Labourers of the Real: Authenticity Work in Reality Television

Introduction: the Epistemology of Reality Television

The fundamental scholarly claim about television is that as a medium it is, and thrives to be, closest to the "real", and that consequently, it offers mediated experiences of "liveness", a sense of shared "witnessing", and the like (e.g., Bourdon, 2000; Ellis, 2000). As John Hartley (2008) demonstrates, television can be seen to entail an entire philosophy, or "truth" system; including aesthetics, ethics and politics, and even metaphysics ("what can television mean"). Naturally, television also manifests and promotes its own "sense-making" or knowledge system, epistemology. It could be argued that the more "reflexive" the cultural practices—the more aware of audiences are of the mechanisms of cultural production and of their own cultural practices—the more crucial the question of epistemology for television.

The hybrid genre of "reality television" is a prime example of television's claim to authenticity: it aims to "restore direct access to the fullness of the real" (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 201). As noted, values such as the real and the authentic have been ascribed to the television medium from its beginning. The essentially evaluative and legitimating notion of authenticity has been used to define what is genuine, sincere, trustworthy and, ultimately, "good", since the notion of authenticity also implies the possibility of inauthenticity, of being fake or false (see Van Leeuwen, 2001). The specificity of television, especially in comparison to cinema, was related to three characteristics: screen size, domestic reception and live broadcasting, which has had a strong emphasis on truth and authenticity (Bourdon, 2000, p. 533). Thus, certain genres have been privileged as more authentic than others. Factual television traditionally drew its trustworthiness from authentic actions, locations and characters (Thornborrow & Leeuwen, 2001). During the last decades, however, television's authenticity claim has intensified under the pressure of increased competition and the need to sustain legitimacy with audiences (Couldry, 2003, p. 104; 2008, p. 23). This is evidenced by the growing tendency to use "ordinary people" (as opposed to media professionals and experts) in different television genres, from broadcast news to factual entertainment, in order to establish authenticity and to appeal to audiences (e.g. Couldry, 2008, p. 23; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994).

Two characteristics of the reality TV above all serve as "authenticity markers": reality programs feature *ordinary people*, rather than professional actors, who are engaged in *unscripted action and talk*. Capturing the "real" is the crucial aim for the program makers, since it is what differentiates reality programming from fictional entertainment (e.g. Fetveit, 1999). Reality TV promises to offer us real thoughts and action and, most importantly, true emotions of people like ourselves (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006; Aslama & Pantti, 2006). Audiences of reality TV are similarly focused on authenticity; negotiating the paradox between authentic and inauthentic elements are among the key attractions of reality programming (Mikos et al., 2000; Hill, 2002; 2005; Jones, 2003; Rose & Wood, 2005). Moreover, much of the public criticism of reality TV has focused on issues around authenticity. The format is frequently claimed to force authenticity by seducing participants into disclosing themselves and to manipulate the audiences to seek truth inside manifest fabrication (e.g. Biltereyst, 2004; Meers & van Bauwel, 2004).

Reality TV thus embodies a new type of televised authenticity with its focus on "ordinary" people who are equal to the targeted audience (Andrejevic, 2002). Besides relying on the supposed "authenticity of the ordinary", reality programs also employ several narrative techniques in order to construct authenticity. For instance, essentially inauthentic talk situations, such as confessions in *Big Brother's* "diary room", are produced to authenticate the participants since they give them the opportunity to talk to the audience "directly", to open their hearts about their feelings and judge other contestants. At the same time, they give the viewers the ultimate chance to judge the key characteristic of authenticity: the participant's integrity and credibility when it comes to feelings—and even to vote for it. In his analysis of "first person" media, John Dovey (2000) offers the conclusion that the proliferation of publicly mediated, individual experiences and emotions operates as a new regime of truth and guarantor of authenticity (pp. 23, 25; see also Montgomery, 2001, p. 404). The guarantee of the authenticity of reality programs is primarily anchored in the idea of "being true to oneself", which is weighed up by the nature and manner of the expression of individuals and their interaction with other participants. The judgements of contestants' "subjective authenticity" are evidently connected to wider social norms and stereotypes regarding behaviour and expression; as Catherine Squires (2007) states, issues of authenticity "have real world antecedents and consequences" (p. 438), meaning that

judgments of authenticity are constructed through such elements as race, class and gender (Bell-Jordan, 2008; Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008). The issue of "social authenticity" emerges also from studies about indigenized reality television formats in which the construction of authenticity is anchored in national stereotypes and national identity (Dhoest, 2005; Aslama & Pantti, 2007).

