

Media and Celebrity: Towards a Postmodern Understanding of the Role of Reality Television in the Development of New Forms of South African/African Celebrity

Elva Gómez De Sibandze, Polytechnic of Namibia; Damian Garside, North-West University

1. Introduction

In our paper we deal with the issue of media celebrity in a South African context, focusing on the role reality television has played in regard to emergent forms of new South African celebrity, and determining the social and cultural meaning of these emergent forms in an African socio-political and cultural context. The paper discusses the way in which such celebrities and local audiences' fascination with them are constructed. We further analyze indigenous and "imported" reality television forms and formats in our investigation in order to explore the phenomenon from the perspective of such antithetical binaries as stardom and celebrity, private identity and public personality, dramatic art/and dramatized reality, and entertainment/exploitation.

We raise issues that are central to understanding the way in which the media functions in postmodern South Africa, assessing the way in which reality TV and reality TV celebrities reflect either an "empowering" freeing up of cultural spaces, or, alternatively, a closing down of such cultural spaces as an expression of late capitalist/postmodern "comodification" and of increasingly invasive forms of technological surveillance – famously expressed by Michel Foucault with his notion of the "panopticon." This critique, expressed in its strongest form, views reality television as destroying essential ontological distinctions between reality and media image in constructing a virtual realm of the celebrity "real" (here Baudrillard's notions of the "spectacle" and the "simulacrum" are most apposite). In regard to what is, for post-apartheid South Africa, the crucial issue of identity, we consider the degree to which reality television exploits postmodern anxieties such as the fear of loss of value, status and identity as part of wider transnational and globalizing processes of social, cultural and psychological dislocation.

2. A "new" celebrity¹ is born

In essence, the birth of "new" forms of celebrity in South Africa coincides with the birth of the "new" South Africa in 1994. These forms of celebrity must be analysed in the context of identity formation within post-apartheid South Africa. As a number of cultural theorists exploring this terrain have made clear (see Wasserman and Jacobs 2003) though exclusionary race/ethnicity based notions of identity are still powerfully present and influential, there are emerging notions of identity and identity formations being shaped, developed and "negotiated" which explore the plurality of possible naming, descriptions, allegiances and affiliations which arise out of the shifts and changes in our complex and rapidly evolving social and cultural landscape.

Here the role of the mass media is crucial, particular as its technologies develop, and with growing inclusiveness that some might also see as invasiveness, it

develop gains the capacity to provide a virtual alternative of Habermas' celebrated public sphere or what we might see as a simulacrum of such a public sphere. In our paper we wish to explore the role South African television media are playing in relation to issues of identity, shared cultural reality and the democratic social contract with the creation of a radically different form of celebrity, an "unearned" celebrity, quite different from traditional kinds of celebrity not to speak of the old, largely supplanted notion of "fame", which has been created by the media itself as part of a new industry of commodity signs and images, in which celebrity becomes something that can be created, controlled marketed and sold, to an audience of "fans" who themselves could just as easily become part of the whole celebrity-making process. This new media phenomenon presents interesting challenges for our reading of post modern identity – particularly in respect of the changing nature of the relationship between the once distinct realm of the media image and the realm of social life. It is our contention that the birth of these new forms of celebrity (associated with reality television) are a very important phenomenon which relates so strongly to how identities are constructed in the postmodern period that it could be employed as a lens through which to scrutinize and understand postmodern media society as it unfolds. This is particularly true since the defining use of the term "society of the spectacle" which was devised by Guy Debord and is being popularized Douglas Kellner (2005) shows the degree to which our understanding of the workings of postmodern society becomes focused upon the modes in which it produces, circulates and consumes cultural images, knowledge and information. For Kellner, the way in which television is developing is an expression of the logic of the spectacle development of TV linked to postmodern spectacle:

Television has been from its introduction in the 1940s a promoter of spectacle, selling cars, fashion, home appliances, and other commodities along with consumer life-styles and values. It is also the home of sports spectacle like the Super Bowl or World Series, political spectacles like elections (or more recently, scandal), entertainment spectacle like the Oscars or Grammys, and its own events like breaking news or special events. Following the logic of spectacle entertainment, contemporary television exhibits more hi-tech glitter, faster and glitzier editing, computer simulations, and with cable and satellite television, a fantastic array of every conceivable type of show and genre (2005:9).

