

Reality TV, or The Secret Theater of Neoliberalism

Nick Couldry

Every system of cruelty requires its own theater.¹ By “system” I mean an organization of objects, people and opportunities that is both regular and open to public view. There are of course many forms of cruelty that depend on secrecy, but the legitimation of *systems* of cruelty requires the transformations enabled by ritualized performance. The regime of economic production that, with its associated discourses, is usually called “neoliberalism,” is a system of cruelty. What else to call a way of organizing social resources and human labor that requires of its participants continuous loyalty, submission to surveillance and external direction even within the deepest recesses of private life, yet demands of those same individuals an acceptance of the fragility and impermanence of the opportunities it provides? The “truths” of neoliberalism would be unacceptable if stated openly, even if their consequences unfold before our eyes every day. Those truths must therefore be translated into ritual that enacts as “play” an acceptable version of the values and compulsions on which that cruelty depends.²

“Reality TV” is a theater where just such an enactment takes place.³ Reality television’s theater is secret only in the sense that its playful inversions obscure their links to the labor conditions normalized under neoliberalism. That is how all ritual works, by smuggling past us one set of terms, while apparently enacting another (Bourdieu 1990).

I want in this short article to develop these thoughts in three sections: first, by sketching the key aspects of neoliberalism as a particular mode of socioeconomic organization based around the primacy of markets; second, by pointing to the hidden ritual

dimension of contemporary work, in particular the “emotional labour” (Hochschild 1983) of the service economy (this is the other “secret” of neoliberalism); and third, by exploring how the first and second phenomena are translated into the structures of reality TV, and particularly one form, the so-called “gamedoc” in which “ordinary people” compete, under televised surveillance, to be selected by popular vote as the most “real.”⁴

NEOLIBERALISM

The term “neoliberalism” needs little introduction. It identifies under one label a range of discourses, operating as a form of “common sense,” that absolutely legitimates the market and delegitimizes the social (or any indeed institutional forces that seek to counter the market, such as the state).

As Hall (1977), Billig (1997), and Bourdieu (1998, 8) have argued, the densest concentration of ideology lies in what passes for common sense. This particular “common sense” confirms, as natural, transformations in capitalist work conditions that are anything but natural. The *first* transformation is the extension of working hours into a permanent availability-for-work under the guise of “flexibility” (Bourdieu 1998, 34). The U.S. and UK are particular exemplars of this shift, with the number of UK people working more than forty-eight hours a week more than doubling since 1998 to 26% (20% of thirty- to thirty-nine-year-olds working over sixty hours per week).⁵ The *second* transformation is increased employer flexibility to terminate work opportunities with minimal regard for the consequences to the employee, creating “the existence of a large reserve army which, because of the overproduction of graduates, is no longer restricted to the lowest levels of competence and technical qualification” (Bourdieu 1998, 82). The combination of the first and second conditions leads to a series of contradictions. One contradiction lies between the “timelessness” (availability without restriction) required of employees and “the ‘timeliness’ required by [employees’] intimate human relationships” (Bunting 2004, 16), with the former increasingly overriding the latter. Another is the conflict between the growing *individualization* of the consequences of increased availability-for-work (as individuals adapt their wider life to constantly changing work flows) and the *social* costs of that process (for family life, education

of children, violence). The contradiction is difficult to see because of the compulsion to see "biographic solutions to structural contradictions" (Beck 2000). The individualization of negative externalities acquires ideological force through the valorization of individual "competence" and self-transformation through work (Bourdieu 1998, 42–43).

At the broad political level these shifts result in the devaluation of the idea of collective politics and collective resistance (Bunting 2004, xviii), as part of a wider divorce between "the economic system . . . and the social whole to which it should belong" (Touraine 2001, 18). The outcome at the individual level is a violent contradiction which Richard Sennett analyzed as "the corrosion of character" (1999): workers are required to put more time and therefore experience into work, yet the value placed on past experience in an increasingly "flexible" labor market is reduced, often to zero. Such contradictions, of course, have costs for the fabric of particular lives without (for this is what the "common sense" of neoliberalism denies) any shared narrative that might explain them (except as necessity). Difficult contradictions, however, often generate displaced narratives whether in the workplace itself or in the apparently distant site of media entertainment. Let me examine those displacements in turn.

