

- 10 Well I think at the end of the day I am famous okay lots of people know who I am and I'm damn well gonna use my fame positively. You know if I can bring aware- if I can save one person's life just by awareness I'm gonna damn well do it I don't care what you know, you know whether I'm famous enough. If just one person recognises me and thinks well actually you know that's gonna bring attention that's good enough for me.
- 15

It is surely not necessary to elaborate on the features of ordinary talk which Geri uses here. There are markers of sympathetic circularity ('okay' is used in this way, as well as 'you know') and there is the colloquial emphasis ('damn well', lines 10 and 12-13). Again there is a hint of that peculiar construction where the celebrity animates the ordinary person thinking the celebrity's thoughts (lines 15-16). The key point is that this way of talking reinforces the claim of the celebrity to speak for everyone. This claim is and, interestingly, this is a form of politics that seems to transcend the conventional public sphere. No longer simply a matter of political debate or opinion, where Geri is floundering, it is now the focus of a higher moral conviction. I will return to the implications of this in the conclusion to my final chapter – but for the moment let us note that it has become the rationale for some forms of celebrity talk. And let us not be too cynical when we recall that Geri's adoption of such an exalted persona lasted for about a year, after which she reverted to her former career as a fairly average pop star.

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Talking to Big Brother

1. Approaches to reality TV

Not surprisingly, given its rapid growth, 'reality television' has been the focus for increasing debate in the recent literature of media studies. Initially some of the discussion was concerned to compare and contrast reality TV with more conventional documentary formats (Kilborn 2003). It has been suggested that reality TV is indicative of a 'post-documentary' culture in which traditional concerns for social or public issues no longer apply (Corner 2002). Subsequently, other writers have discussed the affinities between some reality TV formats and naturalistic drama (Piper 2004), whilst it has also been recognised that the application of generic definitions may be problematic in this ever-diversifying field (Holmes and Jermyn 2004). Thus the term now seems to apply, not only to documentary formats with an emphasis on 'real lives', nor simply to lifestyle makeovers of various kinds, but also of course to 'created for TV' shows, the game-docs and survival programmes, which have enjoyed international success. In these shows, where participants are placed in artificially constructed environments and required to perform extraordinary tasks, the question of what 'reality' might possibly mean is at stake. This chapter makes some preliminary explorations of this question, by focusing on aspects of the talk in the widely successful format of *Big Brother*.

Big Brother is indeed the reality TV programme that has so far received the greatest attention. I want to start, perhaps provocatively, by making a distinction between two types of academic approach to its analysis. The first approach takes the programme to be symptomatic of a crisis in the public sphere. Thus Van Zoonen (2001) in a commentary on the European success of *Big Brother* speculates that it might be indicative of a challenge to the traditional bourgeois distinction between public and private life (and thus, at some deeper level, consistent with feminist concerns). Van Zoonen's positive endorsement of this is at odds with, but strangely in the same territory, as Corner's conclusion that such 'documentary diversion' might represent a deepening 'crisis in the very idea of the public' (Corner 2002: 265). A common theme in much academic commentary is that this crisis in

the public sphere relates to emerging dynamics of consumerism: and this is given a further, sinister twist by Andrejevic's (2003) argument that reality TV programmes function as a metaphorical representation of a new kind of customised consumer economy characterised by increasing levels of surveillance. Here, before the omniscient gaze of Big Brother, individual self-expression is realised, via consumer choice, in self display. This again connects with Dovey's suggestion that 'first person media' operate within, and work to support a 'neo-liberal' economic formation (Dovey 2000).

These are all suggestive accounts, but at this general level they do not begin to engage with the specific dynamics of reality programming. Andrejevic's account can be taken as a case in point, because it does begin to touch upon some of the concerns of this book. Thus Andrejevic points out that a concept of authenticity, and indeed the notion of 'being oneself', was part of the professional ideology governing the production of the American show *The Real World* (2003: 104). It is not clear, however, beyond broad references to 'self-expression' and 'self-validation' how this translated into the performances of ordinary people who were neither professional broadcasters nor (yet) celebrities. To British eyes, Andrejevic's account of the US version of *Big Brother* makes for depressing reading. Apparently the American audience was split between a 'savvy' minority attuned to the show's manipulative construction and a naive majority who voted off all the 'actors', thus reducing its entertainment value (2003: 129). In this chapter I hope to show that the UK *Big Brother* (BBUK) has succeeded in creating a form of entertainment out of ordinary people 'being themselves' in ways which are not perceived as acting.

