
Media Rituals

A critical approach

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any complete analysis of the media process – as a social and ethical form – these encounters should receive more attention.

Sometimes an intended pilgrimage mutates into its reverse, as in this fragment from Mike Davis' wonderful book *City of Quartz* (1990) where he describes a conversation in the Mojave Desert outside Los Angeles with two migrant workers from El Salvador:

I asked them what they thought about Los Angeles ... One of my new Llano compañeros said that L.A. already was everywhere. They had watched it every night in San Salvador, in endless dubbed reruns of *I Love Lucy* and *Starsky and Hutch*, a city where everyone was young and rich and drove new cars and saw themselves on television. After ten thousand daydreams like this, he had deserted the Salvadorean Army and hitchhiked two thousand five hundred miles to Tijuana. A year later he was standing at the corner of Alvarado and Seventh Streets ... along with all the rest of yearning, hardworking Central America. No one like him was rich or drove a new car ... More importantly no one like him was on television; they were all invisible.

His friend laughed. 'If you were on TV you would just get deported anyway ...' He argued it was better to stay out in the open weather whenever possible, preferably here in the desert, away from the center.

(Davis 1990: 12–14)

What is so moving, and exceptional, about this passage is the connections it brings out between two worlds that absolutely should not be connected, or at least not if they are to retain their hold over us: the ritual space of the media and the coexisting (but, as we shall see in Chapter 6, connected) space of *surveillance*, operated by the state and other agencies. The workers imagined a journey to Los Angeles, taking them to a 'higher' place, somewhere where people 'saw themselves on television'. But it was the grid of surveillance space that they encountered in the real places occupying that supposed ritual centre. 'Being there' meant being tracked on a bank of security screens. Sensing the danger, and perhaps the reversal, they took the best course and left.

This story, dramatised though it is, is not a false dramatisation. It points exactly to the connection – normally obscured – between media rituals and a part of the media system with very different connotations, where mediation works closely with government. It is, not surprisingly, an unusual story, since, if such stories were commonplace, they might corrode our belief in the media's symbolic authority. Sometimes, however, the interfaces between media ritual and other forms of power cannot be avoided, and then must be controlled, as we see in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Live 'reality' and the future of surveillance

Nothing has changed, except, you are there ...

(US TV guide describing reality footage, quoted in Nichols 1994: 54)

The most fundamental claim which the media can make is the claim to present 'reality', not any reality but the 'social reality' which we share as members of a society. Since the media's ritual status is based on that underlying claim, 'reality' (and the related term 'liveness', whose significance depends, as we shall see, on the access to 'reality' that it guarantees) are important ritual categories, which deserve a chapter to themselves.

Claims to present 'reality' are multiplying in contemporary societies, but in two ways whose connectedness is not generally discussed: first, the countless new forms of 'reality TV' which have received attention in media studies; and second, the claims to present 'reality' associated with the real-time information processing by government and other systems. This connection, as noted at the end of Chapter 5, risks contaminating the media's ritual status (which requires media to seem to be 'above' power), and is therefore rarely stated explicitly, although, as we shall see, in programmes such as *Crimewatch UK*, the separation between the two has to be carefully managed. It is against this background that I recall Jane Feuer's (1983) argument that 'liveness' is an ideology, an argument that can easily be extended to the claim to present 'reality'. Its full significance, however, only emerges when we examine the media's authority in a wider sociological context, which addresses contemporary forms of governmentality and the media's entanglement with the mediation process otherwise known as 'surveillance'.

LIVENESS AS A RITUAL CATEGORY

It has always mattered that television is 'live' in some sense. I want to argue that 'liveness', however obvious its meaning might appear at different historical moments, is a socially constructed term, tied not just to television's but to the media's claim to present social 'reality'. This is why in an age of 'reality TV' but relatively little live-performance footage, 'liveness' goes on mattering, even if its reference points have changed.²

In television's early days, when all programmes were performances broadcast live, television was entirely a 'live' medium. As the proportion of live performance declined, the term 'live' switched its reference. The issue is how exactly this reference point changed. Jerome Bourdon (2000) argues that the reference point of 'liveness' shifted to those parts of television which broadcast *real* events as they happen, excluding fictional programmes. While the term is often used this way (to suggest a direct representation of reality), this is not the only way that connection to reality works. A contradiction in Bourdon's discussion brings this out. He imagines a family watching a programme: what would defeat their belief that what they were watching was live? The only decisive factor, he argues, would be if they found out that a child had in fact taped the programme weeks ago and was showing it to them as if it were being broadcast for the first time now (2000: 535–6). If so, the decisive criterion of liveness is not the factuality of what is transmitted, but the *fact of live transmission* itself (cf. Ellis, J 2000: 31).

Bourdon is, however, right to suggest that factuality has something to do with the wider significance of 'liveness', but the connection is more indirect than he supposes. Live transmission (of *anything*, whether a real event or a fictional narrative) guarantees that someone in the transmitting media institution *could* interrupt it at any time and make an immediate connection to real events. What is special, then, about live transmission is the *potential* connection it guarantees with real events, rather than an actual portrayal of real events themselves. Or at least, I would argue, this is how liveness is now generally constructed. Joshua Meyrowitz expressed the point succinctly some years ago:

There is a big difference between listening to a cassette tape while driving in a car and listening to a radio station, in that the cassette player cuts you off from the outside world, while the radio station ties you into it. Even with a local radio station, you are 'in range' of any news about national and world events.

(Meyrowitz 1985: 90)³

The connection with the media's ritual status is clear: liveness – that is, live transmission –⁴ guarantees a potential connection to our shared social realities as they

are happening. Because of this connection, 'liveness' can properly be called a ritual category which contributes to the ritual space of the media.