Is it not the case that spectacle and surveillance are two sides of the same coin (can you have spectacle without surveillance intrusion or invasion?) Has the fear of being seen –the paranoia associated with Orwell's Big Brother (a satire on modernism at its most totalitarian) been replaced by an insatiable desire to see, the fascination with the spectacle? There is a sense in which reality television is not a sudden fascination with the creation of the real-time televised "panopticon" -- that it isn't a radical departure from the older forms of television with which we are quite familiar – but that it represents a working out of the logic of panopticon surveillance that Lynne Nugent argues TV has always been about: 'Television works like a panopticon – the structure of a prison that keeps prisoners from interacting with each other and instead focused on a central controlling power'(Nugent 1994:33).

The new media created media-dependent forms of celebrity and it would seem as if these are to prove the post modern ontological point, as expressed most famously by Jean Baudrillard, that the real and the simulation can no longer be separated, that the new forms of celebrity tease us with the kind of paradoxes that cannot but

trouble modernist frames of reference. For instance, to exist as celebrity is – however tenuous this existence might be – is to exist in the absolute and incontrovertible form of television image, as being of a higher order of interaction and experience in the realm of spectacle and the hyperreal, a mythological model for audience admiration and emulation. On the other hand, as has been convincingly argued, the celebrity is a figure of misrepresentation, an identity which is created and marketed over which the individual herself or himself has no real control, and in the construction of which certain selections have been made dictated by the logic of what works and what does not work as image and code on television. So, simultaneously, the image is one of plenitude and one of emptiness and absence. As Frances Bonner points out, the individual and her or his individuality is something with which television struggles:

Individuality is a complicated matter for television. Desirable because of the way it can be used to underpin an increase in consumption on the basis that individual difference is demonstrated through individualized consumption patterns, yet problematic because broadcast television cannot address an individual and is not interested in individuals until enough of them can be aggregated into a market with shared preferences (Bonner 2003: 106).

Often, as is well known in reality television programs, participants or contestants will play to the house acting out a particular image, which may involve particular roles; including ones, which are manifestly stereotypical in the narratives that seem to unfold. We cannot escape the typologies of narrative – even where the action is ostensibly totally unscripted and appears to arise spontaneously and organically out of unpredictable human actions and reactions. In the “closed” environment of the reality TV set, such as the *Big Brother* “house” or the Survivor island camp site, should the interpersonal tensions, dramas and dynamics on display start to seem like Soap Opera it should not come as a huge surprise, and more to the point, it does not strike audiences as strange that this should happen.

3. The politics of the new celebrity

The politics of the new celebrity needs to be explored. Since 1994 ordinary South Africans, including, if not especially, Black South Africans, have started to gain more media exposure and greater media presence. But what is the relationship between greater exposure, a very controlled form of participation, and representation? We need to think carefully and critically about current trends in our media. Is it the case that our democratic political is being paralleled by an equivalent or similar form of transformation in the media: one that actively facilitates the participation of previously disadvantaged, and more to the point, silenced people; in public debates and party politics, as well as providing a conduit for ordinary people to express their opinions through the media (and, in the case of the South African reality programme, *Starmaker*, for ordinary people who feel unhappy about their physical appearance, would like to appear in the media, and would like a helping hand or kickstart to a new life/new career are provided with free (televised) plastic surgery in order to take the first step on the route to self-improvement (guesting in a small role on a homegrown soap opera in their surgically enhanced state). In this sense the media’s own take on the idea of transformation (meaning a physical and psychological transformation for a particular individual) is different from the idea of a program of general access to the media leading to democratization.

Certainly the media has a pivotal role to play in a process of democratization and the (changing) notion of celebrity is seen as being an important player: 'by democratizing celebrity, such programs help reinforce the notion that a surveillance-based society can overcome the hierarchies of mass society' (Andrejevic 2004:97). This of itself is a dramatic indication of the power of the media, since the idea of there being any connection between democratization and surveillance would have been unthinkable a couple of decades ago, when, with George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty Four* still strong in the public consciousness, people had a very different attitude to being seen (and the term 'Big Brother' was a synonym for the perfect dystopia in which all personal freedoms were surrendered to the state).

