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## Celebrity Talk

its limitations. Shattuc talks about the high level of self-consciousness in this form of drama; I think this revolves around an awareness that the participants in shows like this are flouting the norms of ordinary talk. The knowingness of the youthful audience for these shows extends to recognising the bad acting, speculating about 'fake guests', and generally feeling superior to the 'trailer-park' behaviour on display. Perhaps this is a dubious attraction, and it has been widely criticised as 'trash TV'. But it can also be argued that the spectacle of bad communication provides an extreme version of the general effect of talk shows, because the display of dysfunctional and deviant behaviour confirms 'being ordinary' as our everyday normality.

As he begins to outline the conversational practices that constitute 'being ordinary' Sacks identifies a category of people for whom this is at best problematic, perhaps impossible:

### 1. Forms of celebrity

Now it is the case that there are people who are entitled to have their lives be an epic. We have designed a series of storyable people, places and objects, and they stand as something different from us. It may be that in pretty much every circle there is somebody who is the subject of all neat observations, as there are, for society in general, a collection of people about whom detailed reports are made that not merely would never be ventured about others, but would never be thought of about others. The way in which Elizabeth Taylor turned around is something noticeable and reportable. The way in which your mother turned around is something unseeable, much less tellable. (1984: 419)

So it is not that you do not see your mother turning round, it is that this action, being ordinary, does not constitute a topic of conversation. In contrast, the actions of film stars, of the stature of Elizabeth Taylor, are always, in Sacks's term, 'tellable'; and it is the conversational practice of 'reporting' that confirms this noticeability.

Such distinctions, between the ordinary and the 'epic', are firmly rooted in the literature of media studies, particularly in discussions of film stars. In this account, the status of stars is confirmed by their 'charisma' (Dyer 1979) sustained first by a finite number of screen appearances and second by our knowledge of their highly glamorous and extravagant lifestyles. It is the job of the subsidiary publicity industry to circulate reports and images of this, as well as to use star images in the promotion of films (Ellis 1982). Further research has demonstrated the fascination of fans with this glamorous imagery, heightened, for much of the last century, by a perception of their distance from the deprivations of everyday life (Stacey 1994). For many commentators, stars as celebrities have been taken to personify the 'American

dream' within a consumer culture dedicated to acquisitive individualism (Ewen 1988; Rojek 2001).

In other accounts, the legitimacy of this culture is supported by a broader 'system of celebrity' (Marshall 1997). Here, film stars sit at the top of a tree whose supporting branches are filled, not only by commentators and publicists but also by less-exalted media figures, particularly television 'personalities'. In the influential work of Langer (1981) and Ellis (1982) such personalities are distinguished from stars precisely by their relative proximity to 'ordinariness'. TV personalities make regular and frequent screen appearances, they address the viewer directly using conversational forms of talk, and crucially they insist on their co-membership of a common, usually national, 'imagined community'. Their world is not glamorous or exotic, but familiar and relatively mundane. Partly, however, they function to confirm the exalted status of the stars, especially when the latter make their rare appearances on the talk shows which the TV personalities host.

One corollary of the distance between stars and ordinary people is our preoccupation with the question of what the former are 'really like'. To some extent this is simply an interest in the public figure's private life, which it is the function of subsidiary print media and gossip columnists to cater for. More significantly, however, Richard Dyer (1991) has discussed a 'rhetoric of authenticity' which involves making judgements about star performances. He points out that aesthetic criteria for judging qualities of acting have changed from classical assessments of conformity to convention to modern notions of 'truthfulness', 'that is, true to the true personality of the performer' (133). Psychological realism becomes a significant criterion in method acting, for example. By extension from this, fans scrutinise performances in various media for glimpses of the essence of the star persona. This may be revealed in the unique gesture, the catch of the voice, or in moments when the star appears off guard (138–9).

Because of the importance of this concept to many subsequent accounts (including this one) it is important to be quite clear what this 'rhetoric of authenticity' assumes. It does not assume that the essence of the 'real person' can ever be captured once and for all. By precisely defining this as a *rhetoric*, Dyer is pointing to a strategy of interpretation which has a figurative, not literal, relation to its object. It is a semiotic strategy, which involves reading certain signifiers (body, voice, movement) as signs of 'authenticity'; but Dyer himself notes that there is an inbuilt instability to this, in so far as 'yesterday's markers of sincerity and authenticity are today's signs of hype and artifice' (137). In this chapter, and the next, we will look at how certain types of media performance, displayed in forms of broadcast talk, might be read as 'authentic'. This will extend Dyer's concept beyond film stars to the broader world of media celebrity and to forms of talk now routinely performed by ordinary people.