Once we express the issue in these broader terms, it is clear that liveness can apply to a range of media, not just television. Paradigmatically it is television that is live, simply because until recently television has provided the greatest amount of live information. But not only are other media themselves transmitted 'live' in their own right – radio obviously, but also the press (as in the idea of the 'exclusive' report, or the just-printed edition on breaking news) – but those other media contribute to our sense that 'the media' connects us to our shared and current reality (the ritual meaning of 'liveness').

Indeed, the range of media which can contribute to the media's liveness, or claim 'liveness' for themselves, goes on expanding. So considerable claims were made for the epochal significance of the *Big Brother* Website during its first UK series in 2000:

Yesterday ... the internet ... offered a shared viewing experience of an unusually powerful kind. In offices – or at least hi-tech, media-friendly offices – employees crouched around computer screens to watch the live web transmission from the [*Big Brother*] house [to watch Nick Barmann's expulsion] ... People in homes and offices unable to receive broadcasts on the internet kept up with developments in the house through email and the mobile phone ... As a significant moment of television, the [discovery of Nick's deception] is most remarkable for being the first of the medium's highspots not actually to have occurred ['live'] on TV.

(*The Guardian* (G2 section), 18 August 2000: 2)

It is less clear whether most actual viewers considered the *Big Brother*'s Website so important (Hill 2002). Liveness in any case continues expanding into new media spaces, for instance text messaging, as in this piece on the marketing strategies of UK mobile phone companies during the build-up to the second UK *Big Brother* series and other game-based reality TV series (*Survivor*, *Castaway*):

Ultimately the [enhanced] SMS services may all boil down to the quality of the content and characters, not forgetting the giddy excitement that can be generated from a message telling *Big Brother* obsessives of two housemates being in bed together – 'live on the internet now'.

(*The Guardian* (Online section), 24 May 2001: 5)

Clearly, it is the sense of 'liveness' that advertisers seek to capitalise upon when they suggest that it is 'exciting' to get standardised promotional material on your private phone (a strange ideal), but this 'liveness' would be meaningless if many media did

not contribute to our sense of 'live' connection (in the broad sense of the term). It is not therefore a question of one technology superseding another as the main carrier of 'liveness', and there is no reason why television cannot retain its own claims to liveness alongside those of other media. Television's 'liveness' continues to mutate into new forms: for example, NBC's striking (although unsuccessful) claim to present 'plausibly live' coverage of the far-away Australian Olympics at later times favourable to its advertising revenue.⁵

This puts into perspective repeated claims that liveness is declining in its overall importance for television. 'Liveness' – as the guarantee of *actual connectivity* to events of central social significance – is not declining, only finding new forms. These forms are surprisingly flexible. In the early 1990s, it was claimed that video timeshift-forms would kill liveness and with it a crucial element in television's symbolic authority (Cubitt 1991). But liveness – access to current shared realities – can easily accommodate your watching a video recording of a soap or football game broadcast earlier that evening. Indeed it can be argued that liveness in the broad sense is *enhanced* by video, since video extends the time-slot within which we can share the significance of the transmitted-live event. More recently, an interesting argument has been made by John Caldwell (1996: 27–31) that live transmission content has declined as the proportion of multichannel television's output dedicated to reruns of old films or television classics (for example, Sky Gold) increases. Certainly if this archiving function became television's main form, liveness would have lost its ritual force, but this has not happened yet. Indeed, as Bourdon points out, most cable and satellite packages contain at least one live news-only channel (2000: 552). 'Liveness' (and the related notion of 'prime time') is still what cable and satellite television providers market as their distinctive value: think of the Discovery channel's slogans 'Watch with the World' and 'Global Primetime Premiere'.⁶ Even in the multichannel environment, the territory of liveness goes on being reclaimed.

Whatever exact form 'liveness' takes, what matters about ideological critiques of liveness, and is missed by non-ideological accounts (however much they tell us about the detailed narrative construction of 'liveness'),⁷ is their link from the categories of media discourse to wider relations of power. Brunson and Morley's (1978) deconstruction of the myth of "the nation, now" targeted precisely the mythical idea of 'liveness' (in the form of the BBC live current affairs programme *Nationwide*). Liveness is not a natural category but a constructed term. It could not have its broad impact if it rested on simple technological fact. Its significance rests on a whole chain of ideas, which are worth unpacking:

- 1 that we gain access through liveness to something of broader significance, worth getting access to now, not later;

- 2 that the 'we' who gain live access is not random, but a representative social group;
- 3 that the media (not some other social mechanism) is the privileged means for obtaining that access.

'Liveness' is therefore a social construction, an object of belief (Bourdon 2000: 535), but since it is generally treated as 'natural', it is also ideological. 'Liveness' naturalises the idea that, through the media, we achieve a shared attention to the realities that matter for us as a society. This is the idea of the media as social frame,⁸ the myth of the mediated centre. It is because of this underlying idea (suggesting society as a common space focused around a shared 'ritual' centre) that watching something 'live' makes the difference it does: otherwise why should we care that others are watching the same image as us, and (more or less) when we are? Critics of liveness were right to sense that something major is at stake in the term.

The most well-known such critic was Jane Feuer in her classic paper 'The Ideology of Liveness' (1983) (cf. Rath 1988). By 'ideology' Feuer meant the ideology of television as an institution, not a political ideology. She was writing against the background of the wider critique of television and film's 'realism' in early film studies (Heath and Skirrow 1977) and in Marxist and Marxist-influenced analysis (Brunson and Morley 1978; Dahlgren 1981; Hall 1977). One problem with that tradition of ideological critique of entertainment was how to link the 'content' of the television or film text to any wider social process that could be called ideological.⁹ At the end of her article, Feuer raises, but cannot answer, this question:

It seems to me that the ideology of 'liveness' must surely act to suppress contradictions. However, I have difficulty theorizing the level at which this occurs ... we remain caught in a hermeneutic circle. Is the spectator positioned by the [television] apparatus, or is the spectator relatively free, and if so, what permits us to analyze texts [as ideological] in the way I have done above, and why is *Good Morning, America* so successful? Or perhaps this manner of articulating the problem is itself the problem?

