Media Savvy and Lateral Surveillance among Reality TV Audiences

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A Thesis

In

The Department

of

Sociology and Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts (Sociology) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

May 2006

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Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-20716-1
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-20716-1

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ABSTRACT

Media Savvy and Lateral Surveillance among Reality TV Audiences

Daniel Trottier

Contemporary media outlets call upon an increasingly interactive engagement from audiences. Reality television in particular invites its viewers to offer feedback through a plurality of modes, notably through the internet and text messaging from portable devices. To employ Erving Goffman (1959), it is through a multi-modal appraisal of media texts that audiences are given access to a backstage where deliberate constructions of reality are sustained. This savvy engagement with media texts and media devices among audiences resonates with the expansion of practices and discourses of lateral surveillance. Through a cynical assessment of interpersonal relations as risky, discursive subjects are invited to adopt strategies – also through media devices – to monitor their peers.

To this end, this research calls attention to the increasing convergence of media savvy and lateral surveillance in contemporary reality television. Here, reality television instantiates the proliferation of both strategies. In particular I am looking at *Big Brother*, a longstanding reality program where audiences monitor purportedly real people who are contained within an enclosure. I conduct a discourse analysis of *House Calls*, an online call-in talk show produced by CBS for *Big Brother* fans. This talk show offers a behind-the-scenes interpretation of *Big Brother*, and enables a critical appraisal of the program among audiences. Additionally, I will conduct an analysis of audience engagement with this discourse by looking at audience conversations about *House Calls* on an audience-generated online message board.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In completing this endeavour, I am indebted to numerous individuals whose respective contributions have made this an enjoyable and enriching experience. To begin, I would like to express my most genuine appreciation to D'ette Bourchier for her unconditional support of my work as well as her willingness to ask the difficult questions I may have otherwise avoided. It is because of you that this research is something that I will always hold in high esteem.

I would also like to thank Dr. Bart Simon for his invaluable guidance throughout my stay at Concordia. In your teaching and research I have gained a greater appreciation of the potentials of sociological work. As a consequence, you have taught me how to teach myself, and I suspect that there is no greater measure of a successful mentor. I am also deeply indebted to Dr. Valérie de Courville Nicol for her guidance during the past two years. Not only have you been willing to assist me throughout the various stages of this project, but you have also entrusted me with your own research, which provided me with an excellent frame of reference for making sense of the social. I am also very thankful for Dr. Anouk Bélanger's contributions to this project. In particular I am grateful for the opportunity to guest lecture in your media class as well as the invaluable feedback you have given me. It is through this experience that I discovered the many rewards that are intrinsic to teaching.

Lastly, I would like to thank the students with whom I have been fortunate enough to share a seminar room since my arrival in the master's programme. A university is only as eminent as the accomplishments of its students, and you have undoubtedly

helped place Concordia at the top of a very short list. I look forward to hearing of your successes in the years to come.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Preamble

The research presented in the following chapters is situated at the intersection of two distinct topics in the field of the sociology of information. One the one hand, I am concerned with surveillance regimes that are predicated on the collection and sorting of information. Not only have such regimes undergone an acceleration in recent decades (as evidenced by, among other measures, the proliferation of closed-circuit television networks in major urban regions across the world), but discourses which render such regimes meaningful and legitimate have successfully integrated themselves into public articulations of safety, prevention, and even empowerment. The extent to which security cameras, keystroke monitors and biometric devices are backgrounded during everyday conduct is indicative of how these technologies are embedded in contemporary living (Mosco 2004)

On the other hand, my research also addresses the tensions and potentialities inherent to mass media channels of information distribution. In light of the Frankfurt School's dystopian vision of uncritical reception by mass audiences as well as the romanticization of audience resistance within cultural studies, contemporary media studies operate with a finesse that reconciles yesterday's frameworks with tomorrow's technology. Yet today's audiences have access to an unprecedented volume of information, sophisticated algorithms to navigate through it, and wholesale priced storage technology to retain this information without any immediate worries about deterioration. Navigating through these developments while deriving meaning from all accessible information is a daunting task that has been insinuated in individuals' lives in the most

pedestrian of scenarios. Indeed, surprisingly little distinguishes the fully engaged viewer from the overwhelmed viewer or even the non-viewer that has dropped out from the mediascape.

Although one may talk about surveillance studies and media studies as autonomous and mutually exclusive fields, recent developments call into question the divisions that differentiate the two. With regards to surveillance studies, we can cite the fact that in addition to being subject to monitoring, individuals are increasingly called upon to monitor others. What's interesting is that this surveillance typically occurs through mediated flows of information that liken them to other media outlets. A trivial example we can consider is apartment buildings that offer a live feed of their lobby as part of a cable television package. A less accessible yet more compelling example would be the use of instant messaging and cellular phones to govern relations with one's dependents. From this we can infer that subjects are not only being called upon to monitor one another, but that this surveillance is largely effected through communication technology.

Regarding media studies, the increasingly interactive nature of consumption calls for an engaged viewership predicated on an intimate familiarity with the contents as well as the conduits of media venues. Additionally, trust, accuracy and representation in the media have constituted a savvy form of viewership that scrutinizes and surveys an increasingly nebulous mediascape. In addition to teaching viewers to 'not trust what you see on TV', the media deploy notions of risk and uncertainty and implicates them in articulations of the social. To this end, contemporary media consumption increasingly resembles surveillance practices, which in turn are increasingly relying on mass media.

These developments add an immediate appeal to surveillance and media studies insofar as a tremendous discursive and practical overlap complicates any distinction between the two.

The following research attempts to make sense of the terrain shared by surveillance and media studies by harnessing two theoretical frameworks. As these perspectives amount to two seemingly opposing relations to the self, I seek to evoke their tensions and respective contradictions in order to sustain a position in line with the findings of my research. On the one hand, I am adopting a framework that understands individual subjectivities as constituted by discourses. Rooted in Michel Foucault's and Nikolas Rose's respective works on governance, this perspective understands human subjectivity as the product of a discursive shaping that is dispersed in its nature and distribution. The second framework, which is informed by Michel de Certeau and cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, Henry Jenkins, and John Fiske, recognizes individuals' capacity to engage with discourses through a reliance on local (cultural) contexts. While visions of outright resistance may be immediately accessible, this perspective is enriched by looking at negotiations with discourses that have more pedestrian goals in mind, such as evading momentary inconveniences or evoking some additional pleasure from a media text.

More concretely, the following research is about reality television audiences. Reality television's blending of engaged media consumption and voyeuristic appeal makes it an ideal candidate for concurrently studying media outlets and surveillance regimes. In particular, I am interested in the fan culture surrounding the sixth American season of *Big Brother*, especially the extent that the show's production team is largely

responsible for its construction. As fan cultures have traditionally been the exclusive domain of engaged and autonomous audiences, the production team's involvement calls into question the notion that these spaces serve as an exercise of audience resistance to or negotiation with the meanings generated in media texts. By constituting a media savvy audience that engages with *Big Brother* in an often critical manner, the show's production team ensures that critical readings of the program remain within governable boundaries. In other words, what could potentially be an act of disengagement from a media event, or even a forceful re-articulation of its meaning, is channelled into a peripheral and fully anticipated authorship of the media text.

I am also concerned with the constitution of subjectivities through discursive engagements with texts. As such, this work is rooted in analyses that examine how discourses such as those found in self-help manuals and home-repair television programs call upon viewers to conduct themselves in a specified manner (de Courville Nicol 2006). However, my work deviates from this kind of research insofar as the texts I am studying are not directly advocating a particular conduct. In broadcasting the straining and rupturing of cohabitational relations, *Big Brother* conveys that peer-based relations are problematic. What's more, this pathology is accounted for in the margins of the program (including meta-show resources available on CBS's website), where viewers are called upon to engage in "correct" peer-based relations through a savvy monitoring of houseguests. Thus, resistant readings of *Big Brother* are encouraged insofar as they amount to a savvy engagement with media texts as well as a technique through which lateral surveillance may occur. In this regard, we may consider the *Big Brother* program as generating the conditions that would necessitate such an engagement, whereas meta-

show elements such as the online talk show *House Calls* articulate the manner in which this engagement can occur.

Epistemology and Methodology

Upon securing a rich theoretical framework surrounding a focused position, I will negotiate an epistemological position through which both the media savvy discourse in *Big Brother* as well as audience reception of this discourse can be understood. This will serve to outline the methodological devices available to this inquiry. As such, I will also present a detailed account of the discourse analysis undertaken. I will conclude by offering clear definitions of the key terms employed in my research. In operationalizing potentially ambiguous concepts, I wish to ensure a firm understanding of the subject matter prior to embarking in the discourse analysis.

The extent to which savvy media reception is the product of discursive engagement or a manifestation of agentic resistance cannot be solely determined through theoretical musings. To this end, it will be necessary to illuminate these manifestations as they occur within the boundaries of media consumption. While this endeavour calls for a reliance on clearly outlined research methods, selecting a suitable methodological approach first requires that no uncertainty remains concerning the manner in which knowledge will be derived.

As a starting point, it is necessary to mention that the research involved for this endeavour is split into two components. The first component consists of highlighting the manner in which a particular form of viewing reality television is embedded in material that has been generated by the show's producers. Although this may include the program

itself, shows such as *Big Brother* are often accompanied by a wealth of peripheral writing that informs viewers about the nature of the program. In *Big Brother*'s case, a call-in talk show that is aired and archived on CBS' website serves as a sterling example of a site where proper viewership is articulated. The first half of my research will attempt to yield an understanding of this viewership as it is manifested on *House Calls*.

In addition to considering how a privileged form of consumption is advocated by *Big Brother*'s production team, my research also contains a second component that looks at the manner in which audiences themselves make use of this form of viewership. In particular, I am interested in audiences' capacity to replicate this viewership outside the official CBS (web-)site's boundaries, as well attempts to distance themselves from it or appropriate it for other uses. To this end, I will be looking at *Morty's*, a fan-generated *Big Brother* message board where audiences discuss *House Calls*.

My research will therefore consist of an analysis of two separate objects: a talk show that surrounds *Big Brother* as well as audience-generated discussions about the talk show. Whereas the former can be understood as discourse about audience activity, the latter stands out as audience activity surrounding the discourse itself. At this juncture it would appear necessary to question the extent to which this distinction will be problematic. By treating *House Calls* as discursive and the message board conversations as reaction to that discourse, we risk viewing the latter as nothing more than a product of the former, circumventing any debate between discursive formation and audience agency.

Yet this possibility is mitigated through a clarification of the nature of the materials I intend to study. While I regard both *House Calls* and *Morty's* as discursively meaningful, in my analysis of either text I do not intend to produce an exhaustive account

of the meanings that can be yielded from them. *House Calls* may be deemed relevant insofar as it discursively engages audiences to sustain an awareness of media manipulation, yet other research may deem it important insofar as it manifests racist, sexist, or other discourses. Likewise, conversations on *Morty's* may be articulated as products of (or reactions to) the discourse evoked in *House Calls*, yet they can also be understood as manifesting a myriad of influences not addressed in this research. Thus, while I am not seeking a holistic account of *House Calls* and *Morty's*, these texts will be used to generate an understanding of a discourse on savvy media reception as well as the reception of the discourse itself.

To this end, the first component of my research consists of a discourse analysis of *House Calls*, a talk show produced by CBS about *Big Brother*. I regard discourse analysis as the most appropriate research method for the fact that it enables the practitioner to underscore a subject position which is expressed in a text, without reducing that position to a mere manifestation of the text (Matheson 2005). Although I offer a more detailed account of *House Calls* in chapter three, and of the underlying structure of my analysis in chapter four, I should mention that in undertaking this analysis I am concerned with statements that constitute a privileged consumption of the *Big Brother* meta-show. While the majority of these statements will originate from the talk show's hosts, input provided by guests and callers will be deemed equally relevant, especially insofar as it triggers discursive reactions from the hosts. The statements evoked from *House Calls* will be arranged into categories that will serve to offer a multifaceted understanding of the subject position being articulated.

More specifically, the first step in effecting this discourse analysis consists in obtaining a familiarity with the *Big Brother* viewing experience. To this end, I have watched the entire array of televised episodes for the sixth season (thirty hour-long episodes in total). In addition, I have viewed every episode of *House Calls* (which aired every weekday for twelve weeks), and visited the live Internet feed and unofficial message boards (the latter two totalling roughly two hours a day for three months). Based on the knowledge derived from this viewing, I established categories of statements that corresponded to the discourse articulated in *House Calls*. Selecting one full week of *House Calls* episodes as my object of analysis was advantageous in that the weekly cycle of *Big Brother* activity was represented. In viewing each of the five episodes two additional times, I performed a thorough audit of each statement made by hosts, callers, and guests. While the vast majority of statements were readily contained within my categories, the later were revised on a number of occasions in order to reflect findings which only became evident further in the analysis.

Following the discourse analysis, the second component of my research will serve to underscore in what capacity this discourse is manifested beyond the *House Calls* text, namely in fan conversations that occur on the *Morty's* website. To this end, I conduct a discourse analysis of audience activity. By this I mean I apply the categories of statements formed in the discourse analysis to arrive at an understanding of that discourse's formation within a separate space. A central concern about conducting this analysis is the notion that there may be a disconnect between the talk show and the message board insofar as audiences who contribute to the latter may not have access to the former. In accounting for this, I will concentrate on conversations that pertain to

House Calls. One section of *Morty's* in particular is designated for discussions of this nature. While not all of the 963 statements in this section readily corresponded to the categories established in the discourse analysis, those which replicated as well as deviated from these categories were utilized.

As such, my research draws upon a context of previous ethnographic work surrounding mass media audiences (Ang 1985; Hill 2005). These attempts at understanding audience engagement have been remarkably fruitful in that they have treated the immediate environment – both cultural and material - in which textual reception occurs as a crucial analytical focal point. Annette Hill's work in particular has underscored the importance of arguably pedestrian determinants such as the interpersonal dynamics among a family of viewers and the level of attentiveness one manifests when watching television (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999). My research marks a divergence from this work in that I am looking at virtual contexts through which media texts may be rendered meaningful. While I am not alone in researching this development (Holmes, 2004), my work is differentiated insofar as I am looking at instances where this context is generated by the television program's production team instead of uniquely by audiences themselves.

Disambiguation of Terminology

Prior to effecting an analysis of this nature, it is crucially important to clarify the meanings implied in several of the terms that will be used. This will be especially helpful considering the fact that this research will involve the employment and subsequent abstraction of numerous lay terms. For instance, I refer to media texts as the object of my

analysis. While this term does include actual electronic text that is made available online, I also use this term to denote statements and conversations that take place on *House Calls* as well as conversations and activity that is broadcast through the Internet feed and television program, notably in recognition of the narration which often accompanies the latter.

In addition, I will frequently refer to the producers or production team responsible for the *Big Brother* meta-show (a term that will be addressed shortly). While my understanding of producers may match general usage insofar as I am describing the array of individuals responsible for the manufacture of a television program, in my meaning I also include other staff such as directors, editors and marketers. Although the tensions inherent in relations between these different functionaries may be pertinent at a later stage, for the purposes of this thesis I wish to concentrate on relations between this group and audiences. In using this term, I must remain cognizant of the fact that individuals employed to work on *Big Brother* may not be deliberately engineering a discourse that engages savvy audiences, even if this is the end result of their labour. As such, the potential remains that the meta-show's producers may conduct themselves inappropriately, as when the host of the *House Calls* talk show encourages members of an audience-generated fan site not to watch *Big Brother*. To be sure, such transgressions are particularly lucrative in that they outline the kinds of self-governance that the meta-show seeks to instil in audiences.

While I will sustain boundaries in my understanding of audiences, at no point do I attempt to establish an entirely stable definition of this term. Indeed, recent scholarly material on the topic has acknowledged the concept's volatile nature, suggesting that

researchers should not aspire to simply understand what audiences are and be done with it (Abercrombie 1998; Mosco and Kaye 2000). Bearing this complication in mind, I wish to employ a selective definition of *Big Brother* audiences that is subject to a number of criteria. In addition to having watched at least one episode of *House Calls*, my articulation of audience will also necessitate a familiarity with either the live Internet feed of *Big Brother* or the televised program (even if one has not directly watched either of these), as well as having posted at least one message on a *Big Brother* themed website. I have selected these criteria in order to illustrate a viewer who manifests an understanding of the connections between the various elements of the meta-show. Yet in generating a conditional definition of *Big Brother* audiences, I am calling into question the significance of my analysis, in that I may only be limited to understanding a fraction of the program's audiences. While I fully acknowledge that this definition may only represent a marginal minority of *Big Brother* viewers, this degree of selectivity is in line with previous research on fan cultures. As such, my inability to generalize my findings to the full scope of *Big Brother* fans is mitigated by their relevance to other clusters of media-savvy audiences, such as those who would manifest a comparable engagement with other reality programs such as *Survivor* and *American Idol*. As well, the cynical approach that audiences manifest towards inhabitants of the *Big Brother* enclosure is relevant in the context of the increasingly (multi-)mediated nature of peer based relations, where emerging technologies allow increased opportunities for dissimulation as well as strategies for monitoring peer dissimulation.

My research explores the relations between audiences and producers, which are based on their respective involvement with the *Big Brother* meta-show. By the term

meta-show I refer to the totality of textual information that surrounds *Big Brother*, including the televised program. This term is rooted in a tradition of fan studies that have sought an understanding of media events that extends beyond television programs and movies in order to include peripheral elements such as those generated by audiences. The term is especially relevant given the contemporary mediascape that advocates for a multimodal consumption of media texts. Although I provide a detailed account of the *Big Brother* meta-show in the third chapter, some relevant components include the Internet feed as well as *House Calls* and official episode summaries. Traditionally this term has included textual elements which have been generated by audiences themselves (Jenkins 1992). However, *House Calls* as well as other meta-show elements produced by CBS promote a consumption of *Big Brother* that does not include fan-generated content. Presumably, this practice serves to privilege CBS' interests insofar as the consumption of *Big Brother* remains an activity that is predominantly regulated by the broadcasting corporation. As I am concerned with CBS' articulation of the meta-show, I employ a definition of the meta-show that excludes fan-generated elements, although these will be studied in detail in chapter five. Related to the term meta-show, I wish to employ the term meta-text to denote the discursive logic that unifies the various meta-show components.

Chapter Outline

The second chapter seeks to produce a comprehensive understanding of the academic literature that informs this research. This chapter is divided into three sections, with each section corresponding to a relevant theoretical position. I begin by addressing the discipline society model outlined in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, extending this

model to contemporary surveillance regimes as well as representations of surveillance in the media. Following this, I present a view of agentic resistance derived from cultural studies. This perspective is especially relevant in the context of audience reception, and is credited for having greatly enriched media analysis by shifting the focus towards the context in which media texts are consumed. Finally, I will consider the extent to which critical media reception is the product of a discursive engagement that acknowledges the perceived flaws and contradictions inherent in media production.

Effecting a discourse analysis of the prescribed reception of *Big Brother* will require a thorough understanding of the reality program as well as its position in the context of an ever shifting mediascape. To this end, the third chapter will offer a detailed explanation of *Big Brother*, starting with a primer on reality television. Instead of presenting a myopic vision of a recent televisual genre, I will instead consider the prominence of reality claims in mass media from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Far from coming off as a recent trend, reality television will be presented as the most recent attempt to deliver a realistic articulation of the social. From this I will present a comprehensive description of *Big Brother*, spanning from the original Dutch version to the most recent American season. Beyond the television program, I will offer a comprehensive audit of the fan spaces engineered by its production team, placing an emphasis on the online talk show *House Calls*.

The fourth chapter will consist of a discourse analysis of *House Calls*. This analysis will focus specifically on the kind of audience reception of *Big Brother* that the talk show prescribes. I am particularly interested in the manner in which a savvy consumption is advocated through an acknowledgment of the program's contradictory

and manipulative nature. Additionally, I am interested in *House Calls*' articulation of an engaged viewership that not only relies of a myriad of sources of information, but is primarily concerned with the conduct of individuals located within the *Big Brother* enclosure. This analysis will also illustrate how audiences are invited to offer their opinions of houseguests on the talk show. While this many amount to according a degree of authorship to audiences, my discourse analysis will underscore the fact that this constitutes a colonization of audience resistance insofar as audiences are being offered a marginal position within a carefully surveyed semantic field.

While the analysis undertaken in the fourth chapter will offer a detailed account of activity within the official *Big Brother* fan space, it remains that our understanding of fan activity in general will be far from exhaustive. While the resources offered on CBS' fan (web-)site are extensive and readily accessible, audiences may also access sites which are not directly regulated by *Big Brother*'s production team. To this end, the fifth chapter will focus on one of these fan-based sites to understand the manner in which audiences make use of *House Calls*' discourse. In addition to looking at the manner in which the viewing position articulated in this discourse is reproduced, I will also consider the possibility of audience resistance insofar as the discourse may be contested or rearticulated.

The sixth and final chapter will serve as a discussion of my findings. In particular, I will assess the theoretical framework outlined in the first chapter in light of the discursive activity yielded in the fourth and fifth chapters. Avoiding a conclusion where agency triumphs over structure or vice-versa, I will instead seek a nuanced perspective that addresses the tensions engendered by both poles. Additionally, this chapter will

underscore the limitations inherent in the theoretical framework as well as the manner in which it has been actualized. This criticism will illuminate the direction that future research may follow.

CHAPTER TWO – REVIEW OF RELEVANT SCHOLARLY MATERIAL

Panopticism, Surveillance, and Reality Television

Undoubtedly, surveillance is among the most illuminating topics within contemporary social theory. By considering the conduits through which information is (and may be) gathered, the discourses which inform these arrangements and the subjects which emerge as a consequence, surveillance studies enable an understanding of current and potential social arrangements. Although typically associated with the study of subaltern groups, it has since been applied to issues surrounding emerging marketing technologies as well as peer-based communications. Regarding the latter, the increasingly uncertain nature of both personal and professional relations has been articulated alongside strategies, products and services marketed as guarantors of certainty.

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is largely regarded as the most influential theoretical work in the field of surveillance studies. Through a careful arrangement of gruesomely detailed executions and blueprints for proper conduct, Foucault (1995) seeks to map out a transition regarding the governance of regimes over their subjects. The old model can be characterized by brutal and corporeal manifestations of the sovereign. Gradually, compliance was induced not from spectacular displays of repression, but rather through the dispersed minutiae of proper conduct. The principal example used to illustrate the latter is the panopticon, originally a prison design by the 18th century utilitarian Jeremy Bentham. The design consists of an array of cells located around the periphery, with an all-seeing guard tower located in the centre. While the guard has visual access to any individual cell, the inmate can see neither the guard nor any other cell; only the tower's opaque façade is in view. The inmate is unable to

determine when he or she is under scrutiny; the only strategy at their disposal is to conduct themselves as though they were perpetually under watch. Thus, inmates come to monitor themselves with a diligence unmatched by any external guard or team of guards. This can be regarded as an instance of self-governance: a subject – a prison inmate in this case – is constituted by an external authority. In a move that could either be seen as an act of strategic resistance by the subject or an attempt to induce the most cellular form of compliance by the regime, the individual metabolizes this subjectivity as it becomes their own mandate to situate themselves within the regime. The inmate is actively involved in constituting his or her subjectivity by fusing inherited knowledge of the various subject positions offered to prisoners with a strategic navigation towards the type of recognition they seek to receive from guards and staff. Accordingly, we may wish to extend this model beyond the prison walls and consider the subjectivities with which individuals contend within everyday settings.

