



Current Contents

Past Issues

Reviews

□ Mathijs, Ernest & Janet Jones (Eds):

Big Brother International: Formats, Critics and Publics

London and New York, Wallflower Press (2004). ISBN 1-904764-18-5 (pbk), pp. xvii + 261

Particip@tions Volume 2, Issue 1 (August 2005)

A Review by Margaret Montgomerie

Through a preface, an introduction and 16 research based chapters and an epilogue this volume provides a valuable and fascinating glimpse of the different ways in which *Big Brother* is being made sense of. Ernest Mathijs and Janet Jones introduce the book, arguing that:

This book tells the story of the international career of *Big Brother*. It is not only a chronicle of the many significant events that distinguished almost all national versions, but it also links them to their respective cultural contexts and audiences (3).

As John Corner indicates in his forward to the volume, like *Big Brother*, the story being told is not 'a uniform text' but a complex assemblage of different voices, perspectives and methodologies which illuminate the challenges of global/ glocalised multimedia, multi platform formats for media academics. The editors admit that the order of contributions is arbitrary (7) but it is interesting to observe the distance created between Daniel Biltereyst's *Big Brother and its moral guardians. Reappraising the role of intellectuals in the Big Brother panic* (9-16) and Pamela Wilson's partisan account of *Jamming Big Brother USA: Webcasting, Audience Intervention and Narrative Activism* (194- 210). Biltereyst's contribution considers the reception of the 2003 Pan African *Big Brother* and the ways in which the reality TV genre uses public debate, scandal and controversy as 'a key for commercial success' (16), while Wilson celebrates 'semiological guerrilla information warfare' (195) allied politically to the anti-corporate, anti-globalization movement, in response to *Big Brother USA 2000*. Such seeming contradictions, although separated by 12 chapters, make this a lively and engaging collection, which is worth reading in its entirety as well as for its stand alone individual contributions.

John Corner suggests that 'the ordinary, the real and the honest' are major points of reference in discussions of *Big Brother* (xiii). These concerns are evident in Liesbet Van Zoonen's argument that the success of *Big Brother* in the Netherlands can be traced to the ways in which it breaches the historical and ideological functions of the public/private division challenging the hierarchy of white male bourgeoisie, 'disclosing the private realm hidden by bourgeois mores' (19:2004). Underlying this she identifies a desire for a sense of recognition, familiarity and community - a desire which Annette Hill identifies in her

account of the extensive empirical study of British television audiences and factual entertainment. Hills argues that talk about *Big Brother* works as a 'social glue', the basis for social interaction and the mulling over of how to distinguish between 'authentic' and 'performed/fake' behaviour. An interpretation of audience response that is shared by Lothar Mikos (who carried out a similarly extensive quantitative survey in Germany), that concludes that respondents' substantive motive for engaging with *Big Brother* was so that they could talk about it, their key frames of reference being psychology and authenticity. Fernando Andacht's account of the reception of *Big Brother* in Brazil and The River Plate Region further develops the discussion of authenticity through Pierce's notion of the interpretant, arguing that audiences are not confused by collisions of fact and fiction but instead search for indexes of the self to contemplate and evaluate. Daniel Chandler and Merris Griffiths shift the discussion to gendered readings and identifications in relation to *Big Brother* based on the interpretation of extensive responses to a web questionnaire. Noting that although viewers perceived of their interaction with *Big Brother* as 'looking through a window' their character preferences mirrored their sense of themselves in relation to their gender and sexual identity.

From a different perspective Baris Kilicbay and Mutlu Binark argue that reality programming in Turkey coincided with the boom in private television networks and revealed the 'reality' previously concealed by the 'mask' of official state televisual discourses. They argue through textual evidence that popular Turkish spin offs of the *Big Brother* formula are significantly glocalised, the interactive and intertextual currency of the format allowing for the revelation and negotiation of contemporary Turkish sexuality, gender identity, moral codes and civic values. Magriet Pitout shifts the discussion of glocalised formats from what is revealed to what is constructed by mobilising Fourie and Van Poecke's notions of paloetelevision and neotelevision in the analysis of the production and reception of *Big Brother* South Africa. They argue that the 'rainbow nation credo' of post apartheid South Africa created particular problems for Endemol who had to devise a casting strategy which simultaneously addressed the subscription paying audience who were 80% white in a nation which is 80%

black The emphasis of Marco Centorrino's account of *Grande Fratello* is on a textual and contextual analysis of the role of the pornographic and sex in the selling of the Italian version of *Big Brother*, whilst Janet Roscoe identifies the distinctive idiginised format of the Australian version, noting the aspirational location of the Gold Coast, discourses of mateship and the lack of a culture of respect for authority.

Mathijs and Hessels provide a useful analysis of shifting notions of the audience of *Big Brother* in Belgium drawing on the opinions of the producers, public opinion and small-scale audience research. For Mathijs and Hessels, producers and newspaper editors use the notion of the audience to promote, market and defend their product, believing that they can influence the audience through textual and contextual elements. However it is suggested that although they may think that they are influencing audiences, it may be that the ideas of the audience that inform production practices are a product of their own

assumptions rather than an accurate account of actual audiences. However Janet Jones argues that the producer's projected perception of the multimedia usage and culture, particularly of 15-30 year-olds was accurate in the British context. She perceives of *Big Brother* as a part of the move towards developing 'interactive consumers' who create revenue by responding in a number of digital formats to a variety of stimuli. As a result of her enormous (over 30,000 responses) longitudinal web based survey she concludes that 'young techno-confident viewers' have successfully negotiated a 'new grammar of reception' (228). The variety of ways in which viewers can access the 'house' is seen as increasing the 'perception of witnessing reality'; the viewers feel that they have adequate access to unfolding events to detect attempts to 'bear false witness' (229). However, she goes on to argue that interactive television is still part of an asymmetrical structure which does not fully embrace audience agency. A perception which is endorsed by Gary Carter, who, as a media practitioner argues that multi media applications are integral to reality entertainment and to the economy of the media, allowing for the exploitation of continuous footage through 'reversioning' and 'repurposing'.

The qualities which make this volume a valuable contribution to the debates about reality entertainment, audiences, institutions, multi media, multi platform formats, the local and the global are precisely the factors which make it hard to review. The embedded local accounts of text, context and reception are illuminating but incredibly diverse, calling upon an amazing array of theoretical models and methodologies.

Contact (by e-mail): Margaret Montgomerie

