
Big Brother and Reality TV in Europe

Towards a Theory of Situated Acculturation by the Media

■ *Divina Frau-Meigs*

ABSTRACT

■ This article examines the cross-border circulation of reality programming among European countries, taking *Big Brother* as a case in point. It tests the specificity of the media factor in the process of acculturation, by considering the whole communication process, from production to reception, in a comparative manner. It deals with the dichotomy induced by contact between imported elements and traditional domestic core values and with the strategies related to adoption or adaptation. The media appear to apply three filters: the first filter, in production, makes a matrix of Anglo-American origin acceptable by editing out angst; the second filter, in broadcasting, acts as a transfer 'airlock', aimed at making people accept the commercial audiovisual system; the third filter, in reception, shows a variety of strategies as co-present publics vie about the values that are being transmitted by reality programming. Assessing these acculturation filters brings the author to develop the notion of 'situated' acculturation as it may reflect better the fundamental stakes at work in such cultural transfers – dissymmetric power relations – without precluding the possible strategies of resistance to hegemony that they entail and the cultural bypasses they produce. ■

Key Words acculturation, cultural diversity, reality programming, reception, television

Divina Frau-Meigs is full professor, Media Sociology and American Studies, Institut du Monde Anglophone, Université Paris 3-Sorbonne nouvelle, 17, rue de la Sorbonne 75005, Paris, France. [email: divina.frau-meigs@univ-paris3.fr]

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Among European countries, the cross-border circulation of entertainment programming of all genres and formats remains low, and in some cases non-existent. Exchanges are either national or imported from the US. When the production system allows for it, national identity expresses its preference in the consumption of so-called 'flow' and 'stock' programmes. Otherwise, a preference for American productions prevails over other European countries' programmes (Frau-Meigs, 2002). Europeanization in programming is noticeable only in the success of reality TV formats, as the same formula can be adapted to any national situation. Contrary to expectations, flow programmes, known for their faddishness and their short lifespan, seem to be more adaptable than stock fiction formats (series for example), even when they have been highly successful in their country of origin. Historically, the emergence of such programmes, as they engaged audiences internationally in the late 1990s, can be seen as Europe's response and adaptation to the large flow of American imports.

Big Brother, produced by the Dutch company Endemol, is a case in point, as it opened the way for a European migration of formats.¹ The adaptations of this hybrid programme – a combination of game show, talk show, soap opera and docudrama – have invaded European screens since the end of the 1990s.² Not only does this programme hybridize genres, but it also produces a transcultural hybridization of formats and content throughout Europe.

The standard literature has mostly monitored the reception responses in a variety of countries, focusing primarily on young people (Lochard and Soulez, 2003). Most academic studies have focused either on genre or on gender. The genre issues tend to relate reality programming to soap operas and telenovelas (von Feilitzen, 2005). They analyse how the programme displays fantasies of seduction, love and romance and allows the audience to evaluate their own experiences and learn from others while participating actively in the selection process, which is a device to gain their engagement (Hill, 2004). Gender research tends to show the involvement of girls and their social positioning, around consumption choices and class matters as a basis for collective identity (Foster, 1999); the results of small pilot studies emphasize trends in appropriation by adopting, circulating and reiterating expressions and fashions derived from these shows.

But the critics have failed to identify the specific kind of acculturation process taking place in the cross-cultural setting of format migration and have not considered the whole communication process, from production to reception, in a comparative manner. Few deal with the

dichotomy induced by contact between imported elements and traditional domestic core values or with the strategies induced by adoption or adaptation, especially in terms of resistance. And yet assessing these acculturation elements might reveal what such programmes reflect in terms of the creation of a potential Europe-wide culture.

The acculturation process – which tries to explain domestic change after foreign contact – often implies an asymmetrical relation, with underlying economic and cultural power struggles (Berry, 1976; Hall, 1976; Ladmiral and Lipiansky, 1991; Demorgon et al., 2003). In the political economy of the media, the term has often been associated with the export of American products, raising concerns about Americanization and the perceived threat of cultural imperialism. However, as research on globalization has focused more and more on audience reception and micro-level analyses, the transnational flow of programmes has been presented as 'localized' in regional and national cultural contexts (Fiske, 1992; Liebes and Katz, 1990; Appadurai, 1996; Varan, 1998; King, 1997). Fiske and Appadurai both posit that some cultural forms are more open than others with attendant variations on the cursor of interpretation of their embedded messages. Liebes and Katz argue that core cultural values, especially moral ones, tend to be prevalent in viewers' interpretations and can explain cultural differences and resistance strategies (Liebes and Katz, 1990). Varan, on the other hand, argues that acculturation is a phenomenon that only concerns the strata open to adaptation in a culture (mostly tastes, in fashion, music, food), not the structural strata or the core values strata. He plays down its importance, considering it as transitory and attached to youthful emotions and desires that vanish in adulthood.

Some researchers prefer the term 'interculturalization' to acculturation, to stress the voluntary process of adoption rather than the dissymmetric power relations. Demorgon suggests the concept of 'evolutionary interculturalization' (Demorgon et al., 2003: 88). According to him, the intercultural process needs to be linked to real situations of contact, which may produce new cultural inventions (but it may also fail and lead to simplistic assimilation). However, it seems that such interculturalization is a secondary process, after some degree of acculturation has already taken place, and the external culture is already highly present in everyone's mind. This is currently the case in continental Europe, where compatibility among cultures is relatively high and where the elite, the decision-makers and other mediators (producers, distributors, adapters, translators and so forth) are deeply steeped in the process of globalization.