It is important to note that little consensus has been achieved regarding which articulation of panopticism most accurately reflects contemporary relations. For his part, David Lyon (1993) observes that new electronic technologies not discussed in *Discipline and Punish* exhibit panoptic monitoring and sorting. However, Lyon contends that Foucault and other theorists' totalizing articulation of panopticism overlooks other forms of social ordering (*Ibid.*). From this one might reason that the panoptic guard tower, despite indications to the contrary, is not monolithic in its nature. Rather, it operates in conjunction with (or, in other cases, in isolation from) other mechanisms of ordering and constraint. Lyon's (2001) perspective enables us to consider a dispersed mapping of surveillance apparatuses, each containing information that may leak beyond its

designated territory. Conversely, Oscar Gandy (1993) prefers to treat panopticism as an ever-expanding system of information management. It is through multifaceted monitoring and sorting that Gandy speculates that subjects are reconstituted as consuming subjects. Mark Poster (1990) contends that individuals are subject to a superpanopticon, a system that harnesses the guard tower's totalizing gaze and disperses it in the form of databases of information. Although there is an immediate appeal to updating the guard-tower imagery in light of new forms of data-collection, it appears advisable to carefully scrutinize the Foucauldian logic that accompanies it before casting it away as well (Simon 2005).

To this end, we can consider the inmate-guard relation in light of current information and communication paradigms. While Foucault's work may be recognized as presenting a totalizing vision of contemporary society, he perplexingly omits the mass media from his model. Thomas Mathiesen (1997), for one, articulates Foucault's panoptic society as one where the few (and typically hegemonic) see the many (typically the masses, or subaltern populations). Deeming this model inadequate, Mathiesen proposes an accompaniment called synopticism, where the many oversee the few. Such a descriptor resonates with our understanding of the mass media. While maintaining a distinction between panoptic and synoptic apparatuses, Mathiesen argues that they have been fuelled by the same historical conditions, noting the industrial revolution as an accelerant towards their contemporary state (*Ibid.*). Additionally, Mathiesen further crystallizes the difference between panoptic and synoptic apparatuses by stating that the former target subjects' behaviour while the latter target subjects' consciousness. As an example of the panoptic influence on behaviour, Mathiesen cites his experiences during

the McCarthyist period in the United States. While Marxists might have taken particular measures to appear compliant with anticommunist sentiment, their beliefs remained unaltered. Conversely, Mathiesen invokes the Frankfurt School in order to convey the mass media's influence on subjectivity.

While there is an intuitive appeal in the concurrent development of monitoring and broadcasting technologies, Mathiesen's differentiation between panoptic and synoptic processes requires further elaboration. In particular, moving from abstraction to practical examples raises some concerns. For example, in my earlier work on this topic I have considered the extent to which seemingly panoptic devices such as a prison guard tower operate synoptically as well (Trottier 2006). While the guard tower may benefit from lighting that enables the guard to monitor inmates without being seen, the tower itself operates synoptically insofar as it visually communicates its (singular) presence to the (many) inmates. In fact, it is possible to consider the guard tower as uniquely synoptic if there is no surveillance taking place while the tower remains a daunting reminder to inmates that they are being constituted as monitored subjects. Moving beyond the prison walls, CCTV cameras located in a train station – regardless of whether or not they are operative – can be understood as communicating subject positions (the potential criminal, the potential victim). In fact, one might speculate that the cameras might experience greater success as synoptic devices than a mass media product that addresses commuting subjectivities such as *Train 48* (a fictional television filmed on a set that is meant to simulate a Toronto commuter train).

Furthermore, we may distinguish panopticism from synopticism in terms of what is made visible in either process. While panopticism renders the many visible to the few,

very few synoptic instances involve the few becoming the object of scrutiny for the many. There is certainly a wealth of contemporary examples of powerful figures whose private affairs have found prominence in the public sphere. Should Bill Clinton's relations with Monica Lewinsky be attributed to a decline in moral character, or to an increase in synoptic technologies and strategies that weren't around during Kennedy's presidency? Yet synopticism is also comprised of instances where information about the many is being relayed to them by the few. Purportedly, *Train 48* conveys more information about its viewers than about the CanWest Global executives who are responsible for its airing (the same can be said about the CCTV infrastructure in the train station). Bearing this in mind, it appears necessary to clarify that both panoptic and synoptic devices are actually rather similar insofar as they are both operated by the few and onto the many. This perspective crystallizes a gap between the few who are always constituting subjectivities and the many whose subjectivities are perpetually being constituted.

A more nuanced understanding of panoptic and synoptic processes enables us to consider the connections between mass media (reality television in particular) and surveillance. A review of the literature indicates that reality TV and surveillance ultimately overlap in a manner that is reminiscent of panoptic-synoptic relations. Here, we can consider examples of crime-based reality programs such as *Cops*, *World's Dumbest Criminals* and *Crimestoppers U.K.* The conventional media-studies take on these shows would be that they perform synoptic functions such as providing subject positions for viewers to adopt. In other words, audiences are invited to understand themselves as potential victims of violent crimes, as well as potential crime fighters if

they report suspicious others to the show's producers. Yet reality TV's relations to surveillance is underscored when considering that such programs broadcast events recorded by surveillance devices like CCTV cameras and cameras mounted on police car front windshields. This serves as a clear example of panoptically derived information (accompanied by selective editing and a calculated narrative) being used in a synoptic apparatus. Fishman and Cavender (1998) have explored the divergences between rates of violent criminal activity and the portion of airtime accorded to these crimes, noting the manner in which the overrepresentation of such crimes lends support to punitive forms of law-enforcement. Likewise, Aaron Doyle's (2003) case study of *Cops* highlights the particular state of dependency that characterizes the relationship between the show's producers and the officers from whom footage is produced. As a result, law enforcement practice is portrayed as resulting in a disproportionate amount of arrests, lending synoptic support to controversial surveillance practices such as racial profiling. Doyle's work has also focused on the use of footage derived from CCTV networks in crime based programs, noting the promotional effect the synoptic broadcasting of this footage has had for the propagation of such networks. Other academic material has addressed the portrayal of surveillance practices such as CCTV within the media. Nic Goombridge (2002) has noted the manner in which the prevalence of these practices within a vast array of programs is indicative of an increasing preoccupation with, among other things, their efficacy. In response to this research, Kammerer (2004) has looked more specifically at the increasing employment of CCTV elements in Hollywood movies, noting the manner in which this broadcasting accompanies contemporary surveillance practices by way of Mathiesen's synopticism. Finally, Elayne Rapping interestingly notes

the "othering" that occurs within this sub-genre and suggests that this kind of portrayal contributes to the marketing of "new, harsher methods of repression" (Rapping, 2004, p.228).

Another example involving synoptic reality TV and panoptic surveillance would be makeover programs such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Trading Spouses*. While the footage in these shows doesn't stem directly from panoptic infrastructures, *Queer Eye* (among others) has reaped financial backing through the pretence that it encourages audiences to cooperate with panoptic marketing apparatuses (Florian 2004). While makeover programs may not target and "work on" subaltern populations to the same degree as crime-based programs, the subjectivity that is being constituted in these shows takes place in much more pedestrian settings (the bedroom, the kitchen, the bathroom). This kind of backgrounding insidiously enables these discourses to escape critical scrutiny. Mark Andrejevic (2002) touches upon this process in his discussion of *Big Brother's* first U.S. season, noting its relevance in context with the emergence of the online economy and dispersed monitoring practices that accompany it.

Making sense of reality television is greatly enabled through the social imagery conveyed in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. While there may be little consensus regarding the extent to which the prison walls and guard tower can be stretched to map out society, panopticism resonates with the anxieties expressed in contemporary social theories. We can consider panopticism's relevance to mass media by underscoring the subject positions that it accords to individuals. While viewing *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* may lead audiences to come to see themselves as perpetually

subject to a panoptic gaze, *COPS* viewers may situate themselves within the guard tower. In both cases, newly emerging surveillance technologies are naturalized.

Resisting Reality Television

The scenario presented in the previous section undoubtedly resonates with media watchdog groups, diligent parents and cultural critics who are comfortably detached from 'mass' society. Yet concerns about reality television's detrimental synoptic properties overlook the pluralized engagements that viewers have with media texts. Surely we can endow media consumers with enough self-consistency to not be reconstituted by reality programming. The following literature balances out Foucault and Mathiessen's subject-constituting processes by articulating individuals as agents capable of resisting panopticism and synopticism.

Around the same time that Foucault was writing about guard towers, cultural theorist Stuart Hall envisioned audience reception as determined from both peripheral, localized contexts and central authors. The production of meaning is an activity shared between encoding producers and decoding receivers (Hall 1980). While producers and receivers are still regarded as separate agents, Hall maintains that they are related insofar as "they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole." (*Ibid.*: 130). From this perspective, the extent to which a *COPS* audience member comes to favour surveillance regimes is equally determined by their own experiences as subjects of these regimes[1]. As a consequence, the encoding/decoding model suggests heterogeneous audience positions. Hall notes three in

[1]Yet it remains that simulated events witnessed through the media may be received by audiences as more real than anything experienced in actuality (Baudrillard, 1994; *c.f.* Bogard, 1996)

particular: a dominant viewership that remains in accordance with the author-encoded meaning, an oppositional viewership that rejects the author's narrative in favour of localized (or earlier) meanings, and a negotiated viewership that attempts to reconcile any gaps between encoded and decoded meanings (*Ibid.*). In relation to reality programming, Hall's model suggests negotiated and oppositional readings specifically take issue with the reality claims presented in these programs.

David Morley and Charlotte Brundson's (1999) *Nationwide* study is recognized as a seminal application of Hall's model. In this study, Morley and Brundson interviewed members of diverging socio-cultural groups regarding their equally divergent readings of a British televised news program. Other studies have yielded support for Hall's pluralized subject positions by focusing on international audiences of American television. Katz and Liebes (1985) examined how diverging communities within Israel offered diverging interpretations of the 1980s cultural staple, *Dallas*. While such programs raise a variety of issues for audiences, it is argued that the cultural contexts of the various focus groups were responsible for how these issues were received. In a similar light, Ien Ang (1985) conducted a study looking at Dutch *Dallas* audiences, examining how the program would be consumed within a context that maintained a pronounced aversion towards American mass media. Ang notes the various manners in which an enthusiastic viewing of *Dallas* can be reconciled with this cultural sentiment. Yet another study of 1980s American broadcasting is Linda Fuller's (1992) study of *The Cosby Show* audiences. Once again, while the program undoubtedly evoked topics such as race and socio-economic status, audiences – including South Africans living on both sides of the apartheid – utilized their cultural contexts to generate their own interpretation of how these topics related to the

program. Jhally and Lewis (1992) present a similar analysis, arguing that the Huxtables are deliberately constructed so as to offer multiple readings and thus encourage consumption from both marginal and non-marginal audiences. At this point it becomes clear that this purported attempt at producing polysemic media jeopardizes the notion of a dominant reading, assuming audience marginality cannot be synoptically (re)produced. It is important to add that the notion of a 'local' context is not necessarily geographic in nature, notably as recent developments in communication technology has greatly accelerated mediated flows of information (Mitchell 2003).

John Fiske's articulation of popular culture accompanies Hall's encoding/ decoding model as a testament of audience resistance. For Fiske (1989), popular culture is differentiated from dominant or hegemonic culture insofar as the former serves as a subordinated appropriation of the latter. Counter-hegemonic meanings generated by *American Idol* audiences – and not *American Idol* itself - would be considered popular culture. Fiske's work draws heavily on Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a treatment of dispersed and subordinate instances of meaning-production. For de Certeau, hegemonic discourses correspond to systems against which popular usage "constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations" (de Certeau 1988:18). In other words, while "everyday" institutions such as shopping centres are designed through the constitution of a particular consumer-subject, usage of the shopping centre corresponds to a diverging subject position.

Clearly there are parallels between Fiske's popular readings and Hall's negotiated and oppositional readings. However, Fiske's differentiation between popular and dominant readings is much more pronounced than Hall's resistant, negotiated and

dominant readings. Maintaining such a gap between the popular and the dominant may become problematic if popular meanings have (at least partial) origins in dominant discourse. For instance, a popular reading of *The Amazing Race* might privilege the reception of exotic locations and luxury cars over the competitive nature of the show. While such meaning can be directly attributed to popular audiences, in turn these audiences might have been partially constituted by discourses propagated by the tourism and automotive industries. This framework rightly points to the possibility of popular culture emerging from marginal pockets, one can't help but wonder how producers will cope with this kind of "poaching" in the cases where it can be reconciled with the dominant forms of consumption.

Henry Jenkins' (1992) *Textual Poachers* also serves as a fruitful application of de Certeau within media studies. Specifically, Jenkins examines the development of marginal fan communities, emphasizing the extent to which they generate their own forms of media consumption and thus engage in antagonistic relationships with producers of programs such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Twin Peaks*. It is likely that producers would have a desire to appropriate and sanitize these kinds of audience appropriations. As an example, Jenkins points to the use of newsgroups and other online technologies for the intensification of fan consumption of *Twin Peaks* (*Ibid.*). Well over a decade later, the Internet holds a substantially more privileged position with regards to broadcast media. It is with this observation in mind that Deery (2003) highlights the mainstreaming of online forms of supplementary consumption. Likewise, van Zoonen (2004) highlights the participatory nature of programs such as *American Idol* and *Big*

Brother as contributing to fan communities that are capable of being sustained from one season to the next.

Annette Hill's extensive material on audience studies emphasizes the importance of studying local contexts. Methodologically, this is accomplished by conducting research within audiences' own viewing environment and paying attention to how local factors (such as a spouse's viewing tastes or the possession of a VCR) shape individual viewerships. While her collaborative study with David Gauntlett for the British Film Institute (1999) emerges as her most recognizable work, she has recently published a book looking specifically addressing reality TV audiences. In this book, Hill underscores the extent to which audiences deconstruct the reality claims made by these programs through a negotiation with supposedly authentic social determinants (2005). Additionally, her earlier work on violent entertainment underscores audiences' capacity to differentiate between real and fictional violence as well as audience awareness of the effects that exposure to the latter might have on their attitudes towards the former (Hill 1997). From her research emerges a ground-level understanding of audiences as capable of balancing local conditions against meanings generated in mass media texts. What's more, this research suggests an understanding of audience resistance that is not necessarily a deliberate and politicized act. Resistance towards a crime-based reality show may be based on a viewer's torrid relations with police officers, yet it could just as likely originate from a partially-distracted viewership that mistakenly believes the program is fictional and suffering from repetitive settings and lousy actors. In both cases, the producers' intended meanings are pre-empted by audiences; whether or not the audience intended to resist is an afterthought.

Reality television in particular has been the subject of critical popular discourses that underscore the manifestation of resistance against the genre. During its first American season, *Big Brother* became the target of a publicized campaign denouncing the program's voyeuristic nature. Through the use of airplane banners, the show's isolated houseguests were nearly convinced to walk off the set (Wilson 2004; Andrejevic 2004). Similar forms of resistance have been noted towards maternity-themed reality TV programs (Maher 2004). It is worth noting that public resistance was also witnessed in other countries (Mathijs 2002). Beyond this, some theorists have considered reality television's positioning in response to the shortcomings of previous genres as conducive to a viewership that critically engages with the discursive claims made in the media. In particular, reality programming is understood as a sort of catalyst regarding the contested divisions between private and public spheres (Van Zoonen 2001) as well as the border between authenticity and performance (Barcan 2002; Lewis 2004; LeBesco 2004). In accordance with Hall's encoding/decoding model, Hartly (2004) has noted that audience reception of character performance is crucial when producing meaning for these performances.

From these considerations emerges an understanding of audiences that endows them with the possibility to resist subject positions that are discursively offered through media texts. As such, it can be said that audiences are granted with partial authorship of these texts. While a division may remain between those who generate meaning in a television studio and those who perform this act in front of a television, the gap between the many and few that is central to panoptic dynamics is called into question. As a parallel to diverging audience positions, we may consider a similar divergence occurring

within conventional surveillance relations (Green 1999). An individual facing a security camera (a panoptic device which nevertheless synoptically broadcasts an intended meaning and subject position) may adopt the equivalent of a "dominant" reading of the camera by seeing themselves as a potential criminal/victim and in need of proper self-conduct. Yet they may also produce a resistant reading by recognizing the camera as a decoy that should bear no influence on their conduct (whether or not the camera is a decoy is another matter). In commenting on *Discipline and Punish*, Anthony Giddens (1984) contends that Foucault underestimates inmates' ability to exercise agency within panoptic spaces. Foucault's panopticon is subsequently contrasted with Goffman's (1961) work on total institutions, with an emphasis placed on the plural coping strategies that the latter recognizes in inmates. Among other possibilities, Goffman's subjects may actively reject the institutional discourse or withdraw completely from it, with the latter constituting the most accessible exit strategy. The existence of these diverging strategies suggests that a supposedly "total" institution is incapable of generating a unitary subject positions for inmates.

Governance and the Anticipation/Cultivation of Resistant Audiences

Individuals who are subject to surveillance or media regimes, negotiating with panoptic and synoptic circuits, can now be understood as exercising some degree of autonomy by virtue of the array of meanings they may draw upon. Yet we should not assume that individuals are working alone in generating these meanings. In an era when prominent media-figures warn viewing subjects not to trust the media, it is necessary to consider the extent that resistant discourses are articulated outside the viewing subject. In

considering Gramsci's "organic intellectuals" as well as Katz and Lazarsfeld's "opinion leaders," we find support for the idea that audience resistance draws upon discourses that are situated outside of the audience member.

Beyond this, contemporary studies have suggested that polysemic media texts themselves encourage multiple readings. Ostensibly, auxiliary meanings could serve as a recognition and attempted channelling of critical discourses beyond the producers' immediate control. As an example, we could reconsider the American *Big Brother* production team's attempt to cope with a disappointing first season. It has previously been acknowledged that producers are actively involved in shaping its critical discourse (Biltereyst 2004). As an enriched understanding of discursive formation looks beyond attractive but dispersed politicized moments, it is worthwhile to examine instances where little friction exists beyond producers and audiences. In the vein of Lyotard's paralogy, competitive reality programs such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, and *American Idol* benefit from generating a viewer climate based on uncertain outcomes (Haralovich and Trosset 2004). Because audiences cannot ascertain a winner until the end of the season, (meta-)discourses that articulate winning attributes cannot privilege themselves over others.

If media regimes are capable of articulating resistant discourses, it is worthwhile to reconsider surveillance regimes as well. From Foucault's panoptic model one can look at instances where discourses embedded in the architecture generate diverging inmate conduct. Governance as a social concept illuminates the engagement between the few guardians/administrators and many users. Both guards inhabiting guard towers and media figures can be understood as operating with a degree of authority, imparting conductive strategies to subjects of their regimes (Rose 1998). In conjunction with polysemic media

texts, an individual may negotiate with(in) several regimes. To this end, resistance against one regime may draw upon strategies that have been articulated by the targeted regime. The governance perspective is especially relevant in a political context of scaled-down social services and media regulation by governing agents (Cruikshank 1993). In response to these conditions, users are invited to a state of empowerment (*c.f.* Glynn 2000) that places the onus of responsibility on the individual (Ouelette 2004). Bearing such conditions in mind, both the prison guard and eventually the guard tower can be deemed unnecessary. As an example we can consider the redundancy of the judges on *American Idol* when the work of artist-selection is left in audiences' hands.

Effecting a transition from the inmate/guard tower relation that operates through a singular normalizing discourse towards governing subjects that draw upon plural discourses is bound to the transition Gilles Deleuze notes from disciplinary societies to control societies:

> In disciplinary societies you were always starting all over again (as you went from school to barracks, from barracks to factory), while in control societies you never finish anything – business, training, and military service being coexisting metastable states of a single modulation, a sort of universal transmutation. (Deleuze 1995: 179)

Thus, where rigid borders separated discursive engagements from one another in disciplinary societies, control societies suggest a liberation from particular sites of engagement only insofar as locations themselves are no longer important. Furthermore, resistance towards one discourse may occur, but only within a context of perpetual discursive engagements. Communication among subjects, which was strictly regulated in disciplinary societies, is now amplified through new technologies and emerging markets. Thus, prison walls give way to instantaneous and continual speech activity as a more (cost-)effective way to bind individuals to discursive engagement (*Ibid.*; Dovey 2000;

MacGregor Wise 2002). Jean Baudrillard echoes this sentiment in noting the revolutionary potential of mass-scale withdrawal from social discourses:

> It is a question of life and death. When the indifference of the masses becomes dangerous for the political or cultural class, then interactive strategies must be invented to extort a response at any price. In fact, the interactive mass is still a mass, with all the characteristics of a mass, simply reflecting itself on both sides of the screen. (Baudrillard 1995: 101)

Whereas a Frankfurt School-inspired model of audiences would regard audience passivity as a state of complete subjugation, Baudrillard envisions media texts and their producers discursively engaging with audiences through feedback technologies. Because overwhelming audiences with synoptic fanfare may lead to resistant readings, mis-readings or a withdrawal from the text, a symbolically marginal form of authorship is accorded to audiences in order to sustain correct viewerships.

In returning to Goffman's *Asylums*, we see that these strategies predate the postmodern era. In order to maintain compliance among patients towards the institution and its staff, events such as the annual "mixer" as well as the house organ were utilized. The house organ served as the official print media within total institutions, with writing positions given to select inmates (Goffman 1961). Goffman notes that this enabled inmates to exercise a familiarity with the institution's official language. Interestingly, resistant subjectivities are incorporated into this official discourse by way of the annual mixer. This gathering between staff, officials and patients permits the latter to offer harsh satirical critique of institutional life (*Ibid.*). This example underscores the concern among discursive regimes to contain resistant subject positions that cannot otherwise be suppressed. From all this emerges an understanding of contemporary media practices that, far from being endangered by the indignant enthusiasm of audiences, is actually containing these audiences through the dissemination of a particular language of media

experts. This perspective resonates with Foucault's first volume of *History of Sexuality*, where deviant subject positions, seemingly repressed by dominant discourses, are actually produced by these discourses in order to engage subjects (1990). As Deleuze notes:

> Repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and even rarer, thing that might be worth saying. (Deleuze 1995: 129)

In the place of daily organs and yearly mixers, we can consider the increasing prevalence of web-based technologies that are used to provoke audience activity. Having long remained the exclusive domain of fans (Jenkins 1992), reality TV producers are making use of the Internet to generate audience feedback. In addition to adapting to audiences who are demanding greater interactivity (Haralovich and Trosset 2004; Cavender 2004; Deery 2003), these sites offer a marginal position for potentially resistant fans within the program's meta-discourse.

From this we may speculate that reality programming engages audiences by offering them savvy subject positions. Indeed, the reality principle upon which these shows operate becomes the object of critical scrutiny, allowing audiences to exercise a privileged "insider" position (Andrejevic 2004; McCarthy 2004). This kind of savvy is reminiscent of Todd Giltin's work on the media's meta-coverage of political campaigns, where public discourse takes a backseat to the horserace-like discussion of polls and campaign strategies. Gitlin (1990) argues that the cynical deconstruction of electoral promises serves to naturalize the manipulative nature of contemporary politics. Thus, in political races and in reality television, audiences may wish to further the manipulative discourse if they believe they maintain a savvy position that is privileged over the

"dupes" who believe what they see on TV or hear in political speeches. As a corollary in the realm of surveillance, this savvy cynicism serves as an accelerant in peer-based surveillance technologies that call upon subjects to not be duped by the manipulative nature of their daily interactions (Andrejevic 2005)

Media texts that induce this kind of savvy are characterized by a self-reflexive nature that calls upon the sophisticated viewer to recognize a discourse about discursive engagements. Caldwell (2002) comments on this phenomenon extensively by highlighting episodes of television programs where a storyline involving the presence of a documentary crew helps develop a narrative about the program's narration. In response to this article, Julie Russo (2005) offers a close reading of a similar episode of *The West Wing* to demonstrate that although viewers are capable of crudely discerning between fiction and reality, this reflexivity contributes to a gradation between these two poles that complicates evaluative/resistant forms of TV viewing. Similarly, David Morley (1999) points to this phenomenon through an examination of the interplay and continuity between fictional programs that comment upon contemporary politics such as *Murphy Brown*, and the reciprocal engagement of synoptic political figures such as Dan Quayle.