A second approach, which does begin to engage with some of the appeal of reality TV programming, starts with a foundation in audience research. In the UK, to date, there are two studies of the audience for BBUK which have raised interesting questions about viewer engagement. The first of these, the survey reported by Annette Hill (2002) suggests that of the various sub-genres of reality TV, 'created for TV' is the least popular generally, partly because many viewers are critical of participants overacting for the camera. This connects with the theme of 'performativity' identified by Corner (2002) as a key feature of the new factual entertainment. More significant, however, is the finding that it is 16–34 year olds who are least worried by this (they are of course the target audience) and in this connection Hill argues that *Big Brother* presents the engaged viewer with a challenge:

The focus on the degree of actuality, on real people's improvised performances in the program, leads to a particular viewing practice: audiences look for the moment of authenticity when real people are 'really' themselves in an unreal environment. (2002: 324)

Of course the inverted commas in this quotation again beg the question of what 'really' being yourself might mean, but what Hill's research does deliver is a sense of active interpretation and qualitative judgements of contestants' performances. In a further study, Janet Jones (2003) has given further insight into what these judgements might entail. Fans of BBUK are described as 'using the vicarious experience of watching others to help them make sense of their lives' (407). Crucially this involves judgements of 'worthiness', or moral judgements, as one fan is quoted as saying: 'I feel that watching and commenting on *Big Brother* tells us a lot about ourselves: how we judge people, what our values are in relationships' (408).

From her findings, Jones starts to map out some key criteria for making judgements of moral 'worthiness' in BBUK. A clear distinction is made between those contestants who are honest, genuine and 'themselves', as opposed to those who are apparently 'two-faced, devious etc., and/or are too intent on playing the game in a manipulative fashion' (413). Herein lies the basic paradox of this particular reality TV format. It is a game which involves nominating other contestants for elimination in order to win a cash prize. However, the virtues which are most highly rewarded by the audience have nothing to do with any skills one might have as a game player (indeed they involve the suppression of these) nor do the winners display any special talents or knowledge as would be required in a more traditional game show. Rather, in BBUK, contestants appear to be successful in so far as they offer an effective performance of 'being themselves' which is understood in terms of moral 'worthiness' by the *Big Brother* audience.

Now it will be clear from the previous chapter that I think the methodology of broadcast talk has the potential to probe more deeply into this territory. In fact, the analysis of talk is particularly relevant here because that is precisely what the contestants do for most of the time, and indeed *Big Brother* has been described as a 'gossip community' (Scannell 2002). In this chapter then I propose to investigate how moral worthiness might be performed in the way contestants talk, with the further assumption, taken from the audience research, that the contestants who have been judged most 'worthy' are likely to have been most successful. Having said that, there are two caveats. First, I think the audience research of Jones, in particular, fails to investigate fully other possible motivations for watching *Big Brother*, such as voyeurism (Goode 2003) or a desire to be entertained by spectacular conflicts as per Jerry Springer. BBUK caters for several tastes, and it also, in any single episode, produces vast amounts of different forms of talk, much of which is untranscribable. There is then a doubly selective approach taken in this chapter, to one aspect of the interactional dynamics of *Big Brother* and to a particular setting for the talk. I shall look at some examples from the 'Diary Room' of BBUK5 (2004), to determine what is at stake in talking to *Big Brother*.

I am assuming that the format for *Big Brother* is familiar to readers of this book and therefore only a brief résumé of its basic structure is necessary. Essentially this involves an interplay between three spaces in which the contestants are observed. The first, the most fluid and the largest source of footage, focuses on the interactions between contestants in the living areas of the house. The second space is the Diary Room, which contestants enter, usually individually, at their own request or at the behest of Big Brother, to offer observations on the interaction, to make nominations for eviction, or personal, sometimes emotional, statements. There is a sense in which these first two spaces operate as 'frontstage' and 'backstage' areas of activity, in so far as the statements made in the Diary Room are confidential with respect to fellow contestants. The third space is the studio to which contestants are admitted on leaving the house, and where, to considerable fanfare, they are interviewed by the show's presenter.

For present purposes, I have chosen to focus on the Diary Room. To use Paddy Scannell's phrase previously discussed (in Chapter 5) this space involves a 'double articulation'. That is to say, contestants enter to speak to Big Brother, but they also speak directly to the overhearing audience. This directness is intensified by the fact that, although contestants are overheard talking to Big Brother, they are observed by a single camera which they often address directly. Visually at least, the viewer is aligned with Big Brother here. Contestants then proceed to offer metastatements on developments in the house and/or to disclose their personal feelings. Thus, though there are opportunities to make judgements of 'worthiness' in all spaces of the format, the Diary Room counts as a privileged space for the performance of a persona styled for direct consumption by the viewer.

By Day 61 of BBUK5, there were six contestants remaining in the house. The script for the week involved each contestant being shackled to another housemate of the opposite sex and being required partly just to live, but also to complete set tasks, with this handicap. The set tasks in BBUK often take the form of games, associated (in British memory) with game shows of the most traditional kind: for instance the contestants were required to throw a pot, on a potter's wheel, using one hand apiece, and to write a short story, typing one letter each. Because contestants were bound together they had to appear in the Diary Room in pairs. In Transcript 40, Shell and Stuart, who finished fourth and fifth in the final vote, have been invited to comment on the situation. To understand some of this fully, it is necessary to know that the couples were attached by different parts of their bodies – ankles (Dan and Nadia), hands (Michelle and Jason), hips (Stuart and Shell):

Transcript 40

V/O: Stuart and Shell are in the Diary Room talking to Big Brother

BB: How did you find your first night chained up together?