This continued interest in 'authenticity' as a criterion for media performance will also necessitate a step beyond, or perhaps back from, other kinds of discussion of celebrity culture (including some I am responsible for myself). In particular we will be putting to one side the recent interest in types of celebrity performance which appear to be deliberately inauthentic, ironic and designed for sceptical audiences. Gansson's (1994) research documents the emergence of ironic celebrity where it seems that any story the celebrity tells, or any 'tellable' feature of celebrity, is perceived as just another performance designed to sustain the hype. 'The private self is no longer the ultimate truth. Instead, what is most true, most real, most trustworthy is precisely the relentlessly performing public self' (54). Given this, what emerges in Gansson's audience discussions is some residual fascination for the authentic star persona, but also a growing attitude of postmodern cynicism together with compensating pleasures of gossip and detective work. For these consumers, Madonna was admired precisely because her persona was constantly changing, its artifice was apparent, and she appeared to be in control. The question of the 'real' or 'true' Madonna was irrelevant.

These issues have also been reflected in the academic literature on celebrity talk in 'chat' shows, with which this chapter is partly concerned. Originally John Langer, in keeping with the rhetoric of authenticity, argued that it was the prime function of chat shows to reveal something of the 'real person' in the public figure or celebrity, and that this was the focus for 'disclosure' as a key feature of the chat show interview (1981: 361). In his account, personal disclosures had the ideological effect of humanising the public sphere. Bell and van Leeuwen (1994) updated this somewhat by suggesting that 'chat' is not so much a revelation of the real person as a fascination with the role of celebrity, from the ordinary person's perspective. But this is still seen as 'wide-eyed' rather than cynical, and it is the role of the host to orchestrate that kind of fascination.

In Tolson (1991) and Montgomery (1999), however, a rather different account was given of a subgenre of chat show which began to emerge in both the USA and Britain in the 1980s. In *The David Letterman Show* and on *Wogan* the main requirement was not so much disclosure as banter, or the play of wit between guests and hosts. In this format, the guests were licensed to transgress their pre-allocated role of interviewee, to ask questions and initiate changes of topic. The performance frame was so marked that the question of the 'real person' could only be provisional: what might be an authentic statement might also be a playful gesture. In Britain, such developments culminated in a form of comic chat show, *The Dame Edna Experience* (1987) where the host was a pantomime dame (a familiar comic character played by the Australian comedian, Barry Humphries) and where the guests were routinely subjected to face-threatening jokes (Tolson 1991,



In some ways this extract illustrates the same sort of problems as the Peter Sissons interview with Margaret Rhodes previously considered in Chapter 3 (Transcript 8). Once again, it is not clear that the participants share the same understanding of what is appropriate – the conversational 'frame' in Goffman's terms. There are several signs of trouble, principally CE's failure to respond to MM's questions from lines 16 to 38, with lengthy pauses accompanied by audience laughter as he declines to take his turns. (It might be added that throughout this sequence he holds his right hand, cocked, in front of his chin, whilst fixing Mrs Merton with a stare.) Following the third lengthy pause MM produces an increasingly urgent prompt followed by a restatement about the frame. Her laughter in lines 28 and 33 is hearably nervous, though the audience, through their laughter and applause (lines 34–5) continue to treat this as a piece of theatre. Finally Eubank is prompted to offer his own gloss on the proceedings.

Clearly he is no linguist, for MM has not been making 'incorrect statements'. Rather the interactive trouble has been caused by implicatures in her questions. At the root of this is what Montgomery (1999), in his analysis of this show, calls a deliberate 'category mistake', that is, a failure to make appropriate cultural distinctions. In Montgomery's example, Mrs Merton implies that Lord Lichfield, the royal family's portrait photographer, might be a member of the paparazzi. Here, she fails to make the distinction between professional boxing and street fighting, reproducing in the process a familiar stereotype of the Irish. The resulting implicature is an insult to Eubank's professional integrity. But this is a routine feature of the show, and generally the effect of the face-threat is mitigated by the character she is playing.