(Feuer 1983: 20–1)

The way out of this 'hermeneutic circle' – whose apparent closure perhaps discouraged further ideological critiques of the media after the early 1980s –¹⁰ is the concept of ritualisation developed in Chapter 3. The level at which 'liveness' suppresses contradictions (as Feuer puts it) is through its operations as a ritual category; it naturalises a hierarchical notion that media are our privileged connection to a social centre. But this does not require us to believe in a specific ideological content;

it works instead through patterns of thought and action across the wider space of ritualisation where the category of liveness is sustained.

Fundamental questions not just of ritualisation, but also of social trust (Silverstone 1994), are in play when we analyse the media's role in our shared 'reality'. This helps to explain why 'liveness' was seen by producers right at the beginning of television history as a category of overriding importance:

I believe viewers would rather see an actual scene of rush hour at Oxford Circus directly transmitted to them than the latest in film musicals costing £100,000. (Gerald Cock, producer, quoted in Corner 1999b: 25)

The primary function of television is to transmit pictures as they are being made ... the basic attraction is not so much the subject matter it presents but the realisation that whatever is happening is happening at the time. (John Smith, television producer, quoted in Corner 1999b: 25)

Liveness was of course especially notable in the early days of television when its possibility of image transmission was so new. But that only makes it more striking that liveness still matters to us now, when we take the technology of television (and many other forms of instantaneous telecommunication) for granted.

There are broader sociological issues here: 'liveness' is part of a wider coordination of society in time (Scannell 1989).¹¹ As Jerome Boudon has recently argued:

Liveness should be interpreted as a development within media history as a whole. Media technological history at least partly reflects an effort to reduce the gap between events and media users. It is intimately linked to a history of communication as speed ... there has been a mutual adjustment between technique, society and economy. From the top, major institutions have all used news, then radio and television liveness, to create a connection between the masses and events ... At the base, the need to connect oneself with others, to the world's events, is central to the development of the modern nation. (Boudon 2000: 551–2)

But once we make that broader sociological connection, we must not forget the operations of power that are at work within it. It is *not neutral* in terms of power that society is coordinated through one particular medium – the operations of one particular set of institutional practices and resources – rather than another. This cannot be emphasised enough. The point of seeing 'liveness' as not just a sociological but a ritual category is to maintain some distance from the myth of the mediated centre.

Apparently innocent histories of technology and society may obscure this. Why this matters will, I hope, become even clearer by the end of the chapter.

MEDIATED REALITY

If the 'liveness' that media claim to offer is a ritual category (that is, a category which helps to naturalise the media's ritual status as a frame on the social world), then so too is the media's 'reality'. A quotation from the US television anchorman who commented on the Apollo moon touchdown in 1969 brings out the link:

[television's] real value is to make people participants in ongoing experiences. Real life is vastly more exciting than synthetic life, and this is real-life drama with audience participation. (quoted in Marvin 1999: 159)

The overall nature and volume of televised output has changed markedly since then, and not just in the United States; in addition, television now competes with a number of other access points to 'reality', including the World Wide Web. John Ellis (2000) in a lucid analysis has described a shift from an era of television 'scarcity' through television 'availability' to, increasingly, television 'plenty'. Certainly, in the age of channel, and indeed medium, multiplication, television has increasingly relied both on specific claims to present 'live' special events (especially sport) and on generating new forms of exclusivity in entertainment genres such as 'reality television'. There is a link, then, between the changing forms of the media's ritual categories and changes in media institutions and markers.

'Reality-television'

The invention of 'reality-television' (part of its impact is that we no longer see it as a paradox) is a fascinating story which has received increasing attention from media scholars.¹² In line with my broader aims, I want here to look quite selectively, not at the whole genre but at what a ritual analysis can contribute to the analysis of that genre's main features. I will be concentrating on programmes which use documentary formats more or less,¹³ rather than talk shows, another development involving media's claims to present 'reality' (see Chapter 7).

The claim of television to present 'reality', as with 'liveness', is a thread throughout its history, and is part of a wider 'ideology of naturalism' (Collins 1986), within that consistent history, however, it is clear that different definitions of 'reality' have been fought over at different times. If we take the well-documented case of 1950s and 1960s Britain, a central contest was over the appearance of 'real people' on radio and

television, and documentary and news programmes were a key site of conflict. John Corner in a helpful survey of this period quotes Denis Mitchell, a leading documentary maker, on the shift from requiring interviewees to read from a prepared script written on the basis of unrecorded conversations to allowing them to speak direct to camera or microphone:

It was an astonishing success mainly because for the first time ever [people] were listening to real people saying whatever came into their minds ...
(quoted in Corner 1991: 50)

How exactly to present 'reality' shifted, as broadcasting changed from a 'social' to a 'sociable' medium (Corner 1991: 57; cf. Scannell 1989). This was, however, no straightforward democratisation, as the increasing appearance of 'ordinary people' was inseparable both from the ideological implications of that category and also the editing to which their testimony was subject (Corner 1996: 167–8). From the 1970s onwards, further developments in video recording and the improved quality of film shot with cheap hand-held cameras changed the technological fundamentals, but did not automatically allow 'ordinary people' to be more widely represented in television's picture of the social world. There was a complex interplay between technological possibilities, the 'cultural' recognition of those possibilities in mainstream television, and subsequent economics, as the 'ordinary person' became in the 1990s a valued television commodity (Corner 1996: 173; see, for the US case, Caldwell 1996). Throughout this period, factual 'reality' developed in parallel with soap operas' (or *telenovelas*)' establishment as a fixed part of the television schedule in Britain, the US, Latin America and elsewhere. In fiction, although in a different form, the claim of broadcasting to present social 'reality' also became more insistent, for example by addressing current social issues in soap opera plots (Geraghty 1995). It became commonplace in Britain for fictional narratives to generate news headlines and in *telenovelas* the process went one stage further when real public figures appeared in fictional narratives (see Hamburger 2000, for a case from 1990s Brazil).