Sh: Fine

5 St: Yeh I slept all right [Sh: yeah] I think we kind of got the best deal out of everyone just because we can kind of roll

Sh: And move around rather than having to keep a hand in one place or a leg in one place [cut] I mean it's not as perfect a sleep you might have if you were sleeping on your own but I think we definitely got the best deal so yeh it was absolutely fine.

BB: How do you think the other pairs are coping with being in such close proximity to one another?

15 St: Dan and erm Nadia are like the comic relief pair [Sh: yeh] just as in the most erm flamboyant erm sort of almost a bit of a kind of mismatch in like her little steps his big steps [he's so big and yeahhh

Sh: [Yeh and sort of insulting each other all the time and stooping to put on each other's mascara and moisturiser [St: yeh] and one takes it too far for the other one and then they're in a huff which is even funnier=

St: [yehhahaha just sort of

25 Sh: [= 'cos you're still chained to each other which is really good but erm

St: The Michelle and Jason and the hand thing I think it's a problem of kipping [Sh: yeh] but everything else is fine.

Sh: Before I think Jay had spent a lot of time with Vic when he kept himself to himself sort of you know having wee chats with himself () and it's quite nice 'cos he's good craic when he's around. When he laughs he's really really funny to have around so it's nice. I think he enjoyed it last night 'cos he was forced to sit and have a beer with us [you know

35 St: [It might it might make things easier as well for the rest of the week [Sh: yeh] cause he'll just feel easy [easier

Sh: [Yeh he'll feel easier about sort of joining with everyone if he wants to although he'll be able to have his own space if he wants so maybe he can have the best of both now [cut]

Now I am going to suggest that one way of understanding much of what happens in *Big Brother* is to focus on different meanings of the word 'character'. There are three possibilities here, all of which are invoked by the programme: first, a character performs a function in a scripted narrative; secondly, being 'a character' is associated with a successful demonstration of sociability; and, thirdly, 'character' is used to describe the moral worth of a person. We will return to the third meaning in the next section. What

Transcript 40 illustrates is the contestants' preoccupation with the first and particularly with the second definition. In this discourse, a successful contestant is one who possibly takes on a narrative function (the 'comic relief pair') but who certainly participates with all due co-operativeness and equanimity in the on-going interactions of the house. This includes being 'game for a laugh' in the silly tasks and games, but it also requires the ability to offer an entertaining personality, to perform 'being a character', for the purposes of everyday sociability.

Shell's anxiety about Jason here provides a very clear illustration of Scannell's point that *Big Brother* is a 'forcing house in sociability' (2002: 279). In the 'frontstage' areas of the house, the script forces individuals to get along with others purely for the purposes of entertainment, and they are being judged, in part, on their entertainment value. Shell's judgement that Jason, in these enforced circumstances, provides 'good craic' (line 32) is precisely relevant, for this Irish word defines exactly the kind of heightened sociability at stake. I think this aspect of the show's format might also explain the degree of entertainment value attributed (in viewer polls and the like) to hysterical arguments and fallings-out. Here the limits of sociability are tested, but there is the expectation that a co-operative equilibrium will ultimately prevail.

However, Stuart and Shell's appearance in the Diary Room not only rehearses these points about co-operativeness and sociability, it also performs them. To a quite remarkable extent, it illustrates how two successful *Big Brother* contestants, eight weeks into the show, have developed a high degree of mutual affiliation. This goes far beyond the minimal indices of co-operativeness such as supportive back-channel behaviour; it also extends to the joint development of topics, such as the comic effect of Dan being shackled to Nadia (lines 15–24), the mutual recycling of key phrases ('the best deal', lines 6 and 11; 'feel easier', lines 38–9), and to the use of co-operative interruption, of the sort identified by Coates (1996) as characteristic of the interaction between women friends. Here overlapping talk (lines 18–19, 38–9) is not treated as competition for the floor, but as the co-production of a turn, where one participant completes what the other has started to say. From a feminist point of view, Coates claims that this is a feature of women's talk, whereas men, on the contrary, are said to be more confrontational. In *Big Brother* it is expected that men too, will display a high degree of co-operative affiliation, though in the light of Coates's argument it is interesting to observe that it is Stuart who initially answers BB's question (line 15) and initiates the change of topic (line 27) whereas it is Shell who takes on most responsibility for the co-operative development of turns (lines 19, 39).