To appreciate fully the levels of irony here, some cultural knowledge is necessary. The 'northern-ness' of Mrs Merton, with its straight-talking vulgarity and cultural naivety, is a parody of a claim to authenticity which is deeply rooted in British popular culture. The industrial 'north' (of England) has long been associated with a gritty realism of setting for claims to moral virtue (Shields 1991). In this version of ordinariness, a stoicism in the face of material deprivation, and a 'down-to-earth' communal identity, is deeply suspicious of 'airs and graces' or indeed any other kind of middle-class cultural pretension. This has been a staple diet in British comedy and soap opera, and has been personified in media personalities from Wilfred Pickles to Cilla Black (Scannell 1996). As a caricature of this, Mrs Merton displays the ordinary person's fascination for celebrity on the basis that celebrities too are ordinary. And ordinary people get into fights.

The refusal of Chris Eubank to play along with this raises an irresolvable question. It is just possible of course that his refusal to answer these questions, together with the posture he adopts, is itself part of the act. For the ordinary view of fighting as a natural, uncontrolled way of responding

to personal insults is paradoxically confirmed by his unwillingness, as a professional boxer, to react. But as Montgomery's work shows, the celebrities who appear on *Mrs Merton* routinely display in one way or another (minimally by laughter, or sharing banter) that they see the joke. Eubank is serious throughout this interview, and though irony is constantly thrown at him, he refuses to engage with it. Of course, in the ironic frame nothing is serious, as the audience laughter attests. But we are also left with the possibility that Eubank's 'seriousness' might have been really serious after all.

## 2. Exemplary human beings

Meanwhile, as I have suggested, a more traditional approach to the performance of celebrity has continued. In this approach, to adapt Dyer's (1986) discussion of stardom, celebrities 'articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society' (8). Celebrities personify contemporary beliefs and concerns about the human condition and their talk, in this context, is designed to construct them as representative of this. I have to say that, for all the theorising of celebrity as the embodiment of consumer capitalism, conspicuous consumption is not a dominant feature of this kind of celebrity talk. Where this is discussed, it is often in the context of personal problems, addictions and the like. As representative human beings, celebrities today (when they are not being ironic) are much more likely to reproduce a motivational, even moral, discourse of personal achievement. And here we can see the emergence of a 'middle ground' of global celebrity, which is neither the exotic world of Hollywood stardom nor the mundane ordinariness of the TV personality, but a combination of both.

Oprah Winfrey has been cited by David Marshall as the exemplar for television's construction of celebrity (Marshall 1997). There are certainly some key features of her persona that suggest this. First, Marshall discusses the construction of her show which builds into her familiarity a level of intimacy with her audience and a populist identity as she articulates their concerns. Beyond that, in her ethnicity and her gender, Winfrey has personified some key black and feminist aspirations in contemporary popular culture. According to Marshall, her celebrity 'is built on a reconfiguration of the women's television audience' where 'the real life of the host ... constructed ... as authentic and sincere, is never elided from the stage performance' (1997: 148).

Arguably, however, Oprah Winfrey's celebrity now extends beyond the confines of her TV show. She is no longer simply a 'television personality'. In the USA, she is a public figure who manages credibly to combine her position as a very rich TV executive with being a representative of black

womanhood. But she is also a global phenomenon which takes her persona beyond the boundaries of its immediate imagined community. In Britain she is both a famous black American woman and some kind of embodiment of the human spirit (in some ways like Nelson Mandela). At least this was how she was constructed in her performance for *Parkinson* in 1999, where, instead of the usual three guests, the entire show was devoted to an interview with Oprah.

This traversed some familiar ground. Though her appearance was ostensibly occasioned by the promotion of her new film *Beloved*, the promotional discourse was given additional authenticity by the retelling of Oprah's life story. The crucial point here is that the story works on two levels. At one level, because the film is set in the American south during the break-up of slavery, Oprah's own past experience attests to its credibility. At another level, however, her personal narrative has universal themes: it is introduced very much about a personal triumph over adversity achieved through dedication and self-belief (and not a unique talent). It is at this second level that the rhetoric of authenticity is not so much concerned with the 'real' Oprah, what she is 'really like', but rather a version of 'what it is to be a human being in contemporary society'. And the focus is not on the fact that she is rich, but on her admirable personal qualities:

Transcript 35

- OW: Just like in the movie I grew up in an environment where you know there's a tin tub in in the kitchen, and you heat the water from the pump and you take your bath on Saturday night and sometimes my grandmother erm because this is all she knew she would save up the whippings until I was naked in the tub and say 'remember Tuesday' 'remember you did this remember that' so
- MP: How old were you?
- OW: I was erm I-I was between er three and six >cos I lived with my grandmother till I was six< but that's the way I grew up that's the way children were handled
- MP: But I mean would you were also sexually abused
- OW: And I was sexually abused beginning at nine I was raped at nine. And all of that but all of that that has happened to me I think has happened to make me a stronger erm more vital woman who can now obviously share those stories in a way that I hope lifts somebody else up to say 'look at me I made it, so can you' that to me is the whole point of being [famous actually]
- MP: [But all right fine b-but but nonetheless it is I mean how do you get out of that? I mean most people find themselves most children in that kind of trap [don't escape it]
- OW: [You don't get out. You don't get out unless somebody helps you out=

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- MP: [But then y-  
OW: = [Nobody gets out alone
- MP: Then in your case wh-who was it?
- OW: It wasn't a person specifically. You know I had books (.) and I swear to you that in my hours of great you know as a child I really if you asked me what is the feeling I felt the most the most overwhelming emotion I felt as a child it would be loneliness (.) loneliness. And a sense of abandonment. But the only thing that held me together I believe now er were books. I could read stories and know that there was another kind of life and another kind of life existed and I always believed. That is I think the secret if I had one to how I've become what I've become. I always believed that my life would get better. I remember one day watching from this back screen porch just like *Beloved* (.) in the movie *Beloved* and I remember one day looking through the screen door through the back of the house and seeing my grandmother boiling the clothes cause that's how they would treat the clothes boil them and hanging them on the line. And my grandmother said 'you better stand there girl. You better stand there watch me. Cos you gotta learn how to do this'. And I remember thinking >I stood there cause I didn't want a whipping< but I remember thinking hhh I don't have to watch this because I'm not going to be doing this.
- MP: You knew then
- OW: Yeh I just knew then inside myself I was not going to be boiling clothes and hanging them on the line. I don't know how we didn't er (.) er we didn't even have like television. I just knew in my spirit.

It is apparent that there are some inconsistent voices in Oprah's account. In particular the voice of therapy talk which she animates on lines 24-7 produces a maxim ('Nobody gets out alone') which sits oddly beside the main theme of self-reliance. In this context, however, the IR is not about to probe such inconsistency, particularly when confronted by an IE, who, despite the cultural distance, continually assumes a common ground. The collective, indefinite use of 'you' at the start of this extract, is reinforced by the repeated sympathetic circularity ('you know') in lines 29-30. Thus the setting may (to a British public) be unfamiliar, but the narrative—books and education as a legitimate means to escaping poverty—is not.

And the power of Oprah's message is further reinforced by her use of anecdote. We have seen how oral narrative can work to package ordinary experiences for moral evaluation. As a distinctive speech genre, anecdotes are exemplary narratives where the evaluation has the force of an indisputable truth (Tolson 1985, 1990). In chat shows, this ranges from stories told about other famous people, on occasions which confirm the essence of their characters, to personal exemplary incidents where life-

changing lessons are learned. Oprah's anecdote, though short, is skilfully told. Again it conforms to Labov's model for oral narrative, consisting of orientation (the screen door/boiling the clothes), complicating action (what the grandmother said and Oprah's response), some evaluation (of the poverty and ignorance of this situation) and the coda, 'I just knew in my spirit'. When Oprah speaks her grandmother's words, she puts on her 'black voice'. This is the same voice she uses in the movie, in which this scenario might have been a symbolic moment.

Thus, anecdotes confirm absolute truths about people and about 'life'. These often take the form of moral imperatives (the moral of the story) which are sometimes expressed as maxims or proverbs. Here, then, the construction of a common ground through sympathetic circularity and the narrativisation of experience is raised to a higher level of moral consensus. Whereas oral narratives generally invoke ordinary common sense, anecdotes articulate a 'philosophy of life'.