Contemporary 'reality TV' therefore emerges from a wider history of how media claim to connect us with a shared social reality. Recent 'reality television' has taken a variety of forms. Perhaps the most useful definition has been provided by Richard Kilborn (1994: 423). Reality TV, he argues, involves (abbreviating his description slightly):

- 1 recording 'on the wing' of events in lives of individuals or groups; or
- 2 the attempt to simulate real-life events through dramatised reconstruction; or
- 3 the incorporation of (1) and (2) in edited form in a packaged programme.

This definition captures well the formal flexibility of 'reality TV':¹⁴ from the mid-1990s explosion of 'docusoaps' in Britain (such series as BBC's *Hotel and Driving School*) to programmes based on reconstructions of action by the emergency services (in the UK, BBC's *Emergency 999*, and, in the US, CBS's *Rescue 911* and Fox's *Cops*), to package programmes which run together clips from surveillance footage provided by the emergency services or camcorder footage shot by viewers (in the UK, ITV's *Police, Camera, Action* and *You Have Been Framed*). Other writers, however, have argued for a narrower definition. For example, Jon Dovey (2000: 71) argues that the term should be focused on programmes where the claim to represent 'reality' is at its clearest, as in footage or reconstructions sourced from the emergency services, with no obvious element of fictionality: I will come back later to one example of this narrower definition, *Crimewatch UK*. But to narrow the definition is not necessarily helpful; it obscures the flexibility inherent to 'reality TV' seen as a *ritual* category (cf. above on 'liveness'). The claim to offer special access to 'reality' is quite compatible with many formats, including elements of fictional packaging (the 'docusap') or humorous commentary (ITV's *Candid Camera*). None of these moves far from the basic claim that television is a *privileged* access point to unmediated reality, even as (to a greater or lesser extent) it can be seen mediating that reality.

To recognise this inherent flexibility is important if (extending Kilborn's definition just a little) we are to take account of this genre's most recent development in the UK, US and Europe: the television game-show (or 'game-doc') which, while at one level explicitly a game between contestants, at another level claims to show us the 'reality' of the participants as people playing a game. The best known example, shown in different formats across the world, is *Big Brother*, but there are many others (including *Survivor* and *Castaway*). The 'game-doc', notwithstanding its clear artificiality, is just as capable of making claims to present 'reality' as the 'docusap' (which combines documentary claims with an entertainment format of, say, six weekly half-hour shows) or programmes which package surveillance footage. All come within a broad definition of 'reality TV', being broadcasting that claims to present 'reality' but falls between the recognised and clearly separate zones of pure news/documentary and pure fiction.¹⁵ Indeed it is this in-between status of 'reality TV' that is most interesting for a ritual analysis. It is the ambiguity of 'reality TV' programmes with regard to their factual or fictional status that reproduces most effectively television's ritualised claims to present 'reality' (see below).

What underlies the multiplication, indeed the fragmentation, of broadcasting's reality claim in the 1980s and 1990s is difficult to say. Certain factors were clearly important. There were economic imperatives at work: in an era of increasing financial pressures upon, and competition between, programme schedulers, reality TV offered cheap and (more or less) reliable ways of gaining significant audiences (Kilborn 1994; Dovey 2000). As financial pressures on programme makers increased in the mid- to

late 1990s, the costs of maintaining a convincing 'reality' component also increased, particularly against the background of press campaigns about some fakery in documentaries and talk shows (Dovey 2001; Dovey 2000: chapter 1, Winston 2000). In Britain, at least, an older historical strand of public-service-centred 'access television' dating back to the 1960s took on a new revived form in the *Video Diary* and *Video Nation* series (Humm 1998; Kilborn 1998). Can we go further? One possibility, as Garry Whannel has argued,¹⁵ is that in the 1990s television had to adapt, at least in those countries where it was introduced early, for the first time to a population the vast majority of whom had grown up with television and therefore had a high degree of interpretative sophistication. This would account, in part, for the increasing reflexivity in programmes, such as the docusoap, about the fact/fiction boundary, but would not explain the persistence of television's claim to present reality, even against the apparent decline of formal documentary and news outputs. Similarly Umberto Eco's much-cited argument for a shift in the 1980s from 'palaeo-TV' which 'talked about the external world' to 'neo-TV' which 'talks about itself' (Eco 1992: 247), while capturing a broad shift in television's tone and rhetoric of address (its increasingly informal sociability), cannot account for the paradox that television's 'reality' claim intensified in the 1990s, although in more varied and more relaxed formats and with a greater emphasis on 'ordinary people's' place in its discourse. Crucial, perhaps, was not the increased competition within the television sector to which Eco points, but the increased competition from other media which television faced in the past decade. Television increasingly must argue for its social centrality against competing claims from film, music production and the Internet. Fortunately, my argument does not depend on resolving this question.

It is time now to clarify what I mean when I say that the 'reality' to which the media claims to give us access involves a *ritual* categorisation.

The ritual dimension of reality TV

In developing my argument about the ritual dimensions of the genre of reality TV, I want to focus on three themes: first, and most obviously, on the claim to reality itself, and then, more briefly, on issues of democratisation and interactivity.