3. The performance of self

Sociability, of the sort described and performed in Transcript 40, is a precondition for success in *Big Brother*. Contestants who alienate themselves, or are unable to return to the fold, are either voted off, retire themselves or are removed by Big Brother for their own safety (to be illustrated shortly). However, sociability is not the ultimate determining factor, as Scannell (2002) seems to suggest. In BBUK, as the programme has evolved, a key issue is how the contestants present themselves as individuals, particularly in their confidential disclosures in the Diary Room. One aspect of this is the way they make nominations, because this is a ritual which contradicts sociability and enforces competitiveness. Contestants frequently mitigate the force of their nominations by introducing personal disclaimers or absurd reasons for their choices. Generally, contestants seem to be aware that appearances in the Diary Room involve direct address to the audience, the ultimate arbiter of their fate. Accordingly some stylise their performances with this in mind.

As with any classical narrative text, an important factor shaping audience reaction is the knowledge it possesses. In the Diary Room, contestants are able to reveal aspects of themselves to the audience which the other contestants cannot see. Contestants can, as it were, share privileged information with the audience via their conversations with Big Brother. However, there is a potential problem here in so far as this might contradict the norm of being co-operative in the house. If being 'two-faced' is a cardinal sin (Jones 2003) contestants are obliged to negotiate this contradiction, and they do this partly in the way they perform their talk. It is necessary to present this privileged, backstage information in a way that is consistent with being an all-round 'good character' in the show.

Further evidence of Stuart's credentials in this respect was provided in a Diary Room appearance four weeks into BBUK5. The background to this was his developing relationship with Michelle, which was to culminate in their being the first couple to 'have sex' on BBUK. Stuart had clearly become aware of some difficulties associated with this, particularly the problem of conducting this sort of relationship in public, on TV. On this occasion, Stuart confesses things to Big Brother, and thus to the audience, that he has not discussed with Michelle. The key issue then is how he negotiates this potential betrayal of confidence:

Transcript 41

S: Hello Big Brother

BB: Hello Stuart

5 S: Hi erm (...) you know I'm really really enjoying all my time here and everything it's it's wicked but the only thing that's sort of erm is un-unclear in my own mind is just kind of like like you know my relationship with

- 10 Michelle. It's not it's not erm it's not it's not there's nothing wrong with that it's just the fact that it's occurring in here so just oh I do don't even know- see this is it I don't even know I don't even know what's going on in my own sort of (.) 'cos it's such a unique and s-strange situation (.) And I was I was prepared for everything erm (.) like (.) prepared for all the crazy games and you know and arguments and everything but I was not I wasn't prepared to become like emotionally involved with like a chick in here like I just wasn't prepared for that and that's and that's just ooharrgh
- 15 BB: Are you pleased that Michelle's back in the house?
- 20 S: Yeh definitely
- BB: Have you spoken to her at all about how you're feeling?
- S: No (.) because this is it I don't even I don't even know how I'm feeling bec-because I know how I know how I'd feel if I wasn't in here uuhh cor blimey
- 25 BB: Can Big Brother ask how you would feel if you weren't in here?
- S: Erm no I can't I'm afraid I can't tell you that Big Brother. Not for your ears I'm afraid.

It is apparent that Stuart uses several strategies here to display his emotional distress. His speech packaged with multiple markers of disfluency, such as high levels of hedging ('sort of', lines 5 and 11; 'Kind of' like', lines 6 and 16) and hesitant repetition ('it's not' line 7; 'I don't even know', lines 9-10 and 22). In line 9 hesitancy is intensified by the fact that it is preceded by a strongly marked false start ('just oh') and there are further markers of frustration in the exclamation in line 18 and in the colloquial 'cor blimey' (line 24). At this level, Stuart presents a persona which is barely articulate or in control, apparently overwhelmed by the emotional difficulties he is facing. Looked at carefully, however, Stuart's lengthy turn which begins in line 3 does have an interesting structure. Three propositions are made, and each follows a pattern of alternation in which a positive and emphatic point is followed by an observation which is more negative and hesitant, as follows:

1. I'm really enjoying my time here but I'm unclear about my relationship with Michelle
2. There's nothing wrong with that but I don't know what's going on in my mind
3. I was prepared for everything (sociable) but I was not prepared to become emotionally involved

It is the second part of each proposition that is the more heavily marked by hedging and disfluency. The effect of this is to introduce each point of difficulty, which is potentially problematic for relations in the house, on the back of a positive statement which reaffirms his commitment to the norms of

sociability and moral decency. In this way, Stuart mitigates the potentially disruptive effect of his Diary Room appearance, not only by his use of discourse markers and exclamations, but also by a propositional structure which displaces each problematic point.