In a sense democratization happens even though the media may not be actively pursuing this end in the way that it could. The proliferation of news programs, docusoaps like *Isidingo*, talk shows and reality TV shows like *Big Brother* help shape if not create public opinion and provide ordinary people with a shared context (a virtual public sphere) within which to express themselves and their points of view. Here the increasing incorporation of the viewer into the world of the programme through such devices as road shows (*Egoli*), studio competitions and phone-ins (a huge feature of KTV and other channels' children's' programs) and perhaps most notable of all the MNET sports lifestyle initiatives (sports cafes and bars under the aegis of MNET sports broadcasting) has the effect of dissolving the boundaries between the images on the television set stuck in the corner or centre of the lounge or living-room, and the world of the viewers (always configured as a family of viewers) who sit watching attentively and quietly – or who used to – but are now far more likely to sit watching remote control in one hand and cellphone in the other, 'interactivity, offers access to and perhaps some modicum of control over, the site of production' (Andrejevic 2004:88).

All of this has prepared the way for reality television – made its development seem logical and natural. As Frances Bonner points out, "reality television", 'together with a varying conception of what the term describes' was one of the two major changes seen in television programs in the 1990s (Bonner 2003:24). Reality television developed from unscripted on-the-spot coverage of real life situations to creating a special environments or world in which people subjected to unusual situations and contrived experiences. The idea that reality TV is free to use its imagination, has worried a number of writers on the media, who feel that what seems thoroughly immoral and taboo today, will be the logical place to go tomorrow. When art and life lose their requisite degree of separation, then the cultural imagination can become a dangerous thing². We already know the price of human degradation: the American programme *Fear Factor* is able to set repulsive and sickening tasks for its contestants happy in the knowledge that they see the risk -admittedly small- and discomfort -hard to imagine anything worse than that the contestants experience when trying to perform some of the more grotesque tasks that the producers have thought up- as a price worth paying for the chance of winning what is only a moderately large sum of money.

So, reality television programs mark a development -if not the culmination- of this process of inclusion that has already manifested itself in a number of different programs of quite different types. From the perspective of the producers, the television companies, they have the dual attraction of being compulsive viewing for large numbers of people. Here we need to talk about the ways in which reality

television interacts with and slots into wider developments in popular culture. Being relatively inexpensive and easy to produce, since they can be quite low-tech, will not involve wages to actors and or other media professionals, and do not need to wait on the creative output of scriptwriters, choreographers and dedicated news teams. This raises the obvious question: what is reality television replacing and what does this change in programming indicate? That reality television is compulsive viewing cannot be denied. What does this say about the levels of identification and projection taking place in audiences? However, the extremely poor performance of abrasive and self-opinionated *Big Brother* contestant, Bad Brad in the most recent general election should reassure us that the kind of capital (to use Bourdieu's term) that accrues to reality TV participants and contestants would not appear to be transferable to other areas of society – particularly not the realm of the political, at least for now, –of course the United States has a State Governor elected largely on grounds of media celebrity status, and has had, in the person of Ronald Reagan, its first media celebrity President. Power and the imaginative identification with the kind of media power revealed by reality television would seem to be the route to follow to understanding this phenomenon. We would argue that not only does the audience identify with the program's participants/contestants (and thereby led to identify with the lifestyle products of the program corporate sponsors) but they also to buy into the god-like fantasy in which the program assumes for itself has the power to make or break, create or destroy, subjecting ordinary "real" lives to a set or series of artificial (fictive) environments, processes and conditions (in an often quasi-experimental way) which will determine their eligibility for absorption into the marketing machine and transformation into "celebrity". However you look at it, reality television is about power: for the first time television – which is indirectly responsible for a profound restructuring social and cultural life in the twentieth-century, is able to directly subject its viewers to its regimes of power — and not only to be seen by all to be able to do so, but to receive universal approval in so doing.

4. Reality television and national transformation

The reality television phenomenon is one of several examples of transformation that South Africa is undergoing whilst in the process of developing (or trying to develop) a new national identity. South Africans are the center of a complex socio-cultural, political context that makes them question "who is an African?"/"who is South African?" In addition, the media is trying to move from a hegemonic approach to a more inclusive one in regards to issues of representation and also to show a more South African/African identity by "telling the African story".

