

Watch with Brother

Almost overnight reality TV seems to have become the mainstay of popular culture. But it hasn't turned us into voyeurs - it's much worse than that

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Sunday June 24, 2001
[The Observer](#)

Watching Big Brother is about as dignified as looking through the keyhole in your teenage child's bedroom door. To do it occasionally would be shameful; to get hooked on it is downright depraved. People who like watching torture will tune in regularly to see a table dancer, an air steward, a hairdresser, a medical rep and a website designer (inter alia) struggling with the contradictions inherent in having simultaneously to bond with and to betray perfect strangers. Then, if they're in the mood, they will flick over to ITV to watch an ex-footballer, a policewoman and a property developer and the rest of the Survivor castaways face absurd and potentially dangerous ordeals on a remote island in pursuit of a large amount of money.

More than 10 million people watch these shows now every week. They visit the websites and read about the participants daily in newspapers and magazines. What does this say about them - about us - and about our culture?

Pope John Paul II has denounced reality TV as incompatible with human dignity. But human dignity has taken worse knocks than this and the churches were conspicuously silent. Religions whose hierarchs ordered the torture and murder of dissidents have historically been more concerned with the dignity of God than the dignity of man, and their swift and savage judgments were in some ways violent ancestors of the voting-off procedure.

Reality television is not the end of civilisation as we know it; it is civilisation as we know it. It is popular culture at its most popular, soap opera come to life. The celebrities who risked the wreck of their pampered egos by humiliation on Celebrity Big Brother were bowing to the inevitable. Any day now the royal family will challenge the Royle family for top ratings by exposing itself in a special Royal Big Brother.

Reality television is not very real. The situations are contrived and the protagonists are handpicked. No one on line or on TV sees everything that is seen by the cameras because what is streamed is already edited. The least real of all the reality shows must be Survivor. The middle-class middle-management types on Pulau Tiga recruited from the dead reaches of the urban middle class may be strong on strategies for people management but they are absurdly devoid of practical initiative. Watching them faff and flounder is less entertaining than irritating, especially as every viewer is aware that real ingenuity and industry are being deployed off-screen by the production crew, which must greatly outnumber the castaways, in building a spectacular tribal meeting house, outrigger canoes, rafts and wooden pinball games while facing the same kinds of logistical problems that afflict the castaways.

Over the years the TV audience has hardened. Candid Camera is now You've Been Framed, in which people come to grief in spectacular fashion. Old people and fat women tripping over toys and falling through floors or backwards off benches can wind up dead, but viewers are uninterested in follow-up. No one bothers to add a caption reading 'No human was injured in the making of this programme'. People becoming distressed or anxious or confused or enraged are simply amusing. We are no more concerned about their broken bones and torn cartilages than we are about those of Itchy and Scratchy from The Simpsons. And they too seem less concerned about making an exhibition of themselves than their parents would have been.

Like the idea or loathe it, television has become more real than life. La vida es sueño ; video is fact. Don't try to fight it.