Such cultural transfer has an impact on the construction of national identity and its dynamic foundations as it reshuffles inter-, intra- and transcultural relations. These programmes question the traditional understanding of identification by audiences, as they do not really function on imitation or projection but on a socialization process that requires internalization and constant re-evaluation of self-presentation procedures (Dubois, 1994; Frau-Meigs, 2005). The significant presence of reality TV programmes may play a part in the transfer of new values or in the weakening of national values. Reality programmes may also promote an alternative culture, especially among young, malleable generations or minority social groups. These phenomena, of course, are not mutually exclusive.

In such a context, the notion of 'situated'³ acculturation may better reflect the fundamental stakes in such cultural transfers – power relations – without precluding the possible strategies of resistance to hegemony that they entail. This complex process needs to be analysed with a model incorporating the main broad factors involved in acculturation, from production to reception. National economic and geopolitical production factors may influence the import of television programmes, as they can encourage local products, prevent or facilitate the entrance of foreign goods (Papathanassopoulos, 2002). In the case of the European Union, the 'Television Without Frontiers' directive can also affect national policies, as it encourages the production of local audiovisual content. Conversely, the global developments of the American media industry can also influence national markets for reasons of economy of scale and either boost American imports (they are cheaper) or encourage imitation strategies (they are more identifiable).

Cultural factors show that one of the main incentives in television imports can be related to cultural similarity, as the result of a common history and of recent foreign influences; similarity tends to be conveyed via the representation of stereotypes and scripts that influence audience reception and facilitate identification (Kuipers, 2002; Morley, 1983). Cultural flows can also be affected by the perception of the US, nationally, as some countries are more accommodating to their cultural offerings (especially when they share the same language, as in many Northern European countries) while others are more suspicious and do not share a common heritage (especially the Southern European countries). Such perceived compatibility or distance may in turn affect the way audiences react to moral values inserted within the imported formats and messages.

An additional factor needs to be added to this rather classic model, the media factor per se, as the characteristics of a genre or a programme can influence cross-cultural circulation, some of them laying more claim to universality or specificity than others (Hall, 1976; Fiske, 1989). Reality-programming, laying claim to both the universal and the specific, seems at the crux of the new political economy of media, as it tries to identify the situated needs of the audience and cater to them in terms of uses and gratifications.

When considering the acculturation process via the media, the asymmetrical relation does not just occur between a foreign production filter and a domestic receiving filter: the media themselves create an intermediary filter for this transfer (Frau-Meigs, 2001a, 2003a). This media filter acts in a complex manner, placing acculturation in a specific communication setting, in addition to a cultural and geopolitical one. The process of acculturation must be examined in the light of this communication filter, which acts both on the initial foreign message production and the domestic reception. The whole chain of audiovisual communication needs to be taken into account: production in the context of an Anglo-American economic system, broadcasting by national media and consumption by local audiences increasingly aware of their complex participation – their co-presence – in the European Union. This may help cast a clearer vision of how issues of cultural diversity and transnational construction are being played off against one another by the media and their audiences and if they contribute or not to the construction of a Europe-wide culture.

First filter: a transcultural drive in production

Big Brother is considered here as an original, initial paradigm, produced by an Anglo-American cultural matrix or ensemble of coherent cultural traits.⁴ Its continental anchorage in the Netherlands should not conceal the connection to its Hollywood influence. The origins of the format are disputed: according to some, they seem to stem from a scientific experiment, *Biosphere 2*, and from a Swedish concept, *Survivor* (von Feilitzen, 2005), while according to others, *Big Brother* originated in the US, from *The Real World*, in which the players lived communally for six months in a loft. Extracts were broadcast on MTV in 1992 and they reached Great Britain as well (Lochard and Soulez, 2003). This may explain why broadcasters in the US and the UK showed the programme amidst relative public indifference, as these countries were in a more advanced and extreme stage of reality TV development, with shows like

Survivor and *Jack Ass*. In any case, Endemol, in the pivotal country of the Netherlands, with its own track record of emotional and game show productions, partly inspired by the long-established tradition of American television game shows, made it into a popular formula.

The rules of the programme, which, game-like, result in the designation of winners with prizes, are recorded in the 'Bible'⁵ of Endemol. They facilitate the creation of a transcultural format, much in the same way as religion aimed at unifying different countries around a unique text, even before nation-states emerged. However, this format forged for international transfer (it has been adopted by more than 20 countries in the world) does not state intercultural principles in its main tenets. It puts forward transcultural principles, applicable to all countries, requiring a homogeneous adaptation: the Spartan house and lifestyle, the lengthy confinement (about a hundred days), the absence of any media, the panoptic principle of surveillance, the confessional obligation, the battery of tests, the eliminating vote and the exhibition of ordinary people's private lives. All these rules are applied, regardless of local customs.

The structure of the tests and of the nominations is transcultural as well: it is predicated on ruthless competition as a model of social relationships. Survival of the fittest – here, the most camera-friendly – is the rule. The elimination of the candidates, in order to have only one winner, serves as a plot and provides suspense. A strict scenario has been reproduced ever since *Big Brother* by all programmes of the same ilk, from *Star Academy* to *Nice People*. Nominations precede audience votes; a designated loser leaves the house. The participants tend to be cast along stereotyped parts: the seducer, the chatterbox, the confidante, the troublemaker . . . They are selected according to their ability to express their feelings and to assert themselves without any other special talents.