Now contrast that with a Diary Room appearance by Victor, on the same day of BBUK5. If Victor had read Jones's audience research he might have thought twice about presenting this persona, though he was reasonably successful in terms of the vote, finishing seventh overall. From the start, however, Victor characterised himself as a calculating game player. There are two difficulties with this persona: first, of course it involves the overt betrayal of fellow housemates; but secondly, as a calculated stance, it precisely does not allow for the kind of mitigation and hesitancy displayed by the individual in distress. The context, however, for this appearance in the Diary Room by Victor made it especially shocking. Emma, a vulnerable female contestant, had been removed by Big Brother earlier that day following a particularly violent altercation with Victor himself. On this occasion, return to a sociable consensus was impossible, but Victor represented this, not as a loss, but an opportunity:

Transcript 42

- V: Erm got the laminate today, this evening saying Emma's not returning erm (.) hh can't say I'm not happy about it. I'm happy that she's not coming back but I'm unhappy that she didn't get to leave during the right process. Like I said everybody deserves (.) their erm to leave through the front door not the back door you know it's not right [cut]
- 5 Everyone's just rebuilding old bridges and forming new ones forging new ones so to speak which is quite interesting in here you know all of a sudden like within
- 10 Marco's harem and that which now consists of Michelle, Nadia and Marco there's three of them now. They're now making an effort to get to know people they didn't want to know before like Ahmed, Vanessa, Shell and Dan (.)
- 15 It's just even give them their mourning time you know give them the space you know mourn the loss of their friend and then I'm going after the rest of them. If they'd come in this place for a laugh they f- they shouldn't have wasted their time they should have gone to the fun fair you know this is a game. You can't you can't knock people for having a game plan if you're in a game you know. There can only be one winner (.) And I'm trying to give myself the best possible chance for that to be me. Let this be (.) the first time the bad guy wins [cut]
- 20

For the present purposes, the main conclusion to be drawn from the comparison of these two transcripts is about the way personalities are performed in Diary Room talk. Contestants not only make their observations

and present their problems, they also construct different sorts of interactive relationships with *Big Brother* and, by extension, the overhearing audience. In this respect, the feature which clearly differentiates Stuart and Victor is their use of sympathetic circularity. It is the difference between 'just kind of like you know' (transcript 41, line 6) and 'you know' (transcript 42, lines 10, 15 and 16) where the former is hedged and the latter is not. As we have seen now in many examples, hedging expresses hesitancy and modifies the modality of a statement, whereas the unembellished use of 'you know' is more categorical. Victor thus appears altogether more confident in his position – as he then proceeds, with the generalised 'you' to articulate the assumed rules of a game show. The problem is, given the type of game show this is, such a strategy is ultimately fatal.

Now I hope, as we near the end of this book, that I may be allowed to develop a more speculative argument relating to these points. The starting point for this is the concept of 'sympathetic circularity' itself. As noted above (Chapter 2), Montgomery (1986a) introduced this concept as a feature of spoken discourse, which he had derived from the work of Basil Bernstein. Bernstein (1971) was mainly interested in social class variables in language use which, using the sociology of his day, he related to different patterns of social relationships in middle-class and working-class communities. Sympathetic circularity was a feature of working-class speech because it expressed the values of solidarity and shared life experience enshrined in traditional working-class communities. These social values and shared experiences were taken for granted and incontrovertible, so speakers could be confident of a cultural consensus.

It seems to me that 'just kind of like you know' backs away, a little, from that degree of confidence. Clearly Stuart's relationship with Michelle is common knowledge but what he might say about it, especially given the contradictory position he is in, is not. My suggestion is that the use of 'like' is crucial here for it transforms the assumption of a shared social world into a scenario (this is what it's like) which the recipient is invited to recognise. There is only one shared social world but, by implication, when boy meets girl, there are several possible scenarios: so 'like emotionally involved with like a chick' is orientated towards not our unquestioned solidarity but our sympathetic understanding. This is where (to use the colloquial phrase) Stuart is 'coming from', and there are links here to the dialogical use of 'like', noted in the previous chapter, where such scenarios are dramatised: 'and I'm like', 'she was like...' etc. Identities are not being assumed here so much as negotiated. This dialogical use of sympathetic circularity is a distinctive feature of contemporary youth talk and it is in dominance on *Big Brother*.

4. Nadia's triumph

There cannot be many British readers of this book who do not recall that BBUK5 was won by Nadia Almeida, a 27-year-old transsexual from Portugal. Nadia's overwhelming victory was widely acclaimed as the culmination of a series which revitalised the format, achieving the second highest audience ratings in its history. The final night won a 48 per cent share of the UK TV audience. But quite apart from Nadia's popularity, there are other reasons why she was a very interesting contestant. In relation to our previous discussion, Nadia was the first contestant explicitly sanctioned by *Big Brother* to be 'two faced', in so far as her medical history was revealed to the audience from day one, but was kept hidden, with *Big Brother*'s blessing, from her housemates. This took her performance to another level of interest, for it was no longer just a test of her sociability, or her ability to come across as a decent, genuine person. It became a question of whether she would 'pass' as a woman with her fellow housemates and whether they would ever guess her secret.