There is, however, another feature of Oprah's performance in this extract which is worthy of some comment. This involves a very interesting exploitation of 'footings'. When Oprah speaks her grandmother's words, of which she is not the author, in a voice which is not her own, this is clearly a quotation, and a conventional footing shift. (It is the same move that George Bush makes, in Transcript 12, when he animates his plan). But consider now what happens here in line 18. In this footing shift Oprah is quoting herself, as a famous person: 'I made it, so can you'. However, she is not simply speaking her own words, for herself; in an ambiguous grammatical construction (line 17) these words are also spoken by 'somebody else'. Thus we might say that this utterance, of which Oprah is animator and author, has two principals – it is spoken on behalf of herself and somebody else simultaneously. These are the words of a famous person which carry a resonance not only for herself but also as a public utterance for everyone.

#### 4. Celebrity rehab

Clearly there is a strategy here, in choosing Oprah Winfrey to be the voice of contemporary celebrity. I want to show that there is some space, in conventional chat shows such as *Parkinson*, for celebrity talk to claim a moral 'high ground'. Here, narratives of personal experience, retold as polished anecdotes, carry the conviction of general human truths. In her distinctive shift of footing, Oprah speaks both for herself and for other people, and what she articulates is not just a personal philosophy but a moral imperative. Her story is not so much 'rags to riches' as the virtues of self-improvement.

Furthermore, this message is seen as the justifiable point of 'being famous'. Oprah's celebrity now lays claim to a broader ideological legitimacy

of which she seems certain and in control. It is also apparent that one aspect of the legitimacy of this kind of celebrity discourse is that it provides a point of reference for the focus on self-transformation in 'ordinary' talk. Oprah's celebrity persona is explicitly supportive of the philosophy of 'good communication' – not only because she herself hosts a talk show but also because her narrative is about confronting and overcoming personal problems. In this way forms of ordinary talk and celebrity talk (of this sort) echo each other, and it also helps that celebrities like Oprah are able to animate the voice of the ordinary person when it suits them.

Further evidence for this link between celebrity and ordinary talk is provided by Transcript 36, in which Michael Parkinson is interviewing Elton John. At this point in his career (1999) Elton John was speaking publicly about his history of drugs and alcohol abuse and his current commitment to rehabilitation. Again *Parkinson* provided an appropriate forum for this, but without the ideological confidence exhibited by Oprah. It is evident that this interview is more of a co-production, with MP prompting EJ to disclose his personal problems, and where both parties display a high degree of mutual solidarity. In fact this part of the interview is based on the premise that MP and EJ have a long-standing mutual acquaintance:

##### Transcript 36

- MP: hhh but but but I mean I suppose that was looking for for some cure was it?
- EJ: Well you know drugs and alcohol are really er an escapism from what's troubling you I mean erm I'm not very good with confrontation I'm not I wasn't very good at expressing how I felt so drugs were an escape. And of course then when you're on drugs you think you're being so fabulous and truthful you kn- I love you I really love you you know you're the best person >well you wake up next morning, you invite people for dinner and you stay in bed 'cos you don't want to see em<
- Aud: hhh
- EJ: It's that syndrome you know it's the bullshit syndrome [MP: mm] So erm I've learned since to er (.) confront people and say how I feel it's it's something I've never been very good at ever since I was a kid.
- MP: The th th th what was I found difficult to understand was was that you also had this kind of low esteem this low self-esteem [EJ: yeh] and that was the basic problem. And you said you felt unattractive as a kid [EJ: mm] and all that. And yet there you were, this hugely glamorous superstar of pop you walk out and there's eighty thousand people in the audience going crackers [EJ: yeh] you know for two and a half or more hours you had 'em in the palm of your hand you had all that adoration and adulation (.) you had all the money in the world (.) anything you

- 30 EJ: Well I think I think that's true of a lot of entertainers (.) I think they know how to be comfortable on stage but they don't know how to be comfortable off stage [MP: mm] and I think it was it was very difficult for me to er live my life off stage and know what a balance was in my life or a happy medium or whatever erm and drugs were certainly the wrong way to go but that's the w- route I chose and er and er and that's the way I think a lot I can name you so many performers >but I won't because they'd probably sue me< [Aud: hhh] that are they're some of the best performers in the world and they don't know how to live their life [MP: yes] It's that seeking of adoration and then not knowing what to do with it erm I don't know it's just silly.
- 35
- 40

Evidently the talk here is peppered with markers of mutual affiliation. These include the frequent 'back channel' utterances (lines 14, 19, 20, 23, 9, 13, 23). Both parties modulate the force of their utterances using the marker of sociable argument ('I mean', lines 1, 4, 27-8). It is apparent that MP is committed to hedging anything that might be taken as face threatening (for example, 'kind of low self-esteem', line 18; 'I just thought', lines 28-9) and that his question deliveries are characterised by extreme hesitancy (lines 1, 17). In short, this is a very supportive environment.