Such a transcultural drive does not preclude implicit intercultural underpinnings. A show can toy with the characteristics imposed by the original Anglo-American matrix. Competition, the promise of money, transparency, separation from the family circle are all connected to a quest for a candid and authentic presentation of a participant's self that favours expressions of affect and emotion. These characteristics of the genre naturally preclude any high-brow intellectualism or distance. The matrix is founded on strong core values⁶ of Protestantism, like nominalism (the expressive power of language), empiricism (the pragmatic power of situations), utilitarianism (the economic power of exchanges) and presentism (the concrete power of emotions). One element does not fit the original Protestant matrix: the absence of work and production. The shows tend to reflect the permeation of the leisure society, within the

framework of an idleness detached from any context except the television milieu, where everything seems to occur without any effort. But it is to be noted that the new generation of reality TV programmes, like *Star Academy* and *A la Recherche de la Nouvelle Star*, try to correct this absence, by 'training' the participants so that they work to achieve televised stardom; they also introduce on the premises, for short stays, guest TV stars, who at least 'work' in the entertainment business.

Other traits suggest the presence of opposite characteristics, hinting at the presence of another model, predicated on collective relations and pressures: the interpersonal exchanges, the contrived solidarities (in games), the negotiation of common practices, the sexual innuendoes and the management of a time-frame that is not defined by action or work. The weight of collaborative and collective practices refers to a set of core values more generally linked with a Mediterranean matrix. Thus, 'fundamental antagonisms' as defined by Devereux (1972), stimulated by the situation of contact, appear within the format and its very structure. These antagonisms set up the framework for communication transfers and probably aim at forcing some degree of hybridization among the core values. They function as cultural indicators, and reveal the state of a country at a certain point of its acculturation: some values, connected to money and individualism, enter the Southern European countries' spectrum; other values, connected to seduction and collective idleness, cross over to the northern countries of the EU. It is, properly, a percolation process.

In both cases, these programmes blur not only the distinctions between national cultures but also the distinctions between the adult and adolescent worlds. They adopt trappings of youth culture and of feminine culture, which turn out to be one and the same culture. Activities in reality TV programmes belong to the female sphere, in the regressive, infantile meaning of the word: participants in all programmes are shown in attitudes based on very clear oppositions between action and passivity, work and leisure, production and reproduction (Streeter, 1996: 293). The participants are framed within the realm of passivity, leisure and delayed sexual reproduction, traditionally associated with a female housewife audience. In the context of the programme, they are treated as such: their work is not recognized and they receive no wages for their time in the game. Their separation from the public space or productive workplace and their confinement in the 'private' domestic leisure space further feminizes their situation.

Playing with the separations and oppositions between male and female, between work and domesticity, has been the principal structure of

commercial broadcasting since its origins, especially in the US. To produce an audience implies producing private spaces where it stays, even while invading those private spaces for a very public and commercial goal. Broadcasters will foster at any price the invisible process that transforms living rooms into sales rooms. The alchemy that transforms householders into audience and private dwellings into places of public exchange allows the calculation of the ratings necessary for the system's survival. In a reality show, the viewer-participants are on both sides of the screen: those who nominate the other contenders mirror those who vote for the 'survival' of televised participants, according to the game's premise. As such they do not lack power, but this power is minimal compared to the power of the producers, the broadcasters and their sponsors. Engaged in a leisure activity, they think of themselves as at home, out of the market but in fact by their very presence they keep the broadcast economy running. This form of exchange in the marketplace, diffused over an entire country, provides the advantage to broadcasters of offering no focal point to politically organized opposition. The lack of political awareness and clout of the viewer-participants and the relatively weak critical reactions to the programme's ethics demonstrate that broadcast economics has discovered how to short-circuit politics. Indeed, by engaging each viewer in his or her home with limited choices of no collective significance, the system has created a non-political culture, a 'deculturation' of politics.

These programmes tend to reinforce the exploitation of their viewer-participants, since their status as an audience becomes the very object and subject of the show, free of charge. The confusion is maintained between youth and femininity, both taken in the social, not biological meaning of the word. As subject and object of the show, both acted upon and stimulated (just) to act, the programmes function like pornography (Frau-Meigs, 2003b). Reality TV reinforces cultural preferences for commercial broadcasting, to the detriment of public service values (which is not ratings driven). It is both a 'sector-based reinforcement' from one branch of the industry to another and a 'dimension-based reinforcement' from a level of expansion to another (Demorgon, 1999: 189).

As trans-European acculturation takes place, it is the economic model of commercial TV that is gaining ground. This is especially noticeable in Southern countries where the public service model of broadcasting had remained relatively prevalent despite market deregulation. In all the countries where *Big Brother* has been adopted, domestic national audiovisual systems have lost their state monopoly position. Reality TV programming has often been broadcast on minor or emergent

commercial channels, which have successfully displaced the dominance and prestige of the established channels. In this respect, they have distanced themselves from the values of public service, burdened with an image of traditionalism, (self)-censorship and patriarchal stiffness. They have catered to audience expectations for more participation and emancipation in the media.

