Reality goes online
a MediaMag special supplement!
We had such a huge response to our Reality theme for MediaMag that we couldn’t fit in all the interesting ideas and issues. So for this issue we’ve produced a special extra bundle of MoreMediaMag articles as a downloadable PDF.

A Special MediaMag Christmas Present for Teachers:
On 18th December we’ll be launching Part One of our new online resource Doing Reality TV – ideal preparation for the AQA GCSE Unit 1 external assessment on Reality TV, or for classroom study whichever spec you’re following. It includes a Teachers’ Guide, classroom activities, embedded clips and articles, a quiz, a useful Powerpoint timeline, and all the ingredients to get started. Parts Two, Three and Four will be arriving in January. And it’s all there free for the taking on the MediaMag website. Happy New Year!
MediaMag meets Marcus Bentley – the voice of Big Brother
Before it bites the dust, read our exclusive interview with the owner of that laconic Geordie voiceover about BB and its future, the role of a voiceover artist, and why he prefers to remain low profile.

Jean Rouch – father of Cinema Verité
Kevin Dunk introduces you to the work of this great, but little-known documentarist and his impact on French New Wave cinema and beyond.

The surveillance society
What’s the relationship between reality television, new media, and government policy – and how far are we becoming a surveillance society as George Orwell predicted back in the 1940s? Bev Fenner offers some background.

I don’t need a man (or do I?)
How ‘real’ is the Pussycat Dolls version of empowerment?
Emma Clarke deconstructs a music video to suggest that lyrics of empowerment and feminism are often undermined by the imagery and reality of a sexist music industry.

The Boo Radley paradigm
How healthy is reality TV’s focus on extreme or marginalised behaviour? Tony Gears argues that hyper-real shows increasingly rely on the exploitation and humiliation of vulnerable people.

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An important part of A Level Media Studies is the need to consider media texts in context. This idea means that, rather than look at television programmes, films, magazines etc as simple individual artefacts, they need to be viewed as products of a culture. Whether the text is old or new it is the way it is, not simply because a director or editor made personal choices, but because those choices were influenced by the culture the text/producer came from. All media texts in some way reflect their own contemporary issues and ideas and media students need to consider texts in this way. Some would argue that when looking at texts this way there is a danger of attributing meaning and ideas to a text that were not intentional. However, all media producers are themselves products of their own cultural environment and have a relationship to the dominant values of the time which will inevitably influence production. This fact leads us toward an approach to media texts which necessitates considering them as cultural artefacts which reflect, respond to and (sometimes) challenge the ideas, attitudes and values of the culture that surrounded them. Some commentators argue that in the modern age, the notion of history has been lost and that the culture is losing the ability to make connections between the past and the present. One contemporary film-maker who consistently tries to show connections between the past and the present and the influence of politics and economics on society is the award-winning Adam Curtis.

For those unfamiliar with his work, Curtis has made a number of documentary films and series (most of which can be accessed via yahoo video searches) which can be exceptionally useful for Media Students who want to scratch beneath the surface of the mediated world we live in. The documentaries consider how politics and economics have impacted on society in the 20th and 21st Century; and they also deal with the role of the media.

**Style and presentation**
Curtis has created a unique audio and visual style within his documentaries. He uses a mixture of ‘talking head’ interviews and archive montages which are accompanied by carefully selected music and sound effects and, in most of his work, a voiceover provided by Curtis himself. The sound of Curtis’ voice is ‘typical BBC’ as he delivers the stories he is telling in an RP accent that hold connotations of tradition and authority. He tells his stories in a calm and reasonable tone and they are often presented more as spoken essays rather than conventional narrations. Each documentary has its own hypothesis and the films develop their respective arguments by setting a historical context and drawing in selected evidence to support the ideas presented.

The music and sound choices are often carefully selected to lead the viewer to a particular emotional response (although his ready use of clichéd music suggests he expects his audience to recognise exactly what he is doing). For example, in *The Century of the Self*, an ominous drone accompanies discussions about the rise in dominance of free market economic values in the West. This is a classic technique of montage and the visuals use this method of story-telling too. Curtis uses archive news and documentary footage to illustrate his work but many of the images used are clips from a huge variety of sources which lead the audience into making connections between the ideas in the narration and the images. He often uses advertising images and in a recent work, *It Felt Like a Kiss*, media images are supplemented by ‘home video’ footage and recordings of psychological treatments/group therapy sessions. At times the images are unrelated to the story being told within the documentary but, like the music chosen, they add to the emotional responses felt by the audience. Even though the subject matter of the documentaries is always serious, sometimes the juxtaposition of sound and images creates a deliberately satirical effect.

**The texts**
Since 2000 Curtis has written and directed the following: *The Century of the Self* (2002). A four hour journey through the 20th Century which looks at the influence of Sigmund Freud and other members of his family on US (and western) culture. The documentary looks at, amongst other things, the influence of psychoanalytical ideas and their use in politics and advertising; the cultural moves from a ‘citizen’ to a ‘consumer’ culture and from a culture of conformity to individualism. The documentary takes a
been used to normalise certain attitudes and culture and one where clinical psychiatry has these ways of thinking have led to a target led psychology and economics he shows how create happiness. But in an argument that analysis of consumerism's promise to generated and maintained.

John F. Kennedy said, "If you can dream it, you can do it" and this is a truth that is often ignored. However, in an argument that demonstrates how recent political decisions have a relationship to the way power and control is generated and maintained.

Quite a controversial documentary as it has as its basic argument the idea that Al Qaeda, as an efficient and cohesive terrorist group, does not exist. Instead Curtis offers the hypothesis that the notion of this 'organisation' can be seen to be part of the construction of a culture of fear which has benefitted some political groups since 9-11. The documentary looks at the culture of the West and identifies how its dominant values can be perceived as threatening to other cultures and uses this to identify why the terrorist attacks of the turn of this century may have occurred. The documentary also examines how the events of 9-11 were used to usher in what some see as an erosion of human rights in the West. They have helped place more power in the hands of already powerful groups, in the name of the 'war on terrorism' via changes in the laws regarding detention and arrest, freedom of speech and privacy. Whilst these ideas may sound similar to those framed within conspiracy theories which have developed since the 9-11 attack, Curtis does not subscribe to them but attempts to show how recent political decisions have a relationship to the way power and control is generated and maintained.

The Trap (2007)
Again Curtis presents a complex multilayered analysis of consumerism's promise to create happiness. But in an argument that links mathematical and scientific thinking, psychology and economics he shows how these ways of thinking have led to a target led culture and one where clinical psychiatry has been used to normalise certain attitudes and act in self serving ways; and that natural human emotions such as sadness and anger or personality traits such as introversion or certain types of unruly behaviour have been identified within abnormal psychology and medications prescribed in attempts to level out emotions and behaviour.

Adam Curtis has contributed short films to two of Charlie Brooker's programmes Screenwipe (2007) and Newswipe (2009). Both programmes focus on modern news. The Screenwipe contribution deals with the changing face of journalism and how news reports use citizen journalism (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9FalyC4vpU). In Newswipe Curtis considers the audience's responses to the news and the way reports of major events have been simplified, creating the audience response he calls 'oh-dearism' (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW3XeT7qavo).

It Felt Like a Kiss (2009)
Curtis's most recent work has been his most 'experimental' so far. Like his other work there is a clear hypothesis within the documentary which focuses on the construction of the US notions of the 'American Dream' in the 1950s. It deals with US international politics and the stark realities of life in the States where homosexuality was seen as an illness, and beating a woman was an acceptable part of a relationship. Again his work is about connections; he draws together stories which deal with Rock Hudson, Doris Day, Lee Harvey Oswald, Lou Reed, The Beach Boys and the first chimps in space. The documentary brings us up to date by considering how all these things relate to the destruction of the twin towers and the post 9/11 culture that followed. The film uses visual and audio montage to tell this story, but the voiceover has been replaced by intertitles so the audience is encouraged to make connections for themselves. The most unusual thing about this documentary however, was (and is) its presentation. Currently the video within what is probably best described as an art installation project/theatrical event that was part of the Manchester International Festival in July 2009. A version of the video was screened in a US high school gym decked out like prom night and was situated in the middle of an interactive walk through theatrical presentation.