From this, one realizes the appeal of governance as a concept insofar as it provides a fresh approach to the structure / agency binary. While self-governing subjects are clearly operating in conjunction with a particular regime, this behaviour cannot be written off simply as the result of false consciousness. Likewise, one can conceive of resistance against a particular regime without relying upon the notion of human agency. The resistant human can be understood as the site of multiple clashing regimes of the self which may have been synoptically transmitted through a pluralized mediascape. While

reality programming may dictate how audiences should conduct themselves, increasingly it would appear that this discourse is situated in the margins of these texts. This resonates with both Jenkins' and Fiske's models of audience resistance where viewers negotiate with or outright reject meanings conveyed in media texts. The increasing prevalence of online interactive technologies does not constitute a break from this model, but rather a re-colonization of them by media producers. This appropriation is especially pertinent insofar as it invokes a cynical, media-savvy viewership and contains it within the confines of media texts, ensuring that savvy consumption wins out over cynical exit strategies.

Discussion

Although the theoretical frameworks examined above would initially appear to offer conflicting accounts of contemporary audience activity, in actuality resistant audiences often manifest some degree of self-governance in a manner that is not disharmonious with lateral surveillance practices. To be sure, audience reception is tempered by an array of conditions that are not particular to the media text, but rather to the viewer and the environment in which reception takes place. In watching *Big Brother*, audiences generate meanings not only through the program itself, but also through sources beyond the immediate text including their own cohabitational experiences, other reality programs, and fan activity surrounding the program. While this opens the possibility of critical readings of *Big Brother* - denouncing the show's voyeuristic nature for instance -, the show's producers have constructed an elaborate meta-show from which emerge savvy interpretations of the program's shortcomings.

While resistant readings of media texts have typically been articulated as detrimental to the text's producers, they may be effected in a manner that generates an engaged reception of the program. By focusing on pathological instances of daily conduct, many reality programs call upon a reception whereupon viewers are invited to generate their own meanings of events that are broadcast. For example, the dissimulative nature of peer relations in *Big Brother* can be understood as necessitating that audiences increasingly seek information in order to deconstruct claims that houseguests generate regarding their own intentions and conduct. Here, passive reception gives way to a surveillance-based engagement with programs, with audiences actively collecting information and generating their own meanings of houseguest activity. In addition to engaging in lateral surveillance by monitoring 'real' people (who could be potential roommates, co-workers, and loved ones), audience conduct also implicitly endorses information flows that converge and coalesce into central databases insofar as this kind of surveillance is necessary for the program's functioning. Likewise, audience activity is predicated on the disclosure of information in the form of various feedback mechanisms.

This surveillance-based reception constitutes a form of self-governance insofar as the techniques and strategies that make up proper viewership are dispersed to audiences. In the case of contemporary communication technology, this governance relies upon audiences with a savvy awareness of the limitations of realism and representation in the media as well as mediated communication. While this kind of governance can potentially be dispersed to a variety of pedestrian situations, the fact remains that limitations do exist to curb its influence. Whether or not such discourses are met with resistance, they may be

articulated in manners that undermine their original intentions, or at least stray away from them (Goffman 1961).

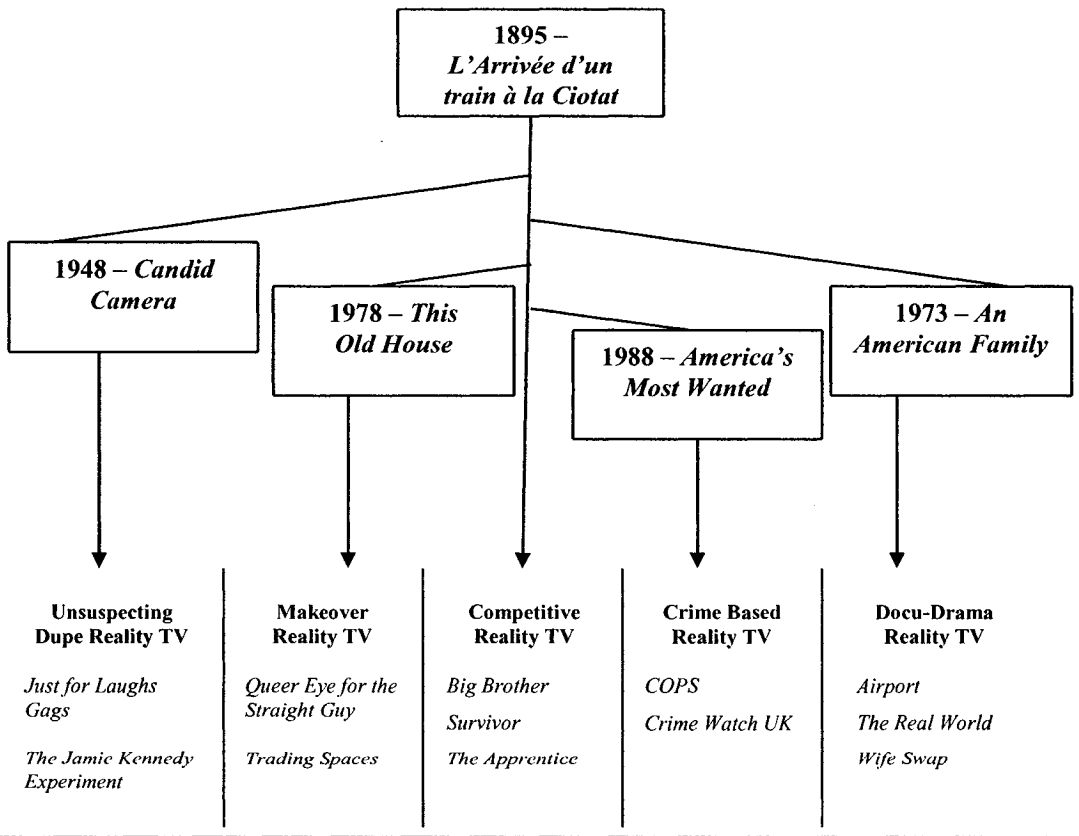
CHAPTER THREE – MAKING SENSE OF *BIG BROTHER*

Big Brother's Cultural Context

Along with fellow cohabitation-based gamedoc *Survivor*, *Big Brother* is situated among the first reality programs during the genre's North American windup in 2000. To be sure, these shows do not mark the first time media producers have synoptically played with notions of reality and the real. The Lumière Brothers' *L'Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat* was allegedly well acclaimed in 1895 for its believability. Into the twentieth century, a preoccupation developed among producers and audiences for delivering previously unattained degrees of realism. In addition to audio-visual innovations, producers developed premises to compensate for deficiencies that were perceived in earlier formats. Allen Funt's *Candid Camera* (1948) provided audiences with a genuine unsuspecting dupe whose overwhelmed conduct in ostensibly real settings gone horribly - and deliberately - wrong is reminiscent of earlier scripted films like Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). Bound to this latest articulation of the real is the claim that audiences were aware of the constructed nature of the event. In contrast, it is only when the dupe is made aware of the cameras that they can claim this fact, yielding several minutes of savvy consumption. *An American Family*, broadcast on PBS in 1973, was considered as a forerunner to contemporary family-themed reality programs like *Wife Swap* (2003) and *Nanny 911* (2004). The show drew considerable attention from audiences and critics alike due to the treatment of issues such as divorce and homosexuality. This deviated sharply from the idyllic portrayals of the modern nuclear family in earlier sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* (1954). In the late 1980's, crime-based reality programs such as *America's Most Wanted* (1988) and *Cops* (1989)

harnessed the dramatic narration found in fictional crime programs and fused it a vignette-based presentation of events reminiscent of the six o'clock news. By broadcasting footage of actual criminal activity, these programs enabled audiences to bear witness to the inefficacy of modern socio-political rehabilitation and welfare programs. In this articulation of the real, the formulaic scripting found in programs such as *Dragnet* (1951) and *Hill Street Blues* (1981) was privileged over faltering humanistic discourses on individual and collective potentials. Interestingly, this is also the period where political campaigns were all too willing to synoptically disclose the calculative nature of electoral promises (Gitlin 1990).

Figure 1.1 – Emerging Instances of Reality Television Genres



The examples listed above suggest that the current array of reality programs may trace their origins back to the emergence of motion picture technologies. Yet reality

programming as it is understood today, while varied in its subject matter, is increasingly focused on the minutiae of everyday living. These shows focus on interpersonal relations, notably issues of trust in cohabitational settings. It should be noted that in addition to everyday relations these programs also broadcast turning-point events such as domestic disputes, home renovations, or personal makeovers. While this is true, these transformations – which are typically under some sort of evaluation from the audience or a panel of 'experts' – are measured as successes or failures based on domestic forms of conduct. The fact that cameras are present to record these purportedly real-life events parallels the increased use of personal surveillance technology, including peer-to-peer technologies (Andrejevic 2005). Typically, this technology is marketed as facilitating relations with others by ensuring some amount of certainty.

Reality programming is situated in the context of shifting notions of realism, trust and authenticity. Along with new communication technologies that have facilitated the mediation of the real, the last one hundred years have been characterized by the development of a savvy or sceptical attitude towards the use of these technologies. The further that articulations of realism in media outlets are extended, the further that audiences develop negotiation skills, resistance skills, and exit strategies. Contemporary reality programs enable audiences to assume a savvy position as insiders who gain a familiarity with clearly articulated protocols and possibly shape the show's outcome. Instances of producer manipulation which would otherwise provoke harsh audience feedback may now go unpunished as a result of audiences' willingness to naturalize these flaws as simply the nature of the business (Gitlin 1990). From all this, *Big Brother* emerges as program about cohabitation, where scripts and acting give way to protocols

(rules and a weekly structure, both are explained in detail below) and conduct (be it strategic or domestic). *Big Brother* differs from earlier programs about domestic cohabitation insofar as conditions are deliberately engineered to provoke tensions between characters. As relations between houseguests are strained through repeated dissimulation and manipulation, audiences interpret these relations as inherently risky. In contrast, through their own engagements with houseguests via multi-modal surveillance, audiences manifest a savvy awareness of the manipulative nature of peer interactions as well as measures that can be taken to overcome this.

Leading up to the first American season

Big Brother debuted in September 1999 on Dutch airwaves. Produced by Jon de Mol and his company, Endemol, *Big Brother* borrowed Orwellian social imagery by placing a dozen willing participants into an enclosure. Complete audio-visual surveillance was ensured by the (omni)presence of cameras and microphones. Additionally, "houseguests" were completely isolated from the outside world; any type of media technology – including pen and paper – were verboten. In order to win the €250,000 prize awarded at the end of the season, houseguests had to avoid being evicted from the enclosure. Because audiences were left to decide who gets evicted each week, houseguests were expected to conduct themselves in a manner that would garner their support. As the program was very well received in the Netherlands, de Mol's concept spread to nearly 68 countries. Programs which mimicked *Big Brother*'s enclosure based concept began appearing across the globe shortly afterwards. While diverging national identities informed each incarnation of the program, all versions maintained a fidelity to

de Mol's isolation and surveillance-based processes. *Big Brother* also stands out from similar forms of broadcasting insofar as the television program is only part of the greater "experiment" which takes place within the enclosure. While the cameras within the enclosure are providing footage from which the televised program is composed, these cameras also constitute the around-the-clock spectacle on the live Internet feed.

The first American season of *Big Brother* aired in the summer of 2000 on CBS. Ten houseguests were sequestered for roughly three months, with the first eviction occurring in the third week. CBS broadcasted daily recap episodes six times a week to accompany the live feed which was available online. Each houseguest nominates two fellow contestants who they would like to evict; the two houseguests that receive the most nominations are put up. The actual evictee is determined by the audience through a 1-900 telephone hotline. Due to the often lengthy periods between evictions, *Big Brother* also focused on the day-to-day interaction between houseguests as well as tedious activities proposed by the producers such as the completion of a large jigsaw puzzle. While other cohabitation-based reality programming like *The Real World* brought domestic drama to audiences, *Big Brother* grants audiences with a more panoptic viewership by giving them round-the-clock coverage of the enclosure. This degree of surveillance enabled audiences to become intimately aware of manipulative strategies that houseguests employed against one another, leading to a savvy backstage awareness of the program (*c.f.* Goffman, 1959).

Relative to its international counterparts, the U.S. version of *Big Brother* was fraught with several difficulties involving houseguest conduct, public protest, and disinterested audiences. Houseguest George Boswell, a forty-year old married roofer

affectionately nicknamed "Chicken George", adopted a manipulative strategy with his friends and family to publicly campaign for the eviction of rival houseguests. Interestingly, George called upon the assistance of his local radio station in Illinois to generate support for his cause. Despite CBS' attempt to maintain a level playing field for houseguests, the fact that (a relatively isolated conduit of) the media could be harnessed in such a way called into question the objectivity that a media event like *Big Brother* could attain. Many of the details surrounding George's misconduct were discovered by online fan communities who were vigilantly monitoring the live feed. These fans successfully sought George's nomination by sending airplanes to fly messages over the enclosure which houseguests could read from a walled-in backyard. The fact that engaged fans were capable of breaching the boundary that separated houseguests from fans also upset the seclusion that *Big Brother*'s reality claims rested upon. Other messages were flown over the enclosure encouraging the contestants to forfeit the $500,000 grand prize and leave the show together. This sentiment quickly spread in the enclosure, and producers subsequently had to negotiate with houseguests to narrowly avoid a walk-off. While it not unusual for oppositional readings of a television show to be generated, the fact that audiences were able to coordinate – thanks in part to the online feed – and privilege this reading over the producers' was unprecedented (Wilson 2004).

Perhaps most frustrating to *Big Brother*'s producers was the fact that despite all the surrounding controversy, the first season's ratings were disappointing relative to both overseas versions of the show and to *Survivor*, which had also debuted on CBS in the summer of 2000. This has been attributed to audiences' habit of evicting controversial and outrageous characters, with interactions among the remaining houseguests rapidly

losing appeal (Andrejevic 2004). In addressing this issue, one finds that several conflicting articulations exist about reality and houseguests performance. On the one hand, there is the expectation of realism, as evidenced by the need to avoid control from external influence as well as outright manipulation by houseguests or any other interested parties. On the other hand, the progressively declining ratings suggest that audiences expected exciting and dramatic footage. The first season's poor ratings are indicative of the fact that *Big Brother* was not a venue for normalized cohabitation to be synoptically transmitted. Rather, problematic relations are more compatible with the interactive nature of the *Big Brother* meta-show.

Remaking *Big Brother*

The first season of *Big Brother* could be considered flawed by its producers insofar as it was asking audiences to do too many things at once. In addition to receiving the broadcast, audiences were also called upon to weigh in on the outcome and consequently shape the show's meaning. In deciding who should be removed from the enclosure and whose conduct merited a half-million dollars, notions of proper conduct emerge, notably with regards to the use of manipulation among houseguests. One might imagine that the employment of dissimulation might upset reality TV's promise of "the real." Yet with a slight rearticulating of the show's premise, this contradiction is nullified. If the competitive nature of relations between houseguests were foregrounded, it would come to be expected that houseguests and audiences alike would consider manipulation as a viable strategy.

Arnold Shapiro took over production of *Big Brother* in the wake of the program's dismal performance. The second season marked the implementation of a number of rule-changes. These modifications also shaped the nature of work that was expected from audiences. The most noticeable change was the fact that the eviction process was left entirely to the houseguests. It was effectively decided that audience-based authorship should not come at the expense of audience reception (that for the time being is more marketable). Other changes to the program ensured that houseguests would be capable and willing to generate dramatic footage. The eviction process was now surrounded by a weekly cycle of ceremonies and competitions designed to invoke greater tensions between houseguests. The week opens with a competition between houseguests where the winner is awarded with the "head of household" title. The houseguest who wins head of household also gains access to a private bedroom with extra amenities as well as the responsibility to nominate two houseguests for eviction. The remaining houseguests cast their vote later in the week and decide who will end up being evicted. Becoming head of household evidently puts houseguests at a strategic advantage insofar as they escape eviction for at least one week. Moreover, they can evict someone who may be perceived as a potential threat. Yet this advantage is short lived: within a week the head of household could find themselves nominated for eviction. After all, the nominated houseguest who isn't evicted could go on to win the head-of-household competition and exercise retribution.

Tensions are further accentuated through a televised nomination ceremony, where the head of household is expected to deliver a speech justifying his or her selections. These ceremonies have often escalated into shouting matches. Later in the week,

houseguests gather for the weekly meeting, where any outstanding hostility is panoptically recorded and synoptically broadcasted on the television program. Food scarcity has also been harnessed by producers to exacerbate pre-existing stressors in the enclosure. Houseguests routinely have to compete against each other in separate teams (or occasionally as a cooperative whole) to obtain groceries for the following week. Defeat in these competitions entails a diet of nothing but peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Based on its coverage on the televised segments, the food competition and its dietary consequences are regarded as a prominent event in the enclosure. The televised episodes also cover the various alliances that are formed as well as personal strategies harnessed to gain other inmates' trust. Because houseguests are dependent on one another to avoid eviction, they are chiefly preoccupied with gaining their assurances from peers that they will not be nominated or evicted. Gaps between fronts that houseguests would maintain with one another and their true intentions are underscored during the confessional "diary room" sessions. During these sessions, houseguests are questioned by the production team about their performance within the enclosure as well as their opinion on other houseguests' performances. Their answers, which are regularly featured on the televised program, serve to articulate the individual backstages featured in houseguest performance.

As a result of the conditions listed above, lying and dissimulation are regarded as symptomatic of dwelling within the enclosure. In the second season, one houseguest in particular (the eventual winner) expressed a mandate of forging several false alliances to the television cameras (Big Brother 2001a). While the remaining houseguests were not as explicit about being manipulative, it would appear that on the whole they were more

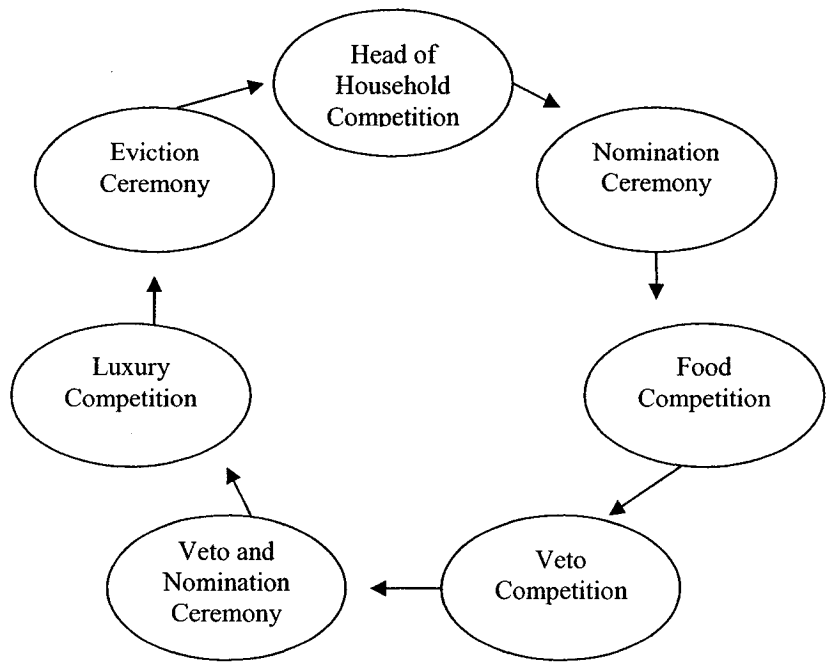
conducive to such (mis)conduct than houseguests in the first season. Houseguests were deliberately chosen for their potentially dramatic and confrontational demeanours, leading to the expulsion of one inmate who repeatedly threatened his peers (Carter 2001b). In addition to possessing a greater explosive potential, the second season's crop of houseguests appeared to have a greater cognizance of their status as quasi-celebrities. Upon being evicted, one houseguest noted his disappointment that so many of his fellow inmates already had agents upon entering the enclosure (Big Brother 2001b). Remaining mindful of future opportunities for employment in the media can be considered as an act of self-interest. The implication is that for many houseguests there is much more at stake than a cash prize, suggesting that they will be more inclined to comply with the production team's mandate, lending further support to a dominant reading of *Big Brother*.

Not only can it be said that audiences lost a significant form of authorship upon having their voting privileges revoked, but further measures were taken in order to ensure that the meaning in *Big Brother* was predominantly generated by the production team. By implementing a number of ceremonies and competitions designed to accentuate tensions, the production team have generated an enclosure which promotes on strategic – and often manipulative – performance. While audiences are no longer able to directly determine through voting what constitutes proper houseguest conduct, the enclosure's elaborate surveillance network provides them with a privileged viewership from which all instances of manipulation are rendered visible. While houseguests may sustain backstages from one another, the presence of cameras and microphones everywhere brings these instances to the audience's front stage. As such, audiences are endowed with

a savvy position insofar as they can be made aware of the constructed nature of relations between houseguests who themselves may be duped by these manipulations.

Big Brother's current format

Figure 1.2 – Cyclic Pattern of *Big Brother* Enclosure Activity



While some modifications have been implemented since the second season, the structure has remained faithful to Arnold Shapiro's vision of audience savvy and houseguest manipulation. Upon entering the enclosure, houseguests participate in the first head of household competition. Following the first nomination ceremony, houseguests take part in a competition for the "power of veto," which was implemented in the third season. The winner of this competition is then able to either veto one of the nominations or abstain from exercising the power of veto. This decision is made during a televised ceremony not unlike the weekly nominations and evictions. If a nominated houseguest is

"saved" by the veto, the head of household must immediately nominate a replacement. Finally, houseguests secretly cast their ballots, and the evicted houseguest is announced on live television, whereupon they have sixty seconds to leave the enclosure. The following head-of-household competition -- which is also broadcast live - takes place a few minutes afterwards.

Eviction from the enclosure holds different consequences depending on which week the houseguest is removed. The first four houseguests are sequestered in a hotel where they are isolated from both enclosure activity and the outside world. They are then given the opportunity to return to the enclosure immediately following the fifth eviction. In the sixth season, audiences were given the opportunity to decide which of the three eligible houseguests (Ashlea, who was the first to be evicted, forfeit her eligibility by leaving sequester prematurely) would return through a weeklong vote. When nine of the sixth season's original fourteen houseguests remained, evicted inmates were sequestered in order to form the final jury. This process differs from the initial sequester insofar as (a) evictees are not kept in isolation from one another, (b) evictees are given a weekly update of enclosure events, and (c) evictees still receive coverage on the televised program. When all but two of the houseguests have been evicted, the seven jury members cast their votes in a televised ceremony to determine who will win the $500,000 grand prize and who will win the $50,000 runner-up prize.

While escaping eviction and winning the grand prize are central preoccupations for houseguests and audiences alike, there are other events to keep both parties engaged. In addition to the weekly food competitions, houseguests occasionally have a chance to obtain amenities such as exercise equipment, a hot tub, or the chance to watch a newly

released movie. The latter prize was especially coveted as a result of the absence of any type of media within the enclosure. Facing such restrictions concerning the kinds of available activities, houseguests focus on interpersonal relations within the enclosure. In addition to becoming a favoured pastime among houseguests and audiences alike, gossip can also be regarded as a strategic asset for the former to garner votes and evade eviction (Thornborrow and Morris 2004).