The only country in the EU to partly resist this transcultural drive seems to have been Spain. In the first season of *Gran Hermano* (broadcast on the commercial channel Canal Cinco), the Spanish candidates refused to name one of their number for elimination. Instead, they nominated everybody, thus compelling the viewers to choose and take on the responsibility for the exclusion, which they did (Lacalle, 2003: 53–7). Spain can also be considered as an exception for its intercultural stance: in the third and fourth seasons, for a few days, there were exchanges between Spanish and Latin American participants (Mexican participants in *Gran Hermano 3*, and Argentinians in *Gran Hermano 4*). The Spanish broadcasters and decision-makers looked for significant exchanges away from the European area to another cultural area of identity and compatibility, with a shared language, for a larger audience. In Europe, but outside the EU, another country was an exception, the French-speaking part of Switzerland. It refused to broadcast *Big Brother* and produced instead a public service television imitation, *Génération 01*, to expose the manipulations behind the scenes of reality TV and create a debate about the difference between reality and fiction (Clavien, 2003: 109–11).

Both examples show interesting and innovative strategies for opposition and differentiation, which are reminders of a stubborn collective spirit. However, on the whole, the transcultural rules were not emphatically challenged, partly because the framework was relatively flexible, partly because Endemol allowed the format to evolve while producing a series of spin-offs. This proliferation of similar formulas, under a cosmetic varnish of variety, dresses up the homogenizing transcultural tendencies of the format and its dominant Anglo-American matrix.

Second filter: intracultural dynamics in broadcasting

If, in production, television can foster a transnational acculturation process thanks to the reality TV format and its adoption in different geographical areas and among different social classes, paradoxically, in broadcasting, the most prominent impact of this transcultural format is its intracultural dynamics. In this respect, television conforms to the

expectations concerning national preference and identity recognition that seem to prevail in Europe.

However, the intracultural dynamics evinced by the programme do not relate to identity in terms of ethnicity. There was no marked effort concerning the representation of minorities across the European countries. The absence of ethnic participants was particularly striking in the first season, with the exception of France: the two contenders of Northern African origin, Aziz and Kenza, contributed to the success of the programme in its early stages, but they were the first to be eliminated. Spain and Italy made a point of having participants from the different federal regions that form their relatively recent political geography. The second season showed a larger mix of well-integrated ethnic participants (for example, the Northern African contender in Flemish-speaking Belgium). On the whole, though, the ethnic dimension was absent, as was the multiethnic dimension, despite the increasing weight of immigration and migration within European societies. On the whole, the vision of a mono-cultural society prevailed and its attendant identity conformism and uniformity.

The profile of the winners reveals how this conformism is also in conformity with a deep-set morality, as the least disturbing candidates have a tendency to win. During the first season, country by country, it was either the girl-next-door (Belgium, Italy) or the clean-cut young man (the Netherlands, Greece, the UK, Germany, Spain) who won. France was the only exception with Loana, whose sulphurous past was splashed across the covers of all the tabloids and glossy magazines. In granting victory to participants with banal and lacklustre lives, television betrays its conformist sense of distributive justice. However, the ultimate winners, whose fame stretched beyond the end of the game, were often contenders with unusual personalities, as in the German case of Zlatko, 'the brain', who was less bland than the actual winner, John. In fact, these were the ones the producers immediately recruited for other TV programmes on thematic channels for young people and/or women, as in the case of French participant Laure, who presents the celebrity talk show programme *Laure de vérité* on the French cable channel Téva, targeting a young female audience.

With such programmes, television creates its own intracultural dynamics: it aims at a self-serving acculturation process to socialize the public to its own industrial modus operandi. The very idea of 'big brother' alludes to the mediation of television, which is presented like a protective family link. The title refers to the image of power that television wants to incarnate – to watch and to punish – but with a twist:

in contrast to George Orwell's work of reference, *1984*, it is sympathetic, angst-less surveillance and compassionate chastisement. Here the pan-optic principle is no longer presented as a cause for anxiety. It is revealed to the participants and viewers from the beginning, even if they do not know how the surveillance is organized within the show's environment or how the editors rework the scenes. The full knowledge of the filming conditions of the show and the power of the television system is represented as compensating for the manipulation in an implied contract, never made formal, and is in fact quite one-sided as not everything is revealed and the rules are constantly changed. Thus, *Big Brother* is like a rite of passage for people to be initiated into television and into the more or less cruel laws of the entertainment world. France is an exception, as it did not adopt the transcultural title and chose instead *Le Loft*, coined less for the type of accommodation – the set was divided into rooms and wasn't loft-like at all – than for the resonance with the movie *Love Story*, with its implications of improbable couplings across social barriers among student-age people. The producers, with Endemol's benediction, have laid the stress on the preferred content of 'flow' programmes, the soppy romances and intricate interpersonal relations; by alluding to this cultural referent of American origin, they have in the process also managed to remove any cause for anxiety.

The reality TV format confirms television's tendency to interfere profoundly in people's private lives, following the trail blazed by talk shows and docudramas (Frau-Meigs, 2001b: Chs 3, 4). This process first appeared in the US, within the framework of exclusively commercial media systems. Its spread implies a change in the perceptions of public and private spheres in Europe. It propagates the idea that the participant is a 'character', in the Anglo-American sense of the word, collapsing into one notions of person, persona and personality (Frau-Meigs, 2001b). He or she must behave on television as in real life, on the screen as in the street. The rules of the game stress the need 'to be oneself' in public as in private. Accordingly, the participants eliminated first were blamed for not being genuine or sincere enough. The audiovisual mediation turns out to be prescriptive and didactic, enforcing rules of behaviour and values to adopt. Codes in reality TV create 'socialized cognitive frames' (Véron, 1987) that viewers use for interpreting – in the double sense of performing and deciphering – the interplay of affects among the participant characters. They also underline the rise of commercial television as the common mediator and denominator in society. This type of mediation places at its centre the return of the speaking subject in the technological system of production and broadcasting, from which it had disappeared with the

advent of public service media predicated on a silent audience at the end of the reception chain (Fouquier and Véron, 1986: 94–6).