It is difficult to describe the experience of It Felt Like a Kiss without giving up its secrets and this would ruin the experience for anyone who may be lucky to see it in its original context as it is possible the film/installation may well be being presented in London before too long (see Curtis' blog for more details). Where the film itself gives a visual/audio demonstration of the falsehood of the ideological notion of the 'American Dream', the 'experience' allows the participant to experience this themselves with areas which show the construction of the dream, from the white picket fences of 1950s American suburbia, through to the erosion of that dream. It allows the audience to experience the undercurrent of fear and paranoia in 1950s/60s culture until the exhibitions plunges you into a nightmare... complete with psychological torture and slasher-movie monsters.

Curtis's hypotheses are controversial; his material is selected very carefully to elicit specific responses in his audience and his work has definite political and ideological agendas. The audience may or may not agree with the conclusions he draws, but his work illuminates how history, society, politics and economics impact on ideological positions which are often seen as being 'normal' or 'natural'. His work intends to provoke thought and debate and as such can be very useful for Media Students, not least because he shows how history is not just a collection of facts, dates and events but is, in fact, the reason our culture is the way it is today.
Are YOU a team player? Could YOU lead the way to a brighter future? Do YOU want a career in television? Then DROP those cameras, DROP those cups of tea and DROP those notions of artistic integrity and social responsibility. TAKE NOTE! Owen Davies introduces: The Top Five Best-Ever Not-Yet-Made Reality TV Shows Of All Time! FREE!

1. Star Tickling

Remember in the Nineties when Dennis Pennis asked Steve Martin why he wasn’t funny anymore? Well, no matter. As members of the Invasive Generation, you can go one step further. Simply find yourself an unemployed comedian (i.e. any comedian) or the instigator of a comedy YouTube prank-video of 100,000 hits or more, and assign them a camera crew as they chase celebrities off their jogging circuits or away from their crying children until they run out of will power and succumb in the damp, urine-smelling corner of some gloomy alleyway to the squealing, writhing and hilarious indignity of being tickled in the ribcage by a man who could, for all they know, be trying to kill them.

2. Xtreme Dating

You’ve seen Blind Date and you’ve seen Born Survivor: Bear Grylls, well now imagine that, instead of a couple meeting for the first time in the florescent surroundings of the tongue-in-cheek gameshow format and spending a sunny weekend away together in Costa Blanca only to discover that they don’t like the same kind of human being, the couple in question don’t appear in front of a live studio audience at all, but are anesthetized in their respective beds at night, with the consent of their heavily compensated family and friends, to be awoken by a sensation of actual falling, strapped in tandem as they are to a parachute and plummeting towards uninhabitable jungle from the plane of the show’s generous sponsor, Air Brazilia!

Unlike the embarrassingly humane dating shows of yesteryear, XD will allow for no such anti-climactic ending as ‘He just wasn’t really my type’, as the situation that the instantly traumatised couple find themselves in forces them to either pull together or fall apart. What could break down the barriers between themselves and the audience more effectively than utter desperation? What could be more definitive than cannibalism or more unifying than drinking each other’s urine when the clean water runs out? As the show’s slick tagline says, participants will either Fall In Love And/Or Die Trying (to escape the Amazon rainforest).

3. Last Man Standing: Nature’s Great Events

That’s right, take six tough-but-vain men from BBC3 – perhaps winners of previous LMS series – and pitch them against BBC1’s Nature’s Great Events, making an Attenborough narrated exploitation show that’s simply perfect for BBC2! Which of the six will be trampled to death, eaten by lions or drowned by crocodile as they attempt to participate in the wildest migration through the Mara River and across the face of Africa? And who will withstand, from the Pacific coast to the spawning pools of the Alaskan foothills, the Grizzly Bears and ice-cold waters of the North American salmon run?

Could William Robinson, aka Jujitsu specialist Iron Will from Northampton, be amongst the last surviving shoals of the shark, dolphin, sealion and humpback whale attended feeding frenzy of the south-east African sardine run? If his ego has anything to do with it…

4. Elizabeth

It’s high time our ceremonial head-of-state threw off the Victorian shackles of privacy and opened her life to the comforting whir of hidden cameras. Twenty-four-hour coverage of such a globally respected subject, edited into neat one-hour episodes of all the most undignified occurrences would make a fine replacement for Channel 4’s folding Big Brother. With the spoilt heirs to her fortune throwing tantrums, rampant Corgis littering the Palace with this waste, and a shaking, mumbling and eternally confused husband as the fall guy, this could become a highly manipulated fly-on-the-wall representation of celebrity family life as we’ve never seen it before. You could even call it The Windsors and give it, say, an ironic swing version of the national anthem as its title theme!

5. Reality TV Show

Think The Apprentice but, instead of despicable idiots vying for the attention of a washed up business tycoon, despicable idiots vie for the attention of a reality TV production company executive, pitching, brainstorming, focus-grouping, youtube-robbing, talent-wasting and soul-selling their way to the ultimate title of Producer, where they’ll receive an annual wage ample for quashing those feelings of guilt and unfulfillment at having bent to the wills of the television establishment and abandoned the very creativity that had spurred them towards such a medium in the first place.

Depressed and now a C-rate celebrity, the winner, having provided executives with a host of new reality TV show ideas during his or her apprenticeship – and, of course, the show that they themselves now produce – could even become the subject of their own reality TV show, revealing such a post-success comedown and personal disillusionment with spellbinding candidness and revelatory insight into the industry that they have become a key player in. Perhaps a subsequent spin-off could follow the winner’s attempts to relinquish the format altogether and get back to their creative roots producing narrative drama by cutting edge writers or prize-winning documentaries about Britain’s celebrity-reared children and their rejection of previous generations’ work-ethics. The possibilities are endless!

So, if you’re interested in making REAL television, then DROP whatever subjects you’re studying and DROP whatever qualifications you’re working hard to achieve, because all you need to WORK IN TELEVISION is a good handshake and a bad idea!

Just go to www.pleasedontgroupto makebadelevision.co.uk and let’s jump-start that career, together.

Owen Davies as a graduate in Digital Media Arts.
Chandana Hall analyses the social networking phenomenon.

Since its inception in February 2004, Facebook has become one of the most popular networking sites in the world with 250 million current users. Its popularity, I believe, can be ascribed to three key factors:
• the growth and proliferation of reality based celebrity culture in our society
• our own belief that we are ‘important’
• our increasing dependence on a range of e-media platforms to form and develop relationships.

Celebrity
Let’s examine the cult of celebrity first. Following the genesis of Big Brother (ten years ago now), ours has become a society obsessed with what ‘real’ people do in a variety of common and constructed situations (stranded on a desert island in Shipwrecked, at home with the kids in Supernanny, living the American Dream in The Hills). The result of this fascination with the actions and behaviour of people who the programme makers would have us believe are just like us, has led to the popular belief that we are all entitled to our ‘15 minutes of fame’.

In their book The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement, Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell relate that: ‘2006 poll asked children in Britain to name ‘the very best thing in the world.’ The most popular answer was ‘being a celebrity.’ ‘Good looks’ and ‘being rich’ rounded out the top three.

They also comment that the ‘me, me, me’ ideology is further reinforced through the consumption of similarly themed broadcast texts: The family sitcoms of the 1980s and 90s, like Family Ties, The Cosby Show, and Home Improvement, have given way to shows about single people in New York; rich, bed-hopping teens; narcissistic doctors; and reality TV with celebrities trying to find love with other TV celebrities. The closest TV has gotten to a top-ten-rated family show in the last few years is Desperate Housewives – not exactly a showcase of caring.

From a sociological perspective, reality shows can be all very interesting. They allow us, the viewers, to empathise and identify with the participants, and also to socially interact with our peers, inasmuch as these texts become the subject of discussion between members of the audience. As a means of entertainment, reality shows are certainly fit for purpose: their dominance of TV schedules and the revenue they yield for production companies confirms this.