Big Brother is thus understood as an enclosure containing houseguests who cope with isolation, surveillance and the possibility of eviction. A panoptic infrastructure allows events within the enclosure to be synoptically broadcasted to audiences. In addition to surveillance and mass media technology, a selective editing process further mediates relations between houseguests and audiences. In the sixth season, three hour-long televised episodes (totalling roughly two hours and fifteen minutes of airspace after commercials) encapsulate one week's worth of footage from 47 cameras and 76 microphones. Aside from the weekly competitions and ceremonies, the televised episodes focus on relations between houseguests as well as more pedestrian concerns such as grooming habits. These developments are articulated through voice-over narration during the Saturday and Tuesday night episodes. On Thursdays, host Julie Chen provides live commentary in addition to interviewing freshly evicted houseguests. While the Internet feed is marketed as the television program's unedited counterpart, users can only access four cameras and microphones at a time. Moreover, the feed is frequently subject to censorship, as when houseguests discuss the selection process they underwent prior to entering the enclosure.

Beyond the TV program and Internet feed

While we may consider the Internet feed to serve as a backstage to the TV program, in employing this imagery we must also account for a number of elements which constitute the *Big Brother* text. The elements listed below were generated by CBS as an accompaniment to the three hour-long televised episodes which air every week. The morning following the weekly eviction, *Big Brother* host Julie Chen conducts an interview with the evicted houseguest on CBS' *The Early Show*, which Chen also co-hosts. Additionally, these interviews are archived on the CBS website as video files for audiences to later access. These televised segments would appear to target casual or uninitiated audiences, as much of the same information can be located on the CBS' *Big Brother* website.

The official *Big Brother* website offers vast quantities of information pertaining to the televised series. In addition to detailed biographies for each houseguest, the website contains episode summaries which provide a detailed analysis of the turning points and storylines that were covered in each televised episode. As such, these summaries make no attempt to filter out televised footage which may be deemed unimportant. It's also interesting to note that each summary is accompanied by roughly ten screenshots from the episode as well as a persistent employment of quoted conversations which are embedded in the summary. Consider the following excerpt: "Upstairs Michael confides in Kaysar that the time for diplomacy is over and that Eric is "absolutely unscrupulous." He adds that he is "going to make sure that that midget is exposed" for his lies." (CBS 2006a). From all this we can speculate that these summaries seek to maintain as much information originally derived from the panoptic technologies as possible. This goal is

also evident in the website's "Show Video" section, where every week a dozen or more video clips from the Internet feed – each ranging from twenty seconds to two minutes in length – are featured to provide anecdotal footage of life within the enclosure.

It should be noted that the website doesn't merely recapitulate information provided in the televised episodes and Internet feed. In fact, several of the website's sections offer material generated by the houseguests themselves that aren't featured on the program or the Internet feed. The "Hoh Blog" serves as a site where each week's head of household may disclose "his or her innermost thoughts with the outside world." (CBS 2006b). This form of authorship is articulated as a privilege for houseguests as a result of the absence of any other connection – mediated or otherwise – with the outside world. These web-log entries are also unique insofar as they are the only sites where audiences may be directly addressed by the houseguests. While they share the diary room sessions' confessional tone – insofar as houseguests are asked to disclose how they "really" feel about fellow contestants – the diary room sessions are directly fuelled by questions asked by the production team. Each week's head of household is given access to a digital camera with which they may further generate meaning of life within the enclosure. These photographs, featured on the website's "Hoh Snapshots" section, contrast sharply with the rest of the *Big Brother* text insofar as houseguests are always seen smiling and embracing one another. Whether these photographs are evidence of the underlying cohesion among houseguests or merely their ability to readily generate frontstages when facing a camera lens is left to the audience to decide. The website's "Voting History" section stands out as a recap of perhaps the most crucial form of houseguest authorship. Here, each houseguest's eviction vote is arranged on a week-by-

week graph, serving as a testament of their capacity to determine subsequent enclosure activity. Former houseguests are also called upon to make sense of the current season of *Big Brother* on the website's "Revenge of the Houseguests." This section is comprised of a web-log that is shared by a seven houseguests from the fourth and fifth seasons (one of whom was later replaced with the current season's audience-favourite, Kaysar) and an anonymous figure appropriately dubbed "Winston Smith." These former houseguests are invited to contribute to the web-log as they please, there are weekly themes and questions to direct discussion in particular directions. Previous experience within the enclosure enables them to adopt a privileged position, as evidenced by the following quote: "Meet our elite panel of BIG BROTHER experts, former HouseGuests who discuss and debate the finer points of life in the BB house." (CBS 2006c). Despite the employment of terms such as 'elite' and 'experts', this statement also underscores the editorial rather than authoritative nature of the web-log. Instead of providing some objective truth based on their experience within the enclosure, these experts are regarded as debating and discussing, lending support to an understanding of *Big Brother* as a program that calls upon an expert – or at least savvy – form of engagement.

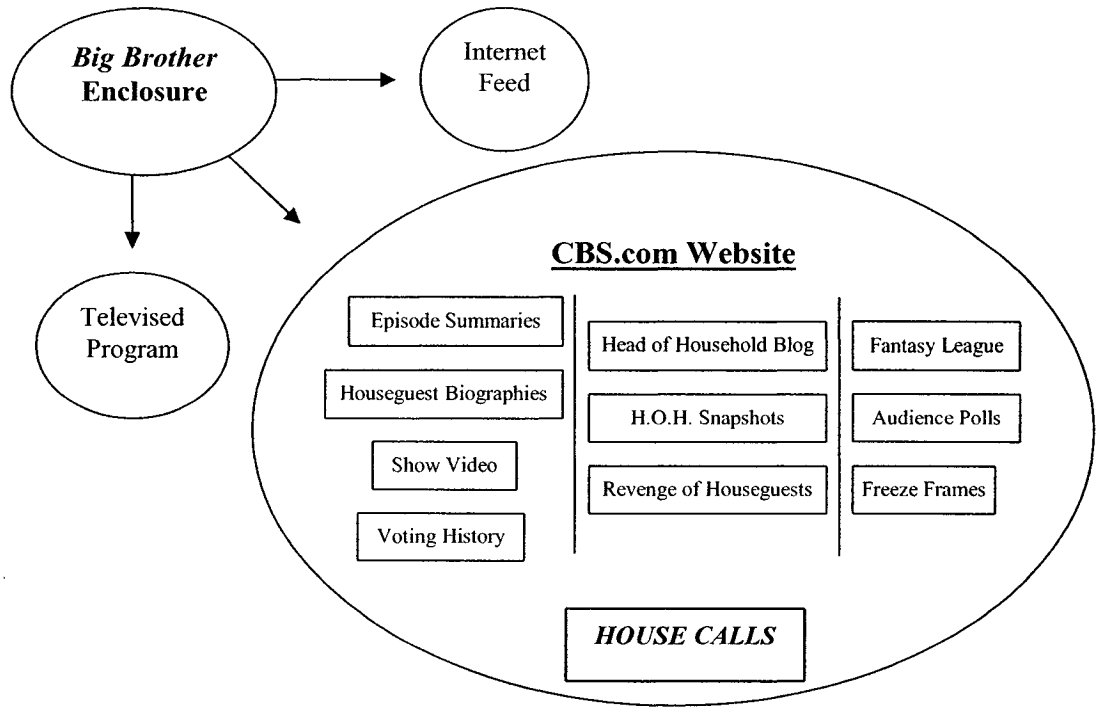
Several elements on the website directly call upon audiences to provide their own input into the *Big Brother* text, and thus come to adopt a savvy viewing position. The *Big Brother* Fantasy League allows audiences to compete to win a prop from the sixth season by exercising their knowledge of houseguest conduct. Contestants form their fantasy team by selecting four houseguests. They are able to modify their team members throughout the season except when the televised episodes are airing. Points are accorded or deducted based on a number of events which may occur during the televised episodes.

For instance, players win forty points every time a team member wins the head of household competition, whereas they lose twenty points every time a team member is nominated for eviction. Participation in this game implicates or cultivates an ability to discern which houseguests are likely to win competitions, as well as which ones are likely to kiss other houseguests or be reduced to tears (for which participants earn five and ten points, respectively).

Audiences are also invited to weigh in houseguest conduct through a series of polls which are recalculated every week. One asks viewers to determine whom they believe will be evicted next, while a second poll asks viewers to determine the winner of the grand prize. A third poll, dubbed "Love 'Em or Leave 'Em" asks audiences to rate houseguests on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). While the first two polls are similar to the fantasy league insofar as they call upon audience savvy to predict upcoming events, the third poll is uniquely concerned with audience opinion. Moreover, the poll doesn't specify what criteria should be used in measuring audience approval of houseguests, suggesting that opinion formation be an open-ended affair (after all, any opinion is a sign of participation). The website's "Freeze Frames" section also generates user input by posting a photograph taken by the head of household every week and asking audiences to provide a caption for it. A selection of audience captions are then posted on the website the following week. In addition, the live Internet feed is accompanied by a series of chat rooms where audiences can converse with other live feed viewers. These chat rooms provide audiences with an immediate outlet to express their opinions as events unfold on the live feed. The fact that the chat room feature is built into

the feed's browser window suggests that these two components are meant to be utilized concurrently.

Figure 1.3 – The *Big Brother* Meta-show



A brief description of *House Calls*

Among the numerous peripheral elements to the *Big Brother* viewing experience that are available on CBS's official website, *House Calls* stands out as offering the greatest amount of depth in terms of commentary regarding the reality show and its audiences. During *Big Brother*'s sixth season, *House Calls* aired on weekdays directly off the official *Big Brother 6* home page, with all episodes made available later in the site's archives. *House Calls* is hosted by Gretchen Massey, a talk radio host, and Marcellas

Reynolds, a popular former houseguest from *Big Brother*'s third season. Although they occasionally draw upon their experiences within the media industry and within the *Big Brother* house, respectively, it is interesting to note that for the most part Gretchen and Marcellas present themselves not as experts of the show, but rather as viewers - albeit heavily-immersed ones.

Serving as an accompaniment to *Big Brother*, *House Calls* offers commentary on a wide range of events surrounding the show. These events include the 'turning-point' moments of the program (competitions, nominations, evictions) as well as more mundane elements that characterize life inside the *Big Brother* enclosure. As such, *House Calls* draws upon footage aired on the live feeds, footage that may or may not be presented on the televised show. As a consequence, *House Calls* presents a form of viewership that extends beyond the boundaries of the three hours of footage that are televised weekly. Although this form of extended viewership is not a prerequisite for watching and making sense of *Big Brother*, this level of involvement is portrayed in the meta-show and audiences are encouraged to adopt this position on numerous occasions.

A second consequence to addressing the mundane activity that occurs within the enclosure is that *House Calls* can be understood as placing an emphasis on the performance of houseguests in addition to the nature (and boundaries) of the televised program. The notion of performance among houseguests is multifaceted and as such requires some unpacking. Firstly, we can consider the form of strategic performance that relates to the competitive nature of the televised program. The fact that houseguests are competing against one another for a million-dollar grand prize - coupled with the fact that nominations and evictions remain exclusively in the hands of fellow competitors -

suggests that a crucial level of interaction will occur where houseguests may be mindful of how they present themselves and what they say to others. Although much commentary has been offered regarding the strategies of previous winners as well as those who were evicted in the first weeks, no real consensus exists regarding the most appropriate strategy to adopt for escaping eviction. As a result this topic remains incredibly fruitful for generating talk among viewers.

Beyond the strategic nature of houseguest performance, we can also consider the kind of performance that surrounds the daily routines of houseguests within the enclosure. This would include a wide gamut of seemingly mundane statements and behaviours, including heated conversations, sexual advances, hygienic maintenance, and sleeping and dietary patterns. Again, it is interesting to note that as very little of this material actually makes it to the televised program, most of these kinds of performances that are addressed in *House Calls* pertain directly to the live feeds. What's more, although much of these performances are a direct consequence of the enclosure's structural constraints, the vast majority of evaluative discussions serve to differentiate houseguests from one another rather than appraising the conditions that evoke these performances.

There remains a third form of houseguest performance that is the subject of discussion on *House Calls*, although it is not exclusive of the former two. It is widely accepted that the nature of the enclosure serves to transform the houseguest behaviour in order to produce dramatic footage, and therefore there is debate as to whether or not the behaviour is representative of houseguests' temperament outside the enclosure. In other words, there is an active debate within *House Calls* regarding how useful the enclosure might be for making generalizable assessments about its subjects.

As *House Calls* serves as a site of discussion for the events occurring within the enclosure, a central component of the program are the comments offered by viewers calling in. For the most part, these comments pertain to the houseguest performance, but they also range from suggestions for improving the show to nicknames for the houseguests. On occasion, callers might directly question the outspoken hosts' opinions. In many respects, this suggests that the hosts – who identify primarily as fans of the show despite receiving a paycheque from CBS – are not privileged over audiences in terms of their beliefs. This is indicative of the fact that the hosts do not constitute a source of expertise, save for when Marcellas draws upon his experiences as a houseguest and minor celebrity. However, the hosts are provided with the capacity and responsibility to filter undesirable callers via a 'hang-up' button that features prominently on the program. It is worth noting that Gretchen's finger perpetually hovers over this button when taking calls, serving as a warning to potential callers who may wish to protest the nature of the program, or monopolize too much airtime. It is also worth noting that viewers who call in vary widely in terms of their level of involvement with *Big Brother*. While some viewers exclusively watch the televised show, others will describe a form of viewership where televised broadcast, live feeds, chat rooms and message boards are simultaneously utilized.

After the weekly evictions, which occur live on the televised show, the departing houseguest is featured as a guest. In many respects, it would appear as though the discussions surrounding houseguests that occur on *House Calls* culminates to this point, where the hosts as well as viewers calling are given an opportunity to subject them to questions and criticisms. As a result, houseguests are further rendered accountable for

their in-house behaviour, while provided with ample opportunity to attribute undesirable characteristics to the nature of the enclosure. It should be noted that certain topics, such as other houseguests' confessional 'diary-room' sessions, are omitted from the interview in order to maintain the integrity of the program (as several houseguests later make up a jury that decides the winner of the grand prize). To *House Calls*' credit, the hosts publicly acknowledge this form of censorship.

In addition to the evicted houseguests, *House Calls* regularly features guest appearances by both the production staff behind the televised program as well as other media figures such as a columnist for *Entertainment Weekly* who specializes in reality television. In many respects, these guests provide a particular form of expertise regarding the show's development. It is worth noting, however, that this expertise does not correspond to the kind of expertise offered by staff psychologists and other 'psy-experts' (Rose 1998) that have a more prominent role on earlier seasons and international versions of the program. Rather, this expertise pertains more to vast mediascape in which *Big Brother* is situated. For instance, a casting director might discuss the personality traits that they seek in potential houseguests, whereas an editor might provide insight regarding how to condense around-the-clock footage from 47 cameras into three hour-long shows per week. As a consequence of this discussion, *House Calls* offers the viewing audience insight regarding the production staff's level of involvement vis-à-vis the enclosure, and subsequently the extent to which they can be held accountable for the events that take place.

House Calls also features a number of elements that underscore the interactive nature of the viewing experience. For instance, the hosts routinely refer to their standings

in the *Big Brother* fantasy league, another peripheral element of the show that is featured on the official website. As the fantasy league requires the participant to select certain houseguests as being more likely to engage in particular activities, it speaks to the viewers' ability to make evaluations about their performances. Beyond this, every eviction is accompanied by both hosts revealing the degree of success (measured by the number of weeks they could avoid eviction) that they foresaw in each houseguest at the beginning of the season. Once again, this serves to gauge the hosts' capacity to evaluate houseguest performance. Additionally, the hosts have developed a guessing-game of sorts on *House Calls* whereby they guess what room, houseguest, and action is currently airing on the live feeds and then verify the feeds to assess their accuracy. Despite the partially self-mocking nature of this guesswork, it remains indicative of a form of viewership whereby audiences may develop a full understanding of the array of activities which may occur within the enclosure.

At this juncture we may begin to further speculate on the manner in which audiences are presented on *House Calls*. Based on our description of the call-in show, we can state that viewers are assumed to develop evaluations of houseguest performance. These evaluations appear to be evoked by the inflammatory and often hyperbolic language which the hosts employ to describe houseguests. Beyond this, we can also speculate that audiences are meant to understand that the *Big Brother* viewing experience extends beyond merely watching the televised show. Although this would seem obvious to anyone who visited the official website to view *House Calls*, it is worth noting that a discrepancy between the live feeds and the televised show is alluded to and presented as motivation to periodically monitor the former.

Bearing this in mind, it is possible to conceive of *House Calls* not only as a meta-show element manufactured by CBS, but as a discourse regarding the nature of this meta-show. In other words, the call-in program serves to rearticulate the meta-show surrounding *Big Brother*. In the first instance, this can be seen insofar as *House Calls* calls attention to these meta-show elements, as well as the authors and receptors of each of these elements. Beyond this, it can be seen that this discourse positions these elements and their subjects in a particular configuration which, taken in aggregate, evokes a specific form of audience viewership. This form of viewership is immediately relevant insofar as it reflects a regime of the self where 'savvy' viewers are understood as capable of negotiating through multiple-layered and occasionally contradictory mediascapes.

A comprehensive (or at least comprehensible) description of the discourse embedded in *House Calls* necessitates a teasing apart of the divergent manners in which audiences are constituted. The multimodal, media savvy form of viewership is bound to an evaluative component that speaks directly to how audiences are meant to make sense of *Big Brother*. To begin, we can describe savvy viewership as an articulation of conditions surrounding the production, reception, and perpetuation of information through the mass media in general, and of *Big Brother* in particular. As *Big Brother* is situated within a context of market-based media dissemination, the fact that this market poses certain constraints on the content produced and how that content is disseminated becomes subject to popular discourse surrounding the show. This has been shown to problematize claims of authenticity that were at one point a selling feature (or point of contestation) for *Big Brother*. For instance, producing an entertaining television program can be understood as necessitating casting controversial and conflict-prone houseguests.

As a result, the practice of casting individuals for their potential entertainment value as opposed to how they are representative of 'real people' emerges as a topic within critical discourse surrounding *Big Brother*. Beyond this, the fact that only select footage of the enclosure will be broadcasted on the show evokes further criticism against the authenticity of the storylines presented in the televised segments. Houseguests can also be understood as either commencing or furthering a media career, placing *Big Brother*'s authenticity into further question. While these conditions have been highlighted within critical discourses against *Big Brother* in particular and reality television in general, *House Calls* is an attempt by CBS to harness this criticism as a reason for a more involved form of viewing as opposed to a disengagement with the show/genre.

Thus, *House Calls* addresses the backstage elements surrounding the production of *Big Brother* in order to situate the viewer as a media-savvy subject within the meta-show. From this subject position, audiences are deemed capable of recognizing appropriate forms of viewership of the enclosure. These viewership positions constitute an evaluative consumption of houseguest performance, thus evoking lateral surveillance practices within audiences. Houseguests become the subject of evaluation regarding their strategic performance vis-à-vis other houseguests. Beyond this, houseguests may also be monitored as sources of domestic pathology, as subjects whose domestic performances are in dire need of evaluation, not unlike the subjects on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and other makeover reality shows. To this end, *House Calls* outlines the various meta-show elements that viewers can harness in order to perform this evaluative consumption. *Big Brother* audiences emerge as savvy agents with an awareness of - and partial access to – the various backstages that constitute the meta-show. From this, critical discourses

that touch upon *Big Brother* can be channelled in directions that constitute relations of lateral surveillance between – in the first instance - audiences and houseguests.

Bearing these theoretical concerns in mind, a discourse analysis of *House Calls* requires that this discourse is rendered identifiable through the units or cycles that constitute the call-in show. Moving from the largest unit to the most particular, it is possible to first conceive of *House Calls* as operating in terms of seasons with predictable and identifiable characteristics. Although the 2005 season of *House Calls* has continued to air after the final episode of *Big Brother* for that year, it can be noted that these two programs mostly operate along the same time frame and follow the same plot trajectory, presumably because they are meant to be consumed in parallel.

Beyond this, it can be noted that *House Calls* and *Big Brother* operate along a weekly cycle, both following the schedule of events occurring within the enclosure. While *Big Brother* serves to offer a summarized version of the 'storylines' occurring within the enclosure, *House Calls* serves a more editorial function, with commentary provided by both hosts as well as callers. With both the eviction of nominated houseguests and the selection of a new head-of-household occurring on Thursday's live instalment of *Big Brother*, much of the discussion on *House Calls* early in the week is in anticipation of these events, with Friday serving as a period to reflect upon the previous evening's events while in the company of the recently evicted houseguest. Airing every weekday, *House Calls* can also be understood as a series of episodes, with each episode characterized as a self-contained series of conversational exchanges between hosts, between hosts and the occasional guest, and between hosts and callers. Each exchange is characterized by a series of statements, which can in turn be understood as the

convergence of a number of lexical, grammatical, and vocal elements. Although this description of *House Calls* should not be understood as a linear hierarchy of meaning-production (for instance, a statement might be more meaningful when considered immediately in the context of that particular season as opposed to the context of the conversation in which it occurred), it provides a reliable framework from which the discourse on the *Big Brother* meta-show can be identified and rendered meaningful.

CHAPTER FOUR – DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF *HOUSE CALLS* TALK SHOW

Cultivation of a Media Savvy Audience

Although one may find evidence of self-reference in any element of the *Big Brother* meta-show, *House Calls* is uniquely interesting because of the extent to which it foregrounds this preoccupation with its own purpose. Through the hosts' impromptu editorials, the evicted houseguests' confession-like self-appraisals and the caller/audience's regulated outbursts, one discovers an attempt to endow the talk show with meaning. The articulation of this meaning consequently extends throughout the meta-show, rending other elements such as the televised program as well as the live Internet feeds meaningful. Similarly, the production and circulation of this meaning invariably shapes audience interpretation of the meta-show, and it is through this interpretation that a form of subjectivity is constituted. Given the interactive nature of *Big Brother*, the meta-show is partially dependant upon audience feedback. However, this feedback must necessarily remain within the boundaries outlined by *House Calls*' discourse in order to sustain the meaning generated by the program. In other words, the discourse embedded within *House Calls* seeks to cultivate an audience that holds a critical perspective regarding the meta-show. Yet unlike the critiques found in other fan cultures, it is necessary that critical audiences remain within the boundaries articulated by the meta-show and as such do not challenge its internal contradictions.

Although presenting the discourse within *House Calls* in a linear fashion might deviate from the manner in which it is articulated and experienced by audiences, it serves as a necessary and useful approach to make sense of its mode of operation. My analysis will begin by considering the discourse's acknowledgment of constraints regarding the

delivery of reality within the televised event. This section will underscore the manner in which *House Calls* is cognizant of criticisms presented in public debate regarding reality television in general and *Big Brother* in particular. Following this, the second section will consider the manner in which the discourse positions the meta-show elements vis-à-vis one-another in order to account with these perceived shortcomings. Here, an emphasis will be placed on the articulation of the meta-show's constituents as a set of tools through which the viewer is called upon to overcome these shortcomings. By discussing the meta-show elements in this manner, *House Calls* (inescapably) speaks to the forms of audience participation that are expected from this discourse. This leads to the third section, which addresses the evaluative form of viewership that is cultivated through *House Calls*. Of interest here is how the monitoring of houseguests is proposed as the solution to constraints which are attributed to the nature of the program itself. This section will discern between concerns with strategic behaviour – which is supposedly performed for the sake of winning the grand prize – and the evaluation of more domestic spheres such as hygiene and interpersonal conduct. The final section will consider how the discourse articulates *House Calls* as well as other meta-show elements as sites where audience opinion and observations are meant to be forthcoming. This section will highlight how the discourse obviates the attainment of a state of resolve within these discussions, thus ensuring the need for further monitoring and editorializing. Here it will also be crucial to consider what topics are occluded from the seemingly open forum generated by *House Calls*.