In this respect, Nadia's predicament reproduced, almost exactly, one of Garfinkel's classic studies in ethnomethodology, the case of Agnes (Garfinkel 1967). Agnes was a 19-year-old transsexual who presented herself at UCLA's Department of Psychiatry in 1958, as part of her campaign to secure a sex change (male to female) operation. Garfinkel uses her case to show how 'passing' as a woman becomes a practical accomplishment, which involves learning a whole new set of social behaviours (including practices of talk) and reconstructing her biography (which involved staying silent on certain issues). Garfinkel shows how this identity had to be negotiated in different ways with those who knew Agnes's secret (for example, the psychiatric and medical staff) as opposed to those who did not (her friends). His general point was that gender identity (which he calls 'sexual status') is not an incontrovertible given, even if it is treated as such by most people in most social circumstances. As the case of Agnes demonstrates, gender can be thought of as an ongoing performance, orientated towards mutual confirmation in everyday social interaction.

Now the only real difference in BBUK5 was that Nadia was a post-operative transsexual. Otherwise the scenario was uncannily similar, as we, who knew of her history, watched how she would pass with her housemates, who did not. Furthermore, as the series progressed, it became clear that if Nadia were to win *Big Brother* this would be taken as a popular endorsement of her identity. This is how she began to present it herself, in a guarded way, to fellow housemates, who were left in no doubt that Nadia would regard victory as a vote of confidence. The stakes were high therefore, and there were some scary moments as it seemed that Nadia's secrets might be revealed. For instance, on one occasion, a group of

housemates with Nadia herself in attendance held an extensive conversation about the anatomical details of sex-change operations. After this, Nadia locked herself in the toilet for several minutes, her behaviour attributed by the others to an unsatisfied craving for cigarettes. On Day 61, during another cigarette break, Nadia and the other housemates overheard shouts outside the *Big Brother* compound. To the TV audience these were indistinct, but Nadia herself was clear that they contained references to her gender, and this occasioned another visit to the Diary Room:

Transcript 43

(6secs)

BB: Evening Nadia

N: Hello

BB: How are you this evening?

5 N: mhm you tell me

(13 secs)

BB: What is it you'd like to discuss with Big Brother this evening?

N: What I've just heard

10 (6 secs)

BB: What have you heard [Nadia?

N:

[hh Big Brother you know () about what I heard. I'm just wondering what is going on (7 secs)

ooh (5 secs)

15 I am not a man. Just for the record. And what I heard was Nadia is a man. Are you satisfied with that?

(2 secs)

20 And you I'm not going I'm not going to cry about it do you know what I mean I'm going to it's just like I'm just like shocked (.) I wasn't expecting it. I mean I'm actually quite surprised it took this long hh I don't know exactly what they heard and I think they've heard or just they can't handle it or I or I d-now I'm like in a position that I don't know what how to sort of justify myself. I don't know what to do.

25 Either they heard it and they're not telling me or they did not did not hear it and I'm compl-completely paranoid about it (.) So wh-what am I supposed to do now I don't know (.) I just I I'm not I cos I've forgotten about it so well the it kind of it makes me more vulnerable because I c-I-I don't know how I'm how I'm going to deal with it 'cos I'm=

(5 secs)

35 to be that strong for confronta- to confront it justify to them why exactly I haven't told them () I'm not that strong right now 'cos I haven't been thinking about that it has it hasn't been part of me (.) whatever hh (.) I think it's all my fault because I actually said to them let's go and have a cigarette we'd've been in bed by now. Oh my god it's like sort of fate or destiny whatever

that is. I don't know I don't know I'm just I'm just a
little bit scared right now I'm just a little bit scared
hh [cut]

In this extract, Nadia engages with one of the basic concepts in ethnomethodology (and thus the methodology that informs this book), namely, *accountability*. Her immediate concern is how she will justify herself if she is found out (lines 24-5, 35-6) for, by not being straight with her colleagues, she can be accused of flouting Grice's maxim of Manner. Moreover being found out might well lead to a further spiral of accounting, because she will be obliged to explain, not only her immediate behaviour, but also a past history which has involved 'breaching' one of the most fundamental 'natural-moral' institutions of everyday life (Garfinkel 1967). Note also how, as a consequence of the conventions for talking to Big Brother, Nadia's appearance is, from her point of view, unhelpfully one-sided. Big Brother is not about to answer her questions or provide any kind of reassurance – a point which is evident in Nadia's rhetorical responses (lines 5 and 16). Nadia is therefore put in the position of displaying her anxieties to a non-reciprocating interlocutor and, by extension, overhearing audience. It is almost as if we are positioned as witnesses to an ethnomethodological experiment.

In this context, Nadia can only do what any 'good contestant' on *Big Brother* would do, and that is to perform her distress. What may not be particularly evident from the transcript (though the false start on line 35, 'confronta-', is indicative of this) is that, despite her insistence that she is not going to cry, she is on the verge of flooding out. The difficulty of this whole exchange with BB is further illustrated by the lengthy pauses between turns. Initially BB demonstrates a reluctance to respond to Nadia (lines 6 and 10), and she then prefaces her key declaration ('I am not a man') with a double pause (lines 13-14). In the lengthy turn that follows this, Nadia escalates the evaluation of her distress from being 'shocked' (line 20) to 'paranoid' (line 27) to 'vulnerable' (line 30). This whole turn becomes a performance of vulnerability, and it is not until she produces the formulaic *Big Brother* exclamation 'Oh my god' (line 41) and the de-escalation 'just a little bit scared' (lines 42-3) that she seems ready to move on.