The cult of self-importance
Perhaps the most important consequences of reality shows is how participants have become celebrities in their own right after the shows have ended. This is significant, as essentially they have carved out media roles on the back of being ‘normal’ and ‘themselves’, without having to display any particular talents or merit other than a reasonable sense of humour or a well-developed chest. Indeed for some, a complete lack of talent has been the key to their success – Jade Goody forged an entire career from mispronouncing East Anglia and then not knowing where it is.

Their fame or notoriety is further fuelled by scores of vacuous interviews with said participants in the tabloid press, usually focussing on their love life, diet, and feuds with other members of the show. This leads to the assumption, I believe, on the part of the viewer, that in fact everybody’s opinion (but especially their own) is valid, interesting, and should be given a viewing platform. This is where Facebook comes in. It is that platform.

Digital relationships
With status updates, the facility to post photos, video and audio, and the opportunity to accumulate hundreds of ‘friends’ Facebook fulfils our need to belong (we are part of a bigger network), can boost our self-esteem (comments are usually positive as they originate from people we know), and can even allow us to represent ourselves as our ‘ideal selves’.

The concept is strengthened by the findings of The Sunday Times, who have reported on the growing number of people having their holiday photos airbrushed in order to improve their appearance, before posting the images on sites like Facebook. The paper reports that: Sociologists believe the advent of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace has raised people’s expectations of how they ought to appear in their holiday photos... having photographs visually enhanced [makes] them look more attractive and their holiday more fun.’

In some respects this not really groundbreaking news; who doesn’t want to look good in a photo? What is surprising, rather, are the lengths that people will go in order to represent their ideal selves on their pages. This also stimulates debate as to how ‘real’ our accounts of our lives are on social networking sites. Facebook allows us to subject every facet of our lives to mediation before scrutiny by others – as mentioned, we have the ability to select and edit images before we post them. We also have the power to make our lives sound more interesting/enjoyable/successful than they actually are, again fulfilling our need for the approbation of others and increasing our status. The gap between reality and subjective representation is therefore ever widening: the potency and appeal of Facebook is in its ability to accommodate our desire to rewrite and revise what happens in real life, in order to bring our experiences closer to what would occur in our version of an ideal world.

It also reinforces our belief that we are important and that people will be fascinated by what we have to say, which leads to status updates that generally lean towards inanity (a random sample taken from my husband’s page include ‘I’m hungover and off to work,’ ‘Just had a lovely walk’ and ‘Really tired and going to bed’). I’m sorry, but even if you’re my best friend, I’m still not that interested in what you had for your tea. This is why ellipses are so essential to the narratives of novels and films – to engage and maintain the interest of their readers/audience there is no need to detail the minutiae of the characters’ everyday lives – the assumption that the characters are eating, sleeping and having a shower somewhere off the page or off-screen is enough. So why this obsessive need to record our every action and thought through Twitter or Facebook?

Possibly the key to explaining the true success of Facebook et al is that they are e-media phenomena that can fill a logistical and psychological gap. As our society becomes ever more swayed by a series of moral panics (too dangerous or poor to go out because of terrorism/swine flu/paedophiles/the credit crunch), and lives become too busy to engage in quality ‘face time’ with our friends, so Facebook becomes the ideal platform for staying in touch with others. However, if its intellectual stimulation and thought provoking discussion you’re after, even the Jeremy Kyle Show might be a better bet.

Chandana Hall is a media teacher in Hull.
David Bell introduces the strange virtual world of simulcrum.

With this month's Reality issue comes the opportunity to explore new territory, in the same way that the technological developments altering our experience of reality are allowing us to inhabit alternative spaces, places, physical and metaphysical worlds. I thought that there was no better way to do this than to look closely at the notion of Hyper-reality – we live it, we breathe it, and we exist within it, one way or another. So, in an attempt to explain what it is, why it's important, and where it will take us next, I present you with an area of Media Studies that forms part of one of the set topics for the new AQA specification this year – The Impact of Digital and New Media – something for all A2 students to get their teeth into.

What?
Jean Baudrillard, a cultural theorist known for his work on postmodernism and post-structuralism, said that hyper-reality is 'The simulation of something which never really existed'. This 'something' he refers to as a simulacrum or many simulacra.

In one sense, a simulacrum is something that has been created out of nothing. In another sense, it is a recipe of many different things: blend a hearty portion of physical reality with a pinch of virtual reality and artificial intelligence; garnish with human intelligence, and serve hot in a technological vessel. The technological revolution of the late 20th and early 21st Century has enabled this blend of elements to mutate, or to use a less biologically-centred and more media savvy term, to converge. It is important in Media Studies that we consider how this could impact on our lives in the digital era.

Italian Semiotician Umberto Eco once called hyper-reality (oxymoronically) 'the authentic fake' – a type of reality but one that acts as a surrogate, a replacement that means that many of our experiences are becoming pseudo-experiences characterised by the absence of the 'real thing'. Let's see if we can clarify these definitions with references to some well known examples.

Firstly, to put to you a potentially mundane but straightforward question: when was the last time you used a map? Not a Googlesmap or other online street map, but a physical, tea-stained, roughed up at the edges paper document? My guess is that you probably haven't since late 2004 or early 2005, when the first TomTom Global Positioning System (GPS) became available on the mass market. Satellite navigation took hyper-reality to a whole new level in the way that we could use a simulation of a close-up of our own planet to navigate our way through physical reality. If we think of hyper-reality as a simulation, and a simulation as an imitation of a real thing, then we could argue that the maps we've been using since civilised man began tracking the landscape are also examples of hyper-reality – and indeed they are. But – and this is a big but – hyper-reality is an evolving phenomenon, and what it does for us today is bringing things to life. In the 21st century, hyper-reality 'animates'.

Secondly, to return to hyper-reality as something that describes the way in which we are cut off from reality; take celebrity culture as an example of a hyper-real world. Celebrities no longer live the lives they may have once lived as a child, pre-fame, and therefore find themselves out of touch with normality. They are trapped in a world where everything is done for them and at the same time, exposes their every waking moment to the public. Technology of course, plays its part. The media we consume exposes celebrities; their lives are simulacra of normal living. The technological representation of their existence is therefore hyper-real.

Hyper-reality, then, is problematic in the sense that its meanings are by no means limited to one of the key elements mentioned earlier. It is ever-evolving. Furthermore, a common theme emerges when we clarify its meaning and purpose in more depth: falsity. Yet hyper-reality is at the same time feasible, credible and significant. We are all attached to it, like nodes or end communication points – connected to a systematic web of finite possibilities. In short, increasing interconnectivity means that we cannot ignore hyper-reality, and as a key area of Media Studies.

Significance?
In Capitalist cultures, many of the experiences we'd like to indulge in are in fact further from our grasp than Pluto is from the Sun. How inviting then, that Cyberspace – the virtual world of technological communications that exists without the need for geographical references and lies within hyper-reality – offers us an 'as-near-as-we’re-going-to-get' option to be able to, say, walk on the moon, fly an X-43 aircraft at 110,000 feet, or shake hands with an Aztec Warrior having just defeated the Spaniards on July 1st, 1520 – the closest we’ve come to time travel. As Donna Harraway (1991) argues, the freedom of Cyberspace is the freedom to construct new experiences and identities without being restricted by our physical reality. Similarly, Marshall McLuhan, in Understanding Media (1964) talked about technology as ‘extensions of mankind’ that modify the body and hence change reality – of the individual and that of the culture in which the individual grows and develops.

Since McLuhan’s pioneering work in the sixties, technology has not only extended mankind, but has redefined what it means to exist in reality. This transcendental shift could also be termed hyper-real in that we can experience a form of non-reality within the real world. Why is this important? We are now approaching a stage where a ‘get involved or get left behind’ attitude is becoming the norm. In other words, embrace the hyper-real world or risk the possibility of becoming evermore remote. To reject any involvement in the hyper-real world in the 21st Century would be nothing less than virtual suicide.