Furthermore, both parties are constructing a common 'lifeworld'. Elton's excessive behaviour may have been extraordinary but it is not presented as such. His use of the generalised 'you' represents his drug abuse as experiences anyone might have. His dramatic shift of footing as he animates his former self (in lines 8-9) reinforces this effect, as does his use of a colloquial expression to define it ('the bullshit syndrome', line 13). This is a notion of the syndrome is assumed. The perspective of the ordinary person is also reproduced in MP's lengthy question delivery in lines 17-29. However, this is not so much the 'wide-eyed' fascination for celebrity described by Bell and van Leeuwen (1994), but more a perplexed bemusement that common expectations of fame and material success have clearly been unfulfilled.

As such, it is also evident that both parties have recourse to the ordinary answer to such problems. Elton's unhappiness may have focused on the difficulties of reconciling his public and private identities (the front and back regions of performance) but they were also rooted in a failure to 'express himself' and to confront them. In other words, bad communication.

A further, predictable dimension is then provided by MP's suggestion that this might be related to his childhood experiences of 'low self-esteem'. What is now in place is precisely the lay person's expertise in personal problems and their solutions familiar from talk shows. EJ's testimony, delivered with MP's supportive prompting, provides yet another instance of its 'truth'.

In this interview Elton John also began to sketch a number of pathways to self-improvement. Again with Parkinson's prompting he spoke (with all due modesty) of his work for AIDS charities. A most interesting development was the documentary film he made with David Furnish, *Tantrums and Tiarras* (1997). MP glosses this as 'a man confronting his demons', so winning the respect of the British public. EJ claims that the purpose of the film was precisely to explore beyond the performativity of pop stardom, to an area where 'I was being truthful' and 'that was the real me'. It seems clear from this that such levels of 'truth' and 'reality' can be especially problematic for some celebrities, possibly because they are being explored in public. As the next section of this chapter illustrates, Elton John is not the only celebrity to take the documentary route towards this claim to a new authenticity. At the end of the process, however, it is assumed that a newly rehabilitated celebrity persona might emerge, ready to use its fame in productive ways and as a force for good – just like the exemplary Oprah Winfrey.

### 5. 'Being yourself'

Whether or not *Tantrums and Tiarras* truly gave us the 'real' Elton John can only be a matter for conjecture. Again, we have to remind ourselves that the *rhetoric* of authenticity bears a figurative relation to that which it describes. Possibly, however, Elton was referring here to a further development in celebrity talk, which is associated with the increasing variety of formats in which it is displayed, including documentary and 'reality TV' formats, as well as the ubiquitous chat shows. It is a development which is glossed, by professional broadcasters and celebrities, as the notion of 'being yourself'. The goal here seems to be a type of media performance which is not perceived as such, but rather taken as a display of authentic personality. In the course of his discussion of Erving Goffman as a media theorist, Espen Ytreberg (2002) comments on this notion:

Today's radio and television provides a glut of informality, which displays all the hallmarks of a dominant discourse. Notions of 'speaking from the heart' and 'being oneself' have been thoroughly appropriated for strategic purposes by the broadcasting industry ... A host of notions of 'being genuine' and 'being yourself' dominate the legitimating rhetoric of the broadcasters. They provide a yardstick for success and

a rationale for the star system of celebrity hosts, anchorpersons and reporters. (2002: 492–3)

Taking up Ytreberg's suggestion, it is instructive to examine this type of celebrity performance, using Goffman's theoretical concepts. Indeed it is intriguing to explore what 'being yourself' entails – what exactly is this form of 'being', what ontological space is defined? In Ytreberg's account, it is a notion which seems to combine the authenticity of the self with a professional, public role. However, such is its claim to legitimacy that it is no longer confined to the dominant discourse of broadcasting; rather, it has become a mantra of everyday life. Ytreberg's discussion echoes my previous account of this phenomenon, where I first gave some examples of the professional ideology and, secondly, explored its take-up in another celebrity documentary (Tolson 2001c). Here I will reprise, briefly, some aspects of that account, which analyses a film made about the ex-Spice Girl Geri Halliwell, in which, in its opening sequence, she announces her intention to 'be herself'.