Section One: Acknowledgement of Constraints

Crucial to the reception and enjoyment of reality-based programming is an appraisal of the reality principle upon which it operates. Reality television typically claims to operate through more authentic social determinants than scripted counterparts. Such assertions are the subject of appraisal and deconstruction within public discourses surrounding these shows. As such, if the *Big Brother* meta-show is to serve as a site of potential fan activity, this would be facilitated by enabling the discussion of the show's realism. *House Calls* is especially interesting insofar as it acknowledges many of the constraints that discredit *Big Brother*'s authenticity.

The *Big Brother* Television Program

Situated at the core of the meta-show, the televised program offers a candid glimpse of daily activity within the enclosure. However, it remains that CBS airs roughly two hours and fifteen minutes of footage per week. While this may provide enough time to convey a handful of narratives, a vast quantity of pertinent footage is omitted. Consequently, the inadequacy of viewership based entirely on TV-watching is expressed in *House Calls*. For example, a fan called in order to describe a strategy that Howie, the current head-of-household, could utilize in order to avoid nomination the following week. In response, Marcellas states "Just to let you know, Liz, that has already happened over the feeds." (House Calls 2005a: 5:10). Here, the live Internet feed is privileged over the television show, which is understood as providing an inadequate amount of information. Similarly, Gretchen alludes to the obsolescent nature of the televised format when she comments on the previous night's episode: "I know for all of us watching the feeds, a lot of that stuff, we knew what was going on." (W6, Wed. 1:45). Because of the time

required to edit footage and arrange it into an episode, there is a gap of a couple of days between a televised event and the moment it actually occurred.

The selective editing involved in the production of televised episodes is also presented as the cause of discrepancies between the feed and on TV, notably regarding houseguest performance. When Gretchen, Marcellas, and *Entertainment Weekly* columnist Lynette Rice are discussing a particularly controversial character that was among the first to be evicted, Lynette notes that she does not understand why he is so disliked. She attributes this to not using the Internet feed, which from previous seasons she gathers is the site of greater activity (House Calls 2005b: 3:20). Lynette later emphasizes this point, stating: "It's disappointing seeing these things [footage from the live feed], cause you wish they were in the show. (...) [T]he things we don't learn about these people... I mean... our opinions would be so much different." (House Calls 2005b: 11:20). This statement underscores the televised show's inadequacy for providing a realistic assessment of houseguest performance, calling into question the claim that "real" drama is being broadcasted on *Big Brother.*

The live Internet feed

While the shortcomings associated with the televised episodes privilege the live feed as a superior source of information, it remains clear that the latter also serves as the target of critical scrutiny. In comparison to the televised programs, the feed is considered free from biases related to editing criteria. However, it remains that close to fifty cameras are operational within the enclosure whereas a maximum of four are offered to viewers through the feed. This suggests that the Internet feed offers but a partial account of enclosure activity, with important information never making it to the viewer. This

sentiment is echoed when Sarah, a newly evicted houseguest, addresses concerns regarding her boyfriend and fellow contestant James' behaviour (House Calls 2005e: 21:40). As a result of its unedited nature, the Internet feed is also criticized by *House Calls* for lacking the excitement that purportedly characterizes the televised episodes. When Gretchen and Marcellas visit the live feed, only to find footage of Rachel washing dishes, Marcellas sarcastically proclaims: "Oh wow! This is exciting, riveting!" (House Calls 2005d: 17:05). From this one can infer that while the live feed serves to rectify some of the shortcomings of the TV show, and vice-versa, it is difficult to engage in a form of viewership that does not challenge or deconstruct some of the reality claims made by *Big Brother.*

The Houseguests

If one were able to overcome the shortcomings associated with the televised show and live feed, it would appear possible to gain access to the events within the enclosure. We may consider that such activity lives up to the program's reality claims, and that the flaws listed above were mere setbacks associated with the broadcast medium. However, the critical scrutiny offered in *House Calls* endorses the notion that the houseguests themselves have particular attributes that jeopardize *Big Brother*'s realistic appeal. Firstly, there is the notion that the houseguests have been selected based on their entertainment value as opposed to their ability to realistically simulate interpersonal dynamics. This point emerges repeatedly when the hosts and callers seek to make sense of outlandish houseguest behaviour. For instance, a caller comments on a misogynistic rant delivered by a houseguest by stating: "Howie is a male chauvinist pig, but he's also the one who's making the show. He's hilarious, he's an idiot, but we're laughing."

(House Calls 2005a: 17:02) In this instance, the entertainment value derived from the program is foregrounded, jeopardizing the sense of realism that is also articulated. Howie's presence in the show is further discussed when a newly evicted houseguest speculates that he is only there "for the fame" (House Calls 2005e: 18:20). As he has participated in two other reality programs prior to *Big Brother*, it would be fair to assume that the aspiring meteorologist is attempting a media career. The selection of houseguests for their entertainment value is discussed further when viewers were given a chance to select an evicted houseguest to return to the enclosure. A caller discusses why he wants Eric to return, noting that "he stirs things up, he makes us laugh." (House Calls 2005d: 12:25). Later, Marcellas takes an oppositional perspective regarding Eric's entertainment value: "Eric is going to come back, and he's going to be like "ration the food", "everybody in bed by 11:30". It's not going to be humorous (...) and I don't want to watch that" (House Calls 2005d: 19:45). It is interesting to note that the principal criteria used to determine whether Eric should return is the extent to which they make for "good television," rather than his ability to maintain some state of authenticity in front of the cameras.

Other Shortcomings that are Articulated in *House Calls*

Potential critiques of - and contradictions within - *Big Brother* and manifold, which is reflected in *House Calls*' extensive discussion of the program's meta-show. For instance, between the first and second U.S. Season viewers lost the ability to evict houseguests through voting, a feature that has been retained in the overseas versions of the show. When a caller on *House Calls* suggests that the audience be given back the power to vote, Marcellas replies "I do think in this weird way Big Brother should be

more interactive. I actually always felt that it should like haves and have-nots." (House Calls 2005c: 12:02). What is interesting here is the fact that Marcellas, supposedly a representative of the *Big Brother* franchise, publicly acknowledges and endorses criticisms against the program. By speaking in the first person, it would appear as though he is speaking as an individual, or more precisely an individual fan of *Big Brother.*

Much attention is also accorded to the actual nature of the *Big Brother* enclosure. In a manner that is typical of reality television, the program draws upon a myriad of predecessors. Part co-habitation drama, part game show, and part documentary, one is left wondering what function the show is meant to serve beyond surface-level entertainment. It is possible to infer that replacing paid actors with amateurs with little to no experience in front of a television camera was meant to provide some measure of authenticity, yet it remains unclear what has been rendered more authentic. This point is accentuated by claims that the stresses associated with the enclosure have no off-screen equivalent, thus calling into question the social experiment aspect of the show. Upon discussing a recently evicted houseguest's demeanour in the enclosure, Marcellas states: "What people that are viewing it don't understand is that this is a very specific moment, it's a crazy different kind of stress that nobody can imagine. This not an indicator of who Sarah is outside in her real life." (House Calls 2005e: 23:25).

Shortcomings Associated with *House Calls*

As *House Calls* is itself situated within the *Big Brother* meta-show, it would make sense that it could become subject to scrutiny. This is precisely what occurred when a caller complained about the influence that the call-in program had over audiences:

> If you were in the house (...) and there was a *House Calls* show on, and you had TV personalities actively campaigning to keep you out, to tell people to vote against you, you had people online with computer programs that could vote a million times, how would

you feel about the ethics of that whole thing as far as is it really America's choice? (House Calls 2005a: 19:30)

The caller was specifically concerned with *House Calls*' influence over an audience-based vote for a recently evicted contestant to return to the enclosure. Before the hosts could respond, the caller was cut off the line by producers. It is interesting to consider that a critical appraisal of a vehicle of critical appraisal is considered as exceeding the boundary of proper conduct on the talk show.

Discussion

This portion of the discourse regarding *Big Brother* viewership serves to underscore the flawed and contradictory nature of not only the televised program, but of the meta-show in its entirety. Upon first glance it appears perplexing that CBS would produce a talk show that would encourage audiences to accept a critical reading of their programming. However, if we follow popular culture theorists, cultural consumption necessitates "both the forces of domination and the opportunities to speak against them" (Fiske 1989: 25). From this perspective, CBS appears to be pursing an apt strategy: while leaving the *Big Brother* TV program's discursive nature unaltered, it produces an accompanying site on the meta-textual field that offers the critique of the show that is necessary for its enjoyment. Henry Jenkins' (1992) work on fan communities underscores how critical stances taken towards popular texts constitute fan activity. However, the discourse outlined above marks a radical shift from typical fan activity insofar as the audience-generated reaction to the culture industry's output has been anticipated by that industry, which it now attempts to appropriate. Thus, the critical engagement with popular texts in order to render them meaningful is partly in the hands of the producers of these texts.

From another perspective, we can consider the manner in which *House Calls* offers viewers a privileged position by allowing them to speak *on* the program (which no uniquely bottom-up fan culture could offer), thus enabling them to situate their voice within the official meta-show. At this juncture it remains unclear whether or not this constitutes a form of empowerment for audiences or a confining subjectivity that inhibits pluralized readings of *Big Brother*. However, immediate affinities exist between this strategy and those used by Goffman's (1961) institutional staff to induce a 'compliant insider' subjectivity among inmates. Goffman notes how inmates are accorded some form of writing activity - be it the house organ or theatrical satire at the yearly mixer. While the content produced may be located at the periphery of the institutional discourse, relations between staff and inmates are facilitated. Given the animosity that often characterizes relations between heavily involved fan communities and television producers (Jenkins 1992), it is in the producers' interest to invite audiences to participate on a (meta-)textual terrain that has been recently colonized by the former.

House Calls also serves as an instance where audiences are purportedly granted access to a backstage (Goffman, 1959) to the production of *Big Brother*. Although this status may be symbolic (with its set that has been carefully designed to resemble an actual backstage – despite the fact that *Big Brother* is filmed on a separate lot), the fact that it acknowledges the existence of a backstage is significant. By doing so, *House Calls* invokes a savvy subjectivity in its audiences, a keen awareness of the constraints and driving factors that underlie the synoptic fanfare that characterizes the televised program (Andrejevic 2004). Resistance to the failed promise of reality television - which

otherwise might hold a strong presence in public discourse – flows into conservative channels in which satisfaction is derived from merely being "in the know."

Section Two: Ways of viewing / Articulating the meta-show

In addition to illuminating the flawed and contradictory nature of the reality principle offered by *Big Brother*, *House Calls* articulates a form of viewership that incorporates the "insider" position discussed above. Viewers are invited to work through the shortcomings that permeate the meta-show by adopting a multi-faceted subject position. The following pages illustrate the conduct that viewers are called upon to perform with regards to the meta-show that constitutes *Big Brother*.

Multifaceted consumption

As key portions of the meta-show are perceived as flawed by viewers and thus deemed incapable of providing an accurate representation of the enclosure, *House Calls* invites a form of viewership that relies on multiple meta-show elements in order to illuminate blind spots associated with any single element. The previous section underscored the manner in which the live feed could be used to accompany the televised episodes. Beyond this, we can consider how other meta-show elements can be prescribed in conjunction with one another. For instance, Gretchen invites viewers at the end of an episode of *House Calls* to consume the live feed by stating: "In the meantime go to your feeds. If you don't have them, get them, because it's heating up." (House Calls 2005d: 30:04). Claiming that things are "heating up" implies a level of excitement that cannot be matched on any other meta-show element. Moreover, stating this at the end of the episode suggests that the feed can serve as a continual source of entertainment / revelation,

including in between episodes of *House Calls* as well as the televised program. The act of using the feeds to fill in the temporal gaps left by *House Calls* is also alluded to when Gretchen states that "luckily we had the feeds to keep us company and Saturday night's episode" (House Calls 2005a: 0:56) during the opening portion of a Monday episode. Here, both the feed and the televised episode are presented as remedies in light of the fact that *House Calls* does not air during the weekend.

As the feed is presented as the least edited – and thus most direct – source of information regarding the enclosure, it can be used to clarify incorrect observations made on other meta-show elements. For instance, a live-feed user calls in to say:

> Listen, I love the show. I watch every day… I look forward to it. Marcellas, yesterday you had said that Howie was not aware that James had told Ivette that he would put up Maggie. You said that he had made these nominations because he thought that James would nominate him and Sarah… and I just wanted to tell you that last week Thursday night on the feeds that Ivette did tell Howie that James said that he would go back on his word… (House Calls 2005b: 14:28)

Thus, the caller is talking about using the live feed to clarify something that was said on *House Calls*. Beyond this, *House Calls* can be seen as updating viewers with information that they might have missed had they not watched a particular televised episode or live feed segment. For instance, a caller states:

> I kinda took a vacation last week, I come back and now all of a sudden everyone's hating Sarah. How'd that happen I know James is evil and all that, but I can't understand how Sarah became such a big target… and the second part of the question is there any way to save her at this point? (House Calls 2005b: 21:02)

Finally, the televised episodes are shown as capable of providing a layer of reality that could not be afforded to the houseguests when they are in the enclosure. This is due to the strategic nature of their performance which necessitates that they not reveal their true intentions to each other, but rather display them in the confessional diary room sessions.

When a caller asks Sarah if she's going to watch the earlier televised episodes and if she believes that anything will surprise her, the newly evicted houseguest responds:

> I'll absolutely watch the previous shows. I'll probably watch them twenty times over. And I'm sure every single time I watch them I'll be surprised by something cause you never know what's going on in that house and it's crazy, it's a crazy world in there and I definitely want to know what's going on in everybody's head. (House Calls 2005e: 31:15)

Marcellas responds by echoing this sentiment, presumably from his experience as a houseguest in a previous season. From all this it would appear that no single meta-show component is seen as sufficient for the savvy viewership that is produced in *House Calls*.

Voting Week: A token of participatory viewership

During *House Calls*' sixth week, *Big Brother* viewers were offered the opportunity to have an evicted houseguest return to the enclosure. A vote took place this week where viewers could cast their ballot on the CBS website or through their cell phone's text messaging function. While chapter three outlines other examples of fan voting, the importance of this vote made it the topic of much discussion on *House Calls* during the sixth week. Gretchen repeatedly pleaded with viewers to vote (House Calls 2005b: 30:10; House Calls 2005c: 29:10). Speaking as the show's host as well as a passionate fan of Kaysar (one of the evicted houseguests), Marcellas made similar pleas throughout the week as well (House Calls 2005a: 2:55; House Calls 2005c: 4:20). Marcellas goes on to privilege his position as a heavily engaged fan over a responsible host in providing a detailed account of how he cast multiple ballots, claiming that he was "voting like it's my job" (House Calls 2005b: 25:33).

Guessing games and other forms of marginal play

As if to alleviate the comparatively lacking entertainment value often associated with the live feed, *House Calls* spends a considerable amount of time producing games

that incorporate the monotony associated with monitoring. For instance, the hosts routinely turn on the live feed while guessing who will be performing what activity in what part of the enclosure (W6, Mon: 28:25; House Calls 2005d: 17:05). Not only is the predictable nature of the live feed's contents portrayed as a source of enjoyment, but also knowledge of these conditions is regarded as evidence of savvy viewership. Beyond this, callers fill up airtime on *House Calls* with nicknames for houseguests (House Calls 2005c: 9:25; House Calls 2005c: 17:05) as well as noting which celebrities they resemble (House Calls 2005c: 18:12). Gretchen and Marcellas are also engaged in an activity dubbed "eviction prediction", where they attempt to determine which houseguest will be next to leave the enclosure. Ostensibly, this activity puts to use knowledge of the houseguests nominated for eviction as well as the remaining houseguests who will eventually select the evictee. Finally, the sixth week marked the beginning of what Gretchen called the "clip of the week" (House Calls 2005a: 9:52). The clip in question has been selected from the Internet feed by the producers of *House Calls*. By virtue of the frenzied discussion that ensued, it serves as a reminder of excitement that can come from monitoring the feeds.

Long-term memory and inter-seasonal discourse

Much discussion pertaining to *Big Brother* on *House Calls* is bound to events and houseguests from earlier seasons. This is the case for two reasons. Firstly, Marcellas exercises his expertise as a *Big Brother* insider partly through his experiences as a houseguest during the third season. Secondly, given *Big Brother*'s fragmented status as a quasi docu-drama co-habitation game show, it only makes sense for it to generate meaning in a self-referential manner. In other words, while determining a referent outside

the mediascape may always be a source of contention, comparing a current season or houseguest to their respective precedents (literally) makes sense. Following her eviction, Sarah admitted that she had watched previous seasons, which enabled her to describe the current instalment as "so different from any other season. Just to have the opportunity, you know, to be with him [James] and share this opportunity with him. It was really great and we still learned so much about each other just from being inside the house." (House Calls 2005e: 3:25). Here, season six is differentiated from previous seasons by virtue of the fact that houseguests were paired up with people they had known prior to entering the enclosure. Further, Sarah cites the victor from the second season in explaining why she wanted her boyfriend – who was less popular than her among houseguests – to remain in the enclosure when they were both nominated for eviction: "and you gotta think... what about Will? You know... everybody hated him and wanted him gone and look, he won." (House Calls 2005e: 13:38). Marcellas and guest Lynette Rice also construct an understanding of *Big Brother* strategy that relies upon earlier seasons. When Lynette suggests that leader figures are typically evicted early in the season, Marcellas adds:

> And, don't be the father. Every season that there's a father, the father ends up going, like, the fifth week... and Eric actually got out quicker. There's a history of that: Kent – out. Gerry – out... it's like you don't want a father. Nobody wants to be parented in the Big Brother house. (House Calls 2005b: 4:04)

House Calls constructs a privileged viewership that is partly constituted by a familiarity with previous seasons. Callers also manifest this familiarity, notably when engaged with Marcellas concerning his ill-fated performance during the third season. As one caller notes: "Let me tell you, when you were on the show I watched it... and when you didn't use the veto, I stopped watching it. This is the first... this is the first season I've watched since then." (House Calls 2005b: 7:16). Thus, the callers' viewership – or

lack thereof – is treated as spanning multiple seasons, with events from one season determining viewing habits in the following ones. Beyond this, other callers have offered detailed thoughts regarding Marcellas' performance, suggesting that these events are relevant in understanding the current season as well as the fact that they have yet to be resolved three years later (House Calls 2005d: 15:30).

Multiple and simultaneous meta-show consumption

At this point, the multifaceted nature of *Big Brother* viewership can be ascertained. We can return to the example of the viewer calling *House Calls* and using it as a forum to provide information derived from the Internet feed (House Calls 2005b: 14:28). In this instance, viewership is constructed in a manner that spans several meta-show elements, detracting from a conventional perspective that would situate the televised program at the centre of the meta-show. Analyzing *House Calls* underscores the extent to which a multimodal viewership is prescribed by the talk show's hosts. At the end of an episode, Gretchen reminds viewers that *House Calls* airs five times a week, adding "Do not forget to watch tonight's episode, and you still have a few hours to change your fantasy league (...) So, you want to do that (...). Now you have until Wednesday to vote, so America, if you haven't logged on to vote, you need to do that now." (House Calls 2005b: 29:30). Here, four meta-show elements (*House Calls*, the televised episodes, the fantasy league, and voting to repeal an eviction) are prescribed as components for proper viewership. Similar pleads are made at the end of other episodes (House Calls 2005c: 29:10; House Calls 2005d: 29:26 & House Calls 2005e: 43:07). Beyond this, viewers are also instructed to consume various elements simultaneously. When Marcellas directs viewers to the *Big Brother* website to vote, he states: "Get

online... No.... don't leave us.... Just, you know, go up... vote for America's choice. You can vote during, but... you know... you keep us... you keep the real... you move the real player out, it's still going..." (House Calls 2005c: 4:30). This is indicative of the fact that the *Big Brother* meta-show need not be restricted to any given element at a single point in time, allowing for a multifaceted viewership.

Outer boundaries of the meta-show

A full presentation of the *Big Brother* meta-show necessitates tracing out its outer boundaries. In other words, audiences should be made to understand that the types of content not produced by CBS could be included in CBS's *Big Brother* meta-show. Paradoxically, content not directly constituted by CBS requires a conservative fidelity to the viewership dictated by CBS. An example of this would be media coverage of *Big Brother* discussed in *House Calls*. It is meaningful that Lynette Rice has been invited to the talk show: while she may be an "outsider" in comparison to guests who have a direct involvement with the program (executive producers Arnold Shapiro and Don Wollman, host Julie Chen, evicted houseguests), Lynette wrote a weekly column on *Big Brother* for the *Entertainment Weekly* website while the sixth season aired. As her treatment of *Big Brother* resembles CBS's discourse more than other popular media representations (*c.f.* Carter 2001a; Salamon 2001), it is understandable that it would be included in *House Calls*. According to Lynette: "I write a weekly column about the show and in that column I'm able to be very subjective and so I can say "Please vote for Kaysar"" (House Calls 2005b: 23:32). Here, it is interesting to note that Lynette adopts a conventional position regarding the voting issue while maintaining a semblance of autonomy by remaining subjective.

As agents situated outside the CBS meta-show, it appears that viewers are placed in a similar position. While they may be offered inclusion, this process serves to crystallize the legitimacy of CBS's production of the *Big Brother* meta-show. What's more, it becomes clear that the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate is not subject to audience revision. In returning to the caller who was forcibly excluded from *House Calls*, we see that he makes mention of potential meta-show elements outside CBS' jurisdiction: "I've expressed my thoughts on the online chat, *you know which one I'm talking about....*" (House Calls 2005a: 21:15, emphasis added). The caller's insinuation of the discussion site refers to previous attempts on *House Calls* to prevent any mention of non-CBS websites pertaining to *Big Brother*. Coupled with his questioning of *House Calls'* function in relation to the audience vote, as well as questioning the vote itself (House Calls 2005a: 20:19), we can begin to appreciate the many strikes lined up against this caller in terms of his status as a "legitimate" *Big Brother* audience member.

Discussion

In addition (and as a response) to discussing the questionable reality principle contained in the *Big Brother* program, the discursive elements analyzed in this section outline a meta-show wherein accumulating information is treated as a fluid and multi-faceted process. As such, *House Calls* produces a viewership that works through and negotiates with the meta-show's inherent contradictions. At the same time, this discourse locates the viewing subject within specific boundaries defined by the producers of the show.

Returning to Henry Jenkins' work on fan cultures, a meta-show is regarded as a fan construction that accords the program in question an aggregated meaning. As in the case of *Big Brother*, Jenkins (1992) notes the crucial function that the entire fan culture – and not just the program itself – serves to constitute this meta-show. *House Calls* and the rest of the CBS-endorsed *Big Brother* fan culture departs from Jenkins' schematics insofar as the elements peripheral to the televised episodes are no longer the product of engaged fans, but rather a deliberate attempt by the show's production team to engage fans. While this may not signify a sharp turn towards an oppressive, top-down information-management regime, it is noteworthy that CBS is more directly involved in producing the meaning derived from such an enigmatic media assemblage.

