularly strong in countries that, unlike the USA, continue to have active (if threatened) policies of public service broadcasting and whose versions of reality television often reflect a continuing commitment to public and social values. Here, what we can

call a “positive politicality” has been a part of basic program design for certain projects, whatever the final level of success and effectiveness with audiences. Series concerned with health and with dietary issues, in which key public themes are built into entertaining observational/game-play structures, have been among the most prominent. In Britain, a good (and internationally influential) example would be the work of the celebrity chef Jamie Oliver in Jamie’s *School Dinners* (Channel 4, 2005), which focuses on diet and children, and Jamie’s *Ministry of Food*, which engages issues of diet, class, gender and region (Channel 4, 2008). It could be claimed that both series proved controversial at the level both of policy formation and of individual viewer perceptions, although they have taken their place in the schedules alongside formats drawing much more directly on commercial models, in which space for the “serious” is marginal.

Perhaps Nichols’ critical terms, provocatively suggestive though they are, not only now fail to do justice to the formal and thematic variety of “reality” work, but also beg too many questions about the range of viewer interpretations. For despite the clear pull towards disconnection and fantasy exerted by some productions in the reality mode, taking the viewer out into what can be seen as an asocial, ahistorical space, many series offer forms of portrayal which, if only in partial ways, would seem necessarily to feed back into a subjectivity of self-conscious and socially situated watching. They do so as markers of kinds of living, kinds of activity, kinds of self that cannot be “read” except against a degree of biographic and social self-reflection, markers placed in a relationship of mutual, implicit judgment against personal anxieties, hopes and aspirations. Forms both of “good politicality” (self-developing, emancipatory, socially expansionist, alert to the flows of power) and of “bad” (strategically regulatory, negatively confirming, phobic in emphasis, naturalizing of the contingent) can follow from the same program as construed within different interpretative contexts. As I noted earlier, in the absence of more evidence about particular programs and audiences, this gives to the whole area a degree of semiotic “openness” that is apparent in both the public and academic debates surrounding it. Here, the quote from Holmes and Jermyn above, with its hopeful emphasis on “oppositional and ambivalent readings” can be set off against the gloomy accounts of viewing dysfunctionality suggested by Nichols in a way that is finally more to do with kinds of thinking about popular television than with “evidence.”

Reality television and political culture: dynamics of development

I have suggested there is little doubt that the broad inter-generic phenomenon of “reality television” will continue to be a prominent feature of the international television landscape. Across its varieties, it often combines a number of “attractions” that are central to television’s popular appeal—for example, that of assumed spontaneity, of the “candid” and the “raw,” of “ordinary people” placed in extraordinary situations, of the bizarre and the extreme, and of the intimate and the confessional. It is an area of programming well-suited to a multi-channel television environment, in which conventional forms of distribution are increasingly played-off against web delivery options and the distinctive, emerging forms of web content. It is also likely to continue to be a focus of debate within *cultural politics* (the structuring and distribution of cultural provision within the terms of public and commercial strategies) and *political culture* (the ways in which cultural expression connects with the political system and with the range of political options within a society at a given time).

I want to finish this chapter by looking at three areas in which we can expect shifts in the political nature of “reality television” itself or in our ways of understanding it. First of all, I want briefly to explore likely and possible routes for change and development in the area of programming. I then want to look at the kinds of research which may aid us in getting a firmer, yet also more subtle, sense of the political and cultural work which “reality television” can carry out *with* its audiences (“upon” slips too easily into assumptions about its power) in diverse contexts. Finally, I want to reflect on theoretical development, including the improved placing of reality television within a more general sense of political change at the levels of structure, process and popular consciousness (political subjectivity).

It was clear from the conference upon which this volume is based, as well as much wider indicators, that there is a potential for reality television formats to be significantly informed by ideas of public value and public “betterment.” Some series have already shown how this might be done, shaping their themes in ways that go well beyond simply providing diversion and entertainment and extending their offer to include valuable types of public connection. Of course, the question of just what the defining political terms for “public value” are needs regular critical attention, since they are subject to change, a point brought out sharply in Ouellette and Hay (2008). Such series will always provoke dispute about the perceived “compromise” that has gone into their making but, in many countries where public service broadcasting remains an active principle,

they are likely to continue with a level of commitment to popularizing serious themes without condescension and with high levels of creative imagination. Of course, the dominant economic context for television internationally is not one in which there is much space for “marginal” values, that is to say values that do not connect directly with profitability and the furtherance of commodity transactions. In his important attempt to offer a clear economic framing of the culture of reality television, including its culture(s) of viewing, Andrejevic 2003 brings out sharply both the objective and subjective dimensions of this situation. Even the time taken to try out different ideas with audiences is, in practice, limited by a requirement for quite rapidly auditable success indicators and by reference to what is currently “working” elsewhere. It is easy to underestimate the scope for innovation even within these conditions, and some academic writing has done this, but the constraints are clear. In many countries, the dynamics of neo-liberalism have yet to fully influence what is on television screens and it remains to be seen how much they will hold sway against other available frameworks for television production. Shifts within the diversity of political culture (for instance, around skepticism, anxiety, aspiration, around emerging interest beyond the national, in various “others,” in “alternative” approaches at the level of political structure and process) offer opportunities for popular viewing engagement. Yet the regulation of the *visibility* of the political occurs at a level other than that of the individual program or series initiative, and it would be naïve and wildly optimistic to expect “reality” forms to articulate the political, whether by directly propositional strategies or strategies of indication and display, very far beyond the currently dominant politico-economic contexts of the television industry. In many countries, this is a *range* not simply a *position*, but the parameters are nevertheless active. Equally, and in reference back to my earlier point about interpretative variability, it would seem implausible to champion the “openness” of formats to oppositional and subversive readings by viewers without confronting the question of the cognitive resources and scale of use of interpretative options amongst popular audiences. This is inevitably a matter of empirical investigation, which is my next area for concluding comment.