Crucially for the overall argument of this chapter, Molly Dineen's film *Geri* (1999) was part of a public relations strategy of redefining her celebrity persona (just as *Tantrums* and *Tiaras* had attempted for Elton John). In this, Halliwell was to escape the confines of her previous incarnation as 'Ginger Spice', setting out not only on a solo recording career but also on an Oprah-esque moral crusade. Dineen's film charts how Halliwell became, for a time, a 'goodwill ambassador' for the United Nations, with a brief which focused on women's reproductive health. However, the really interesting thing about the film is that it shows us how a celebrity persona is formed in this context, and specifically how 'being yourself', as a species of public talk, is performed.

There are two moves essentially, in this film. The first involves taking us 'behind the scenes', beyond even the backstage areas of performance, and into the private sphere. Here Halliwell is filmed in big close-up and without make-up, and the talk she produces conforms precisely to the practice of 'disclosure' which John Langer (1981) took to be the defining feature of the celebrity chat show. However, in this context, Geri's discourse is characterised by ambiguity, amounting to a paradox. On the one hand, in the practices which are now familiar, she displays her 'ordinariness', whilst on the other hand her discourse becomes an extended meditation on the impossibility of the celebrity 'being ordinary'. Indeed she seems to be trapped in precisely that situation described by Sacks, that whatever she does is reportable:

Transcript 37

- GH: You know everything's going right (.) but then (.) you know I was thinking oh maybe I haven't got any friends is that what it is (.) you know and I have got some really nice friends you know but I've I've three four I don't know and my sister's there and Alastair's there and it's great and whatever but I've just got this massive (.) you know I don't mind working hard all week but at the weekend I think oh it's kind of an anti-climax at the there (.) do you know what I mean? When the work stops I'm like oh like that every weekend I start crying hh erm [cut]
- MD: Would you describe it as a void?
- GH: I don't know. I think everyone's got a void to a degree if we really set down (.) the unconnection with God or with the world but then maybe I was thinking maybe it's something more simpler than that maybe I just want someone to love in my life [cut]
- But the thing is I can't just go and have a flickle flippant snog with someone because there's no point because (.) it'll get blown up out of p-proportions (.) you know the whole media thing do you know what I mean? The consequences the repercussions are not even worth it (.) Do you know what I mean? I can't go [cut]
- You know when you have a fling you think 'oh god why did I do that?' Then you forget about it. You get a real [shakes a piece of paper] 'WHY DID I DO THAT?' Do you know what I mean? So it's just like 'oh I'm not even going to go there it's not even worth it' so I'm feeling really lonely hh (.) [cut]

The paradox of Geri's discourse is that she speaks of the impossibility of leading an ordinary life in very 'ordinary' ways. Here, the possibility of her having some 'love in my life' is immediately segued into its colloquial reformulation as a 'fickle flippant snog'. There are the shifts of footing where she proceeds to animate what anyone who had a fling would think. There is also the characteristically modern, youthful way of not simply reporting or narrating personal experiences, but rather dramatising them in dialogical expressions ('So it's just like ...' line 27). This dialogical use of the discourse markers 'like' and 'so' assumes the affiliation of co-participants, as of course do the more traditional markers of sympathetic circularity, 'you know' and 'do you know what I mean?' In the next chapter I will explore some differences between these expressions, in terms of the kinds of solidarity they construct.

So Geri demonstrates her ordinary credentials, even as she asserts their inappropriateness for her. This, I want to suggest, marks a key dilemma in contemporary celebrity talk. Of course, it is possible to avoid seriousness altogether and retreat into realms of irony and playfulness, and there are

still chat shows which cater for that. But suppose, like all my examples in this chapter, the preferred strategy is to link fame with some sort of moral purpose, where the celebrity persona achieves some sort of authenticity? Geri is casting doubt on the possibility of celebrities like herself really 'being ordinary', despite her evident ability to perform ordinary talk. So the authenticity of the celebrity cannot be that of the ordinary person. The question is whether another kind of authenticity is achievable – which is where, I think, the notion of 'being yourself' comes in.