This meta-textual production of meaning touches upon Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding / decoding approach to cultural reception. Hall notes the extent to which audiences are as implicated as cultural producers with regards to the meaning derived from cultural texts. While *House Calls* purports to be a venue for audiences to arrive at a shared understanding of *Big Brother*, the decoding process is no longer mutually exclusive from – but rather contained within – the encoding process. In other words, the producers of the *Big Brother* text seek to actively constitute a particular reception. Following Hall's model, this is accomplished by not only providing a cultural text, but a surrounding context that audiences come to regard as local, or immediately relevant to their viewership.

Section Three: Evaluative consumption of houseguests

Having established the contradictory tensions which necessitate a savvy viewership as well as an outline of meta-show strategies with which pertinent information can be derived, we can turn to the manner in which *House Calls* encourages a consumption of *Big Brother* that foregrounds monitoring and evaluating houseguests. The viewing subject who is aware of the constraints to *Big Brother*'s reality claims - and knows how to consume the meta-show in light of these shortcomings – is invited to manifest this media savvy through a careful appraisal of houseguest activity within the enclosure.

Monitoring houseguest strategic performance

As houseguests are competing against each other to win the grand prize, much of the discussion on *House Calls* pertains to the strategies they adopt in order to escape the weekly evictions. Part of this strategizing involves carefully deciding who will be evicted, and who will remain as a competitor for the following week. Naturally, such decisions are the subject of many heated conversations on the call-in show. When Gretchen asks Marcellas who he believes will be evicted, he replies: "Sarah's going. They've gone back and forth, but they come up with... it's like every single moment... they come up with great ideas and then they talk themselves out of it." (House Calls 2005d: 11:02) In addition to taking issue with the manner in which houseguests are performing as strategic subjects, Marcellas demonstrates extensive knowledge regarding their behaviour by generalizing it as a long-term pattern. Marcellas further broadcasts this knowledge when a caller takes issue with the projected outcome of the upcoming eviction. In response to the caller's dissatisfaction, he responds: "This is my problem with the house this week... and this is my problem with the house in general. They

don't... they're not thinking. They're not... like... they're not dissecting every single variable." (House Calls 2005d: 20:36). This complaint is followed up with an appraisal of the strategic value of evicting either nominated houseguest. Once again, Marcellas demonstrates a capacity for making a generalized claim about the houseguests' ability to collectively sustain a strategic performance.

Houseguests are also routinely singled out and appraised as individual players. In response to the claim that the 36 year old fire-fighter Eric was manipulative, a caller believes that nominated houseguest James is more deserving of this attribute: "James is so... even though I don't want to admit it... so absolutely devious and absolutely smarter than we're giving him credit for. (...) With his controlling, cult-like... we thought Eric was cult leader... how about James?" (House Calls 2005c: 13:35). Here, an attempt is made to revise the general consensus regarding houseguest performance. Specifically, who emerges as the most manipulative within the enclosure? At another point, a caller wants to cast more attention on Rachel regarding her abilities as a fierce competitor:

> I think one of the things that I'm not hearing too much people talk about is Rachel. I think she's the biggest powerhouse in the house and *she's behind the radar.* She's controlling that whole other team *and nobody's even looking at that.* I mean... Maggie's really out there as the powerhouse on the other side, but I think Rachel is the person to beat in this game. (House Calls 2005d: 13:58, emphasis added)

By employing the terms I have italicized, the caller points to the surveillance-based subtext in strategic performance. Not only will cunning "players" misrepresent their intentions to other houseguests, but the more capable ones will even escape the viewers' attention, necessitating a venue such as *House Calls* for the convergence of information derived from an atomized surveillant assemblage.

The above quote is also interesting because of how time spent within the enclosure is described as a "game." Further examining the lexicon used during these

discussions reveals the strategic nature that is emphasized at these instances. Commenting, on her dissatisfaction with houseguest activity, Gretchen states: "Right, and when they are saying 'We have to stick to the original plan'... It's no longer your original plan. Once James came off the block, your plan was already blown to pieces, so you gotta come up with a new and better plan." (House Calls 2005d: 21:31). Houseguests are not only expected to have a plan, but this plan should be subject to continual revision. Interestingly, such a demand necessitates increased vigilance on the part of audiences in order to provide revised assessments of revised strategies. Sarah, the newly evicted houseguest, further naturalizes this vocabulary when she is asked if she would have chosen to save herself (at her boyfriend's detriment) if she was given the chance:

> I may have used it on myself. But with him winning, I don't feel like I... um... it wasn't fair for me to ask him to use it on me. He won it. He deserved it. He deserved to be in that house. He played the game the way he played it and he got where he was because of how he played the game, not because of how I played the game. So... he deserved it. (House Calls 2005e: 15:38)

At a later instance, Marcellas applauds Sarah's appraisal of another houseguest's behaviour, noting that she has a "grasp of the game" (House Calls 2005e: 21:23). In offering this compliment, Sarah's access to information as somebody who until very recently resided inside the enclosure is privileged and treated as something to aspire towards through a vigilant employment of the meta-show's resources. The viewing subject is even treated as superior to the houseguest in terms of their access to relevant information. When a caller asks Sarah to explain why a fellow houseguest fell victim to what was generally perceived as a transparent ruse, she states that: "[i]t's so hard to see what's going on, you know, when you're in the house. You know things are going on behind your back..." (House Calls 2005e: 17:05). Here, the savvy *Big Brother* viewer, perpetually monitoring the live feed, can be seen as performing a service for the

houseguests, who may fall victim to their personal blind spots. This could explain why callers are perpetually addressing Marcellas' ill-fated performance within the enclosure (House Calls 2005c: 18:35; House Calls 2005c: 21:45; House Calls 2005d: 7:55; House Calls 2005d: 15:30)

The boundaries of strategic evaluation

In commenting on the efficacy of the strategies adopted by houseguests within the enclosure, callers on *House Calls* as well as the hosts are left with a troubling quandary: whether to characterize their observations of houseguests as deliberate strategy or as a tactless betrayal of their actual demeanour. For example, the hosts are discussing Jennifer's low-key temperament, when Gretchen notes: "She is definitely reminding me (...) a little bit of a Cowboy's [the previous season's runner-up] game. Only even less of a presence. And I don't know if it's a strategy or if it's... she's just maybe a little blah. I mean, you know, maybe she just doesn't provoke people or get involved in controversy." (House Calls 2005a: 5:55). Here, Gretchen is able to evaluate Jennifer, but acknowledges that this may be an evaluation of her personality rather than her performance as a contestant. Undoubtedly, houseguests should not be expected to sustain their performances as strategic players throughout their duration within the enclosure.

In considering other houseguest assessments, it would appear that strategic and non-strategic factors needn't be mutually exclusive. When Marcellas asks Lynette Rice if she considers either strategy or charisma more important when judging houseguests, she replies: "I think it's a little bit of both. I mean, it certainly makes the strategy more interesting if you have somebody like Kaysar who's got great charisma and obviously great looks playing into that strategy." (House Calls 2005b: 1:48). Here, personal

attributes such as physical attractiveness and charisma are presented as strategic elements. In other words, even if a viewer is strictly concerned with determining which houseguest has adopted the most appropriate strategy, the boundaries of that strategy may be open to negotiation. This is further demonstrated when Marcellas is evaluating Ivette, who has been nominated for eviction:

> Okay, let's actually look at Ivette. Ivette strengthens the sheep [the name given to a group of houseguests]. Ivette also strengthens Maggie cause she's like this blind instrument for Maggie to do whatever Maggie wants. Ivette's abrasive, and that's my problem with Ivette. It's not that she's a liar. It's not that she's a cheater. It's not anything... It's not even that she's a racist, because that can be just the... I think that can be the situation she's in. (House Calls 2005d: 20:57)

When it comes to determining whether or not it is in the other houseguests' interests to evict Ivette, Marcellas considers both her value as a competitor as well as somebody with whom both the houseguests as well as the audiences have to endure for the duration of the contest. Speaking as both a former houseguest and current viewer, Marcellas cites Ivette's abrasiveness as the reason he wants to see her evicted. It would appear that houseguests themselves cite non-strategic factors when evaluating one another. Upon being asked to explain why Eric was her least favourite houseguest, Sarah claims that it was "[e]verything he stood for, you know, he tried to use his family, his children, and what he did for a living as a way to get into people's hearts, and that was just wrong, you know. He just... he bugged me so bad..." (House Calls 2005e: 33:41). Having a houseguest echo sentiments that have been shared by callers and hosts alike would appear to naturalize the evaluative viewership that the latter have articulated in *House Calls*. Even if one were to remain uniquely interested in strategic activity, personal attributes may emerge in hindsight as key ingredients to a houseguest's victory. When a caller dismisses Howie as not performing strategically, Marcellas notes that it's too early to

make such a judgement: "And if Howie makes it to the end having made this decision, and only time will tell, then maybe he's the smartest player in *Big Brother* history." (House Calls 2005a: 7:45). From this it would appear that strategy is not always readily apparent, necessitating a careful monitoring of seemingly banal enclosure activity as it can potentially change the course of the game.

Monitoring houseguest domestic performance

At certain points, the evaluative consumption of *Big Brother* that is articulated in *House Calls* bears no relation to strategy or competition. Instead, discussion is centred on understanding the houseguests as diagnosable individuals rather than as competitors. Consider the hosts' discussion of evicted houseguest Eric, with Gretchen stating that: "[h]e's so aggressive and insecure that it's just a dangerous combination, I think. He was so aggressive in the house. There was a situation on the feeds where there was almost a physical confrontation that had to be stopped." (House Calls 2005b: 4:32). Rather than portraying Eric's aggression as a strategic attempt to instil fear or respect in his fellow competitors, it is understood as pathological and necessitating external intervention – as well as monitoring, naturally. The potentially therapeutic nature of this sort of monitoring is also raised when Marcellas offers an analysis of Ivette:

> Well with Ivette, I kind of feel like it's just textbook. Like… she sort of… would benefit from some therapy. You know, you can tell, like, that this is the first time that she's been accepted by the power base. She walks in, and the white male married fire-fighter father of two tells her that she's good and she's valid. So she follows him blindly. (…) These are how people are susceptible to cults. (House Calls 2005b: 5:56)

In this example Ivette's alliance with Eric is fully attributed to a pseudo-psychological profile based on Marcellas' consumption of *Big Brother*'s meta-show resources. A similar diagnosis is made regarding April by Marcellas, who claims she: "just talks a lot of… a lot of crap and she's one of those people who likes to hear her voice." (House

Calls 2005c: 10:47). Again, the implication is that a savvy viewership of *Big Brother* enables audiences with a privileged understanding of the houseguests that might not otherwise be afforded to them. Often, houseguest demeanour is attributed to stressors within the enclosure, as when Marcellas observes that: "April freaked out. You know, she's on PB & J [peanut butter and jelly sandwiches] and she's just stopped smoking, so she's, like, losing it." (House Calls 2005b: 13:30). Thus, Marcellas is not only capable of assessing April's composure, but the later can be traced back to events and conditions which have been gathered from the live feed and other meta-show sources.

Yet audience speculation is not restricted to what transpires in the enclosure. In response to a caller's claims that Howie's outgoing behaviour is the result of his insecurities, Gretchen replies: "Well they are very insecure, you're right. And anybody who needs that much plastic surgery as a guy... and the people who are not getting the action are the ones who are talking like they are the players." (House Calls 2005a: 26:56). Following her eviction, Sarah endorsed Gretchen's assessment (House Calls 2005e: 37:35). By bringing up plastic surgery and possible sexual frustrations, this evaluation raises concerns with the houseguests that extend beyond their limited stay in the enclosure. This is also exemplified when a caller questions Sarah's relationship with James: "I'm not your mother, but I want to talk to you like your father. Has anybody in your family, your close friends or anything ever question you and James' relationship, particularly on James' devotion to you?" (House Calls 2005e: 21:38). By stating that he wanted to address the evicted houseguest as a parental figure, the caller appears to undertake an authoritative subject position on the basis of his supposed familiarity with Sarah's relationship. Interestingly, both Sarah's mother (House Calls 2005e: 25:16) and

father (House Calls 2005e: 28:30) called in later and voiced similar concerns, albeit in a less blatant manner. It should be noted that many of the observations offered on *House Calls* touch upon more pedestrian concerns. Consider when Marcellas states: "And let's hope that they take away James' tweezers. I... all day on the feeds, that's all I can think about every time he comes in, I'm like 'What's wrong with his eyebrows?'" (House Calls 2005b: 25:55; House Calls 2005d: 22:52). In addition to over-plucked eyebrows, James' slow blinking is later discussed (House Calls 2005c: 17:20), as well as allegations that he tampered with the contents of another houseguest's underwear drawer (House Calls 2005c: 23:40).

Discussion

Thus far, the viewing subject articulated by *House Calls* is one that is fully aware of the constraints that dictate *Big Brother*, has access to the various meta-show elements and targets their attention on the houseguests. In looking at the discussions surrounding houseguest monitoring, it is difficult to pinpoint one specific purpose behind this viewership. While much of the discussion outlined above pertains to strategic performance and the competitive nature of *Big Brother*, at no point is it privileged over more pedestrian evaluations of the houseguests. As a result, *House Calls* appears to maintain a flexible and open-ended nature when it comes to utilizing the surveillance-based components that constitute the meta-show.

While the exact reasons for surveillance may be multiple, they all stem from the anxieties regarding the fabricated nature of new media and communication technologies. This resonates profoundly with Andrejevic's (2005) treatment of recent developments of peer-based surveillance. In response to uncertainties associated with new communication

technologies such as online dating and instant messaging, subjects are invited to implicate themselves further with such technologies by adopting strategic forms of peer surveillance that capitalize on the former's questionable nature. Possibly, we can consider *House Calls* as an open-ended mouthpiece for newly emerging lateral surveillance technologies, where a mediated transparency characterizes our relationships with friends, colleagues and loved ones. Additionally, this section of the discourse resonates with Gitlin's work on political metacoverages. Gitlin (1990) describes a type of viewership whereby the contradictory and calculated nature of political discourse becomes an openly divulged fact, channelling outrage and dissent towards an inherently conservative form of savvy (and passive) consumption. When *House Calls* undercuts critical discourses regarding reality television by articulating them itself, savvy viewers may much more readily enjoy the contents of their television screens and computer monitors, uncritically directing their attention to the real dupes who are trying to kick-start their Hollywood careers.

Section Four: Instantaneous, Perpetual and Meaningless Opinions

The preceding sections of the discourse suggest the viewing subject in *House Calls* is invited to share their commentary on events inside the enclosure. Interestingly, it is articulated as an opinion, rather than as knowledge or proof (*c.f.* Andrejevic 2005). This is underscored in Gretchen's description of a meta-show game that is played on the talk show: "Now these are not clips chosen by Marcellas and I. These are clips chosen by our producers, and then we're gonna get our reaction and your reactions as well." (House Calls 2005a: 10:01). Gretchen and Marcellas suggest an opinion-laden meta-show when

they describe other activities like the weekly eviction predictions (House Calls 2005d: 28:57). When conversing with a newly evicted Sarah, Gretchen disarmingly points out that they never succeed in guessing which houseguest will leave (House Calls 2005e: 27:00). The hosts' viewing position is further outlined as Gretchen informs Marcellas that he is incapable of not commenting on anything relevant to *Big Brother* (House Calls 2005c: 6:55). Marcellas appears to be in agreement with this assessment when he offers his opinions of the importance of opinions in *House Calls*:

> I thought House Calls was actually about our opinions. I thought House Calls was about like this irreverent sort-of, funny look at not just Big Brother, but Big Brother the series. And I thought that part of the reason that Gretchen and I were hired was because we bring this passion for Big Brother to the show. And we bring this passion about our lives and ourselves and our opinions and when you get Marcellas, you know you're going to get Marcellas, sort of, unbridled. I'm not going to hold back and I've discovered that about you [gestures to Gretchen] as well. (House Calls 2005a: 22:11)

Although this may be treated as the hosts' modus operandi, neither Gretchen nor Marcellas consistently privilege it as a viewing position. In addressing their performance as hosts, Marcellas states that they "did so well yesterday. I believe the total yesterday was fifteen calls, which was huge for us because you know I like to ramble on. (...) Gretchen can be chatty too. Gretchen's points are usually, like, deeper than mine. Mine are usually about somebody's shoes or an outfit I don't like." (House Calls 2005d: 1:33). Not only does Marcellas suggest that he is an inefficient talk-show host, he also claims that he only engages with *Big Brother* in a superficial manner.

Already, we may wonder where viewers are meant to situate themselves vis-à-vis Marcellas and Gretchen. To further complicate things, it appears that the hosts are not entirely consistent in their consumption of *Big Brother*. In paying particular attention to Marcellas' articulation of viewing positions, one may find that there is no clearly sustained boundary between appropriate and inappropriate use of the *Big Brother*

apparatus. As an example, we can consider Marcellas' reaction to comments made by callers regarding Sarah's relationship with James, where he states that "[i]t becomes like these questions and certain things that are put out there that become nobody's business, you know. How your man treats you and how you treat your man is between the two of you." (House Calls 2005e: 22:16). In this instance, Marcellas is asserting that passing judgement on relations between houseguests is an inappropriate use of the *Big Brother* apparatus. Additionally, Marcellas takes issue with the employment of terms such as stupid and dumb to describe enclosure activity. When a caller compares Howie's performance to Marcellas' in the third season, Marcellas responds:

> Listen, let's stop saying what's stupid. Let's stop saying what's dumb. I made an emotional decision and I played the game with my heart. That's that. Howie did what he thought was right for Howie. You guys are not in the house, so you have no right to sit and say somebody's dumb or somebody's not dumb. You can disagree with what did. Howie did what he did cause it was right for him. He thought that he was protecting himself. (House Calls 2005d: 9:01)

From Marcellas' proscriptions emerges a subjectivity that recognizes limitations to the types of opinions that can be formed from viewing *Big Brother*. Yet one must question the immediate relevance of this statement when Marcellas not only uses the judgemental language that he takes issue with, but also has used it to evaluate the very same events as the caller in the previous example:

> Okay... so, what do we want to talk about today? Let's talk about Howie. I am passing the torch. I am no longer the dumbest player (...) in Big Brother history. (...) What else can we talk about? We can talk about Ivette and this undercurrent in the house. The house is as annoyed with Ivette as we the viewers are. (House Calls 2005a: 1:26)

While speaking little to the logic behind Marcellas' complaint, Gretchen comments on this issue when she points out the enjoyment derived from the unrestrained generation of opinions:

> I understand where you're coming from. But first of all (...) when you watch Big Brother. Part of the fun I think people have is being the coach from the bench. (...) I

> know that you're like "Let's not call people dumb. Let's not say that they do stupid things." But I know in about thirty seconds, something's gonna happen and you're going to go "We'll she's the biggest idiot. This is a house of fools!" So I just want to put that out there, baby. (House Calls 2005d: 9:46)

Interestingly, Gretchen also notes that Marcellas is incapable of adhering to the subject position that he seeks to privilege. This would appear to reinforce the sentiment that the hosts of *House Calls* perform as heavily engaged viewers of the *Big Brother* meta-show rather than as formal experts. This is also illustrated when Marcellas comments on the nature of the commentary that he provides:

> Please don't ask me questions about anything anymore cause I'm an idiot. Like, I'm the one that's like "Oh, vote! Oh, do this!" Just ask me questions about, like, who made my shoes, or my amazing bracelet that I'm wearing today. (...) I'm the idiot that didn't use the golden vote. I'm just kind of cute and opinionated, so don't ask me anything. (House Calls 2005d: 25:23)

Discussion

The exchanges outlined above invoke a viewing subject that perpetually offers opinions regarding *Big Brother*. While these opinions may be the immediate result of extensive monitoring of enclosure activity, *House Calls* ensures that they remain opinions rather than knowledge that has been formally recognized and agreed upon by experts. This is evidenced in the hosts' performances as fans susceptible to bias and partisan commentary. Such viewerships resonate with Henry Jenkins' (1992) understanding of fan communities as generating evaluations of meta-show units such as episodes of a televised series. What's more, Jenkins notes an attempt by fan viewers to negotiate between a plurality of "correct" ways of consuming a program. One might speculate that *House Calls* intentionally conveys some openness regarding opinions generated regarding *Big Brother* in order to simulate the meaning-producing activities that are typically part of fan cultures' jurisdiction.

While prescribing peer-based surveillance strategies in response to uncertainties associated with the *Big Brother* meta-show elements, *House Calls* also underscores the questionable nature of the viewer's monitoring, lending support to the assessment that the risk and ensuing scepticism associated with contemporary communication technologies may potentially be amplified through lateral surveillance strategies (Andrejevic 2005). The certainty once assured by expert testimonials give way to a flooding of savvy editorializing, purportedly instantly accessible and disposable by the touch of a button. This sort of viewership becomes troubling when we consider its conservative acceptance of manipulative representations found in media outlets (Andrejevic 2004). Beyond a mere acceptance of such conditions, *House Calls* offers the viewer a form of (limited) authorship by invariably calling upon audiences to generate an opinion.

By constituting a viewing subject that helps pen out the *Big Brother* meta-show, *House Calls* affirms concerns by cultural theorists about the increasingly interactive nature of audience subjectivity. As Baudrillard (1995) has noted, a reflexively active mass may be safer than an indifferent or unengaged one. Gilles Deleuze (MacGregor Wise 2002) echoes this sentiment in noting that a repressive silencing of audiences has given way to a state of participation that reduces all statements made to some base level of meaning. One can speculate if the indiscriminate questioning of any writing within the *Big Brother* meta-show drowns out the production of risky or undesirable signification by audiences.

CHAPTER FIVE – ANALYSIS OF AUDIENCE NEGOTIATION WITH DISCOURSE

Transition from Producer Articulations to Fan Articulations

The preceding chapters outline a discourse embedded in *House Calls* where audiences are invited to engage as authors within the margins of the *Big Brother* text. While such an offer resembles the sort of authorship that Henry Jenkins' fans sought, it shapes meanings attributed to panoptic regimes synoptically. Additionally, it articulates viewers as self-governing subjects, savvy insiders within a media text based on surveillance and peer manipulation. Yet it is necessary to question the extent to which this discourse shapes audience reception of - and involvement in – media texts. Potentially, the discourse surrounding *Big Brother* may sharply diverge from articulations produced by fans. At this juncture it remains to be seen how audiences will situate themselves vis-à-vis the *House Calls*' discourse concerning *Big Brother*.

Bearing this possibility in mind, this chapter will address instances where audiences discuss *Big Brother* beyond the official website. In particular, I will look at websites that have been built by fans themselves. While fan-based websites may not be directly constituted by the show's production team, the extent to which they employ meanings generated by the latter warrants detailed consideration. An analysis of fan-based websites must first confront the heterogeneous composition of each site. Running "Big Brother season 6" through a search engine might yield a wide gamut of sites, and most of these sites will purport to provide coverage of the reality program. Yet it should not be assumed that these sites engage with the program in the same manner. To this end, it may be useful to outline the various formats in which information on *Big Brother* may be found on fan-based websites.

Several fan-based websites provide detailed summaries of activity within the *Big Brother* enclosure. Unlike the CBS website which only summarizes televised episodes, the summaries found on fan sites draw upon the live Internet feed. Consequently, the narrative that emerges from fan-based summaries vastly surpasses the carefully edited vignettes that air on television. The labour involved in this endeavour is typically shared by several volunteers, and one can expect temporal gaps where nobody was available to monitor the enclosure by live feed or willing to share their findings. Interestingly, attempts are often taken to distinguish between the information derived from summarizing the live feeds and commentary that might be generated in response to the former (Morty's 2006a).