Creating a ‘hyper-world’
In as far as many technological theorists have attempted to define hyper-reality, it still remains a subject with close connections to Media Studies that is difficult to conceptualise. It is already evident, particularly with the development of interactive technologies, that we are becoming more and more involved in the hyper-real world than the real world itself. Hyper-reality represents a reality shift where a ‘hyper-world’ is now available for us to enjoy new experiences, to experiment with alternative ways of living. As futurist Richard Buckminster once said, until the 20th century, reality was everything humans could touch, smell, see and hear. The electromagnetic spectrum proved that this amounted to less than one millionth of reality. In the 21st century, the hyper-real world will force us to rethink Buckminster’s assertions once again.

David Bell teaches English and Media Studies at Morley High School in Leeds.
Jean Rouch: the Father of Cinéma Vérité

A discussion on issues of realism, reality and documentary is not complete without a footnote to the legacy of Jean Rouch: visual anthropologist and documentary filmmaker.

In the 1950s Jean Rouch embarked on a journey to study and film the lives of the Songhay people of West Africa; it was a journey that would have a profound effect not only on the people he was filming, but also: visual anthropology, documentary filmmaking, the French New Wave, and the future Reality TV.

Very little acknowledgement is given to this charismatic French man, indeed across the course of my entire Film Studies degree as a student, his name was never mentioned! However any Film Studies course that includes Documentary or the French New Wave (WJEC A2 Film Studies specification) should make room for such an important figure; the father of Cinéma vérité and adopted son of West African cinema.

As a documentary style Cinéma vérité is often confused with Direct Cinema, which came to prominence around the same time in America through the work of Richard Leacock. This latter movement’s style concerned itself with immersion in a situation with the filmmakers going ‘unnoticed’; a movement that has, broadly speaking, evolved into ‘fly-on-the-wall’ documentaries. Rouch contested the very notion that filmmakers could go ‘unnoticed’; instead he considered the filmmaker (he always used the term ‘film-maker’ not ‘director’) as the catalyst in a filmed situation, the agent provocateur. Rouch talked about the camera as a tool to record oneself when being filmed.

Cinéma vérité was a new language of documentary cinema created through the advancements of portable equipment, most importantly sync sound and (relatively) lightweight cameras. Rouch has often been credited with inventing sync sound (this is a debateable claim but he certainly pioneered it’s use and possibilities). These technological advancements allowed Rouch the freedom to spend time with the people he was filming without the presence of a large film crew. This style of filmmaking directly influenced the work of French New Wave directors in particular Jean Luc Godard.

Chronic d’un été (1960)

Although the bulk of Rouch’s work was filmed in West Africa where he lived and worked for much of his life as an anthropologist and filmmaker, in 1960 Rouch teamed up with sociologist Edgar Morin to make Chronique d’un été (Chronicle of a Summer). Set in Paris the film pioneered the use of the camera to document public opinion, in much the same way film and media students hit their local town centres to document the word-on-the-street, still to this day! The participants in Chronique d’un été were able to speak candidly and truthfully through the presence of the camera; cinematic truth in action! Rouch is present in many scenes involved in philosophical debate, acting as the agent provocateur. Chronique d’un été was an innovative and influential Cinema Verite film, pioneering the many forms of reality TV we have since become accustomed to.

Rouch’s later films took on an interesting development by playing with the notion of the ‘real’; in Jaguar (1967) Rouch used non-actors and set them an agenda to act out. This hybrid form of documentary has been termed ‘docudrama’ or ‘ethnofiction’. What makes this form even more remarkable is that Rouch shows the viewer the set-up; that it’s ‘just’ acting, in turn rendering the work highly self-reflective. By acknowledging that ‘this is a film’, the sense of audience investment is heightened; these are real people improvising and acting for the camera. This self-reflective style was also used by the French New Wave directors, Godard in particular. By giving his ‘actors’ the choice of how to be represented Rouch is giving them an unprecedented amount of agency. It is known that Rouch often screened his films (often in the African villages in which he filmed) to receive feedback, thus giving the people in his films a chance to communicate if they were happy with the way they had been represented. Rouch recalls the moment he screened his early film Chasse à l’hippopotame (1950) to the village chief and how the chief had pointed out to him that the music Rouch had edited into the film would scare the hippopotamus away! Rouch took on the feedback and rarely used music again in his films.

Rouch’s career was industrious both behind the moving camera (102 films over a 60 year career), behind a still camera (in 1998 he donated 20,000 photographs from his work in Africa to the Musée de l’Homme), and away from the lens. Rouch was also heavily involved in championing communication between anthropologists, visual ethnologists and documentary filmmakers; establishing many film festivals, workshops and cineclubs over the years to support such filmmaking.

Much can be learned from Jean Rouch through the films he produced, his championing of African culture, and enthusiasm for the visual medium we all study/teach and love. Budding documentary filmmakers can learn from Rouch the importance of establishing good relationships with their subjects; Rouch was an anthropologist and spent an unprecedented amount of time within communities while filming. However from Rouch we can learn to understand and respect our subjects before representing them to an audience.

Jean Rouch tragically died in 2004 in a car accident in Niger. Shockingly not one of his films is available in the UK.

Kevin Dunk teaches Film and Media at The Ravensbourne School in Bromley.
As the doors close on the *Big Brother* house for the final time, Stephen Hill catches up with Marcus Bentley, the voice of *Big Brother* to find out about his views on reality television, the future of the show and to get some insider info on being a voice over artist.

**MM** Hi Marcus, thanks for agreeing to be interviewed for *MediaMagazine* – can you tell us a bit about what you watched on TV when you were a teenager?

**MB** I was very frustrated with the lack of access to kids programmes. In the 70’s and 80’s kids programmes in the school holidays finished at midday and on week nights ran from four until six and were boring. *Blue Peter* is awful and God knows why it is still here. *Jackanory* – terrible! ‘Why Don’t You’ pretentious crap, with only the cartoons and great British animation such as *Rhubarb + Custard*, *The Clangers* and *The Wombles* as a saving grace. Kids’ programmes today are brilliant. Broadcasters care these days! And as for teenager programmes, *Grange Hill* was great! Tucker is a legend!

**MM** What about your career before you started working for *Big Brother* – could you tell us a bit about that?

**MB** I'm an actor I left drama school in 1992 went straight into theatre, where I worked solidly for about three years. Then for about two years I seemed to star in about 10 TV adverts. At one point I was the face of MacLean's Tootpaste, BT and Blockbuster! I even had a small role in an Elizabeth Hurley movie, which was a big flop! Then all of a sudden from being very busy I had no good acting work for two years, which was very frustrating. Then I started doing voiceovers and got *Big Brother*.

**MM** What do you think it is about your voice that makes it perfect for voiceover?

**MB** I'd like to think it was perfect! But I think I've developed a style that is unique. There is an argument that a voice shouldn't be noticed just understood, but I didn't want to be boring. I wanted to be noticed! I'm a punk at heart!

**MM** Do people recognise your voice when you're out and about?

**MB** Yes I live in the South East so I don't blend in so well. If I get talking in a shop say I usually get asked and I always get a pleasant response!

**MM** You're the narrative voice of *Big Brother* but who writes the script? Can you tell us a bit about the process?

**MB** The script is written by the *Big Brother* producers, in a certain style, which has been developed over the years and it is dictated by the 'Houser-action'. It is then 'tweaked' by me!
MEMORABLE VOICE!
MB Yes. Sometimes they like me to say irreverent things to shock... ‘booze’, ‘boobs’ and this year I even used the ‘F’ word!

MM You’ve only appeared in front of the camera once on Big Brother – why do you choose to keep such a low profile?
MB I have appeared on Little Brother about five times over the years... but I want to return to TV drama one day and not be facially recognised!

MM Do your kids enjoy hearing you on Big Brother?
MB My Kids have grown up with Big Brother and get a big thrill in hearing their dad’s voice coming out of the TV. They also get a bit of attention at school... which they think is ‘cool’!