With reality TV formats, television is carving out its niche in the information society. Leaving to other media the production of other riskier and long-time investments, television claims for itself the interpersonal and intranational flow, for immediate use. These programmes show the current interaction between the economic order and the information order; they test the acceptable limits of what this interaction could be: it combines the acceptance of individualism in the market and the enhanced value of profit-making, with self-performance. The media economy puts forward its primary subjects, the viewers, turning them into active, self-interested participants, while recruiting those most likely to serve the entertainment world and be game. This information model, contrary to the classic economic model from which it derives, shakes the stability of the old references to politics or religion. It blurs their borders so as to promote a new hybrid culture, as illustrated by the intrusion of the principle of election and selection inherent in the Protestant tradition into traditional Catholic countries, via the Anglo-American matrix.

Thus, these programmes show the cultural leanings of economics as led by the new information model: via reality TV, the media reinforce the general public's acceptance that the economy generates culture. As a result, it is a culture based on reproduction and not on the production or the accumulation of goods (the format is reproduced, the songs are borrowed from other stars, etc.). That is how, in democracy, it is possible to reconcile the myth according to which private supply meets public demand with the practice of making the public a target for the private sponsors (Streeter, 1996). The logics of economy, information and democracy are legitimated despite the obvious contradictions between the spheres of production, reproduction and consumption. It is only possible if the cultural act of being-viewers-together is non-work, a passive activity that is 'produced' without any specific talent, without any pre-required knowledge, without any visible conditions of exploitation.

So it seems that television works its intracultural dynamics to better promote its transcultural drive. It is not a good medium for intercultural exchanges because it is an institution with its own self-preserving system. It conveys stereotypes and keeps them in constant circulation; it reduces some altruistic concepts (friendship, solidarity, freedom of expression) to a functional utilitarianism with its own logic of (s)election: self-presentation, nomination, exclusion. As an institution both reflecting and creating society around it, television cannot come

into conflict with the environment in which it is produced. When it is private and commercial, building business on a national audience, its successful marketing is further proof of its embeddedness in society. To its credit, there is no guarantee that taking the risk of conveying a more balanced intercultural content, more curious of other cultures, would meet with success (Demorgon, 1996). Television can only create intercultural exchanges if these are of value in its society, as in the very specific case of certain American programmes that are justified by the politics of identity and mandatory affirmative action. These programmes actually show a certain amount of minorities and of American subcultures that would not in other circumstances be present on the screen (Frau-Meigs, 2001b: Ch. 3). In this respect, national audiovisual production strategies are indicative of the absence of a cultural Europe, curious about the pluralism of its differences and convinced that it is a common wealth, worth mediatizing.

Third filter: sparse intercultural prospects in reception

Europe-wide, reception of these programmes reaches the lower middle class, mostly women and youngsters, urban, with little education (even if other sections of the general public were watching in the beginning in the first season). This loyal public is made up of heavy consumers of television.⁷ The most loyal audience is composed of young housewives (20–30), who did not go to university and who stay at home. They are closely followed by young people (12–25), old enough to go to school but with no employment. These overlapping age groups seem to share a mirror relationship with the television medium, especially with reality programming, whose 'characters' are not unlike themselves, having little education, no clear occupation and so on. The panoptic principle of angstless surveillance is extended to the whole young European public. A temporary zone for shared membership is thus formed, which characterizes the acculturation of European publics as minted by Endemol.

The adoption of these programmes by the young public, relative as it is,⁸ indicates that the youth culture is more transnational than currently believed. For young people, nationality is not necessarily the main criterion for cultural differentiation and they share more in common than meets the eye. They have a harder time understanding the world of adults, in spite of having the same nationality, than that of their peers. It turns out that the most important cultural difference in Europe is generational, which also confirms the 'feminized' interpretation of the programme structure.

Big Brother, although its intracultural dynamics prevail as regards values and formats, points to some prospect of intercultural communication in reception as a result of the various adaptations of the Endemol 'Bible': even if the viewers in each country do not know the details of what happens elsewhere, they know that the other countries have broadcast a similar programme. Via Internet and satellite connections, some of them can even watch what occurs in other countries. This phenomenon hints at the potential of an intercultural strategy in the making. Europeanization of the public may take place according to the very definition of the public inherent in a *res publica* where it is not the individual act of watching that matters, but the collective certainty that everyone knows the others are watching too that creates a shared cultural space – the prerequisite for the perception of a common good and the constitution of public opinion. Viewers in each country are partly motivated to watch by this sense of common activity, and they can perceive this common watching as a source of symbolic and cultural exchange. This co-presence and its instantaneity allows for some degree of conversation among the members of the public as a community at large. To be able to meet and communicate with other members of the public is the tacit audience agreement that is put in place by reality programming. The audience feels it belongs to a cultural system and a market in which the meaning of an object is tallied with the meaning others give to this object. This is one of the stakes in the acculturation in progress. In this respect, reality TV is profoundly political in its implications as it brings into the public space a marketplace of self-promotion while annexing the private sphere of intimacy and secrecy.