Unmediated reality

The claim to reality, like liveness, is a construction: the very idea of 'reality television', let alone 'unmediated television', is a direct contradiction. And yet it is this contradiction that has always been at the root of television's claim to present the real, 'reality TV' just presents this paradox in starker form. Although the technological possibilities of the camcorder predated by some time its wide usage in broadcasting both in

the UK and the US (Caldwell 1996), once it did become more widespread, television producers believed that the hand-held camcorder, since it was flexible enough for non-media people to use, might 'refresh' the medium (UK producer Jeremy Gibson, quoted in Dovey 1993: 168). Certainly camcorder footage (juddery, moving in a confined space) has in some respects become a sign of 'direct' access to 'the real' within television and elsewhere,¹⁶ although not perhaps the privileged form of "TV truth-telling" (*contra* Dovey 2000: 55). There are many other such truth-signs: for example, those moments in a talk show (see Chapter 7) when 'real' emotions seem to emerge, or the helicopter zoom shot in US breaking news footage focusing in on the details of a street scene. Indeed the camcorder's significance is complicated by its prevalence as a medium for domestic use (Dovey 2000: 65). Does this 'reframe' television's camcorder usage, implying that the tools of truth-telling are now in your hands or mine, not just those of reporters or programme-makers? To argue that would be to ignore precisely the *ritual* form which television supplies for camcorder footage (*cf.* Caldwell 1996: 283). My camcorder footage of a private event *might* be shown on television but it would remain in status just private footage, unless packaged (for example) as special 'insights' into family life, that is, unless brought within the rhetorical discourse of television more generally. Television's claim to 'reality' is not just a feature of this or that video clip, but a much broader construction.

Indeed it can be argued that the foregrounding of television's representational mechanism, in the form of the shaking, hand-held camcorder, serves not to problematise or weaken television's wider 'reality' claim, but to naturalise it further, familiarising us with television's everyday operations in the 'real world'. We could argue the opposite – that reality TV makes the media process more transparent – but do television's presentations of the real matter less now than those of individuals, or other media? As yet, there is no evidence that people are spending their time and money watching or distributing their own camcorder footage in preference to television's camcorder-based offerings! If so, television's underlying 'metadiscourse' (in Steve Neale's useful phrase) is unlikely to have changed either.¹⁸

Nor should we believe the classic postmodern argument that the more television images are produced, the less the claim to 'the real' matters (Baudrillard 1983). Kevin Robins (1995a: 139–40) develops this argument by claiming that in the era of 'karaoke television', participation in the media process seems to matter more than the contents of television's representational space; if so, we might see 'reality TV' as a response to people's desire for connection with others, what Michel Maffesoli (1996a: 12) has called 'the aesthetic of the "we"'. While this captures, perhaps, one reason why television's 'reality' rhetoric insists so much on interactivity (see below), it flies in the face of the intensification of television's claims to be our access point to reality (*cf.* Dovey 2000: 90).

Sometimes the 'reality' claim depends on liveness itself: for example, the category of news story common in the US of 'breaking news', when live footage of a developing event is shown open-endedly with minimal commentary and editing (for example, live footage of O.J. Simpson's station wagon chased by police cars along a Los Angeles freeway). Here, as Bondebjerg notes (1996: 37), television's live presence seemed to justify its claim to present the 'real' life behind the celebrity facade: it was inconceivable, surely, that this celebrity was acting at this moment. In such cases of 'live reality', the framing provided by the television station may be limited to a logo and a short caption, but it is quite enough to assert the ritual status of the television frame. Indeed this is arguably television's ritual frame in its purest form; 'frame' and nothing more.¹⁹

Having it both ways?

Television's 'reality' claim, however, does not require purity; it can subsist in the most messy and ambiguous of forms, as in recent game-docs. What exactly is at stake in programmes such as *Big Brother* (Channel 4), entering its third year in the UK as I write? The only starting point for analysing the significance of what happens in the *Big Brother* house is that television cameras are present. Hence the importance of television's presentation *underlying* that fact, and insisting that, in all their details, those events are not directed for media presentation. As Ruth Wrigley, producer of the first series of *Big Brother* in the UK ('BBUK1'), put it: 'I wanted it to look live and exciting ... this was not meant to be a polished drama. *We were filming it for real*, and it was a virtue of the programme that viewers understood that' (quoted in Ritchie 2000: 11, my emphasis). Filming it 'for real', paradoxically, meant ensuring that audiences did not believe that what they watched was just ten people performing for the camera. The psychological discourse of the programme (with regular comments from its 'resident' psychologists) had a role here, since it reproduced the idea (hardly uncontested in itself) that submitting ten people to national surveillance for two months would reveal their human 'reality'. As Wrigley put it, 'nobody can keep up an act all the time in front of the cameras – the world was going to see them [the participants] as they really were' (quoted in Ritchie 2000: 26). As the programme's official book put it without irony, BBUK1 'should not just show what went on in the house, but should explore human relationships with the help of top psychologists' (Ritchie 2000: 9).

The ambiguity of *Big Brother* – as both artificial entertainment and human 'reality' – is found elsewhere in game-doc discourse. So in a projected BBC variation on the *Survivor* format to be called *Serious Jungle*, children will be placed in the Borneo jungle for two weeks for our entertainment, but the explicit aim once again is to reveal more of human 'reality':

Because it is focused on children, the viewers will see very clear and honest reactions to their experiences ...

(Marshall Corwin, producer, quoted in *The Observer*, 31 March 2002: 15)

For the first time, these children will be trying relationships that are no longer about what music they like or what trainers they wear. They will change so much during these few weeks that going home to their old friends could be quite difficult for them.