MM Big Brother is referred to as ‘reality television’ but of course it’s also ‘created’ – how ‘real’ do you feel Big Brother is?
MB Big Brother is unique and should be in its own bracket. There is only one Big Brother. It is not another talent show so can Big Brother... untill people get tired of watching people and hearing their stories!

MM Which housemate(s) made the best Big Brother ‘character’ and why?
MB The list is endless... but I loved Brian Dowling for his humour, Jade Goody for being ‘Jade’, Nadia for being a woman, Siavash for being an individual and Bea for being horrible.

MM What’s been the most difficult time for you on the show?
MB I always have a ball!

MM Do you think people will look back in twenty years time and view Big Brother with the same affection they have for Coronation Street or EastEnders?
MB If these soaps can last for decades so can Big Brother... untill people get tired of watching people and hearing their stories!

MM What are you career plans for the future – any ambitions you’ve yet to fulfil?
MB I’m going to get back into acting over the next 3 years and do some good stuff!

MM How did you feel about the way in which the media covered the death of Jade Goody?
MB The media are unpredictable at times. Who would have thought Jade’s Big Brother story was so interesting but it was and not because the media told us that it was, people wanted to know all about her and fed her every success and failure. God Bless Jade!

MM How do you feel about Middlesborough leaving the Premier League?
MB Gutted! But ever since we got to the UEFA Cup Final the club have shown an appalling lack of ambition!

MM Any tips for the media students out there who would like to get into voiceover work?
MB I’m thinking of putting together a course, passing on my tips and helping with demos etc. Watch this space!

MM And for media teachers – any tips for when we lose our voice?
MB Never raise your voice and stress your vocal cords! I once cheered Middlesbrough on at a play-off match and couldn’t sing at an audition the next day!

Stephen Hill
Surveillance Society
Utilitarianism and the Media

In this article, Bev Fenner explores the relationship between 18th-century philosophy, government policy, reality television and new media.

Is Britain becoming a surveillance society?

In recent years there has been a growing debate about whether or not the United Kingdom is becoming a surveillance society. Closed Circuit Television was first introduced in the UK in the '70s and '80s after initially being developed for use in banks. Bournemouth was the first town to introduce outdoor CCTV in 1985, leading to trials in many town and city centres throughout the country. A home office report in 1994 deeming the trials to have been successful lead to the proliferation of CCTV in the UK. Since then the number of cameras in this country has grown to an estimated 4.2 million, confirming the Information Commissioner Richard Thomas' fear that Britain would 'sleepwalk into a surveillance society'.

Big Brother is watching you

Alarming CCTV is now less of a tool for crime prevention – with only one crime being solved per thousand cameras – and has instead become emblematic of the wider trend of increasingly pervasive security and surveillance measures post 9/11; culminating in the controversial shooting of suspected terrorist Jean Charles de Menezes in July 2005 and the Identity Cards Act the following year. It therefore seems ironic that concurrent with these rapid changes in public security policy that has placed public life under the scrutiny of private eyes, there has been a boom in Reality television; a phenomenon that puts individuals' private lives in the public eye. Likewise, whilst the culture of surveillance has arguably promoted a climate of paranoia and the Orwellian fear that Big Brother is watching our every move, this has also coincided with new media technologies which are propagating increasingly open, unguarded and communal attitudes to private life. Is the danger then, that such openness exposes us to the risk of being snooped upon?

The recent increase in cases of identity theft and the trend for 'data mining': the use of data extracted from 'private' sources such as credit card accounts and social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Bebo, for marketing, surveillance or fraud, seem to suggest that this is indeed the case. Recently, Facebook has come under scrutiny for not deleting the profiles of those who had deactivated their accounts. Likewise, in January 2008, over 567,000 private photographs were downloaded from MySpace by using a bug available on the Internet.

Utilitarianism and the Media

Many forms of surveillance are justified under the political ideology of social utilitarianism. The 18th-Century philosopher Jeremy Bentham is attributed to the devising the principles of social utilitarianism. In his doctrine on legal jurisdiction, The Principles of Morals and Legislation (1786), Bentham introduces the concept of social utility: a measure of the overall happiness of a society. The utility principle is expressed as 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'; a phase Bentham borrowed from theologian Joseph Priestly's First Principles of Government (1768). At a most basic level, it is possible to see Bentham's concept of utilitarianism as the premise on which broadcast media is based. For example, the Royal Charter, which governs the role of the BBC as a public service broadcaster stipulates that the corporation must sustain citizenship, promote education and learning, stimulate creativity and cultural excellence. In effect, the remit of the BBC is to bring the greatest good to the greatest number. Likewise, Bentham's original concept of utilitarianism also has much in common with the principles of the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s a time when surveillance was still in its infancy.

Public Sector Reform

During the 1980s the Conservative government in the UK embraced a series of reforms to the public sector that reflected the rise of electoral engagement with the role of the individual as consumer as opposed to producer. As a feature of the generalisable proliferation of post-modern culture, the decline of heavy industry and domination of society by information technology, Tory reforms pertained to be at the vanguard of social utilitarianism. Indeed, central to Margaret Thatcher's policy of governance was financial expedience in the public sector. By appropriating the principals of free-market capitalism Thatcher's reforms encouraged the electorate to engage as consumers of public sector services. This was a time during which forms of governance and social monitoring became increasingly transparent. Public sector services adopted consumer models of quality assurance including audits, opinion polls and the national curriculum and OFSTED in schools. Other examples of utilitarian reforms which supposedly catered for both public and private interests include the publication of school league tables, the privatisation of nationalised transport systems and the sub-contracting of auxiliary services in the NHS. The short-term effect of this was that the Conservative government was able to lower taxes creating considerable 'happiness' for middle-income earners. The long-term corollary, however, was that public sector services suffered not only from chronic under investment but that the selfish interests of consumers undermined the premise of egalitarianism in the provision of state services.

Theories of surveillance

It is perhaps no coincidence then, that Bentham is not only seen as the founder of modern conservitism but is also attributed with the invention of surveillance. Key to this is Bentham's panoptic: a new concept of crime prevention. It is perhaps not coincidental that the recent increase in cases of identity theft and the trend for 'data mining': the use of data extracted from 'private' sources such as credit card accounts and social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Bebo, for marketing, surveillance or fraud, seem to suggest that this is indeed the case. Recently, Facebook has come under scrutiny for not deleting the profiles of those who had deactivated their accounts. Likewise, in January 2008, over 567,000 private photographs were downloaded from MySpace by using a bug available on the Internet.

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with the primary aim of improving its cost and efficiency. The design consisted of a circular building allowing for a single layer of tiered prison cells built around a central tower from which a single observer could view all of the cells. The cells were to be backlit and the central void surrounding the tower until so that observer could remain hidden whilst those in the cells would be constantly visible. The observation room would be darkened and its windows obscured with the primary aim of improving its cost

You are watching Big Brother
Taking these ideas into account, their seems to be a strong theoretical argument for the relationship between the performance of social transparency – from online feedback forums for media organisations to restaurants with ‘theatre kitchens’, to the unguarded openness of reality television – and the notion of a surveillance society. The very notion of Big Brother has its origins in George Orwell’s dystopian vision of the future in Nineteen Eighty Four (1948); CCTV in this instance predicted by the two-way television. And, indeed, the popularisation of this concept in the reality television programme Big Brother (Channel 4) offers an ironic commentary on this ugly aspect of contemporary society. Its stars are able to subvert the subjecting function of surveillance by objectifying themselves for the camera. Most recently, however, it is the proliferation of social networking sites that have lured us into a more intimate panopticon in which our correspondences are haunted by a vague feeling of paranoia that MySpace is fast becoming ‘their’ space! In theory, these sites serve the very utilitarian function of allowing us to communicate more effectively with loved ones and friends. Increasingly, however, the awareness that other people are sifting through our photos and ‘status updates’ induces a self-conscious panoptic gaze of its own. As the ubiquitous mobile phone camera is testifying: in the 21st century, increasingly our social existence is but a prop to support the version of our life we project into cyberspace. Conversely, we can argue that seeing and being seen has always been a primary focus of youth culture. As Dick Hebdige (1988) suggests subculture ‘forms up the space between surveillance and the invasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is hiding in the light.’