In addition to written accounts of enclosure activity, *Big Brother* fan sites also distribute relevant information through a variety of media formats. This information is usually extracted from the Internet feed and made available as screenshot images, audio files, and video files. Although the official CBS site also provides audio-visual coverage of the enclosure, fan sites can be differentiated insofar as they attempt to overcome boundaries imposed by the program's production team. For instance, when tensions between houseguests Michael and Eric escalated to a physical confrontation, the Internet feed cut to a shot of the enclosure's fish tank. Recognized as an attempt to censor this transgression, online fans began requesting and circulating any salvageable evidence, including a video of the moments leading up to the fight (Morty's 2006b). This activity underscores an attempt to locate material that is situated at the backstage of the *Big Brother* program. In other words, these fan sites bring to light information which is deliberately omitted or otherwise managed by the production team. By doing so, these

sites differentiate themselves from the discourse generated by CBS regarding appropriate and inappropriate material.

Discussion boards are another component common to many fan-based websites. Generally these boards serve as open forums for audiences to offer opinions on recent developments within the *Big Brother* enclosure as well as anything else related to the program. Discussions cover a wide range of topics pertaining to the consumption of *Big Brother*, including audience reception of *House Calls*. Fan-generated discussions of *House Calls* are particularly relevant to this research insofar as they illustrate how audiences who watch *House Calls* situate themselves with regards to the discourse it articulates. While the online talk show invariably provides meanings that seek to make sense of *Big Brother* consumption, audiences may not yield a dominant reading of *House Calls*. Additionally, the speech activity found in these fan sites may not constitute one single discourse, but rather a myriad of engagements to the discourse situated in *House Calls*. Despite this, the statements that will be analysed below can be held together as unitary insofar as they share *House Calls* as a topic of conversation. To this end, it is necessary to examine how the discursive components described in the previous chapter are manifested in a fan-based discussion board.

Acknowledgement of Constraints in *Big Brother* meta-show

Insofar as *House Calls* serves to offer commentary on *Big Brother*, it has been shown to underscore the shortcomings inherent in the televised episodes and other meta-show components. By calling attention to these constraints, *House Calls* advocates a savvy viewership of *Big Brother* that maintains a vigilant engagement with attempts at

manipulation, notably when the manipulation is perpetrated by houseguests. Discussions about *House Calls* that are located on fan-based websites generally manifest a similar awareness. In particular, audiences offer an understanding of broadcast media as implicitly shaped by ratings-based concerns which detract from their ability to provide reality claims.

Fans frequently cite the gap between how houseguests are conducting themselves on the Internet feed and what footage is broadcast on the television program as problematic. In a message that was addressed to Marcellas, a viewer comments on houseguest Ivette's portrayal on the television program:

> You and Gretchen mentioned Ivette, and her racist comments ... my question is -how do you guys feel about CBS not showing this side of Ivette's charchter (sic) on the show? I feel that she is being portrayed in a more likeable, and sympathetic role then she comes across on the feeds. (Morty's 2006i)

Another viewer echoes this sentiment in noting that Ivette "consistently is calling Kaysar 'osama' (sic), which shock of all shocks doesn't get CBS airtime ;)" (Morty's 2006i). Both comments single out the televised program for misrepresenting Ivette's questionable conduct. Yet adopting this critical stance towards the show is bound to an endorsement of the live feeds as uncovering the truth behind this manipulation. The gap between the purportedly unedited live Internet feed and the selective editing on the televised program is further exemplified when a fan discusses co-executive producer Don Wollman's performance as a guest on *House Calls*:

> When Marcellas asked him why they edited the show in such a way that America never got to see Ivette's racist comments he said that they weren't important to the story. What a load. (...) This guy gave me some insight into why the show is so poorly edited. Power tripping, egomaniac with little talent. Thank goodness for the live feeds. (Morty's 2006k)

In this comment the live feed serves to remedy the shortcomings associated with producing *Big Brother* as a television program. Yet *House Calls* is implicated in this

evaluation insofar as it illuminates these shortcomings. *House Calls* is further regarded as performing a cathartic function regarding the program's flawed editing when a fan comments on his eagerness for a controversial houseguest to appear on the talk show:

> I CANNOT wait for Eric to be on House Calls.....I would love for him to know that CBS can edit the BB show all they want to make people look one way or another, however, the livefeeds (sic) cannot be edited and I think we have seen Eric for what he is. I understand that Marcellas can't really tell Eric that most who have the Live Feeds and/or read the updates find him to be horrid!!!! Or can you? :wink: :wink: (Morty's 2006d)

Once again, a gap between the Internet feed and television program's authenticity is expressed. While the fan regards *House Calls* as a site where such discrepancies can be brought to light, they also recognize that limitations may be imposed on the hosts' ability to address them. *House Calls*, after all, is still produced by CBS, and it can be speculated that it is not endowed with the same creative freedoms as a fan-based website.

Discussions on fan-based websites can be differentiated from those on *House Calls* by virtue of the fact that the former manifests a savvy awareness of the constraints inherent in the latter. Another fan comments on the hosts' inability to confront a manipulative houseguest in noting that "Marcellas fell short as far as calling out Eric, but you could tell he was hindered by CBS since there's a good chance they may bring back one of the evicted house guests." (Morty's 2006i). Here, a fan is noting the fact that *House Calls* must remain accountable to the strict management of information that is provided to sequestered houseguests. Because of this, *House Calls* can be regarded as falling short of its promise of no-holds-barred confrontation. Yet another fan notes this shortcoming:

> House calls should have the evicted guest back on the show again when they CAN do a REAL interview with them and dish all the DIRT/Opinions and speak freely. Right now, it is really apparent that the House Calls interviews with the evicted guest are not as open and the questions are tailored so that nothing is revealed. (Morty's 2006d)

Although fans recognize a possibility that *House Calls* might overcome this limitation, they consider interviews under these conditions as falling short of their reality claim. *House Calls*' capacity to provide authentic commentary is further questioned when an audience member offers a savvy explanation of the casting of the talk show's hosts:

> Gretchen is or was a L.A. radio personality. I believe she was paired up with Marcellas so that there would be one experienced media host to go with a former houseguest. In most sporting event broadcasting there is the veteran play-by-play guy paired with the jock/former coach to explain or provide commentary. Think of Gretchen as Pat Summerall and Marcellas as John Madden, or something like that. lol. (Morty's 2006 8)

Here, Gretchen is differentiated from Marcellas insofar as her experience in the media industry enables her to mediate *House Calls*' purportedly unregulated nature. Other comments on the fan-based discussion board underscore instances where the talk show is subject to professional intervention. The previous chapter discussed an audience member whose call was terminated by the production team. Viewers took note of this and speculated on the reasoning behind this intervention. One fan hypothesizes that producers might have "felt he was going to accuse them of rigging the voting. I don't think that's what he was going to say and they should have let him finish his point." (Morty's 2006i). Another fan offers an alternate explanation: "I was curious what that guy was going to say, too, though he might have been cut off because he was going on and on and on and on - but I have heard calls equally long. I just rewatched it; I really hope that guy calls back, but gets to the point faster." (Morty's 2006i). Irregardless of the motivation behind the decision, both fans express disappointment with the fact that such an intervention could take place on *House Calls*. These statements insinuate that *House Calls*, like any other component of the *Big Brother* meta-show, is manipulated in order to ensure a specific reception of the program.

However, other viewers acknowledge that *House Calls* remains privileged over televised segments of *Big Brother*'s meta-show in its capacity to express real opinions. As one fan notes:

> I for one watch House Calls BECAUSE its an online show, and they don't have to follow all the rules of a standard on air tv show. I think that's the reason why lots of others like watching House Calls, its an online talkshow, so they can go all out without CBS really caring much since there aren't regulations. (Morty's 2006h)

While the preceding statement situates *House Calls* in response to limitations associated with the television format, other fans claim that these limitations are inherent in the meta-show's production team. One *House Calls* supporter states that: "House Calls is watched(I'm guessing.. but hell, I'm a damn fine guesser) because it's not ran by company men speaking milktoast (sic) drivel." (Morty's 2006h). Not only does this fan allude to their media savvy by qualifying themselves as "a damn fine guesser," but they disregard discourses generated by production teams (or "company men") as meaningless. Yet making this assertion implies that *House Calls* is situated outside (or at least on the periphery) of the production team's jurisdiction. Another audience member attributes *House Calls* with the ability to shape the outcome of the *Big Brother* program:

> Can House Calls help.... (it is not just about Kaysar - but the longterm interest in the show's viability.) is there anything that House Calls can do, i.e. there is a petition that has been signed regarding allowing Kaysar Immunity this week. Can you help bring it to CBS BB attention. (...) - IMO - it is not the wisest CBS choice this week to allow Kaysar to go - it could spell ratings disaster. (Morty's 2006j)

From this perspective, *House Calls* is privileged over the rest of the *Big Brother* meta-show in its ability to rectify the program's flawed nature. In addition, the fan exhibits media savvy regarding which houseguests would yield the highest ratings. This perspective manifests a cognizance of the possibility of manipulating the show's outcome for the sake of generating "good television."

In a similar vein, one audience member notes the deliberate selection of houseguests that reflect a desirable demographic rather than society as a whole. The claim is made that: "CBS wants the 25-35 year old audience share so bad that they stacked (pun intended) the house this season with a selection of brainless beefcake (sic) and silicon bimbos from that demographic" (Morty's 2006f). By pointing out the shortcomings inherent in *Big Brother*'s casting practices, this fan offers a criticism of both the television program as well as the live feed. Because it is the enclosure's composition which is problematized rather than how activity within the enclosure is mediated, viewers cannot overcome this shortcoming by seeking out what is "really" going on inside the *Big Brother* house.

From all this it would appear that audiences are all too willing to assume the "insider" subject position accorded through *House Calls*. While the comments expressed on fan-based websites underscore the flawed and manipulative nature of the *Big Brother* meta-show, they much more readily implicate *House Calls* in either a positive or critical light. In making these assessments, audiences exercise a savvy articulation of contemporary mass media as inherently manipulative and ratings-driven. For instance, when one fan suggests that *House Calls* should appear on CBS's *The Early Show*, another forum poster responds:

> Not bloody likely if they want to save what little of their journalistic integrity they have left. Between the moronic adolescent on speed weather dude, all the fashion tips, cooking segments, new mommy advice and the reality show and Letterman clips - they actually have about 10 minutes of hard news in their 2 hour show. Could be why they're number 3 out of the three big network morning news broadcasts. (Morty's 2006f)

Thus, *House Calls* is regarded as potentially yet another unimportant component of a floundering news program. In delivering an extensive critique of *The Early Show*, this fan interestingly notes the program's ratings position as a testament to its substandard

composition. This savvy scepticism is even extended to fellow audience members. In response to a vehement denouncement of *House Calls*, one fan speculates whether the poster is "a shill for NBC trying to divert viewers from BB to some tired Joey reruns" (Morty's 2006g).

Articulating the *Big Brother* meta-show

Audiences on fan-based message boards generally manifest a familiarity with the components that constitute the *Big Brother* meta-show, and consequently with their subject position as engaged viewers. Not only does this familiarity extend from television program to Internet feed to online talk show, but it also extends temporally to earlier seasons of both *Big Brother* and *House Calls*. For instance, audiences refer to precedents in the meta-show in order to substantiate statements made on fan-based boards. Many fans question *House Calls* host Marcellas' ability to maintain a professional front while interviewing houseguests for whom he has openly expressed his displeasure. One audience member responds to this speculation by noting his conduct during the previous season:

> Remember last year when Marcellas "hated" the twins? When they were eventually evicted he had to interview them - and he did it with professionalism. Marcellas doesn't like Eric's game play and, yes, has said he "hates" Eric. I'm confident Marcellas will interview Eric with professionalism. (Morty's 2006d)

In this statement, a *House Calls* viewer who is familiar with the previous season predicts future developments by paralleling the current season's conditions against similar ones from last year. Likewise, a detractor of Marcellas notes that he "aint nuttin' but a big hypocritcal (sic) baby", yet this opinion is tempered by the observation that "he is a little better this year" (Morty's 2006c). References to previous seasons are also employed in

assessing the manipulative nature of activity within the enclosure. One fan asks whether it is still possible for an honest person to win the game. In asserting that this may have been the case previously, the fan cites Season 3 winner Lisa as an example of an honest player, but also wonders if other fans' understanding of the show extends far enough to remember her (Morty's 2006j).

House Calls audiences further manifest a familiarity with the dispersed nature of the *Big Brother* meta-show when Marcellas becomes an active member of the *Morty's TV* message board. Interestingly, Marcellas introduces himself to the board by stating: "I just found Morty's! I was chatting @ another site and someone said you guys have great coverage of Big Brother!" (Morty's 2006c)[2]. Having an agent of the 'official' *Big Brother* meta-show introducing his own viewership as including at least two non-CBS fan sites serves to complicate the boundary between production team and audience member. In response, many audience members welcome Marcellas by affirming their own consumption of *Big Brother* in a manner that foregrounds Marcellas' presence. For instance, one fan notes that they "have watched every episode of House Calls in its 2 seasons and its (sic) great." (Morty's 2006d) Yet another fan notes that: "This is my first season watching House Calls, I tried to watch them last year but for some reason my computer wouldn't allow me to. :(" (Morty's 2006e) As if to compensate for not having

[2] In conjunction with the media savvy exercised by audiences, some doubts were raised regarding the claim that the poster Marcellas was in fact the *House Calls* host. One audience member attested to Marcellas authenticity through a familiarity with his conduct, noting that: "[i]t sounds just like him. He was known to post on threads on another site last year." (Morty's 2006d). This endorsement was contested by another fan who described themselves as "way to skeptical for his years" (Morty's 2006e). This fan sought bodily proof in the form of "a secret sign, like the Vulcan greeting" (Morty's 2006e) that Marcellas could perform on *House Calls*. Reliance on bodily manifestations for proof-seeking resonates with Andrejevic's observation that: "[if] (...) what people say is potentially inaccurate, uninterpretable, or illusory, the body is offered as a guarantee of some surplus beyond the manipulations of discourse." (Andrejevic 2005:481).

been able to watch *House Calls*' first season, the fan refers to Marcellas' performance within the *Big Brother* enclosure by noting: "[e]verytime I watch your eviction scene I cry like a baby." (Morty's 2006e). It is interesting to note that while Marcellas is one of many personalities associated with the *Big Brother* meta-show, his capacity to maintain multiple subject positions (in front of the television screen when watching *Big Brother*, in front of his monitor when watching the Internet feed and posting to message boards, in front of cameras when recording *House Calls*, and even in front of a panoptic assemblage during his performance within the enclosure) amplifies his fascination in the eyes of other viewers. As one fan notes: "Marcellas has managed to do what no other BB HG has done, he has stayed in the Limelight. (...) Maybe its becasue (sic) BB3 was the first BB I watched, but to me the name Marcellas will go hand in hand with BB." (Morty's 2006e). At his juncture one can speculate whether privileging Marcellas as a more meaningful component of *Big Brother* can be related to the production team's mandate to promote a new season of fresh(?) faces (especially if ratings generated from the televised segments and revenues generated from the Internet feed's subscription rates bear any importance to them).

Later in the season, members of the fan site call into question the boundaries of the official Big Brother meta-show. Having rendered himself recognizable on this message board, audiences call upon Marcellas directly to explain the producers' articulation. On *House Calls*, callers made a habit of mentioning their favourite fan-sites while on the air. While this was seemingly tolerated for some time, *House Calls* eventually forbade this practice. Many viewers were perplexed by this decision, which

became a topic of discussion on the fan site. Under the impression that he frequently visited *Morty's*, one audience member directly asked Marcellas the following question:

> On Mondays show, you said people couldn;t (sic) give "shout outs" to the boards they are part of. I know I am not the only one curious as to why? I am sure there is a reason, but could you explain? *I would think that shout outs would be a good thing? Was it something that CBS requested or does it count as advertising or just takes up time?* Just curious, cuz you know everyone wants to give a shoout (sic) so that the people on their boards know you actually got through. (Morty's 2006h, emphasis added)

In expressing a lack of understanding for this decision, this fan can be understood as seeking a location for *Morty's* and similar fan-based sites within the *Big Brother* meta-show. Ostensibly, audience activity located on unofficial sites may serve to popularize the meta-show, yet it may also be considered parasitic in nature insofar as it clutters the meta-show with unnecessary – or unregulated – meaning. In the absence of an immediate response from the *House Calls* host, other fans began to speculate about why the *Big Brother* production team sought to exclude unofficial sites. An audience member manifests a cynical interpretation in guessing that: "they would rather [have] people on the CBS BB chat room so they could spy on some feedback." (Morty's 2006h). This fan not only believes that the production team has a location where they wish to situate audience activity, but that audiences may be just as subject to surveillance as the houseguests. While CBS may wish to contain audiences within regulated spaces that can be more readily surveyed (Scott 1998), another audience member offers an alternative explanation:

> I saw him reply on another board :oops: that it was because it was considered advertising and that was a big no no with CBS. He was saying that he couldn't even plug his own site that he hosts. Kind of like when they handed out the goodie bags last year they couldn't show us what they put in them because it was advertising. (Morty's 2006i)

This response is especially noteworthy insofar as it manifests audience savvy on a number of levels. Not only does this audience member manifest a viewership which

involves visiting multiple fan sites, but they in turn recognize the negative light in which these sites have been cast by *House Calls* and account for this through a (presumably) sarcastic "oops". Beyond this, the fan demonstrates an awareness of CBS' policies regarding what constitutes advertising. It is also interesting to note that Marcellas is situated in between the official meta-show and the fans. While he is enforcing CBS's policy, doing so comes at his own expense, as he is no longer able "to plug his own site." However, another audience member attributes Marcellas as directly responsible for this decision, and calls the host's conduct on the fan site into question: "Yet, here you are pluggin' your show, and upcoming guests. Whats (sic) good for the goose ..... so many double standards surrounding HC and next day change of policy after critisism (sic)." (Morty's 2006i). In response to the exclusion of fan-based sites from the official meta-show, the fan is further articulation this boundary by problematizing Marcellas' presence on a fan site. While Marcellas is treated as part of the official meta-show in the statement above, his response serves to re-assert his dual-citizenship within the official and unofficial realms:

> I'm plugging my show because I'm a member here. People are interested in what is going on on "The H.C. as well as BB. I didn't start this thread. Fans of House Calls did. If you wanna do a shout out on the show, buy airtime. We are looking for sponsors. G & I are expensive! LOL! And what change of policy are you talking about? I don't know any show that let's people advertise on it unless they are paying. It was never okay to do shoutouts. This season it got out of hand. (Morty's 2006i)

Thus, while defending *House Calls*' decision to exclude fan-based sites from the meta-show, Marcellas exercises his perceived right to participate on such a site. Through this we can discern some continuity between CBS' meta-show and the sites that have been constructed by fans, even if there remains some porous boundary that restricts audiences from freely engaging with the meta-show.

While audiences largely adhere to an understanding of the meta-show as it is articulated by *House Calls*, material that has not been produced by CBS – notably the websites and message boards in which this recognition takes place – factor largely in their consumption. Moreover, viewers demonstrate a savvy awareness of boundaries that serve to exclude these sites. The following section will examine how the evaluative form of consumption articulated by *House Calls* is in turn harnessed by fans in recognition of this exclusion.

Monitoring Houseguests, Monitoring *House Calls*

As is the case with *House Calls*, audiences who engage with fan-based websites like *Morty's* articulate a consumption of the *Big Brother* meta-show that is predicated on the evaluation of its main characters. Yet it should be noted that the evaluations which take place on fan sites diverge from those within the meta-show in a number of important respects. To begin, we can consider audience commentary surrounding Eric, one of the more controversial characters, who was evicted in the third week. Concerning a physical altercation that broke out between Eric and another houseguest, audiences sought a clear understanding of who specifically was to blame by scrutinizing footage derived from the live feed leading up to the confrontation:

> Try to find the four-panel video. Michael was looking over at the table for approx. 12 seconds before Eric said anything. (...) It's possible that Michael was giving Eric the "stare down", but there's no way to tell since the only view of Michael is from behind. Michael's words clearly were orchestrated to elicit that exact reaction from Eric, though it doesn't excuse Eric's actions AT ALL. (Morty's 2006c)

While negotiating with the limitations of the live feed (limited coverage, difficult to obtain archived footage), this audience member nevertheless constructs an explanation of the incident that renders both Michael and Eric culpable. The live feed is further

employed when another fan cites an earlier incident which illustrates Eric's misconduct: "[E]arlier that night in the hot tub, a buzzed Eric asked Jenn if he could feel her breasts. Jenn immediately moved from next to Eric to over to the other side of the hot tub. Eric the family man, eh?" (Morty's 2006c). The last sentence refers to Eric's repeated claims of conducting himself with integrity. Despite being a father and a husband, audiences exercise a savvy scepticism of this claim, using the surveillance devices at their disposal to uncover the real Eric.

In addition to live feed, audiences draw upon other sources of information in building assessments of houseguests. As a contribution to the critical assessment of Eric, one fan cites their career experience in order to make sense of his conduct:

> For what its worth. I have worked in an acute psych Hospital for over 25 years and have seen this Erick (sic) type many times. He does not belong on the show any longer. These sociopaths are fine as long as they are not challanged (sic) but one little paranoid delusion and all hell breaks loose as evident with the atempted assult (sic) on Mike. Erick can not handle the stress. (Morty's 2006c)

It is interesting to note that outside the official meta-show's boundaries, audiences manifest a willingness to build upon the surveillant assemblage through the incorporation of personal experiences. It should be clarified that these experiences may be derived from other mass media sources. As an example, we can consider an audience member who cites a houseguests' appearance on another reality program to further evaluate his conduct: "I saw BB the clown (Beau) on MTV (sic) "Made" as a personal shopper and you should have seen the the (sic) outfits he put together...gag!" (Morty's 2006i). In this example, other television programs are understood as continuous with the *Big Brother* meta-show insofar as footage from the former may be harnessed to present a savvy deconstruction of claims made in the latter (Beau, a personal shopper, has repeatedly cited his status as the fashionable male houseguest in *Big Brother*).

Another relevant divergence from the evaluative consumption that takes place on *House Calls* is how the fan sites harness *House Calls* itself as a location from which houseguests can be monitored. Following Eric's eviction from the enclosure, his performance on *House Calls* is subject to critical scrutiny:

> I'm watching House Calls right now and Eric practically denies all these things Marcellus (sic) said he did. How long is that guy going to keep denying everything, does he not realize theres (sic) millions of other people that watch the live feeds or read the message boards. (...) [H]e comes in and does all these things, denies what he does, and doesn't show much sportsmanship when he didn't hug anyone from the other team when leaving. (Morty's 2006f)

Thus, *House Calls* is likened to the live feed and television program in its capacity to provide an evaluative consumption of houseguests. Yet houseguests are not the only ones who are subject to this scrutiny. In discussing Eric's performance on *House Calls,* one fan offers a praise-laden assessment of Marcellas as well:

> Anyhow, it was fabulous! Marcellas called Eric out on almost everything... as much as time would allow for. Every time Eric would try to explain his way out of it with his "moral and values", Marcellas would turn his own words against him. At one point it got so heated that Gretchen had to calm Marcellas down. You NEED to watch it, if for no other reason a good friggen laugh. Marcellas did a terrific job! It was great! Also, when they show his pre-show interview, you get to hear how amazing Eric thinks he is which is hilarious because every time he says something about himself, you automatically picture something he's done in the house that would object to that. Very funny! Finally he's portrayed for who he really is. (Morty's 2006f)

While the *Big Brother* meta-show primarily focuses on the houseguest performance, fan-based discussions of *House Calls* extend the savvy evaluation to other characters, notably Marcellas. Concerning Eric's appearance, another fan tells Marcellas: "I love how you knew what he said better than he did." (Morty's 2006g). Here, the fan exercises a savvy awareness of Marcellas' performance as a savvy evaluator of Eric's performance within the enclosure.