(Alex Paterson, trip organiser, quoted in *The Observer*, 31 March 2002: 15)

It is found even in studio-based shows such as *Popstars* (ITV), whose producer Nigel Lythgow claimed that 'it's not just an entertainment show, it's a real life drama'.²⁰ The 'ordinariness' of these shows' contestants has a double significance in ritual terms: first, their 'ordinariness' confirms the 'reality' of what is shown (once their early performance strategies have, we assume, been stripped away by the continuous presence of the camera) and, second, that 'ordinariness' is the status from which the contestants compete to escape into another ritually distinct category, celebrity (Couldry 2002). The apparent contradiction between these two senses of 'ordinariness' – 'ordinary' as 'real' and 'ordinary' as 'merely ordinary' – is only apparent, because both contribute to the wider sense that the media (whether as the frame through which we see 'social reality', or as the space into which we want to go to escape our 'ordinary reality') is special, higher than the 'ordinary world'. Indeed the first claim adds spice to the all too familiar second. This ambiguity – between fiction and reality, pure entertainment and social learning – is precisely the type of ambiguity that Roland Barthes called the 'turnstile effect' (1972) and argued was characteristic of myth more generally.

A complication here is evidence for increasing scepticism, at some level, with television's reality claims. Annette Hill's current audience research suggests (Hill 2002) that, as the output of 1990s UK docusoaps grew, so too did scepticism about their presentations of reality. Clearly the idea that audiences are unaware of the constructedness of these programmes (cf. for talk shows, Gamson 1998: 87, 90; Grindstaff 1997: 187) is as outdated as the loose claims about audience voyeurism or credulity in early discussion of reality TV.²¹ But such sophistication is a long way from a general loss of belief in television's *underlying* status as our privileged access point to social 'reality'. We would not expect audiences to be unambiguous on such questions, but should remember that the claim to 'reality', like the claim to 'liveness', is, because constructed, inherently transferable. Declining belief in the reality-claims of one television genre is compatible with increasing belief in the reality-claims of another – indeed that was how docusoaps themselves came to prominence and the more ambiguously truthful game-doc represents already an implied response to that emerging scepticism.

Democratisation?

My emphasis on the ritual dimension of reality TV is not designed to rule out the possibility that television is becoming, for example in Britain, more democratic as a medium. Certainly, cutting across television's continued insistence on its privileged access to the real is an increasing emphasis in contemporary television on presenting the apparently unedited individual voice. This is seen (at one end of the spectrum) in the BBC's *Video Diaries* (Kilborn 1998; Dovey 2000: 121–2) where individuals tell their story partly, at least, on their own terms, to (at the other end) the game-doc such as *Big Brother* where contestants, by living before the cameras, are interpreted as 'revealing' more and more private 'realities' about themselves, as the game develops. Within a neo-Durkheimian framework, this is precisely how we might be tempted to interpret these programmes.

If we are to move beyond the *prima facie* claim of 'democratisation', however, we need to think, first, about the material constraints that lie behind the appearance of these 'ordinary people'; even in the most favourable case (the *Video Diaries*), the ratio of applicants to those appearing on television was fifty to one (Keighron 1993: 25), which raises unanswerable questions about the criteria on which selection was based. We also need to think about whether the inequalities underlying the ritual space of the media are reproduced, or challenged, in such programmes and the discourse that surrounds them. Take these two comments quoted by Dovey: 'I need to see myself on television to know that I really exist' (2000: 126); or 'a rantooed biker summed it up when she said that she wanted to show that people like her were "just like everyone else"' (2000: 131). The first quotation is from an account by the producers of a *Video Diary*, and the second is from a newspaper article observing the production of a *Video Nation* programme. The status of television as a space where people can make representative claims (see also Chapter 5) is here *affirmed*, not undermined, although the fact these comments were selected by those working in the media, and then highlighted by a media researcher, may itself be significant. What appears like a simple opening up of the practical boundaries around television's enclosed space may involve a reinforcement of the symbolic boundaries which give those practical restrictions meaning. If so, we have an analogy to Bourdieu's analysis of the rite of passage as a 'rite of institution' (see Chapter 3): more than the individual's moment of transition and revelation, what matters are the boundaries which make the rite significant in the first place, that is, in reality TV, the categorical difference between 'media people' and 'ordinary people'. It is this underlying boundary that these programmes reinforce.

Interactivity

Potentially, however, the Web's interactive dimension makes a fundamental differ-

ence to the democratic potential of reality TV. 'Interactivity', like all the other terms we have discussed, is not something natural, but constructed.

We are all familiar with countless examples of 'interactivity' in computer-mediated interaction, from interactive exhibits in museums to the constrained interactivity of most service providers' automated phone lines. In relation to society's central media, however, the stakes around the term are much higher. 'Interactivity' here means showing, in performance, the otherwise merely assumed connection between medium and representative social group. The World Wide Web provides many tokens of 'interactivity': the Website hit counter, the one-step connection between information source and 'chatroom'. The online 'chatroom', whatever is said there, is a form whereby the 'liveness', and implicitly the 'reality', of a broadcast can be confirmed by linking it to 'real people's' talk, as the programme happens. A good example from music radio is the chatroom BBC Radio 1 introduced for the Webcast of some live DJ sessions in 1999; as DJ Dave Pearce said, 'it seems like the most instant way to interact with the audience'.²² We touched earlier on another link between 'interactivity' and media's 'reality' claims in the case of the Website dedicated to *Big Brother*, which enabled you to view through particular cameras around the house (assuming you could download the images at a reasonable speed). Other forms are developing, such as interactive Web-based soap operas (for example, www.onlinecaroline.com, which appeared in April 2000) or the fictional Webcam site (*Big Brother-style*) attached to a BBC drama about a dot-com start-up, *Attachments*.²³

One underlying sociological question, however, is why interactivity is thought to matter so much. Interactivity here represents a further development of the media's ritual categories of 'reality' and 'liveness', whether in the form of 'live chat', or 'live interaction' with an interface that stands in for the media system itself. Clearly any bigger claims for such interactivity's representative significance are highly rhetorical, but it is just such rhetorical claims of social connection that need *ritual* enforcement. Reality TV and its 'interactive' offshoots may only give 'sensations of togetherness' (Nichols 1994: 56), but that is hardly trivial in today's vast social spaces. This is one area where, I would argue, we can expect the media's ritual space to go on generating new forms, categories, and boundaries for some time to come.