Future fears
However, as our private lives become increasingly open, are we blurring the distinction between public and private to the point where we are in danger of losing a fundamental human right: the right to privacy? Indeed, the primary opposition for the introduction of National Identity Cards in 2005 came from Parliament’s Joint Committee for Human Rights whose main argument against the scheme was that it contravened Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights: the right to respect for one’s private and family life, his home and his correspondence. In August 2006 an article in The Observer, Gaby Hinstin highlighted a relationship between National ID cards and a wider project which would ‘widen surveillance of everyday life by allowing high-street businesses to share confidential information with police databases. By integrating the biometric technologies developed for the National Identity Cards scheme with consumer technologies like store loyalty cards and cash machines, police would then be able to track the everyday activities of criminals, suspected terrorists and others that they wish to monitor by instantly identifying them from ‘unique markers such as fingerprints and iris patterns’. This sounds like the stuff of science fiction but unless it is opposed will become science fact. More recently, a report by The House of Lords Constitution Committee argues that as mass surveillance far from upholding utilitarian democratic principles, negates them by eroding privacy; undermining ‘the constitutional foundations on which democracy and good governance have traditionally been based in this country’. If the right to privacy is denied, then not only will this confirm the Information Commissioner’s suspicion that Britain has become a surveillance society but also give prophetic credence to Orwell’s vision, by paving the way for a totalitarian police state.

Bevis Fenner
Hollywood stars are the stuff that dreams are made of. This central idea is the driving force of the film industry. The multi-billion pound industry is dependent on the creation of an elite ‘A’ list of stars that somehow sparkle more brightly than ourselves, drawing us in to the darkened cinema space to watch their epic adventures. They embody some central core of masculinity or femininity that fascinates the audience. If we examine two young male stars, such as Joaquin Phoenix and Heath Ledger, we can see how stars often attempt to create epic narratives with their lives. With Heath Ledger’s tragic demise and Joaquin Phoenix’s career meltdown, these narratives can have a dark and deadly side.

Stars have always attempted to construct epic dramatic narratives from their ‘real’ lives. Since James Dean’s wild car-racing ways, some stars have always had a fascinating ‘second life’ off screen. The star will become embroiled in affairs with men or women, will possibly be arrested, may marry and divorce, the narrative unfolds in newspapers, magazines and the web. Kiefer Sutherland, Brad Pitt and Mel Gibson are other classic examples.

Joaquin Phoenix

On October 27th, 2008 the established young star Joaquin Phoenix announced he was retiring from acting and Hollywood to begin a new career as a Rap artist. He was a macho star who had earned his place in the Hollywood pantheon with several star turns in films. His spectacular fall from ‘Stardom’ amazed us all. Phoenix started to grow a huge beard and began to look dishevelled. For Media students, this ‘car-crash’ spectacle has become so infamous as to be mocked at the 2009 Oscar Ceremony by Ben Stiller.

Playing with Personas

Heath Ledger, Joaquin Phoenix & ‘Real’ Life
Heath Ledger

Heath Ledger was a mercurial star in the Hollywood firmament with potential to be one of the all time greats. His drug death at the age of 28 was shocking and brutal, ending a career that had seen him defy categorization and win a massive audience following. Ledger’s performance as ‘The Joker’ in The Dark Knight, eclipsed Jack Nicholson’s previous attempt at the character and has become a popular cultural phenomenon. T-shirts and memorabilia are emblazoned with his painted face and internet chatter on Ledger’s ‘Joker’ is unprecedented in film history. Blurring the line between stardom and reality, Ledger was a man of extremes, taking his performances to heart. There were some macabre similarities to the death of River Phoenix, Joaquin Phoenix’s brother. On October 30th 1993, aged 23, he overdosed in ‘The Viper Room’, a nightclub on Sunset Boulevard owned by Johnny Depp. Joaquin phoenix made the 911 call for his brother.

Heath himself described the Joker as: ‘a psychopathic, mass-murdering, schizophrenic clown with zero empathy … I couldn’t stop thinking. My body was exhausted, and my mind was still going.’

He died of a drug overdose in New York on 22nd January 2008, cutting short a potentially prolific career, with some speculation that the role of ‘The Joker’ had pervaded his ‘real’ life.

Heath Ledger’s manic, evil, chaotic Joker was a fatal element to seep into Ledger’s persona. He was a M–ethod actor who continued in character even after filming. This type of ‘Method’ acting can be dangerous for some fragile actors.

The curse of ‘The Joker’

Heath Ledger was always extremely ambitious and keen to develop a unique place in the Hollywood and acting fraternity. This attempt to manipulate his representation echoes Joaquin Phoenix, as Ledger was intent on avoiding being typecast. In taking on the role of ‘The Joker’, Ledger was well aware of the giant shadow of Jack Nicholson on the role, but wanted to dare to redefine himself and the iconic villain. Much has been made of Jack Nicholson’s comments on the death of Ledger – ‘I warned him’. This was not a comment on the curse of the role but a reference to his warning on prescription sleeping drugs that killed the young star. As art mirrored life and the epic narrative of Ledger’s real life veered off into sinister territory, sleeping tablet addiction killed the dream.

As David Thomson noted in The Guardian: ‘For good and ill, early death can lead to mystery which is in turn ‘answered’ by a cult-like legend. We may yet have to hear a lot more about Heath Ledger than we care to believe. He may even be a role for some other promising young actor. The show business devours its own creations.’

The show-business may well have devoured Joaquin Phoenix, or maybe, he will return to the

The Guardian: For good and ill, early death can lead to mystery which is in turn ‘answered’ by a cult-like legend. We may yet have to hear a lot more about Heath Ledger than we care to believe. He may even be a role for some other promising young actor. The show business devours its own creations.’

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The Boo Radley Paradigm

Tony Gears explores the insights that a literary character – Boo Radley from Harper Lee’s 1960s classic To Kill a Mockingbird – can offer into the ways reality TV represents ‘otherness’ and vulnerable people.

In the novel To Kill a Mockingbird, Arthur ‘Boo’ Radley is described by Jem as:

six and a half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch...There was a long—scar that ran across his face...his eyes popped and he drooled most of the time.

Not surprisingly the children are intrigued, scared and entertained by this figure and so wish to stare at his house in the hope he will come out. Modern TV has made that more and more possible! This TV version of looking out for the weird people in society is what I have termed the Boo Radley paradigm.

The Boo Radley paradigm is a way of understanding the phenomenon of ‘hyper-reality’ TV where the ‘Uses and Gratification’ (Blumer & Katz) to be gained from the programme are, (and I apologise for the deliberate un-PC aspect of my language here), ‘to watch the local loony’, both for entertainment, social interaction and personal identity reasons, making us feel better about ourselves. We see this regularly in such shows as The X-Factor and Britain’s Got Talent/America’s Got Talent, Big Brother and so on. There is a clear link to the concept of car crash TV.

The appeal of Nadia Almada who won Big Brother in 2004 was that she was a transsexual; that of Pete Bennett (who won two years later) that he had Tourette syndrome. Vulnerable people have appeared, sometimes with distressing consequences, on virtually all the reality TV shows because audiences like to see

...and like Boo, the hyper-reality dominates, as we both fear and yet voyeuristically want to see these people, de-personalised and distanced from us. How many people remember their real names? Take the ‘Bonfire Night Man’ from X-Factor for instance; or the ‘Chicken Man’. How many people remember Boo is actually named Arthur?

Marketing issues

Anushree Chandran writes in Marketing and Media for the Wall Street Journal (Can edginess and voyeurism continue to save reality shows?) clearly makes the marketing issue a priority concern since TV companies are relying on New levels of edginess...seen as a way to refresh a cluttered genre where every big success spawns me-tos.

Media agencies such as Madison Communications cited by Chandran choose these shows on their ‘controversy’ levels, which may obviously colour media planning and buying decisions:

Non-fiction is an area where one can afford to explore and experiment because the viewer is evolving.

