

Reality TV: the Nation on the Couch

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Whether opening doors into people's homes with tests of their cleanliness or taste in interior design, showing video diaries, or – some of the camera's most intimate incursions to date - 'Wife Swap' and 'Big Brother', Reality TV in all its forms is indisputably a growing modern phenomenon. But can its success simply be explained by it being cheap trash to fill the hundreds of TV channels that now exist? Or by programme-makers' ability to fulfil the public's Warholian desire for fame?

These factors are, I'm sure, relevant in the proliferation of these programmes. But I see in this pop-cultural expression, developing out of soap-operas and confessional TV shows, the nation's desire to explore and expose the human psyche, the true nature of which has long been repressed.

Growing up in a middle-class area of South-East England, I found the remnants of repressive Victorian moral values all around me - even as a child of the supposedly more liberal Seventies. There was a prevailing sense of things going on behind closed doors being no one's business but their own, while disapproval was heaped on the head of anyone 'washing their dirty linen in public'. This all went hand-in-hand with a deprecation of any public display of emotion by men in particular – the British stiff-upper lip, which until at least the mid-fifties, supported notions of service and 'duty'. To do one's duty frequently meant sublimating personal feelings, but the glory lay in serving Queen, Country and Empire.

In fact, our 'Greatness' as a nation was not only built on the mass exploitation of foreigners, but also on the sublimation of the individuality and personal development of our own people. For whether using its 'working classes' as the muscle-grind of industry, or sending its children to boarding-schools, where accustomed to discipline and being away from home, they could be enlisted or posted overseas to administrate in the colonies, many up and down the social scale were conditioned to 'put up or shut up'.

Nowadays, although we still live in an age where a great deal of the education of our young people is geared towards providing the skilled workers our economy requires, a cult of individualism has grown up, partly as a backlash to all that previous repression. Yet unfortunately receiving little personal or spiritual guidance from community elders and with an absence of initiatory rites of passage, youngsters turn to other means of finding themselves – through TV and films, but also drugs and alcohol.

Together with the older generations' legacy of self-repression, this doubtless explains the ever-increasing rates alcohol and drug dependency, as well as soaring rates of depression and suicide, obesity, eating disorders and Body Dysmorphic Dysfunction. And so in this post-Freudian era, pop-psychology reigns, with millions of individuals now trying to find themselves with self-help books. Their messages and tools have even been harnessed by business, with companies vetting and then grooming employees in

the language and culture of interpersonal skills and human development models to ensure employees are Okay (and ultimately), operations are Okay.

It is thus unsurprising that the Nation's desire to know itself has been expressed culturally. First, it was through the soaps, which already in the 1950's had taken tottering steps onto sets depicting everyday kitchens and living-rooms, where real-life problems were discussed. Since then, cameras have increasingly entered the previously forbidden territory of bedrooms, providing opportunities for the public to address issues older generations tried to sweep under the carpet.

Inevitably, however, while soap operas continue to be popular, their artifice no longer fully satisfies the public's insatiable desire for self-knowledge. The confessional shows starring real people, such as those hosted by Oprah Winfrey, took private revelation a step further. Yet despite the extraordinary situations – long-lost daughters reunited with their mothers, philandering husbands confronted by their long-suffering wives - this was still an all-too brief paparazzo-style snap-shot of a personality. The public was secretly hungering for more in-depth study.

This is what so many Reality TV shows appear to provide. Taking the cameras into people's homes, following their comings and goings for weeks, seeing people 'warts and all', we feel we're getting closer to understanding ourselves. 'Big Brother', of course, has been the ultimate in this line so far. "This is 'TV history,'" one of its contestants claimed. Locking contestants up for ten weeks in a house where they're continually on camera has certainly taken our observation of real people to new depths.

But does our armchair psychology have any depth? Of course, some viewers may choose to put their own lives on stand-by to observe the contestants of the Big Brother House 24/7 via Internet web-cams, but for the majority, viewing is still circumscribed by the production process, which can edit footage to present a particular portrait. Participants in all the Reality TV shows can also choose to perform a role for the purpose of either maximising or censoring their exposure to public commentary - though with 'Big Brother' becoming more 'evil' this year, submitting housemates like Roman gladiators to ever-more challenging trials, it's perhaps believed that truth will out.

That's as may be, but what I personally find most interesting is those who are most successful in these shows. Unlike the Roman Emperors' thumbs-up or down, it's the public who decides. In the case of 'Big Brother', those elected have tended to be the typical underdogs, the most marginal in terms of mainstream social values – with gay and lesbian winners and now in 2004, the turn of the transsexual.

So is this the nation finally summoning these people from the closet, coming to terms with aspects of the human psyche that traditionally were denied? I think this is certainly the case, but I also believe gender and sexuality were less important factors influencing this year's voting patterns; rather more important was the mirroring of the nation's psyche.

At the root of so many of our psychological problems lies low self-esteem. And precisely this, I believe, underlies the choice of 3.9 million viewers who voted for Nadia, the Brazilian transsexual, and the lesser number who wanted runner-up Jason,

the vain Scotsman, for even though antagonistic personalities, the pair had this in common. In Big Brother's Diary-Room, Jason admitted: "If I won this, it would be the biggest thing"... not money, but gaining a sense that there were people who liked him. While Nadia similarly confessed: "If I got chosen, I'd feel accepted," although as a transsexual in a culture with a narrow gender spectrum, this is perhaps more understandable.

Could then each gender amongst voters have subconsciously identified with one or other of this hapless pair? Another more confident-sounding 'Big Brother' participant also believed the show to have been a vehicle for her personal development - Shell, the middle-class 'super-nice girl' who came fourth, believed it had given her a chance to find herself. So is self-discovery the key to Reality TV's success? Personally, I believe that as long as it takes for the national psyche to undo a history of repression, this will be expressed through a predilection for vicariously journeying into pop-psychology – the Nation on the couch in both senses of the term!