MEDIA RITUALS AND THE EVERYDAY REALITY OF SURVEILLANCE

I want, however, to pursue a different line to the future. So far in this book I have analysed the ritual forms and practices which help make the media's authority seem natural. I have not discussed specifically how that authority connects with wider forms of power. Indeed one impact of the ritualisation of the media's operations is precisely to make such connections difficult to see. However, the genre of reality

TV, and particularly the sub-genre which deals with state activities, for example the emergency services, raises those questions unavoidably; it is here that the myth of the mediated centre gets quite directly entangled with power structures beyond the media.

A few writers have suggested a general connection between the media's authority to represent the world and society's strategies of control, particularly control exercised through images (surveillance).²⁴ But these have not been developed in media studies in any detail, excepting John Fiske's important point that the lack of democratic access to the means of making images is true equally of everyday media and of everyday surveillance (1996: 217–18). So it is to work within the sociology of crime that we must turn for insight into the direct practical link between police work and media professionals' work in generating information about, and definitions of, 'crime'. Police, of course, use media technologies themselves: for example, the video in the interview room (Ericson and Haggerty 1997: 140), and surveillance camera evidence. Norris and Armstrong make the connection powerfully in their book on the 'maximum surveillance society':

Television is a visual medium. CCTV is a visual medium. They were made for each other. Add one other ingredient, crime, and you have the perfect marriage. A marriage that can blur the distinction between entertainment and news, between society and spectacle and between voyeurism and current affairs. (Norris and Armstrong 1999: 69)

This marriage is not a temporary blip in media history. The connection between mediation (as studied by media studies) and more general systems of information control goes back to the foundations of modern societies. Both are part of what Giddens called the control of society's 'authoritative resources' (1984: 262). Indeed mediation in this double sense is a necessary precondition of the large-scale modern state: 'modern societies have been "electronic societies" longer than we ordinarily imagine and "information societies" since their inception' (Giddens 1985: 178). If we consider the types of authority on which both police and media rely, both are forms of symbolic authority; that is, particular, privileged ways of categorising the world,²⁵ although the media's authority is of a broader, more all-encompassing sort. Little wonder, then, that media at times pool their symbolic resources with those of the police (Wilson 2000: chapter 1). These connections emerge particularly in reality TV that deals with crime.

A number of countries have programmes which help the police track down crime through televised appeals: for example, in Germany ZDF's *Alarmzeichen XY ... ungelöst*, in France TF1's *Témoin N° 1*, and in the UK BBC's *Crimewatch UK*.²⁶ I will concentrate on the British programme, which has run continuously with large

audiences since 1984. In *Crimewatch UK*, the myth of the centre has, necessarily, a double reference, to the authority of both media and state; the interesting question is how the relationship between the two types of authority is managed.

Sometimes the overlap between the two seems close, as in this quotation (note also the emphasis on 'liveness' as the frame within which audience and police can interact):

Good evening, and welcome to the programme where once a month instead of just hearing about crimes you can perhaps actually do something about them. As always we're live, and the detectives here from all around the country are waiting for your call. (*Crimewatch UK*, 10 November 1987, quoted in Schlesinger et al. 1992: 46)

But *Crimewatch UK* has always drawn on the media's own symbolic authority in a specific way, through its meticulous reconstructions of real crimes. Television's claim to represent reality is embodied in those who make these reconstructions, as reflected in these comments from a book written by the programme's first two presenters:

[A]ll those who take part in a *Crimewatch* reconstruction remark on the responsibility they feel when filming. (Ross and Cook 1987: 59)

It wasn't a pleasant experience but I'd go through it again. I was so proud that as a result of our filming that day, those men were caught. I really felt I had a part in that. (Renny Lister, actress, quoted in Ross and Cook 1987: 61)

So far, however, the media's representational authority, and all the ritual weight it carries, would appear to be at the service of a quite independent state authority.

At other times wider claims are made for the programme's authority, as in this passage about how crimes are selected for reconstruction:

Any crime that has hit the headlines is followed up for, though the motive may not be entirely virtuous, we believe it is in the programme's interests to be seen at the centre of the crime detection business. (Ross and Cook 1987: 29, my emphasis)

The logic is, on the face of it, strange: why should following crimes which have media attention elsewhere help the programme 'be seen at the centre' of crime detection? But, as a reinforcement of 'the media's' ritual role as central social access point, this

practise makes perfect sense. The programme's aim is to affirm the *media* (represented by *Crimewatch UK*) as being at the centre of society's crime detection. Sometimes the authority claimed for the programme is virtually a form of surveillance itself, but operating through the enhanced medium of national terrestrial television:

Crimewatch has a big advantage over [local] cable TV. The audience is so huge we can reach a third of the population at one go and, what is more, our viewers are spread across the whole of the United Kingdom. For detectives that is even more important than it may sound, for police forces are still organised on a local basis. In an age when a crook can zip from one end of the country to another in a matter of hours, the police are fairly rigidly confined to their own patches. *Crimewatch* cuts across all that.

(Ross and Cook 1987: 110).

The friendly relationship which people have with TV presenters, they suggest, enables the programme's police officers to gather information which, as 'ordinary' police officers, they could not (1987: 115). The symbolic authority of television is seen as enhancing the power of the police, two operations of 'the centre' working in harness.