"PASSION" AND THE RITUALS OF ECONOMIC DOMINATION

Every shift in economic organization, as E. P. Thompson pointed out, requires "new disciplines, new incentives, and a new human nature" (Thompson 1967, 57). Thompson was concerned with the shift in early modern capitalism towards rationalized forms of "task organisation", which were based on a new distinction between workers' own time and their employer's time, with the latter appropriating the former to generate profit. Thompson traces the emergence in early eighteenth-century England of enforced time-keeping and punctuality. Gradually, the division between work time and leisure time (the time left over from work) became both taken-for-granted and contested. The move towards treating "time" (employer's time, that is) as scarce, because translatable into money, was of course only the first of many waves of rationalising labour over the next three centuries. And time still, as Thompson put it, remains "a place of the most far-reaching conflict" (1967, 93).

In the contemporary neoliberal economy workers are facing (under the guise of expanded “freedom”—the freedom to “keep in touch” with work!) the last stage of the reorganization of labor-time whose origins Thompson traced: not just the appropriation of the individual worker’s labor-time as employer’s time (so that the time required to restore the employee’s work-fitness must be reappropriated as “leisure”), but the *further* appropriation of that leisure-time once more as the employer’s (a reappropriation in the opposite direction). Clearly, this second appropriation expands the employer’s influence into time that was not originally labor-time at all: time for eating, resting, playing, maintaining a family. Necessarily, therefore, except in cases of naked exploitation based on brute power, this second appropriation operates not through direct capture but by “gift”: the worker’s gift of her “free” time in return for the affirmation of the worker’s position within the social entity comprised by the workplace. But the gift exchange is an unstable one.

Willing submission to the *total* appropriation of one’s living-time by an employer is impossible without self-denial, so its impossibility must *itself* be denied through the public expression—for others to see and hear—of “passion”: the performance of expressive attachment to whatever are the goals of one’s employer. “Passion” becomes a *necessity* in the neoliberal workplace because its work of denial erases contradictions and legitimates the extended appropriation of the worker’s time (what Andre Gorz (1999) called the “total mobilization of [the worker’s] personality” in work).⁶

Much contemporary work involves, as is well known, considerable emotional labor. It is hardly surprising that such work involves “acting”: as Ann-Marie Stagg, chair of the UK Call Centre Managers Association comments, “service sector employers are increasingly demanding that their employees deep act, work on and change their feelings to match the display required by the labour process.”⁷ The notion of “*deep*” acting is more surprising: surely acting out the required emotion is enough? First, however, we have to remember that in many forms of service industry, such acting must be performed under the permanent possibility of surveillance. Work-based surveillance is used to monitor every aspect of performance, including the length of toilet breaks, and is certainly not designed specifically to monitor emotion; equally, however, surveillance is so entrenched a practice that it is difficult

to imagine any performance required of employees without a surveillant audience to monitor it. That audience (the employer) wants assurance that the performance's features will be reproduced beyond the (necessarily limited) moment of active surveillance: hence the value of "authenticity" or deep acting, based on internalization of the performance norms of the job as "natural":

...the conflicts over power and autonomy which always characterize working lives now no longer take place in the factory, call centre or office, but in the wider cultural life of the country, which promotes the norms of the twenty-first century workplace. For example, when a human resources director gives out instructions that staff are to "*be themselves and be natural*" with customers, the staff's understanding of self or naturalness can be drawn from a disparate range of pop psychology, television, magazines and friends. (Bunting 2004, 69, added emphasis)

Bunting describes her time spent talking to employees of the supermarket chain Asda (now owned by the U.S. supermarket giant Wal-Mart).⁸ Even the spatial layout of the workplace (a supermarket in northern England) plays with the myths of performance. On the stairs leading to the entrance to the supermarket floor, Bunting reports "a full-length mirror and above it a big sign reading: 'Are you ready for the Asda stage?'" (Bunting 2004, 102). The authenticity of performance on the supermarket "stage" is assessed regularly, but in secret, by "mystery shoppers" (recalling perhaps the "mystery guests" beloved of television game shows). The result is a permanent monitoring in work of authentic performance, justified by overarching "values":

the "colleagues", as staff are known, are exhorted to exhibit "miles of smiles". "It's got to be a *real* smile", says Smith [head of Human Resources at Asda's UK headquarters]. "...We do have a sense that people in the Asda family live the values—it's gregarious, off the wall, a bit wacky, flexible, family-minded, genuinely interested in people, respect for the individual, informal. That's what makes the business go—*we've gone into personality, a family and community feel.*" (Bunting 2004, 103, added emphasis)