Throughout, Nadia also employs the type of youthful approach to sympathetic circularity discussed in the previous section. Here it is apparent that the initial appeal to a common ground ('do you know what I mean?') is immediately hedged and modified ('it's just like', 'I'm just like') on lines 19-20. The point made previously about scenarios is most clearly illustrated in lines 23-4: 'I'm like in a position'. This is Nadia's position, not ours, but we are being invited to recognise and affiliate with it. This is different from the use of hedging to mitigate the force of certain words – 'sort of justify

myself', 'kind of... more vulnerable' – though that usage also makes her self-characterisation more dialogical. But the paradox in all of this is that she, like other contestants, is persisting in using these dialogical markers of sympathetic acknowledgement with an invisible, non-reciprocating interlocutor, as well as an even more nebulous sense of the overhearing audience.

This sharing of confidences with an invisible interlocutor is, of course, highly reminiscent of the Catholic ritual of confession (Foucault 1979). On TV, however, this has been transformed from a private communion into a public form of self-display and it is the overhearing TV audience which takes the position of the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge ... (1979: 61) ultimately by delivering its final judgement of 'worthiness'. In this context I think it is really interesting to note in whose favour these judgements have been made. In 2004 BBUK was won by a transsexual, in 2003 it was won by Cameron Stout, a teetotal fundamentalist Christian who was also a virgin (that is, an outsider to the conventional norms of sociability). In 2002, BBUK was won by Brian Dowling a young gay man who advertised this fact on TV before he came out to his family. In short, and with some exceptions, it seems that BBUK has developed a subculture where the ultimate judgements of worthiness are often given to contestants who succeed in 'being themselves' with the greatest degree of difficulty.

To sum up my argument here: I have identified three features of the subculture that underpins *Big Brother* at least in the UK. The first is sociability, where getting along with housemates is a prerequisite. The second is a certain presentation of self, particularly evident in 'youthful' forms of sympathetic circularity. I have characterised these as 'dialogical', but another way of putting it might be to say that this is a way of doing 'self-advertisement', in that the self is differentiated from, but orientated towards, the sympathetic understanding of the recipient. The third point then is to note that the critical test for this subculture is to extend that understanding to identities where difference is at its greatest, because commonalities of experience cannot be assumed. I feel certain that this point has not been lost on the producers of BBUK, who in series five included not only the usual representatives of sexual and ethnic minorities but also Ahmed, a Somali asylum seeker. The greatest triumph, however, for this way of judging a person's 'worthiness' was Nadia, who in these terms, and against all the odds, triumphantly succeeded in 'being herself'.

5. Conclusion: talking life-politics

Building in part on Hill's discussion of the *Big Brother* audience, Su Holmes has argued that the programme presents the very essence of a 'rhetoric of authenticity'. Indeed, by comparison with Dyer's account of studying star

performances for occasional glimpses of their 'real selves', *Big Brother* seems to take that melodramatic project to an excessive 'almost literal level' (Holmes 2004: 130). '*Big Brother* is in many ways *exemplary* as a site for playing out anxieties over identity and contemporary "selfhood"' (Holmes 2004: 133, italics in the original). If this is correct, it surely applies not only to the intertextual material she analyses (for example, the 'real lives' of contestants as revealed by celebrity magazines) but also to the types of performances contestants display for the camera. In this respect I would argue that the format of *Big Brother*, with its distinction between frontstage sociability and backstage confession, constitutes an ideal mechanism for this kind of melodramatic performance. The key issue becomes the recognition of moral consistency in the selves on public and private display.

Holmes also makes the point that this assumption of the rhetoric of authenticity by ordinary people begins to disturb some traditional categories in media studies. In particular, it calls into question the distinction between stars and personalities, or celebrities and ordinary people, which we considered at the start of the previous chapter. The promise of *Big Brother*, of course, is that ordinary people can become celebrities too, and, if much of the academic discussion of this show is to be believed, ordinary people-as-celebrities are now given the cultural status previously afforded to film stars. To return again to Dyer's (1986) argument, it may be that contestants like Nadia are 'articulating what it means to be a human being in contemporary society' (8). At any rate, Holmes seems to suggest as much when she claims that '*Big Brother* and the cultural construction of celebrity both play out issues surrounding the mediation of identity, which in turn speak to broader discourses concerning self-hood and individualism in modern society' (Holmes 2004: 129).

But what might these broader discourses be? Again there is the question of how the term 'discourse' is being used. Based on the evidence presented in this book, I think that the key question is not what these discourses might be saying about self-hood, or how they might be defining it, but rather how identities are being performed. In this chapter I have offered a couple of suggestions as to what might be appropriate strategies in the performance of 'contemporary self-hood', in terms of the display of co-operative sociability and a dialogical performance of 'being oneself'. In previous chapters we have traced some connections between 'doing being ordinary' and 'being a celebrity', but now Holmes's suggestion is that this distinction is becoming blurred. So what are the contestants in *Big Brother* 'doing being'? Let us return to the case of Nadia.