Managing the relations between state and media authority became even more complex when the programme and the police started to rely increasingly on surveillance images. We are here right at the boundary between two very different forms of media-based authority: the media's ritual authority to represent the world for us, and state and corporate authority to collect images for law enforcement. Put another way, and drawing on the work of the leading authority on surveillance, David Lyon, we are at the boundary between the organisational process of 'social orchestration' and the 'cultural commitment', indeed desire, fulfilled by television, for 'omnipresence' (Lyon 2001: 30, 124–5). It might seem strange to describe the media's ritual power as a desire for 'omnipresence', but only because this 'illegitimately' rediscovers the media's workings from the perspective of government.

Is there, then, a risk that in the long run the media's ritual authority will be eroded, or at least contaminated, through this proximity to state power? Certainly the contact zone between these two forms of representational authority needs to be carefully managed. The problem is not one of automatic contamination, as with the taboos on contact between the 'sacred' and 'profane' in Durkheim's theory of religion. Both media authority and state authority are part of society's 'centre' and so there is no automatic problem in their power overlapping by being exercised on the same people. They need not therefore be kept absolutely separate, even if their original mixing in *Crimewatch UK* at first seemed daring (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994: 254–6). The problem of contamination arises at the level of means, not ends. Both

programme and police increasingly rely on surveillance footage. But if the media's claim to present 'reality' (including through its re-presentation of surveillance footage) were to merge entirely with the surveillant eye of the state or its agents, then the 'social reality' to which the media provides access could no longer be 'naturally' consensual; it would have become in principle contestable, for example through the legal process, and directly linked to the authority of the state. Television's authority cannot however appear directly contestable in this way, if it is to retain a *ritual* (that is, fully naturalised) force.

One way round this risk is to keep these two competing interests in the surveillance process (state's and media's) as separate as possible: in *Crimewatch UK* programmes I analysed, for example, from the mid-1990s (1996, 1997) this separation broadly held, with the programme being generally divided into two distinct parts, television crime reconstructions (occasionally supplemented by brief surveillance footage) and other sequences where clips of surveillance footage were played for identification purposes, sometimes with a uniformed police officer commenting. A recent programme (6 March 2002), however, presented something very different, along with a markedly higher reliance on surveillance footage throughout the programme. Here, the narrative authorities of television reconstruction and contemporaneous surveillance footage were not kept separate, but interwoven in tight narrative sequences, often enhanced by the voice (with or without silhouetted face) of the *actual* victim, reflecting on the moment recorded by the surveillance footage; the practice is not unique to *Crimewatch*, it is also found used by *Emergency* 999.²⁷ Reconstruction and surveillance footage here become an intertextual unity, with the first reflecting back on the second: the victim's voice against the criminal's image.²⁸ The treatment of one particular clip from the March 2002 programme illustrates what I mean. It was introduced by a familiar *Crimewatch* comment about the value of CCTV cameras ('If you needed *proof* of how effective CCTV cameras can be, have a look at these clips' – my emphasis).²⁹ We then saw CCTV footage of a man accosting a woman (her face disguised) in a queue at a bank. Over the footage, we hear the voice of the victim, an elderly lady, speaking nervously about the incident. Her testimony ended with these words: 'He's taken away something that I had. I'm not the same person any more.' On the screen, the *Crimewatch* logo is superimposed with the phone number of the studio, and underneath the woman's voice is a version of the *Crimewatch* theme tune playing softly, to provide continuity with the next surveillance clip.

Here the authority of the media gaze is protected from being contaminated by the surveillant gaze, not through separation of their two streams of representation but by separating the *objects* at or for whom the two gazes are directed. There is an implied separation between the media (representing reality for 'us') and the state (scanning social space for 'others'). The voice of the victim puts beyond doubt where our identification should be directed: *away* from the object of surveillance. What we

LIVE 'REALITY'

rarely, if ever, get on *Crimewatch UK* is a sense that we, as reflexive subjects, might be represented on the surveillance screen. Adapting the TV guide quoted at the head of this chapter, 'nothing has changed and you are not there'.

The media's presentation of the social world and the state's surveillance of that same space retain their necessary separation only through the additional assumption that those under surveillance are not 'us', and are unlikely to be 'us'. It is not accidental that the surveillance process is rarely shown on television from the perspective of its 'victims', who may, and probably²⁰ are, innocent.²¹ It helps, of course, that *Crimewatch UK* usually avoids 'political' crimes that might be socially contested (for example, the taking of cannabis), but it is the underlying shift on which we must focus: the stability of the media's ritual authority has begun to depend on assumptions which are not consensual, let alone 'natural', and which divide up the social world into incompatible zones of victims and criminals.

How then does the general practice of 'reality TV' contribute to the naturalisation of surveillance in everyday life? That this is one role of *Crimewatch UK* is clear: the programme is obviously not the place to look to for debate about surveillance's implications for the future of public, and indeed private, space. When the victim's voice is played over surveillance footage of the very moment of attack, the argument for CCTV could hardly be personalised further, but this form of rhetoric is not innocent; it is part of a wider *individualisation* of society's crime discourse whose corollary may be the decline of more broadly social discourses about crime and its management (Garland 2001: 200–1).

It is striking also that the link between surveillance and mediation (in the conventional media studies sense) is increasingly being reinforced in the opposite direction for the purposes of entertainment. *Big Brother* is only the latest in a line of reality TV programmes, going back to MTV's *Real World* (Andrejevic, forthcoming, 2003), which have accustomed us to the idea that it is meaningful and acceptable for cameras on occasion to monitor our *private*, not public, behaviour for an ultimate public audience. If we juxtapose the reality claims of *Big Brother* with the socialised process of surveillance which it and other similar programmes represent, the logic is disturbing: that the most reliable, and perhaps even socially significant, 'reality' is that 'revealed' under surveillance, provided those seen are not yet, or no longer, aware of the camera's presence. If, as Maurice Bloch (1989) argued, the ritualisation of power is a means to make us forget its operations, then we should watch carefully the developing ritual forms associated with the media's (and the state's) claims to present to us the social world.