Of course, sports television and television advertising³ are powerful agents in the concerted attempt to get a populace divided along every conceivable social and economic fault line to buy into the idea of a single, inclusive nationhood (to hear the "higher calling" in terms of which diversity is recognised, bridged and subsumed)⁴. What reality television programs do show is that, firstly, social community is possible in South Africa. Associated with this are the following: that diversity is a source of enrichment (the programs are much more interesting when they have interracial frissance) not a problem to be overcome. People can be seen to be getting on in the special social environments that the programs producers have created even when the underlying competitive logic (the logic of capitalism which sometimes takes on Darwinian undertones) kicks in and people have to leave (because they aren't good

enough or popular enough). It is a shadow cast over all the interactions that we observe: that there can only be one big winner at the end of the day. Secondly, what these programs show is that the media can fix problems including those we have inherited as part of the legacy of apartheid (like the sweet-voiced woman in the television advertisement handing out coca-cola bottles to complete strangers across the ethnic and cultural divide). Transformation is possible. In this sense reality television enacts the postmodern truism that identity is social and culturally constructed. Get on the programme and you can be “cool” (find yourself invested with loads of social capital), “rich” (if you win – and maybe even if you don’t, if your face or style is “discoverable”), and famous. Reality television programs transform ordinary people into celebrities and celebrities into ordinary people, not that these are true transformations: celebrity and ordinariness ultimately deconstruct their own binary pairing, being the two opposite sides of the same much-manipulated media coin.

So the media presents its own alternative to the social reality of class and race division – adds its own special contribution to the current context in which old identities are being challenged, renegotiated and contested. To return to the question of democratization and the media: we need to ask whether the new forms of celebrity that the media are generating can be seen as part of a process of inclusion, empowerment and representation – or whether this is something else entirely that does not make sense when viewed in terms of traditional democratic notions of representation. Perhaps something working counter to democratization as we traditionally understand it.

5. The archetype of celebrity and the post modern media

In his analysis of American celebrities Neal Gabler relates the birth of the idea of celebrity, which supplants the idea of fame, whose history Braudy has explored in depth and at considerable length to Campbell’s hero archetype. For Campbell, the hero “archetype” is intimately connected with the conquest of primal social fears – such as the fear of separation, the terror of the unknown, the dread of forces beyond our powers of resistance, and, most interestingly, the dread of anonymity and the fear of loss of identity (Gabler 1998:173). Here – as with Campbell’s hero archetype – the celebrity “archetype” provides reassurance and by ‘reinforcing the subversive, anomic subtext of entertainment, it told us that the whole idea of celebrity elitism was something of a chimera’ (Gabler 1998:173). What Gabler has to say about the American archetype of celebrity can, we believe, help illustrate the South African case. However, we should bear in mind that as Jill Neimark points out; the new forms of celebrity introduce us to an incredibly disposable, ultra-demotic kind of fame: ‘Celebrities have been demoted from gods of the natural world to agents of the flow of information’ (1995:4).

In South Africa, “new” celebrities are moving from anonymity and even extreme poverty to a life of recognition, fame, and luxury; thanks to media exposure. On the same note well-known celebrities want to reveal their unknown ordinary people status. But, still after ten years of democracy not everybody feels included in this process of democratization and they are blaming the media for it because, as I mentioned before, the media is at the core of this phenomenon. According to Biressi and Nunn, ‘reality TV is celebrated as a democratization of public culture and the

deconstruction of the components of fame that partially construct the celebrity media subject and the construction of social identity more broadly' (Biressi & Nunn 2005: 147).