As a discursive practice, Nadia's self-presentation in *Big Brother* was founded on a contradiction between saying and doing. What she was saying, for instance in her pronouncement above that 'I am not a man', was articulating a claim to a distinctively female gender identity. At this level

she was, like Agnes in Garfinkel's account, resolutely conservative, invoking the natural-moral order that equates gender identity with being essentially female. In her persona, however, and in her mediated performance, Nadia was something of a radical. Her excessive display of femininity in her sociable moments, together with her self-reflexive negotiation of 'passing' as female, indicated a self whose gender identity was in transition. One thing *Big Brother* dramatises, at this level, is a complex politics of 'doing being gendered'. For several contestants conventional expectations, in this and other areas, are under negotiation, and the trick is to reconcile that with a coherent self-presentation.

The suggestion that this amounts to a 'politics' needs some consideration. This is not a politics of ideological belief or commitment to a cause: Nadia was no sexual politician, and neither are the majority of contestants on the show. But nor is this, I want to emphasise again, a complete abandonment of politics in the pursuit of hedonistic consumerism and 'lifestyle'. As the audience research shows, there is a moral concern for the 'worth' of a person related to perceptions of how they are engaged with the performance of identity. All of this has much in common with the sphere of 'life-politics' outlined by Anthony Giddens (1991) and, in the reflexive restructuring of her gender identity, Nadia can be taken as an exemplary case for one aspect of the politics he outlines.

In *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Giddens distinguishes between two kinds of political formation. 'Emancipatory politics' is concerned with life-chances and opportunities, combating forces of discrimination and inequality. This politics is socially engaged and seeks access to the public sphere. It is what has often inspired the documentary movement, in its traditional forms, as outlined by Corner (2002). In contrast to this, 'life-politics' is concerned with lifestyle, but in a broader sense than simply the consumption of commodities. Life politics focuses on identity formation, the self-reflexive 'trajectory of the self', in a social context characterised by the availability of choice. Such choice is not limited to the conventional parameters of social 'mobility', it also extends to what one might 'make of oneself', including one's gender identity:

What gender identity is, and how it should be expressed, has become itself a matter of multiple options – ranging up to and including even the choice of whether a person remains anatomically of the same sex into which he or she was born. The politics of self identity, of course, is not limited to matters of gender differentiation. The more we reflexively 'make ourselves' as persons, the more the very category of what a 'person' or 'human being' is comes to the fore. (Giddens 1991: 217)

Characteristically, Giddens proceeds to totalise this account, seeing life-politics as a symptom of 'late modernity'. Here, life-politics presents a

programmatic engagement with the 'abstract systems' that govern the globalised world order, like the ecology movement, moral dilemmas around genetic sciences and concerns for the welfare of animals. But the kinds of media talk we have considered in this book, particularly in its last three chapters, do not necessarily operate at that level. They may do – as, for example, when celebrities associate themselves with global humanitarian causes, or seek a purpose for themselves in fronting up for charities. However, underpinning all of that is a mundane circulation of ordinary talk, dominated by the ideology of 'good communication', where all kinds of people, interactively, 'work' on themselves.

In this respect our study of media talk in this book has taken us beyond the terms of its starting point. There, the reader will recall, the claim was that talk was central to the way broadcasting works and in particular that the study of broadcast talk can illuminate the ways in which TV and radio communicate with their audiences. That, I hope, has been achieved; but at the same time a more general set of cultural questions has emerged, where talk on radio and TV engages with, and participates in constructing, some key preoccupations of modern everyday life. Central to these is a concern about the 'presentation of self', that, however flexible they may be, lifestyles should ultimately cohere as morally defensible identities, demonstrated in authentic performances of 'being oneself'.

It is crucial to note, however, that such concerns are not only discussed in much contemporary media talk, they are also dramatised by it. To a large extent, media talk might indeed be responsible for their intense interest, particularly in programming targeted at young people. For here, media talk dramatises the moral concern for 'being yourself' in a problematic performative context, where conversational forms of talk are displayed as mediated quasi-interaction. Nadia's problem with *Big Brother* is precisely emblematic of this key point: that the identities performed in media talk, for an over-hearing audience, are not directly reciprocated. In ordinary conversations participants co-operatively confirm their mutual understandings in face-to-face interaction. In media talk, such confirmation is impossible and the identities on display are always therefore fluid and provisional. The self is performed in a context where, as a para-social construct, it is always in a state of uncertainty, subject to capricious tests and unknowable moral judgements. In this respect *Big Brother* is such an effective TV format because it dramatises the very essence of media talk, and the lesson that it teaches. For as Nadia clearly understood, and demonstrated in her moment of triumph, she could only confidently be herself when the audience had cast its vote.