The public attitude and the intensity of the debates around *Big Brother* illustrate the magnitude of the stakes. Two extreme reactions within the public were expressed in different countries and emphasized in the Latin countries especially: on the one hand, support attended by identification; on the other hand, suspicion attended by denunciation. The fundamental antagonisms induced from the two matrices emerge here in a polarization between closeness and distance. Opinions on personal behaviours seem to diverge according to national values.

Those within the public who want to become rich and successful, reaping the benefits of the market, those who would profit by television's star system, even by using non-professional shortcuts or by bringing down other rival players, if necessary, see these programmes as a means of access. The young participant is perceived as a good practitioner of the television codes as well as the codes involved in real-life behaviour; he or she is capable of manipulating these codes both on and off screen. This

view is related to a discourse of parity and mirroring, where television can faithfully and accurately reproduce and transpose everyday life. In this respect, the programme has rallied the support of one part of the mass public (especially women and young people), who recognize themselves in the participants and the situations that are presented on television, which they see as analogous to their own weakened positions in reality. Consequently, they are willingly involved in the glorification of the players. This support of underrepresented youth by underrepresented youth shows the social function of these programmes. They underline the need to restore a broken dialogue with other parts of the population from which young people are alienated. This mutual support of the underrepresented emphasizes the generational gap and can be read as a call for sociability and improved relational exchanges in real life.

Some members of this supportive public are not fooled by the artificiality of the set-up and the commercial use of the image of youth and women. Like some of the contenders, they hope to make use of the imported matrix in order to achieve their own aims for national change. Just as a few participants left the programme before the end or refused to nominate others for elimination, some members of the target public were pleased by the scandal caused by the exposure of social and moral prohibitions. In Southern Europe, they especially welcomed the public debate on the role of generations and the hidden sexual policies and taboos in their society. They did so even at the risk of seeing stereotypes reinforced, according to which the young do not know how to express themselves or according to which women are always flirtatious.

Such programmes provide them with collateral benefits that compensate for the lack of topics in the media in general concerning their social situation. These benefits compensate for the deficit in the attention paid to them, in the news for example, where young people are often associated with violence and insecurity. They prove Oscar Wilde's rule of scandal whereby to be talked about, even negatively, is always better than not being talked about at all. Scandal creates conversation, reshuffles difficult questions and arranges people in a variety of unexpected groupings or even parties. At the same time, it feeds a market avid for revelations around privacy and intimacy, especially sex. The public revelation by one Portuguese contender that she had been raped when she was young made it possible to talk about this taboo issue in her country. Scandal, because it exposes the hidden and the untold, especially when it is about an outrage to public decency, tends to be perceived by some people as a civic necessity. In this respect, the gap between the production and the reception of these programmes is maintained. Young people and

women break away from the cognitive social frames of their expected entertaining performance.

This target public is not the only one that watches. Other members of the audience have seen the programme to reinforce their disgust and their suspicion. They perceive it as a threat, as a disparity and as a pernicious disloyalty to their countries' values. In this framework, the young participant is related to a discourse of betrayal, manipulated by television. In this respect, *Big Brother* has roused the opposition of a portion of the population, mostly composed of adults, men, intellectuals, politicians and church authorities, who have denounced its format as well as its message.

Their criticism has been expressed in two stages. At the beginning of the broadcasting period, denunciations dealt mostly with the format and its set-up, which were said to be conducive to humiliation, confinement, even alienation. In some countries, psychologists mentioned the possibility of suicidal behaviour. Some people complained about the death of the spirit of public service. In Greece and French-speaking Belgium, the regulatory agencies intervened and made recommendations to the producers and broadcasters in the name of the protection of human dignity. Among other guidelines, they asked for a room without any camera and for the careful positioning of cameras to avoid some body parts.

During the broadcast season, criticism focused on the content and the participants. The participants were considered to be of little interest, to be too similar and too stereotyped. The programme was denigrated as adult exploitation of youth. Both the lack of creativity and the 'laboratory' conditions that bore little relationship to any social reality seemed to conflict with a tacit spectator/producer contract in reality programming, predicated on authenticity. This portion of the public denounced the glorification of the young participants, the cynicism of television culture and the risk this cynicism represented for public space and democracy.

This quarrel within the different portions of the audience shows a long-term basic inequality of power between the discourse produced by television and the discourse produced by politics and religion. The polarized attitude of the public maintains the gap between production and reception and is a reminder of the fact that television cannot possibly reproduce reality, even if it purports to do so. Beyond parity or disparity, verisimilitude or dissimilitude, it can only purport to exacerbate the tensions at work in this transitional phase of a nascent Europe-wide culture. The cultural transitions are many and include the liberation of

women and sexual minorities, multiethnic immigration into Europe, migration of the various segments of the population within Europe, corporate and industrial mutations, national political reforms imposed by the federal government, local debates on regional sovereignty, etc.