Strangely, whilst on the one hand the media is becoming more expansive (think of Mnet's move into the rest of Africa) and inclusive, on the other hand, it is becoming more limited and reductive. What kinds of balances are struck between the needs of sports enthusiasts and the need for programs which provide in-depth analysis of social and political issues, which is wrongly expressed as the needs of a small minority of viewers, when it should be discussed in relation to whether television is fulfilling its social duty as educator. Unfortunately, in the post modern media universe, we cannot escape thinking of all forms of television, fulfilling very different functions and meeting very different needs as "entertainment". The development of the "new" form of media celebrity is South Africa, in parallel to the construction of the country's social and cultural identity, is also transforming the lives of people into entertainment. Whilst there is opportunity for people to express their different views on and experience of such serious issues as HIV/AIDS, poverty and racial prejudice – there is something distinctly un-dialogical about this – it seems more a quasi-ritualistic off-loading or out-letting of the sort that makes good viewing – is good entertainment as a form of reality exposure rather than as something which could be seen in relation to the Habermas notion of the public sphere. It is footage that can fill a slot and pull in an audience – in this sense it is no different from a music video or a live British football match. As Gabler observes, 'Celebrities had been propelled into their personas by the commercial demands of entertainment. Ordinary people had been encouraged to let their performing selves emerge by the commercial social and psychological demands of modern culture' (1998:223).

How does this phenomenon relate to what is perceived to be the loss of collectivism in societies due to the impact of globalization, which has powerful social, political and, importantly, psychological implications? Ostensibly, at the social level there is a weakening of the kinds of informal bonds and ties that help "glue" the social fabric together, which is why there is a steadily growing emphasis on the importance of "ubuntu" as a restorative medicine that can help heal the wounds of social alienation and fragmentation. At the political level, however, the picture seems more positive, seemingly presenting an opening up of spaces and possibilities, outside the established protocols of the parliamentary system and the set policies, positions and perspectives of the official political parties. This would appear to allow people, especially young people, a chance to express their views on a number of matters of socio-political relevance.

It is at the psychological level however, that the pressure of globalization is of greatest concern, producing the kind of fragmentation of self and social alienation that has proved to be such a constant theme in Marxist critiques of the capitalist market system. A careful study of the range of reality television programs needs to be undertaken to establish how fragmentation and alienation manifest themselves in reality television and the discourses with which it is promoted and surrounded⁵. What are the tensions here, between the worlds of the participants, "house dwellers" in the case of *Big Brother*, which we shall use as our particular example here? What are the spaces for the house-dwellers to articulate a politics (in the widest sense of the word) that is not consistent with the corporate ethos, consumerist values and never adequately disguised capitalist ideology of the shows producers? What

expressions of identity run counter to the presiding spirit in which the contestants are required to live together under the same roof? How are all these alternate positions, ideas, styles dealt with by those in charge? All of these are questions central to the issue of identity – because there are the areas where sacrifices will have to be made in the name of celebrity. Does the new celebrity not involve in essence a selling of self, which Gabler sees as a particularly nasty side-effect of globalization – but one that produces a new impulse: towards the finding or adoption of forms of identity that are more flexible and provisional -one might add- than ever before. In Gabler's view the global market economy has 'placed a premium on one's selling oneself, a growing sense of dislocation, discontinuity and anxiety that tempted one to find a flexible identity that could adjust to different situations; and, not least of all, the constant inundation of role models provided by the media' (1998:223).

6. The media and self-creation

The South African media was and it still is inundated with foreign models from which South Africans celebrities re-invent themselves to look like Hollywood stars. In order to play the part they need to look the part. We hear this very often as organizers and producers of reality shows look for the "x factor" in these participants to determine whether they will make it or not in the celebrity business. They need 'a definable, publicizable personality; a figure with some physical idiosyncrasy or personal mannerism which could become a nationally advertised trademark' (Boorstin 1987:156; Gabler 1998: 220). So what we have here is a group of media driven people that become self-aware of their appearance to look like a personality and to be recognized as such. In other words, this "self-creation," through fashion, makeovers, the play of images, etc.; is what Baudrillard calls "practical liberation" (Baudrillard 1988:96), a phenomenon that occurs as a form of rebellion in societies that had totalitarian governments like South Africa.

In the process of self-creation there is a blurring of the lines between personal identity and public celebrity, a merger of identity and personality. For example, in "The Face of Africa," "The South African Idol," etc. contestants become an image of what the public expect to see, a specific physical characteristic, a distinctive vocal inflection, a style of dress, or what producers call the "X factor" and what makes them celebrities. Once they enter the celebrity circle, this "X factor" becomes the celebrities' trademark. This trademark would make them recognizable and at the same time celebrities are turned into commodities. 'We are exposed to the instantaneous retransmission of all our facts and gestures on whatever channel. [...] It is just like watching an advertising promotion' (Baudrillard 1995 in Andrejevic 2004:113).