Dineen's film illustrates how Geri successfully achieves this kind of authentic performance, at least in the eyes of her sponsors. In Goffman's terms, it involves a further footing shift, beyond that of 'being ordinary'. In this case, it requires the celebrity to take on an institutional role whilst at the same time making it seem that she is the author of its discourse. It thus involves investing the institutional principal with 'fresh talk', which, according to Goffman, 'commonly presents congruence among animator, author and principal' (Goffman 1981: 229). In fact, in this footing, two principals are invoked simultaneously: the institution on behalf of which one speaks, and oneself, as its authentic representative. In professional media talk, this makes it seem that the animator is also the author of the discourse (Ytreberg 2002). In political talk, the animator comes across as having the 'courage of her convictions'.

When she arrives at the UN, Geri is filmed first in a backstage setting, rehearsing her lines. Here it is apparent that the two principals of her discourse, the political and the personal, do not coincide, as she continuously shifts her footings:

#### Transcript 38

- GH: My main mission my main plight can I use the word  
plight?=  
MD: Ermm  
GH: =give me another word my main  
MD: Objective?  
GH: My main objective oh that's too big a word my main  
objective is to er(.) bring awareness to reproductive,  
for the need of reproductive health (.) care (.) for  
undeveloped country-countries (.) [cutaway]  
MD: Miss Halliwell are you in favour of abortion yourself?  
GH: I'm in favour of, choice (.) I think that's a very  
personal decision and you can never say never erm (.) I'm  
in I'm in favour of, healthcare (.) So I'm in favour of -  
this is such a delicate situation I was going to say I'm  
in favour of pro-choice and pro-life (.) Apparently, pro-  
life is the name of er-erm a real anti-abortion activists  
out here I didn't know that so I was going to blurt it  
out and then all the all the nutty real pro-activists  
would have gone yeh she's on our side.  
MD: Don't you find the biggest nightmare is you're having to

- tread so [carefully]=  
GH: [yeh absolutely  
MD: =in front of all these people that  
could take offence?  
25 GH: Yes absolutely I'm just going to say well actually you  
know it's down to the individual woman (.) and I don't  
know, I don't know what my opinion is [cut]

Geri's initial approach to this assignment is to treat it as a script to be performed. That this is clearly not a discourse with which she is comfortable is indicated by two things: first, the high degree of hesitancy (pauses and false starts) that characterises this performance and, secondly, the frequent recourse to a footing shift in which she expresses her personal doubts. There is an institutional, opinionated voice which she is required to animate, but this does not coincide with an authorial voice in which she expresses confusion and doubts what her real opinions are. Interestingly in this extract, these two footings are given different identities, as Geri first has a go at speaking as 'Miss Halliwell' and then resurfaces as herself to question what Miss Halliwell was about to say. It is also apparent that pressure is added by the fact that this is a public performance, and Geri is about to make a contribution, as a celebrity, to the public sphere.

But in fact, at the subsequent press conference, Geri appears quite fluent with her opinions, and her performance is described by one UN official as a 'breath of fresh air'. This is because the animator and author footings, which appeared quite distinct in Transcript 38, now begin to converge. This convergence is achieved by three strategies which together construct an 'authentic' voice for Geri to adopt. First, there is an agenda-shift away from the specific politics of population to a more general endorsement of the 'empowerment of women'. Here an ideological argument trips neatly off the tongue: Western women/under-developed countries/freedom/the right to choose. Secondly, Geri herself can now appear, not simply as a spokesperson, but as an embodiment of this ideology, insofar as this is consistent with the 'girl power' slogan previously promoted by the Spice Girls. Thirdly, particularly in the second extract below, Geri's ownership of the discourse she speaks is reinforced by its fluent, colloquial delivery. And she takes on a celebrity persona which we have met before:

#### Transcript 39

- GH: I think they're all (.) inter-related you know  
population, erm, but I think the thing that inspires me  
most is empowerment of women. I believe that the western  
world women in the last hundred years have come a long  
long way and I think women in under-developed countries  
deserve that same you know freedom and ability to have  
the right to choose. And in- on a bigger scale that's  
going to benefit our world as a whole.

- 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.

## 9

# 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