In its own way, television socializes people to these trans-European transformations, with its intracultural dynamics. In *Big Brother*, it suggests the acceptance of the relative nature of social norms, especially concerning sexuality and youth; it encourages people to seek personal emancipation instead of political empowerment. This transformation points to a change in the entertainment function. Television renegotiates its status through Europeanization by inviting people to put themselves on stage and to speak. The return of the speaking and acting subject may justify the scope of social mobilization for or against these programmes. This speaking and acting subject is faced with other speeches that are supposed to be legitimate: those of school, church and politics. This new model of television reintroduces a sense of mobility via communication. Participants appear to create the conditions of their own success. They can organize the process of self-transformation via public revelations and confessions. More than identification, it is socialization in procedures of self-presentation that seems to be prevailing, with a focus on communication skills, rather than on moral values; the only imperative seems to be to 'perform oneself', to construct one's own identity rather than to identify with others.

Viewer reactions point to the lines of resistance and the lines of consistence to acculturation. They show the compensating and reinforcing attitudes that have been developed by each country (Demorgon, 1999: 191–4). The range of attitudes that have been noted is not far from Liebes and Katz's model of acculturation, which proposes a typology of resistances, with a wide variety of strategies: moral, ideological, aesthetic or play (Liebes and Katz, 1990). Viewer reactions also reveal the search for a new balance to respond to the thrust of the first and second filters, with intracultural dynamics at the fore but not exclusively, as the arguments concerning distance and proximity, support and suspicion, may be interpreted as a transcultural drive and the promise of intercultural prospects, as they are recurrent, co-present in every country concerned. These reactions indicate how difficult it is to materialize further this co-presence of European publics since the dialogue among them is still only inchoate.

The typology of resistances to acculturation must also be considered in its multimedia dimension since the media have partly organized this resistance and the interplay of fundamental antagonisms. Probably

because television is interested in preserving itself, public service channels debated reality programming (with the notable exception of *Arrêt sur images* on channel France 5) to a lesser extent than newspapers and the Internet have. Newspapers (except for the tabloids and those that belong to the same industrial group as television) have presented the strongest criticisms of a moral and ideological nature. They have allowed intellectuals and politicians to develop their arguments in feature articles. On the strength of their historical tradition, they think they have a role as the guarantor of public space and of a different vision of human relationships. They also act as buffers to public opinion that they would like to embody and for which they want to be the preferred mediators. They perceive the audiovisual system as a real threat to the pre-eminence of their values and their very existence.

The Internet has allowed a less intellectual public to take part in the debate via discussion forums. The new media have fostered the expression and display of aesthetic and playful resistance strategies. Some sites have been created in a satirical or ironic mode and others in a pornographic mode. Forums have reported exchanges revealing that people were aware of the manipulation concerning the tacit contract of reality programming. Some people liked the laboratory-like experimentation. Others wondered about making people's lives into fiction and others wondered about their own viewer implication in the process.

These interactions reveal a certain lucid resistance to manipulation, but this lucidity did not prevent the informed and sometimes cynical public from participating in the game. There is a paradoxical limit to the political interpretation of the programme: to see the confidence trick does not necessarily lead to escaping it. A clear-minded assessment does not encourage people to rebel against it but to play along with it. Criticism does not necessarily create the desire to withdraw from the mirror of self-transforming images. In this thus established co-dependence, strategies of resistance, real as they are, seem to be cancelled out. It is the victory of the market insulation strategy against politics, as induced by the production system. This victory is also partly due to the fact that people are not sufficiently aware of the very acculturation phenomenon and of the influence of the original Anglo-American matrix, which is rarely called into question.

Resistance by national cultures has thus partly been expressed by other means of communication. A model of acculturation by the media appears, in which distribution of the antagonistic options can be made according to the types of information media: television tends to support reality programming, newspapers denounce it and the Internet offers an

ironic interaction with it. Whereas television promotes transcultural unification, the other media introduce diversification and singularization. A division of labour seems to take place in the media, complementary to the needs of the transcultural drive, which organizes a double perception: the perception of brutal reduction of the national identity and the perception of a strong affirmation of this very identity.

In fact, acculturation to electronic communication is organized according to the media, each complementing the others. The different media play different parts and fulfil different functions in the negotiation between resistance and assimilation. The media try to organize the field of contradictory interactions within a sole culture. They increase the number of possible answers, open the range of attitudinal orientations, and suggest lines of reaction different from the cultural automatisms that have become inadequate to explain current transitions and deal with them. In this respect, the multimedia impact is 'differential', in the sense that it changes according to the social strata and according to media consumption and use. Therefore, protecting the diversity of the media and their respective independence is essential because differentiation is not acquired for ever, and neither does it produce reciprocity among media.

The Europeanization process that has been propelled by *Big Brother* is more a matter of differential logic than a matter of 'antagonistic adaptative logic' (Devereux, 1972). What Devereux observed in the case of Japan⁹ probably applies less in Europe because of the relative cultural compatibilities within the western world. It is the synergy within the media that has made it possible to express differences and appeal to the intracultural resistance of national cultures. It reveals the transcultural compatibilities that television can shape around its productions.

At this stage, the three successive filters applied create a composite image of acculturation by media:

- The first filter, in production, makes a matrix of Anglo-American origin acceptable by editing out angst, around basic core values like individualism, competition, profit, presentism.
- The second filter, in broadcasting, acts as a transfer 'airlock' aimed at making people accept the commercial audiovisual systems, and in doing so shows the state of acculturation of the decision-makers and the producers of national television stations.
- The third filter, in reception, shows a variety of strategies. Co-present publics vie for the values that are being transmitted by

television. Their meanings and their impact on youth socialization require symbolic exchanges and recognition of the stakes around the acculturation process per se.