7. The commodification of celebrities

In the view of the British sociologist Nikolas Rose, in our contemporary post modern society, commodities are, of themselves, a source of identity transformation: 'Commodities appeared to illuminate those who bought them, to have the power to transform purchasers into certain kinds of person living a certain kind of life' (Bonner 2003:105). Frances Bonner characterizes Rose's notion of the transformative power of the commodity as one where consumption is "mobilized" through technologies which explain the increased power of televisions to make inroads into identity

formation, and the radical new ways in which television has begun to address its audiences.

When dealing with the creation and commodification of celebrities one has to take into account the convergence of media, entertainment and celebrities. Institutional and cultural developments such as the merger of marketing and “real life” entertainment and the convergence of new media technologies with programs and their promotion, are making the television industry more profitable and this economic significance together with the production of new celebrity are its most imposing aspect. Here it is very important to mention that *Big Brother*, is considered ‘the digital media Holy grail’ (Brenton & Cohen 2003:5) because of its success as a cross-media event (cross-platform, interactivity, trendsetting and profit maker).

Celebrities are not alone in this process their creation and their commodification or “advertising promotion” as Baudrillard puts it. They are part of a big net that includes their fashion designers, trainers, chefs, clubs, resorts and even pets. And for their purpose of their advertising and promotion we have the *E* channel that exposes as much information about Hollywood celebrities and entertainment as they can and shows us the facts, and people behind the scene directly to our screens. ‘Not only are famous people available to us on television, in the movies, in autobiographies, and in celebrity magazines, but often those media furnish intimate details of their private lives’ (Gergen 1991:56). In South Africa we do not have a channel exclusively dedicated to entertainment yet, but we have tabloid or magazine and reality shows that serve similar purpose where ‘webcasters, like reality TV cast members, aren’t rehabilitating the political character of publicity but are, paradoxically, democratizing publicity as celebrity’ (Andrejevic 2004:113). In essence reality television brings a new form of total product creation and marketing. Advertisers and sponsors reveling in the absolute availability of the new celebrities find themselves able to forge powerful associative bonds between the world that these celebrities inhabit and their own products. Suddenly there is no gap between consumer and product to be consumed. Indeed in this seamless economy products and consumers mutate into each other in one endlessly recycling process. No longer mere appendages to the entertainment programme, they are absolutely integrated, and, as with the *Nandos* much appreciated “home” deliveries to *Fame Academy*, the things around which celebrity life took its meaning and structure.

7. Reality show celebrities South Africa

Although the origin of Reality TV can be traced as far back as the 1950s, when the quiz formats represented an early form of highly profitable TV programming⁶ it was not until 1991 with the premiere of MTV’s *The Real World* that we began to see reality TV in its current form. Today, reality TV is all over the world and includes a variety of specialized formats or subgenres such as game-shows (ex. *Big Brother*, *Survivor*), dating programs (ex. *Joe Millionaire*), the make-over/lifestyle programs (ex. *What not to wear*, *Extreme make-over*), talent shows (ex. *American idol*, *Pop idols*, etc), popular court programs (ex. *Court TV*), and reality sitcoms (ex. *The Osbornes*) and all their celebrity variations. Most reality shows in South are aired on digital television that only reaches approximately one third of the country’s population. In all these reality television shows there is a fixation with real characters, celebrities, situations and narratives and their proliferation corresponded with the

development of new media technologies such as small microphones and hidden cameras. 'Providing access to the means of publicity makes it possible for everyone to actively participate in self-commodification. This is the pessimistic conclusion drawn by Baudrillard in his discussion of reality TV (a discussion that anticipated both *Big Brother* and the webcam trend)' (Andrejevic 2004:113) and it is where 'the real economic value of the documented life relies on the tried-and-true panoptic model: the few (marketers, advertisers, and data miners) monitoring the many' (Andrejevic 2004:77).