The ‘Boo Radley Paradigm’ allows for such planning, but diminishes the more negative feedback that could come from courting too much controversy – as in the Shilpa Shetty/Jade Goody situation, which brought much criticism of Channel 4.

Sharda Chhetri (Reality Voyeurism 2008) makes the very clear point that ‘the participation of emotionally vulnerable people holds the potential for more entertainment for viewers.’

And the Able Here Team, a site for the disabled, points out that ‘TV producers introduce more vulnerable people to pull in jaded viewers’.

A union official from the Actor’s Union, Equity (Sep 16 2009) is reported on the ITN website as stating that such programmes are based on exploitation and humiliation of vulnerable people, which cannot be acceptable.

If we take the example of Susan Boyle, who despite learning disabilities wowed audiences on Britain’s Got Talent and YouTube, we can clearly see the paradigm in practice. Susan, 48, lived alone with her cat, ‘had never been kissed, and was teased by children in the street’. As one critic writes:

...she fitted the bill as the eccentric loner. The fact that she could sing a little only added to the fun. There can be little doubt that her attraction was that she was ‘odd’ in her behaviour; but because she has some talent, she gained national recognition since we could both laugh, pity and be in awe all at the same time. Other ‘odd’ people are frequently brushed aside, despite their often tragic back story.

Jo Hemmings, a behavioural psychologist who has assessed psychometric testing on Big Brother is quoted in The Guardian as saying:

People watch reality TV because it is car-crash TV. It is unpredictable and that is why people enjoy it. However, I don’t think people enjoy seeing people fall apart emotionally or psychologically...

TV producers may claim they are empowering these participants (and audience) but I would argue they are much more cynically using the ‘Boo Radley Paradigm’ as a marketing strategy which re-enforces the notion ‘look how much better you are, or better off you are, than them.’ Andy Millman, played by Ricky Gervais in Extras states:

The Victorian freak show never went away, now it’s called Big Brother or X Factor where, in the preliminary rounds, we wheel out the bewildered to be sniggered at by multi-millionaires. (The Extra Special Series Finale) One critic of this year’s X-factor notes on a website ‘What was previously a glorious exercise in embarrassment and awkwardness is now little more than an endless stream of show-offs and weirdos.’

This issue is highlighted quite clearly in The Guardian’s ‘OrganGrinder’ Blog:

The opening episode pulls out all the stops to make sure you continue in your quest to mock the pathetic, offering an ample fix of the stupid, the mundane and the talentless…In case you forget to laugh, Ant and Dec are there to help you ‘take the mickey’. 
Originally hilarious this show has now degenerated into exploitative TV at its worst. Some of the ‘pre-screened’ contestants are clearly mentally ill. It is like laughing at the lunatics in Bedlam...

(But I do)

Of course the desire to watch the lunatics is nothing new and goes back to the 18th-Century custom for the idle classes to visit Bedlam Lunatic Asylum and observe the antics of the insane patients as a novel form of amusement – as graphically illustrated by Hodarth and others.

The question is how far the ‘Boo Radley paradigm’ will go. What are we to make of Britain’s Missing Top Model in which eight disabled women are pitched against each other in a battle for a prize of a fashion photo-shoot to be featured in a top women’s glossy magazine?

There is little doubt that increasingly reality TV programmes are exploiting the disabled, the vulnerable or the distressed to bring in viewers. Big Brother’s clientele became more and more eccentric over the years, as did the tasks they were required to perform. X-Factor’s move to present their auditions in front of a live (baying) audience is reminiscent of the Roman amphitheatre and the chosen ‘victims’ (who having already been through two auditions to get this far, and being encouraged to believe they have a chance) are ‘thrown to the lions’ of boos and chants of ‘off, off’, much to the delight of the TV audiences as they enjoy the discomfort of the ‘local loony’, either through laughter or pity.

Boo Radley docs

We see the Boo Radley paradigm at work also in documentary programming, where mental illness and disfigurement have become increasingly ‘freak show’ in nature. Noting this one critic writes that these ‘exploitative documentaries’:

…are disguised as ‘human interest’ stories or ‘factual documentaries’. Whether it is documentaries about the incredibly fat, or a man who eats badgers, TV producers are instinctively looking for the next weirdo they can stick on TV to be stared at by millions in the comfort and safety of their own lounges.

(Ricky Gervais, Susan Boyle and the Victorian Freak Show)

In a survey conducted by the Voluntary Action Media Unit the reasons for these documentaries was seen by the clear majority as being for shock value, to increase viewer ratings and for entertainment purposes; Some went a lot further; one disabled user from the BBC’s disability site, Ouch! noted:

They are fetishistic and parasitic. Made by ghouls who think they can parade disabled people for money like they used to in Bedlam. Jo Hemmings believes that It is wonderful to open up these opportunities, but if you are going to do that there is even more of a duty of care.

Nevertheless, amongst the majority of respondents to the survey there is still a clear feeling, despite the huge number of negative comments about such programmes, that they should be shown on TV.

I would argue that it is clearly better to see our Boo Radley in the flesh than hide them away from view and that any kind of representation is better than none at all. But as one writer adds, if the vulnerable ‘are required to do things which in anybody’s book are extraordinary, viewers will therefore regard them as extraordinary people’.

Hegemony and the Boo Radley paradigm

The paradigm is not only extant in current media texts like the X-Factor, but also may be reflective and suggestive of a broader current social malaise. One could argue that this ‘sickness’ is represented not only in reality TV, but also in moral panic news items about society and culture – youth, drugs, knife crime, the inner cities etc. – wherein the imagery and texts presented are a vicarious thrill for audiences and are hegemonic in nature as they help reinforce social strata and codes sublimating any real suggestion of pro-active change. The idea here is less simply about ‘marketing’, and more to do with deliberate manipulation. If we are looking at the world through the mediated ‘reality eye’ of TV and the media, observing in a thrill-seeking manner the ‘bad behaviour’ and so on, we are less likely to actively pursue solutions. In terms of the original premise of To Kill a Mockingbird and the analogy, by keeping us focussed on the Boo Radleys’ society, we are less likely to see the corruption of racial injustice or other social issues.

(Jan Pinsler, Power and Hegemony in Reality Crime Programmes 2007)

Crime-appeal programmes successfully give the impression that they defend universal rights even though they in fact defend specific rights, especially the right to private property, which is a precondition for a capitalist society.

The paradigm is, of course, like hegemony itself, not forced upon us but achieved through consent. Programmes are designed to draw us into our own psychodynamic egotistical and other weaknesses. If it is okay to laugh at the vulnerable to make us feel better about ourselves, then we will not look too closely at why we were not happy with our lives, and the status quo will be maintained.

A research team led by Professor Beverley Skeggs (Making class and self through televised ethical scenarios) considered the role of the media in contemporary identity formation, and how class is being re-made in the contemporary culture. It concluded that:

Middle-class participants thought television exploited uneducated vulnerable people, yet maintained that participants were a particular type of person – ‘desperate for celebrity’, ‘generally trashy people’. It is obvious that once such a majority view takes hold, and becomes a ‘dominant ideology’, it is accepted as the cultural viewpoint. The minority who disagree with it then tend to keep their objections quiet, or are simply ignored or laughed at as ‘out of touch’ or taking it all too seriously. Hegemony is about consent, and one of the things it consents to is inequality.

Tony Gears is Head of Media at Bigglescliffe School.
We seem to be in a beauty salon where the girls – and the way that you stare – don’t you dare.

‘Cause there are some things I won’t do
And I’m not afraid to tell you.

The music video is a medium that gives you reality and fantasy in one swoop. It is a platform where you are made to believe anything is possible. Its aim is to capture the attention and the imagination of the viewer, and to hold their attention for a good three and a half minutes. To achieve this, its subjects of music videos are gorgeous, glossy and successful; you want to be or be with them (depending on your gender and/or sexual orientation). Its main storyline usually revolves around sex because sex sells. This means that song lyrics can contradict the content of the actual video: even if the song itself is nothing to do with sex the video will be.