In this quotation, we see the employer reappropriating not so much the private time of the employee (although Asda and Wal-Mart are not known for generous working hours), but rather the *values* normally associated with private time. Little wonder that, as Zygmunt Bauman (1999, 2) has argued, the bridges between private life and

public world are missing: they are being occupied by corporate discourse.

It is possible of course for scholars to commend these shifts as a “humanization” of the workplace:

Work...is taken to provide the opportunity to “work” on oneself; to grow;...to become more effective as a person...Telephone work might be strongly instrumentalised, but the training manuals are replete with psychological rules and assertions to do with overcoming personal negativities. Lex salespeople are not simply working for the sale; they are also working to be/become *themselves at work* (Heelas 2002, 83, original emphasis)

If Heelas intends irony here, it is well-disguised. Indeed he goes further, noting the overlap between new management and “New Age” spirituality: “one is now working on oneself to experience that spirituality which is integral to one’s very nature or essence. The workplace is valued...as a vehicle to the end of self-sacralization” (2002, 89). It is not surprising that this apparent transvaluation of work practice requires, at times, the support of ritual, as Arlie Hochschild notes in her extensive ethnography of the new work culture:

In its engineered corporate cultures, capitalism has rediscovered communal ties and is using them to build its new version of capitalism. Many Amerco employees spoke warmly, happily and seriously of “belonging to the Amerco family”, and everywhere there were visual symbols of this belonging...in my interviews, I heard little about festive reunions of extended families, whilst throughout the year, employees flocked to the many company-sponsored *ritual gatherings*. (Hochschild 1997: 87 quoted Heelas 2002, 87)

It is left to a British journalist Madeleine Bunting, in her study *Willing Slaves*, to track more extensively the human costs of the increased expenditure of time, energy and emotion that this transformed work ethic involves. Clearly there are complex issues here; but, however we assess the overall costs and benefits, the tensions associated with such rhetoric cannot be denied, not least the irony that its growth coincides with a historical period when “most American jobs do not pay enough to support a full household” (Hacker 2004, 38). If we add in the relentless pressures of de-unionization, we must expect some of those tensions to be negotiated elsewhere than on the supermarket or factory floor.

REALITY TV: THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY-UNDER-SURVEILLANCE

The growth of Reality-TV in Britain and many other countries since the early 1990s has involved many portrayals of the contemporary workplace, particularly service industries: well-known examples included *Airport*, *Hotel*, and *Driving School*. It is clear, however, that, if the *contradictions* of the regime of emotional labor required in many workplaces were given direct media scrutiny, they would become open to challenge. Not surprisingly, therefore, this is not what we see on television. It is to the "gamedoc" sub-genre of reality-TV ("reality"-based play such as *Big Brother*, developed in France as *Loft Story*) that we must turn, if we want to understand how the irrationality of being *required* all day to "smile for *real*" is transmuted into something plausibly positive.

Let me concentrate on the key points of the *Big Brother* format,⁹ indicating its links with the rituals of performance in the contemporary workplace.

Big Brother is based around the naturalisation of surveillance (Andrejevic 2004; Couldry 2003, chapter 6; Palmer 2002). This naturalization is all the more effective for operating from multiple perspectives: most obviously, the jokey celebration of the power of surveillance (in the program's ironic title, the constant play with the sounds and images of surveillance in process), but more subtly the habit we acquire of watching people under surveillance, and watching *for* how participants maintain their authenticity in spite of the cameras' presence. The fiction that, after a certain time, people "must" reveal their underlying selves because "you can't act forever" serves to sanction the continued, ever more intrusive presence of surveillance in the shower, the toilet, the love-bed. In all this, we easily forget that through our viewing pleasures, we are directly legitimating surveillance itself. Mark Andrejevic (2004) has developed this point into a powerful critique of "interactivity" more generally, and the naturalization of consumer surveillance in a neoliberal economy that depends on ever more closely targeted marketing.