The relationship between self and image in a celebrity environment, but especially in the context of a developing country like South Africa, that is a function of the postmodern sign economy is one fraught with imbalance and uncertainty (particularly with the loss of a sense of the "real" that can be distinguished from what the media has constructed). As Leo Braudy points out there is always a tension within the idea of celebrity between the dream of audience recognition – and the fear that this purely depends on the vagaries of taste and fashion, rather than something intrinsic to the celebrity herself/himself (Braudy 1986:27). This point can be extended into the realm of the new forms of celebrity. In reality Television – there is a total loss of intrinsic to what the audience reads out of or into (extracts from or projects); there is an absolute surrendering of self to image since the housemates in *Big Brother* –are caught in the prism of the look of the "Other." What is seen in every image of the house is exactly what the camera sees: metaphorically and literally, where – as in *The Truman Show*, Peter Weir's film satire on the assumption of God-like powers by reality TV producers – the mirror is one-way reflective glass, behind which lies a camera.

And on the other side of the mirror: there we find – since being on television has become synonymous with real, and celebrity with "life" – the shadow realm of non-celebrity: 'the ordinariness of life suddenly seen as inadequate and unreal because the very technology that has brought heroes, albeit manufactured ones, into every home has also brought the stark, vivid images of their failures and vulnerabilities and mortality into our bedrooms and living rooms, on television and in newspapers' (Neimark 1995:4).

8. In conclusion

In our paper we explore a number of what seem to us to be the key issues surrounding reality television in relation to the globalization of culture and the question of identity. It is here where, we believe, it becomes very important to think about the new forms of celebrity that these shows are beginning to develop. Coming to us initially through imported formats, South African television producers have and will be developing all forms of innovative local variants of the central forms of reality television. With this proliferation of new programs and programme formats and with the burgeoning of new media technologies, the crucial issue becomes the extent to which they are providing or helping to provide a space for ordinary South Africans to present themselves, their views, their culture, and by doing feeding the process of transformation/democratization. Then, however, there is the question of how the new reality television programs and the new forms of celebrity they are engendering relate to issue such as commodification – and the development of the postmodern/late capitalist economy of information and signs, expressed at the

social level by the idea of the “society of the spectacle” that we referred to earlier (having borrowed it from Guy Debord by way of Douglas Kellner)⁷. We have also addressed the transformative power of these programs, both directly in regard to individual lives, and in social terms as furthering the agendas of democratization and national consensus. But we have also hinted at the dark side to this transformation (with reference to the use of plastic surgery in *Starmaker*⁸ – and it seems that as reality television develops, the greater will be the concerns raised over questions of morality, human dignity and the preservation of good rational taste as these programs chart taboo areas and forbidden waters.

Almost certainly anyone interested in the media, its politics and its impact on a fractured and divided, but developing democratic society will have to watch this space.

(Endnotes)

- ¹ '[Celebrities are] members of a class of people who functioned to capture and hold the public's attention not matter what they did or even if they did nothing at all' (Gabler 1998: 146).
- ² Andy Warhol's notion that the life of the artist could become his or her art is perhaps the most well-known expression of the kind of postmodern dissolution of distinctions and boundaries that provides the basis, and necessary support, for the development of reality television as supplement and replacement for forms that are either purely documentary (factual, objective) or fictional, theatrical and artistic.
- ³ This is particularly true of the advertising which features during sports television programs, and which is trying to make certain products synonymous with soccer, cricket and rugby, the three great national sports.
- ⁴ Where we will be united, if nothing else, in our love of sport and consumption of identical half-time snacks and alcoholic beverages.
- ⁵ For Lynne Nugent Television is itself a source of social alienation (Nugent 1994:32).
- ⁶ These TV programs depended on the popular demand of real people put in dramatic situations with unpredictable results.
- ⁷ Celebrities form part of this economy of signs by providing models that their fans want to follow and which can then be used to sell products and subscriptions while the entertainment industry (marketers, advertisers, producers, etc.) monitor their profits.
- ⁸ With the help of plastic surgeons, make-up artists, fashion designers, etc., contestants undergo a physical transformation that leads to a psychological transformation too because they see themselves more like stars. In the episode broadcast on MNET on 30/9/2005 the narrator told the audience that Sharon, one of the contestants who had just undergone serious plastic surgery and acting lessons, 'is now the star she always intended to be'.

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