If, as I have claimed, the discussion of reality television, both in terms of descriptive accounts and dispute about value, has too often been highly selective and assertive in its approach, then the need for wider and deeper empirical exploration is self-evident. As so often in media and cultural research, international comparative work brings out more sharply that which often passes unnoticed in a merely national study. As we find out

more about how work in the reality category looks and sounds, and relates variously to cultures across the globe, we will certainly enrich our sense of it as a phenomenon of media culture. Although there is a continuing need for attention to aesthetic and discursive forms, it is when this attention is connected to an engagement with production contexts and/or with indications of audience interpretation, judgment and use that the most illuminating indications emerge. Moreover, we know that production contexts vary greatly, and that we can be surprised by what we discover about the matrix of imperatives, ambitions and perspectives, all turned into forms of *practice*, from which programs come to the screen. This often has different, and conflicting, social orientations, relating at different angles to the social and political systems within which both production and viewing occur. As for opening up further the “black box” of viewing and use, there are many different approaches to inquiring into “what viewers make” of what they see and hear. We would certainly benefit from knowing more about broad social settings but we also need to inquire further into the nature of particular interpretations in their relation to specific viewer profiles. We need to know more about the political character of the cross-media pattern of attention, which reality formats work within and which they partly help to generate, as programs link with newspaper reports and magazine articles and both connect with website materials and even merchandise. What is the profile of “reality television” culture at its broadest? This is a question to place alongside complementary emphasis on the immediate, the localized and the textually specific.

My final point of emphasis is on the need for further theoretical interconnection and development, drawing on a wide range of interdisciplinary sources, including importantly those from economics, political science and cultural sociology. The politics of reality television can only be properly explored within this kind of conceptual framing, one that can both be “beamed down” to inform research design and analysis and receive correction and development from the “beamed up” findings of specific research inquiry. Reality television presents us with particular generic instances of the broader set of relationships between television and popular consciousness, between economic and political systems and everyday experience, between the modes of “seeing” offered on-screen and diverse kinds of social knowledge and feeling. Again, Couldry (2006) rightly warns against a too normatively heavy or one-dimensional approach to mapping these relationships. The promise of “participation” that some programs seem to hold out, in that way often contrasting with dominant forms of official politics, needs to be explored more thoroughly in relation to the modes of participation upon which a democratic politics

can build *practically*—there will almost certainly be parallels but also points of mismatch and contrast. This is an area in which Ouellette and Hay (2008), already discussed, have usefully provided analysis and argument upon which later work can build. The way in which a lot of reality programming is television for a “TV savvy” audience also deserves further attention, following Andrejevic’s (2003) insightful exploration both of the causes of this and its consequences for viewing relations. In what ways does increased familiarity with television as a relay device involving important transformations (of “display,” of “performance,” of narrative design) feed into viewing satisfactions and thereby find its way into being an ingredient of program design? How does that broad and volatile play-off between the dynamics of trust and of cynicism, a play-off that can be seen as a central feature of contemporary political culture in many countries, find its expression in this area of output? Insofar as certain reality formats appear to provide an encouragement not so much to “see” politics in a new way as to “see through politics,” to enjoy the spectacle of its evident insincerity and contrivance, how far does this invitation effectively disempower the audience from meaningful action by encouraging a position of entertained distance, of amused, cynical transcendence? Precisely what kinds of “politics of the visible” are being offered here? Theoretical ambition will certainly continue to find a challenge in addressing questions such as these. Properly engaged, they will prevent academic activity in this area from settling into any sub-field insulated from those broader cross-currents of political and cultural inquiry that are so vital to deeper understanding.

Notes

1. See Corner and Richardson (2008) for a recent examination of these ideas in relation to television fiction.
2. The widespread and sometimes rather too relaxed use of the notion of “public sphere” in media studies has perhaps encouraged the blurring together of elements and levels of “the political” that require attention in relation to their specificities as well as their interconnections.
3. See Corner (2009) for a short critical commentary on the tensions at work here.
4. Although dramatic fictions can depict political themes directly, including political argument as carried within dialogue, the scope of directorial control over setting, mise-en-scene, objects, people, action and camera movement allows for a range of the figurative and metaphoric simply not available in documentary production.
5. See, particularly, the early attempt at plotting European developments in Kilborn (1994) and the wide selection of historically informed essays in Holmes and Jermyn (2004) and Murray and Ouellette (2009).

6. There will certainly be more work engaging with the “performative” dimensions of politics, culture and mediation. Continuing attempts to theorize the term adequately and to make it analytically robust are therefore to be welcomed.

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