The performance "values" of *Big Brother* are striking also for their fit with the demands imposed by neoliberal practice on workers (not just consumers), once we factor out the features intrinsic to the entertainment form.

First, *absolute external authority*: gamedoc reality TV such as *Big Brother* is a space governed by an external authority whose validity or rationality can never be questioned. There have no doubt been occasions where such authority has been questioned in private and sometimes they have surfaced in the broadcast output. What is striking however is how decisively they are controlled by the media producers, drawing on the imagined authority of the watching audience (cf Couldry 2004): more on this below.

Second, *team conformity*: while *Big Brother* is based on competition between individuals, a basic rule of the competition is acceptance of compulsory team-work. Many of the set tasks in the *Big Brother* house are team-based, and the ability to “get on with others” is one of the criteria by which it is assumed audiences will evaluate participants in voting them in or out. Dissent from this required gregariousness is not accepted. In the third UK series of *Big Brother* one contestant (Sandy) was unhappy with this, so unhappy that he decided to go into the (shared) bedroom each evening to read a book (a rational use of his otherwise wasted time, you might think). He became isolated within the house and when voted out by audiences was mocked by the *Big Brother* compere. Dissent from the *norms* implied in the regulation of behavior in the *Big Brother* house is even less accepted. In the same UK series, another contestant (Tim) argued that all the participants were being compelled by the producers to perform in a way that was not authentic. A dialogue with the *Big Brother* presenter after he was voted out shows how his dissent was managed:

[Tim]: there were a lot of people in there who I’m convinced are not like that in their normal life...

[presenter] [interrupting] But it’s not that it’s that, I think that generally some of them are quite up positive people... you can’t perform, physically you can’t do it, not for 7 or 8 weeks, you can’t do it...

[Tim]: No there were times when they didn’t and they dipped and that’s the times you saw them when they weren’t acting.

[presenter]: OK, Tim... let’s move onto something a bit more positive... (transcription quoted from Couldry 2004, 69–70)

Third, *authenticity*. Paradoxically, the *necessity* to perform (with an unseen audience in mind) is neutralized by the argument that in the end your “real” self must come out. This is the ludic version of the Asda personnel manager’s insistence (already quoted) on a “mile of smiles,” where every smile must nonetheless be a “real smile.”

Fourth, *being positive*. The one thing that might make performance under national television cameras convincingly authentic—doubt, reflexive uncertainty—is excluded as the just quoted conversation shows. Contestants *must* be positive, which means banishing any thought of contradiction. In the same way, employees must be “passionate” to ward off reflections about the contradictions which their performance entails.

Fifth, *individualization*. Whatever the social dimensions of the *Big Brother* house (including its compulsory socialization), it is as individuals that contestants are judged against each other. Since the norm of teamwork cannot be challenged, its falsity (in this light) cannot be challenged. Ultimately you are “in” or “out” of the house, your “exit” determined by the “voice” of the unseen audience (to echo Hirschman). There is no basis for challenging the national vote, any more than we can individually challenge a corporate decision to downsize; the consequences must in both cases be borne individually.

In these various ways, the “as if” of reality TV tracks with striking fidelity the dynamics of the neoliberal workplace: it is a place of compulsory self-staging, required team-work, and regulation by unquestionable external authority mediated via equally unquestionable norms or “values,” to which nonetheless the worker/player must submit in a “positive,” even “passionate” embrace, while enduring, alone, the long-term consequences of the “game,” if game it is.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

My argument has been that there is an interesting, if hidden, relation between the forms of reality TV and the behavioral norms of the neoliberal workplace. I have been suggesting, first, that the “common sense” of neoliberalism is precisely *common* sense and so widely available for reproduction elsewhere, including (as in reality TV) in ludic forms; and, second, because it is *common sense*, it is fully naturalized and so difficult to challenge and even to identify as a version of values that in another context (the workplace) are far from innocent. As a result, the “value” of “authentic performance-under-surveillance” is validated, “for free” as it were, and without any reflexive distance. But this result is contingent, not determined, nor can its wider consequences (however difficult to unravel and disrupt) be seen as functional necessities.