This composite image allows us to push further the understanding of the acculturation process per se. McAnany thinks that acculturation, if it is real at the beginning, becomes a matter of supply and demand and strives for the balance of opposing powers because local abilities grow to meet local cultural demand (McAnany, 1986). Salomon mentions the '*first order interaction*' and the '*second order interaction*' to point out the way television affects the target national culture on the one hand and the way the medium is itself affected by this culture on the other hand (Salomon, 1985: 381–97). What seems to be taking place via the media is indeed a process of 'situated acculturation', whereby populations are offered a composite matrix that affects their national culture and allows for discursive practices about values, not just tastes. Context-specificity, the locality of place, is thus mitigated with the import of another context, whose specificity is loosened in the process but remains real in its capacity to generate reactivity and to create cognitive dissonance. The reality of dissymmetric power relations remains, but cultural bypasses are produced, less as a means of resistance than as a result of 'resilience', the cognitive capacity to compensate for traumatic experiences (Cyrulnik, 2003).

Thus, if acculturation has a real potential to invent the European melting pot or promote European multiculturalism, it also has the potential to exhaust meaning and to blur references. A comparative analysis does not show a progressive and homogeneous Europeanization of values. The national cultural substratum and its strategies for resistance cohabit with interfering cultural references between the Anglo-American matrix and the Mediterranean matrix. This contact reveals a partial acculturation, with a growing acceptance of the value placed on money and on the power of the star system, along with the erosion of public service functions and missions. It also stresses the great presence of belief in family and friendship at the level of affect, not of national politics or policies. Above all, it reinforces the profound impact of the media culture as such and for itself.

The initial format has undergone some changes as well, downgrading some of its Anglo-American traits and showing that acculturation also results in a selective reception process. But the fact that the original matrix will be presented again in other ways is inescapable, as exemplified by Donald Trump's recent selling of his programme *The*

Apprentice to European stations. As media systems tend to converge, the formats will be more transnational for a better return on investments. More formulas toying with the representation of a nascent European identity are to be expected also. The European final of *Star Academy* and the programme derived from it, *Nice People*, whose participants come from different countries (some beyond the EU) point to this tendency. These programmes were not very successful because they used participants who were too stereotypical. But they demonstrate an attempt to take risks for a better intercultural experience. However, the reduction of a nation's participation to only one candidate blurred the internal diversities while widening the gap between the national representative participant and the foreigners on the show, a process any national ideology will try to pre-empt.

At this point, 'Europe' should be targeted as a nation and not only as a collection of discrete entities (Demorgon et al., 2003). Television should capitalize on real intercultural experiences, after the successful manner of the youthful experiments with Erasmus cultural exchanges, and as evinced by the success of a film like *L'Auberge espagnole*. To rub shoulders with the strangeness of another culture, and to assess the compatibilities and the incongruities of such contacts and transfers, such are the necessary conditions for an accepted interculturality. For future research on situated acculturation, this implies a new way of understanding and assessing what is meant by the representation of identity in terms of its impact on identification and on self-construction (Mitchell and Blumler, 1994). It also implies revisiting audience participation, especially as consumption choices affect appropriation and appreciation of formats and messages. The action of mediators, who are the transnational media gate-keepers, is also essential in this approach that incorporates actors and objects in situation. Some gate-keepers are technological (like rating systems or search engines); some are human, like programme creators and buyers, translators and dubbers, marketers; while others are legal and institutional, like regulators and self-regulators. They all play key, yet often hidden and unattended, roles in the facilitation of the intercultural experience.

Notes

1. Endemol is a merger of two Dutch production companies, the brain child of John de Mol. It specializes in reality TV programming and also experiments and operates in a wide variety of television genres. Within less than five years of its creation, it had become the biggest player in the five main markets in

- Europe, before Telefonica, the Spanish telecom consortium, purchased 75 percent of the shares.
2. The countries in this sample are members of the EU: France, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy and the UK. In addition to my own observations, I used data circulated during the INA's (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel) Second International Summer University (July 2001) and case studies developed in *MédiaMorphoses's* special issue on *Big Brother*, coordinated by Guy Lochard and Guillaume Soulez (2003).
 3. 'Situation' is a term borrowed from cognitive sciences that alludes to the local anchorage of speech and image acts, in a specific time and space; it takes into account the interaction between actors and objects as well as the context of action and problem resolution, reassessing the importance of emotions and moral values in the processes of representation (Quéré, 1997).
 4. I take the term 'matrix' from the American economic realm, where 'matrix management' means a soft, friction-less way of dealing with human resources. This matrix is composed of a coherent ensemble of cultural traits or 'core values', such as self-interest, self-reliance, mobility; it even includes dissent, within certain limits (Frau-Meigs, 2001b: 12). It aims at avoiding conflict from the workforce, partly by making it participate more in the decision-making process and in the profit-taking share. The movie *The Matrix* denounces the manipulative dimension of such management, in the same angst-creating tradition as Orwell's *1984*.
 5. This is the revealing word chosen by the Endemol crew themselves.
 6. Here, this word should be understood according to its anthropological meaning and not its moral meaning.
 7. See the panorama presented in the special issue of *MédiaMorphoses* (Lochard and Soulez, 2003). See also von Feilitzen (2005).
 8. They are concomitant with a major drop in youth programming on the general public channels; their 'success' is relative, due to lack of counter-programming (Frau-Meigs, 2003a).
 9. It is worth noticing that Japan is one of the most important media-driven countries not to have adopted/adapted *Big Brother*.

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