Interestingly, Marcellas is often harshly evaluated as a result of the media-savvy position that he exercises. In particular, audiences recognize Marcellas as using *House*

Calls to further his career in the media industry. For instance, one fan notes that: "[h]e is a "celebrity" in his own mind, which is further fueled (sic) by the show. (...) [H]e is the Richard Hatch of BB. He willl (sic) do anything, say anything and sell his soul to make a buck." (Morty's 2006e). In offering this assessment, the poster exercises their own savvy as a result of their awareness that Marcellas is first and foremost concerned with "making a buck." This commentator continues by likening Marcellas to other houseguests:

> But guess what, so would many other HG's. He always says that HG's show their "True Face" on the show when someone has done something wrong. Well, he shows his "True Face" everyday on HC's. And I wouldn't be particularly proud of the face that's shown. (Morty's 2006e)

Here, Marcellas is portrayed as being just as manipulative as the houseguests whose manipulation he seeks to uncover by revealing their "true faces." Yet the link made between Marcellas and the houseguests is surrounded by an air of resignation, as if one is to expect manipulative self-interest to be at the heart of everyone's conduct. Another commentator balances out this criticism by noting that: "Marcellas has managed to do what no other BB HG has done, he has stayed in the Limelight. He is who he is, take him or leave him." (Morty's 2006e). In other words, if manipulative self-interest is the name of the game, we might as well revere those who are successful in this endeavour. One fan offers a media savvy evaluation of Marcellas' performance through an assumption of the *House Calls* star's aspirations within the media:

> I know you are not a seasoned pro at this yet and will grow into your maturity and professionalism. I think your major area for growth is "grace". You should learn to be more gracious. Your responses are often defensive, argumentative and petty. You sometimes go on the attack. You thank people who support you and "cuss" out those who don't. You are the host and should try to remain at an elevated level but your responses sometimes diminish your content as a person. (...) Don't think for one moment that you are not being watch (sic) by others in the entertainment feild (sic) and not just CBS. If a role should come up, you may be consider (sic), but then if you display too much catiness (sic) and temperament, u may be deemed unsuitable. Everything about you is great except for the way in which you deal with negative criticism. Be nice!. I think you could go far in the entertainment field in terms of your personality, but you should address your

> character flaws and not let them pull you down. The tendency to defend yourself does not showcase your beauty or self confidence. You are funny and likeable. I love your jokes, but u must try to endear people to yourself, not alienate them. You should also not give such lengthy response...make is short, gracious and simple, even the negative ones. Keep the mistique (sic)....people don't have to learn everything about the way you think and your viewpoints etc.....All the best! (Morty's 2006f)

In this detailed analysis, Marcellas' conduct within *House Calls* is understood as primarily an attempt to further a career in the media industry, a sceptical interpretation which has been previously employed to make sense of houseguests' presence within the *Big Brother* enclosure. By acknowledging this, the fan exercises a savvy audience position that recognizes an underlying meaning of *Big Brother* performances. By warning Marcellas that he may be subject to surveillance at particular instances (such as on *House Calls*) and by particular agents (such as 'others in the entertainment field') that he might not have anticipated, this audience member is taking direct measures to assert themselves as an insider of this procedure. In doing so, the audience member naturalizes a reading of the *Big Brother* meta-show predicated on manipulative self-pursuit.

Another viewer makes the following comment concerning Marcellas' performance within *House Calls*: "I don't know you as a person but your "Show biz" personna (sic) annoys me. Of course I am sure I annoy some people too. :wink:" (Morty's 2006d). Marcellas' conduct is negatively evaluated by the viewer in this statement. Yet the viewer extends the evaluative scope by regarding themselves as potentially subject to critical scrutiny by peers or audiences. Through audience appropriation of the evaluative consumption articulated in *House Calls*, even the production staff's performance can be regarded as subject to critical assessment. In discussing co-executive producer Don Wollman's appearance on *House Calls*, one fan states:

> I did not care for him at all. If he didn't want to be there, don't be there. If he had explained why he was so defensive, I think I could have understood it. But that episode

> was surreal in its awkwardness, with Marcellas trying to please, Gretchen trying to soothe and co-ordinate, and Don just sulking. Give me Arnold openly rallying against insane fans over this passive-aggressive Wollman weirdness anyday (sic). (Morty's 2006k)

While these comments constitute a reproduction of the evaluative consumption articulated by *House Calls*, this reproduction does not occur without modifications. In particular, audiences understand Marcellas as well as members of the production staff as necessitating the scepticism accorded to houseguests. Although audiences are engaging in the production of their own meanings of *Big Brother* viewership, this is not necessarily a complete deviation from the discourse articulated in *House Calls* insofar as the latter advocates for audiences to exercise some degree of authorship.

Making Sense out of Opinions

Although *House Calls* invites audiences to generate meaning for *Big Brother* through discussions of houseguest performance, this authorship is contained within the margins through an articulation of this activity as opinion making. In addition to being situated in a peripheral component of the meta-show, input generated by callers undergoes a flattening insofar as it is all subject to potential dismissal. As an example, we can consider Marcellas' admonishment of callers who would describe houseguest conduct as stupid. In accounting for the fact that Marcellas would generate similar judgements himself, coupled with his self-described inability to not offer opinions, one may regard Marcellas as articulating an engaged subject position for audiences to emulate. This subject position can be understood as one that possesses a savvy awareness of the flawed and manipulative nature of reality television, yet is flawed itself in its necessity to always have something to say.

Yet the previous section illustrates how audiences exercise media savvy in recognizing Marcellas' conduct as problematic. In particular, his frequent use of opinions is treated as a discussion topic on fan sites insofar as it is seen as detracting from the opportunity for audiences to participate within the official meta-show through *House Calls*. Reacting to a dispute between Marcellas and a caller, a *Morty's* poster notes:

> Marcellas we all have our opinions of people. Allow us the right to express them. (...) Like I've said in previous posts you annoy me, Marcellas. Which is my right. (...) You say "hateful" things about the HG and that is okay but a listeners call and then you cut them off. That just doesn't seem fair. Of course it is your show so you can pretty much do whatever you want. Just want to say that some viewers just didn't appreciate it. (Morty's 2006d)

In this comment, Marcellas' use of opinions is differentiated from audiences insofar as his status as host of the show enables him to restrict audience participation. While Marcellas is seen as capable of making "hateful" comments about houseguests, his perceived unwillingness to accord this activity to others generates critical sentiment on fan sites. Another audience member echoes this sentiment in discussing Marcellas' conduct vis-à-vis the purpose of *House Calls* as it has been articulated by its hosts:

> [I] did think it was terribly amusing when marcellas hung up on the caller who accused gretchen and marc of being very one sided on their little show.... however, it was perplexing that immediately after he hung up on the caller, gretchen said please call and we value all your opinions.....i like to see the show for the viewers comments who call in, not gretchen and marcellas'. (Morty's 2006c)

In addition to recognizing *House Calls* as purportedly offering an official venue for audience opinion, this poster denounces the talk show's hosts for not living up to this standard. Beyond this, a distinction is made between the caller's input and the hosts' input, with the former privileged over the latter. It should be noted that some of the audience base on *Morty's* has manifested support for Marcellas' unbridled temperament on *House Calls*. In reaction to the critical discussion, one fan notes:

> Well I have never seen House Calls before but decided to watch because of the was he wasn't he rude to the caller drama (...) Marcellas you are great and that woman was rude, crude and deserved to be hung up on....she's lucky that you hung up rather than giving her your opinion of her....although I would of loved to hear that. (Morty's 2006d)

While this viewer is generally supportive of his opinionated conduct, it is interesting that they regard Marcellas giving the caller his opinion as a fate worse than being hung up upon. Also, by noting the enjoyment value of witnessing such a move, the poster can be understood as differentiating Marcellas' opinions as having a more spectacular character relative to other sources of opinion within the meta-show.

The notion that Marcellas' opinions might be differentiated from other *Big Brother* audiences is further evidenced in the reception he received upon joining *Morty's*. In addition to numerous postings welcoming the *House Calls* host to their fan site, many fans solicited his opinion on a wide range of *Big Brother* issues. While one fan wanted to know his thoughts "on strategicly (sic) dumping certain competitions" (Morty's 2006d), another fan inquired as to houseguest James' desirability in Marcellas' eyes (Morty's 2006d). When Marcellas paid more attention to critical postings at the detriment of these inquisitive ones, an audience member stated:

> I am disappointed you didnt (sic) continue our convo. about going for it vs. flying under the radar. A lot of us here are monday morning quarterbacks -- we can speculate as to what we WOULD do if we were in the house or what the houseguests SHOULD do but we havent lived it. I hope you stick to those types of questions (what each player should, could, or might have done) and ignore the rest of the posts. (...) Just talk BB and ignore the snipes. Just my two cents and thank you for coming here and sharing. (Morty's 2006d)

Through this comment the audience member is differentiating Marcellas from other posters as a result of his experience within the enclosure. Consequently, it is requested that he not engage with certain comments on the message board, as though his status as a *Big Brother* 'insider' precludes non-enclosure discussions. For his own part, Marcellas'

introductory comments betray his opinionated nature. In promising to maintain a high level of involvement on *Morty's*, Marcellas states: "You know me, I got soooooo much to say!" (Morty's 2006c). In response to supportive comments concerning an altercation on *House Calls*, he says: "I mean really! Am I supposed to sit there & listen to someone rant about me and not respond? Ridic!" (Morty's 2006c). In making this statement, Marcellas fully exercises his subject position as an opinion-laden participant of the *Big Brother* meta-show on *House Calls* as well as on unofficial fan sites. While such an involvement with *Big Brother* may otherwise be attributed to an involved level of fandom, Marcellas later nuances his relation to the meta-show by articulating a fusion between his passion and career: "For 3 months out of the year I am paid by CBS to eat, drink, sleep and live BB.(...) I'm not just the host, I'm a producer. I'm passionate about that show. So yes I will defend it!." (Morty's 2006h)

It is interesting to note that in criticizing Marcellas' opinionated performance, many commentators are exercising their own right to offer opinions concerning the *Big Brother* meta-show. One fan in particular privileges audience opinions by virtue of the fact that the usual subjects of their criticism have consented to being scrutinized through synoptic broadcasting:

> I was originally posting on another thread where someone asked our "opinions" about House Calls. Last I checked that was what this forum is about. Being able to express our opinions. (...) When someone goes on National Tv we should be able to express like or dislike about someone if we want. Isnt that what we are doing on these boards. This all applies to Marcellas on House calls and Kaysar, Mike, April and all the houseguests. Hello! You all signed up to have your lives dissected. I personally wouldn't do it. :D (...) I am talking about what I see or have seen on tv. Don't go on National TV if you don't want to be talked about! (Morty's 2006d)

In this statement, Marcellas is further differentiated from audiences (and likened to the houseguests) insofar as he is a suitable (and purportedly willing) target for critical

appraisal. As such, fan sites are articulated as a location for audiences to express their opinions about *Big Brother* and *House Calls*. Yet other comments on fan sites express a withdrawal from *House Calls* as an appropriate critical (dis)engagement with the talk show. One audience member notes that viewers may: "disagree or agree with him, but if you are tired of him, just ignore him. (....) Just quit giving him attention and he will slowly fade away, back into Reality. Otherwise, quit bitching." (Morty's 2006e). While this viewer's recognition of a potential exit strategy is laudable to be sure, they simultaneously betray an inability to follow up on this potential by signing their post as "A Dedicated HC viewer, but not a fan of the hypocrite Marcellas." (Morty's 2006e). For his part, Marcellas manifests an endorsement of a disengagement from *House Calls* in stating: "You have the right to say what you want. I would suggest you don't watch my show if you find me annoying (...) Stop looking for a reason to trash it, it is what it is." (Morty's 2006d) Thus, without dismissing the value of highly conflicting opinions, Marcellas acknowledges the fact that they may not be suited for *House Calls*. In addition, audience members cite the fact that the talk show is situated online as facilitating a withdrawal from it. As one fan notes:

> If House Calls was a show on TV, that would be a different story, but there's so many things on the internet, you choose what you want to see and like Marcellas said, if you find House Calls offensive, don't watch it.. simple as that. Not everyone can be pleased. (Morty's 2006g)

Ostensibly, the myriad of sites on the Internet means that not all opinions need to be housed at one location, suggesting that any given site knows boundaries to the opinions which it evokes. A central contributor to *Morty's* echoes this sentiment in saying: "Since helping Morty with the updates, I have had to learn that. You can't always please everyone." (Morty's 2006d).

Discussion

While the previous chapter offered an understanding of the engaged viewership of *Big Brother* that is discursively laid out in *House Calls*, this chapter was concerned with the manner in which this discourse shapes audience reception. Focusing on fan-produced websites constitutes a shift beyond the official meta-show, suggesting that audiences would be able to produce their own meanings concerning appropriate audience activity. Although *House Calls* manifests a general endorsement of audience engagement and authorship, its marginal position vis-à-vis the *Big Brother* meta-show may lead audiences to deviate from this articulation, leading to a gap between how audiences are engaged in *House Calls* and how they are engaged on fan sites such as *Morty's*. By looking at how components of the *House Calls* discourse are reproduced within these fan sites, this chapter has underscored the fact that audiences make use of this discourse in a manner that is not anticipated or expressed in the official talk show.

In their discussion of *House Calls*, audiences on fan sites apply the media savvy scepticism expressed in the talk show to evaluate the show itself, likening its hosts to houseguests within the enclosure insofar as both are surveyed by audiences through synoptic channels. Although this may be seen as an attempt to distance audiences from the *House Calls* hosts and their viewership of *Big Brother*, this gap is complicated when Marcellas participates on the fan site as a frequent contributor. In scrutinizing and soliciting opinions from the talk show's host, audiences invite him to actively shape meanings surrounding the *Big Brother* meta-show and the constitution of correct viewership. Whether this activity serves as a further colonization of fan spaces by the

production team or an attempt by fans to smuggle resistant interpretations of *Big Brother* into the meta-show cannot be readily determined. However, it can be stated that the boundary separating the production team and audiences is increasingly smoothed out not only through Marcellas' transgressive positioning, but also through audiences' engagement with the activity of rendering the *Big Brother* meta-show meaningful.

As *Big Brother* audiences whose understanding of the meta-show has been shaped by *House Calls*, the fans on the *Morty's* thread that I have studied manifest an understanding of the discourse articulated in the official *Big Brother* talk show. In addition, these fans appropriate this discourse in a manner that may be considered negotiating with or resisting the meanings generated by *House Calls*. However, insofar as this appropriation amplifies the critical subject position articulated in the talk show suggests that the discourse is helping to constitute self-governing media savvy subjects. To be sure, it won't be a simple matter of attributing these manifestations either to agency or structure. While it may appear as though any resistance of *Big Brother* in general and *House Calls* in particular may only occur through a compliance with its official line, this perspective overlooks the possibility of effecting an exit strategy by ceasing to talk about either program. Most interestingly, 'dropping out' from the discussion is encouraged in certain instances by *House Calls*' enigmatic host. One can consider these outbursts as marking the outer limits of a meta-show discourse that is maintained by agents who themselves are subject to imperfections, contradictions and momentary lapses in judgement. However, the fact that many who have withdrawn from the discussions on *Morty's* have likely found or forged another site on the Internet to express their disgust leads us to question the end result of such exit strategies.

CHAPTER 6 – DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In studying the conversations and heated arguments that took place on sites of *Big Brother* fandom, we have gained an understanding of the tensions and potentialities that characterize contemporary media consumption. While the porous boundary separating authors from viewers is giving way to emergent subjectivities, the full implications of this transition are by no means clear. Through the proliferation of new meanings, audience participation of this calibre can be treated as a colonization of hegemonic textual spaces. Conversely, the very notion of resistance and audience negotiation may itself have been colonized by discourses that seek to ensure the occupation of contemporary mediascapes.

In analyzing this discourse, I have sought to examine the converging tendencies within surveillance and media studies. Conduct within surveillance regimes has come to resemble conduct within media regimes insofar as both are increasingly involved in processes of self-constitution. In addition to being cautioned against identity theft and other risky outcomes of contemporary data collection, we are called upon to approach mass media venues as riddled with deceitful representations. In these instances subject positions maintain a savvy awareness of these risks through an active engagement with the manipulations made possible through contemporary information technology.

Nowhere is this engagement more evident than in the savvy reception of reality television. Here, multi-modal consumption resembles lateral surveillance insofar as audiences actively seek evidence of manipulative or otherwise flawed conduct. A simulation of scripted televised drama, *Big Brother* enables audiences to actively scrutinize houseguest performance – manipulative or otherwise – through a carefully constructed meta-show that affords access to a purported backstage in *House Calls*. This

backstage has in turn fallen under audience scrutiny through the same criteria applied to the enclosure and its inhabitants. While this activity may not be directly advocated in *Big Brother*, it would be a stretch to state that it was an unanticipated consequence. This ambiguity illustrates the theoretical framework in which this research is situated. While the subjects of media and surveillance regimes may be understood as manifesting an engaged sophistry that resists manipulation, this degree of involvement is also derived from a process of self-governance that is at least partially constituted by media texts. Clearly, the fact that media literacy is largely manifested through the media itself is troubling because of the subjectivities that may be precluded as a consequence. The critical scrutiny and marginal forms of authorship advocated in *House Calls* allows viewers to engage with the tensions inherent in *Big Brother*, yet this position overlooks alternate responses, including disengagement from the meta-show.

The discourse analysis I have conducted suggests that *House Calls* constructs an engaged subject-position for audiences that is privileged insofar as it is based on a savvy awareness of the flawed and manipulated nature of *Big Brother*'s reality claims. By disclosing information about the process through which recorded activity is transformed into a marketable television program, the show's producers accord an insider position to viewers. This serves as an incentive to maintain an engaged reception, as viewers may otherwise risk being duped by the constructed nature of the reality that is broadcast. In order to account for *Big Brother*'s conveyed shortcomings, *House Calls* prescribes a consumption of the reality program that is predicated on the monitoring of houseguest conduct. This activity serves as a manifestation of audience savvy not only through a multi-modal consumption of the meta-show, but also through speech activity within

carefully designated textual spaces. An example of a typical *Big Brother* fan constituted in *House Calls* would be someone who draws upon the Internet feed, televised episodes and CBS' episode summaries in order to piece together an evaluation of houseguests that would fuel a number of discussions on CBS' chat rooms – or on *House Calls* itself. Through this activity audiences manifest an affinity with surveillance technology not only by employing the monitoring devices surrounding the enclosure, but also through a discursive engagement wherein the discussion of findings reinforces the necessity of this surveillance.

Studying audience engagement with *Big Brother* has underscored a blurring between panoptic and synoptic flows of information, suggesting a growing overlap between surveillance practices and mass media venues. The enclosure in which *Big Brother*'s houseguests are situated is built like a contemporary panopticon. Instead of a central guard tower towards which inmates' attention is focused, a spatially versatile arrangement of cameras and microphones are embedded into the décor, naturalizing its presence while ensuring that no facial gesture or semi-conscious grunt goes unrecorded (Big Brother 2005). Although the information collected from these devices is converged through a central editing process, it is subsequently dispersed through synoptic channels as televised segments and online resources. Through their active involvement with these outlets, savvy audiences come to resemble remote prison guards who operate through a mediated engagement with their terrain (Goold 2003). In a further twist, these guards are invited to render themselves visible as opinionated subjects of CBS' meta-show. In doing so they manifest a willingness to have marketable information such as their opinions be consolidated in relations that come off like a voluntary panopticon. Monitoring

houseguest conduct and disclosing this information in the form of opinions and observations constitutes a form of audience governance through savvy but predictable positions with the meta-show.

I have also outlined instances where audiences discursively engage with *Big Brother* beyond the spaces located on the CBS website. Looking at conversations on a fan-based discussion board about *House Calls* has enabled me to consider how audiences negotiate with the subject position accorded to them in the official talk show. While they manifest a viewership of *House Calls* and *Big Brother* that largely resonates with the official discourse, I have underscored points where the latter has undergone either contestation or appropriation by audiences. Insofar as audiences applied a discourse of savvy media consumption to appraise the media text that generated this discourse, it can be asserted that this audience is manifesting some degree of resistance against the subject position accorded to them. Yet this resistance is generated as a result of limitations inherent in the discourse as opposed to a self-evident notion of audience agency. This point is emphasized in the fact that the authored structure – agency's necessary counterpart – of *Big Brother* and *House Calls* is also called into question as a result of the talk show hosts' conduct on fan sites.

In returning to the theoretical positions that were outlined in the literature review, we see that forming a coherent framework involves acknowledging key points from seemingly contradictory perspectives. On the one hand, audience activity through *House Calls* resonates with Henry Jenkins model of fan engagement. Through a multi-modal consumption of *Big Brother* as well as critical engagement with the meanings derived from the show, audiences manifest a savvy awareness of the contemporary mediascape.

On the other hand, my understanding of this audience activity also invokes Nikolas Rose's work on governance insofar as adaptive strategies are being communicated from media experts to media users so that the latter may conduct themselves in a desired manner. The subtext behind the investigative style of viewership advocated on *House Calls* is that the media and mediated communication is inherently risky and that one must self-govern in order to avoid manipulation. Articulating this kind of risk also invokes an understanding of lateral surveillance. It is through a savvy awareness of the deceptive potential purportedly inherent in communication technology that subjects are urged to monitor their peers through this technology (Andrejevic, 2005).

In order to make sense of the tensions between seemingly resistant audiences and governing discourses, it would help to return to Erving Goffman's work on institutions. Instead of attributing inmate conduct to either total subjugation or unbridled agency, Goffman underscores the limitations of rehabilitative discourses, where institutional blind spots facilitate resistant activity among inmates. As a contemporary example, we can consider the literal blind spot of an imperfect CCTV network as enabling users to engage in resistant behaviour. Regardless of the validity of subject agency, it is only through this structural limitation that resistance against such structures may be effected. Similarly, audience negotiation of the discourse articulated on *House Calls* illustrates shortcomings inherent to the talk show, such as the hosts' engagement on fan-based venues.

To be sure, my own research is fraught with limitations that necessitate a negotiated engagement with it. Most immediately, my definition of *Big Brother* audience calls into question the focus of my analysis. While the audience members I have studied can be easily situated within the *Big Brother* meta-show, their own composition within

the greater body of *Big Brother* viewers remains unclear. Ostensibly, a significant portion of *Big Brother* viewers disengage from the meta-show. While these fans may be choosing to opt out in response to the flawed nature of program, they may simply be watching the program in order to placate a spouse or roommate. Such instantiations underscore the potential for withdrawal from media texts. Yet this withdrawal is not immediately measurable within the framework that I have outlined, as I am concerned with audience activity and not its absence. Future research that may seek to remedy this shortcoming could interview former audience members of contemporary media texts who have voluntarily disengaged with the latter.

Beyond this, my research operates through an understanding of contemporary media outlets and communication technology as increasingly overlapping with one another. As a result, the vigilance with which audiences may monitor media texts is paralleled with the labour involved in monitoring mediated peers. While these two activities may be informed by the same discursive logic, the point at which one may spill into the other remains fuzzy at this juncture. Yet the continued proliferation of communication technology to everyday settings coupled with convergence of numerous media formats to single versatile devices – such as cellular phones that can receive televised broadcasts, maintain peer networks through instant messaging, and act as a global positioning system – suggests that the connection between new media and peer surveillance will be all the more accessible in the immediate future. Follow-up research that would serve to illustrate this fact includes analyzing the manner in which the media savvy discourse lends itself to the form of empowerment that is articulated through the use of personal communication devices such as cellular phones and PDAs.

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