In this article I will look at the portrayal of women in music videos and will be focusing on the core messages and values conveyed in ‘The Pussy Cat Dolls’ ‘I don’t need a man’, which on the radio translates into a liberating female anthem, while on screen it constitutes the worst kind of sexual objectification.

The establishing shot thrusts us in to a pink world and introduces a blonde pussy cat doll in black bra and skirt. The exciting jump cut makes it hard to focus on one particular subject. The kinetic camerawork dominates the performance and brings energy and dynamism to the stage: we are drawn in immediately. A dolly shot (in every sense) then introduces Nicole (the only member most viewers can name from the group: so much for girl power!) who begins the song ‘Now you looking at me like I got something for you’ as the lens zooms in and out – like she’s teasing you in and then kicking you away. The camera intersperses Nicole’s moment with a close up of blonde pussy cat leaning down putting on toe polish against a pink/black background with the diegetic ‘Uh-a-woo Uh-a-woo’ blasting us into a world where hairdryers, lipstick and legs rule.

We seem to be in a beauty salon where the girls are dressing up – the implication being they are doing this because they are confident, strong young women and they are not doing this for any man, hence in comes the title. The pink and black colours which provide the backdrop connote femininity and sexual power.

We briefly get a close up shot of pussy cat blonde while Nicole delivers the lines ‘Just give it all up for you’ Coz there are some things won’t do! A few extreme close-ups of Nicole break up the beauty salon. More hairdryers and towels fill the screen and more leg becomes on show. The bras are on and showing; these girls mean business.

We then cut to the back seats of the beauty salon where the dance routine/lip synch number which is flawless and smooth (like the girl’s legs which are the focus of a number of close-ups) and we see the group of girls simultaneously. They form a line, they are a unit as they sing the hook ‘I don’t need a man...I get off being free’ whilst most of the girls expose their knickers to the camera.

We then cut to a silhouette of one of the dolls – unmistakably Nicole who is getting undressed to capture and excite the male gaze. ’I’ve bought my own life and everything that’s in it’ she sings whilst she touches her boobs. We then cut to blonde pussy cat in the bath; shaving her legs and reaching out. The background colours then change to white, black, pink and blue as the dance routine is performed, then to black. Against the background, Nicole becomes the subject of an extreme close-up. ’I get off on being free’ she sings as she strokes her body and plays with her hair. This is interspersed with a high-angle shot of brunette pussy cat, who looks like she could be in the shower.

Again we return to the rest of the girls putting on make up, shaving their legs and spraying perfume (with the label reading ‘girl power!’). The brunette pussy cat takes of one top for another with the words emblazoned upon it ‘I don’t need a man’ again reinforcing the message of the song in case as an audience we had been distracted by a flutter of lashes, breasts and lipgloss. We come to the crux as the drums play on the soundtrack and purple confetti falls down over the dolls. The dolly shot presents the girls in a row – they are a ‘unit’. The girls again hug at the end and punch the air, signifying their female solidarity.

The inherent fiction in this video is that women are strong: we can wear what we like, put on our make up whilst we sing confidently in the bath tub. We are bombarded with so many images of sex that you forget the original premise of the song, but by that time the catchy tune is in your head and the messages have become blurred.

The reality is somewhat different – these girls can sing all they like about female empowerment but if you break the video down you can see that these girls are the product of a sex-driven and highly sexist music industry. As artists these women need the male gaze (and the offer of female identification: I too can be these girls) to sell the huge amount of records that they do. Sadly, if there was no flesh on show in this video and it fitted in with the progressive lyrics of its own song then I doubt it would have made a top ten hit.

You Tube comments of the video are mainly supportive: Mirror image comments ‘They’re just showing how strong women can be without a man in their life. Strong, confident girls – that’s what I’d call it!’ Many female viewers agree that Nicole et al are feisty, feminist felines to many. And if the video has this effect on female viewers then the video directors have achieved their goal.

The main demographic of music video viewers is mainly 13-24 and largely female. The Pussy Cat Dolls’ videos attract both sexes to capture a bigger portion of the music buying market. Some of their videos could be classed as soft porn. ’Girl power’ has taken a backward step. Instead of growing up it has turned in to ‘doll domination’.

What the producers of these videos do though are very clever: these raunchy videos are bundled up as feminist anthems, as confident assurances of female power; of strong catchy hooks so both sexes will be drawn into the video and therefore hum the record and buy the single. Their market is teenage girls and men – just look at audience members at their concerts! They are dolls (for the teenage girls) and dominating whores for the male market. The Pussy Cat Dolls can pretend to themselves and their audience that they are all powerful but this so-called power has no value in the real world: sex sells and the pussy cat dolls’ success (literally) embodies this.

Emma Clarke is a recent graduate from Sussex University who is now working in Brighton.
If you liked this you maybe wasn’t cool when you were younger. These guys are trying to be great but are eventually not.

Damon Beesley writer of The Inbetweeners

The 'Inbetweeners' are a social class of teenagers that are not cool enough to be popular but not geeky enough to be nerds. The programme demonstrates this perfectly when the main characters manage to get themselves a car but it is a yellow Fiat with a tape deck and when they dare to play truant from school they end up drinking Beefeater Gin and Drambuie in one of their parent's houses as opposed to hosting a cool party a teen would be proud of. In their quest to fit in, things for the Inbetweeners very rarely go to plan.

The lead character and narrator of the programme is Will, who after the divorce of his parents, is enrolled in the local comprehensive after having to leave the private school that his very attractive mother can no longer afford. The contrast between Will and that of his new classmates is clear and makes for some witty observational insults from his fellow pupils ‘briefcase twat’.

A lot of the action takes place at the Rudge Park comprehensive as the characters are studying for their A Levels in various subjects. The sixth form is suggested by the programme as a place where you can reinvent yourself after the trials and tribulations of 11-16 education and we are shown the shows characters attempt to do exactly that.

Storylines deal with the ordinary things that people of this age stress over: fancying someone of the opposite sex and trying to attract them, fitting in with friends while trying to stand out from the crowd and the ultimate of the age: trying to get served in a pub. These are things that all of us can identify with but are only funny when you are looking back or they are happening to somebody else.

This is a comedy programme that also touches on some surprising, unusual and unexpected events including the assault of a disabled girl with a Frisbee; having everyone staring at your erection in the common room; getting drunk and declaring your love for a girl and then throwing up on her younger brother and telling the barman that all of your classmates in the pub are underage; real social faux pas for this age group.

At times it makes for uncomfortable viewing, the show has a way of making you feel the characters embarrassment until you remember that you didn't actually do it, relax and then enjoy it for making you cringe.

In terms of realism, some incidents have happened to many of us; some incidents could happen to some of us and certain situations are unlikely to happen to any us but we fear them all the same. The latter of these situations tend to be the nightmare climaxes to the shows and act as a catharsis for all of the nervous tension that we have built up from being teenagers ourselves and from watching the programme.

A target audience for The Inbetweeners could be derived by the fact that it was specifically produced for E4 which is aimed at the 15 – 35 audience and written by contributors from the 11 O’Clock Show and Peep Show. The programme certainly managed to reach this audience as it was nominated for a Bafta for Best British Sitcom (eventually losing out to the IT crowd) and the third series has just been announced with an American version in the pipeline. Funnily enough, whilst it featured a young cast set in a school the first series carried an 18 certificate, an indication of the sometimes shocking nature of scenarios in which the characters find themselves.

‘The Inbetweeners’ production can be followed outside of the programme also, for those of us that are used to interacting with programmes and features on the internet. The show’s website, hosted through E4, allows us to get closer to the characters and the actors playing them along with reliving some episodes under the title of ‘Watch Them Fail’ and listening to the contemporary music that is played during each of the shows, titled, ‘Soundtrack to Their Painful Lives’.

Whether you are looking back at your college years or looking forward to them, this show presents us all with a normal characters that could have made the same mistakes as you and had the same aspirations and insecurities that you had, which is both comforting and reassuring to know and laugh along with.

Robin Makey