I have concentrated on one type of reality TV, the gamedoc such as *Big Brother*. If there were space, we might extend the argument not only to other gamedocs (such as *Survivor*) including those which most explicitly foreground individual competition for celebrity such as *Pop Idol*, as well as those “reality” shows which are more instructional in nature such as *The Apprentice* involving millionaire businessman Alan Sugar, a show adapted from the US which as the BBC put it “gives a unique insight into the competitive world of business.”¹⁰

You might however see the connections I have made between reality TV and the neoliberal workplace as a healthy sign that difficult social tensions are being “worked through.”¹¹ That is, to see reality TV as a form of “deep play” (Geertz 1971) where society “reflects” on its underlying order in necessarily displaced form. This, however, ignores that it is precisely the *absence* of reflexive connection between the much-watched surface of *Big Brother* and the intensely lived realities of the neoliberal workplace that is most notable. If, in this sense, reality TV is opaque and resistant to appropriate contextualization, then this is one further characteristic that it shares with the apparently consensual regime of neoliberalism.

NOTES

1. A slightly shorter version of this article was published in 2006 in French in volume 44 of *Hermes*, special edition on *Economie et Communication* under the title “La télé réalité ou le theatre secret du néolibéralisme.” Many thanks to the editor of *Hermes* for agreeing to its republication here.
2. I will not discuss in this piece the definition of “ritual” and its relationship to power: for detail see Couldry (2003).
3. I wish to acknowledge here the inspiration of Littler (2003) who has been pioneering the exploration of the links between business culture and reality-based television.
4. For fuller accounts, see Couldry (2003, chapter 6); Andrejevic (2004); Holmes and Jermyn (2004).
5. Bunting (2004, 9).
6. Gorz (1999) quoted Bunting (2004, 68).
7. Quoted Bunting (2004, 71–72).
8. See for example Featherstone (2004). For recent attention to Asda’s practices in the UK, see *Guardian* 17 October 2005.
9. Cf Couldry (2003, 2004).
10. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2004/05_may/18/apprentice.shtml (last accessed October 2005).
11. See Ellis (2000) on contemporary television as ‘working through’ in a psychological sense.

REFERENCES

- Andrejevic, M. (2004). *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Bauman, Z. (1999). *In Search of Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Beck, U. (2000). *The Brave New World of Work*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Billig, M. (1997). From Codes to Utterances: Cultural Studies, Discourse and Psychology. In M. Ferguson & P. Golding (Eds.), *Cultural Studies in Question* (pp. 205–226). London: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Acts of Resistance*. New York: The New Press.
- Bunting, M. (2004). *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives*. London: Harper Collins.
- Couldry, N. (2003). *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Couldry, N. (2004). Teaching Us to Fake it: The Ritualized Norms of Television's "Reality" Games. In L. Ouellette & S. Murray (Eds.), *Reality TV* (pp. 57–74). New York: New York University Press.
- Ellis, J. (2000). *Seeing Things*. London: IB Tauris.
- Featherstone, L. (2004). *Selling Women Short: The Landmark Battle for Women's Rights at Wal-Mart*. New York: Vintage.
- Geertz, C. (1971). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Gorz, A. (1999). *Reclaiming Work*. London: Pluto.
- Hacker, A. (2004). The Underworld of Work. *New York Review of Books*, 12 February, 38–40.
- Hall, S. (1977). Culture, the Media and "the Ideological Effect". In J. Curran et al. (Eds.), *Mass Communications and Society* (pp. 315–348). London: Edward Arnold.
- Heelas, P. (2002). Work Ethics, Soft Capitalism and the "Turn to Life". In P. Du Gay & M. Pryke (Eds.), *Cultural Economy* (pp. 78–96). London: Sage.
- Hochschild, A. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hochschild, A. (1997). *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. New York: Metropolitan.
- Holmes, S. and Jermyn, D. (Eds.). (2005). *Understanding Reality Television*. London: Routledge.
- Littler, Jo. (2003). Making Fame ordinary: Intimacy, Reflexivity and "Keeping it Real". *Mediactive*, 2, 8–25.
- Palmer, G. (2002). *Big Brother: An Experiment in Governance*. *Television & New Media*, 3(3), 295–310.
- Sennett, R. (1999). *The Corrosion of Character*. New York: Norton.
- Thompson, E. P. (1967). Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism. *Past & Present*, 38, 56–97.
- Touraine, A. (2001). *Beyond Neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Polity.