All of the above underlines that television as a medium and a cultural form has developed its own authenticity markers or "tools" for authenticity work. These are coupled with additional features in most reality TV programs, ranging from fan chatrooms in the Internet to confession rooms on set. Multimedia spectacles such as the *Big Brother* format use these tools skilfully and invite the audiences as well as the surrounding other media to be the judges of authenticity. As there are different tools, there are also different classes of actors who claim and judge authenticity. For this reason, such reality TV formats offer a perfect case to examine the forms that authenticity work regarding cultural products takes. This article aims to offer a synthesizing perspective on the "authenticity work" in reality TV. We use the concept of authenticity work to refer to collective or individual efforts to claim authenticity or to reject claims of authenticity made by others. The notion of "work", then, is used to stress that authenticity is socially and culturally constructed; that it is not a given quality, but a "a claim that is made by or for someone, thing, or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others" (Peterson, 2005, p. 1086). Accordingly, our notion of authenticity work implies that the experience and judgment of authenticity is pluralistic, in the sense that different groups and individuals might base their assessment of authenticity on different criteria (Van Leeuwen, 2001; Moore, 2002, p. 210; Peterson, 2005). Thus, the question here is not whether reality programs per se provide some kind of authenticity. Rather, we will look at how different "authenticities" are discursively constructed by various classes of actors.

The epistemology of television and its dilemma of authenticity, that is, the staged and scripted character of the "reality", is a recurring topic in the research literature (e.g. Andrejevic, 2004; Corner, 2002; Escoffery, 2006; Friedman, 2002; Kilborn, 2003; Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Jerslev, 2004; Ouellette & Murray, 2004; van Zoonen & Aslama, 2006). At the same time, most analyses of reality TV, all address in some manner, even when only implicitly in their discussions of authenticity, the complex processes that "produce" a reality

TV product. In this light, it is curious that although the claim of authenticity is central for reality TV, discussions of it have often remained at the level of merely re-stating the role of production in the construction of these fabricated realities. More sophisticated analyses of authenticity have not extended beyond particular aspects (mainly consumption) of reality programming. It is suggested here that a more multidimensional understanding of the notion of authenticity would complement and broaden theoretical discussions and reveal areas in need of research. It is clear that the epistemological aspects of television never are separate from broader cultural practices—but this is seldom addressed or researched in scholarly work on reality television.

Our core aim is to address a clear gap in television research, and through empirical examples, suggest why and how that gap could be breached. In a sense, this article presents a pilot for a new research agenda: It breaks ground in examining what we call authenticity work, that is, in addressing how authenticity is claimed, questioned and/or rejected in different interrelated spheres and by different actors: 1) in the production process, 2) by audiences, 3) by cast members, and 4) in media publicity. To this end, we will review and analyze discussions of what has been researched about the various spheres, their internal dynamics, and show the gaps in researching and conceptualizing authenticity. To illustrate the complexity of the concept of authenticity, this article also draws upon analysis of interviews with Finnish reality program makers and of interviews with the production team, audiences and cast members of the first *Big Brother Finland* (2005).[1] Finally, we will discuss the importance of addressing authenticity work as a part of the multilayered epistemology of reality television, suggest research approaches, and link the epistemological considerations to ontological considerations regarding reality (and) television.

Producers: One cannot script reality

The production team, which uses authenticity as a differentiation and selling tool, obviously has a central role in authenticity work. There is yet very little empirical work - based, for example, on observation or interviews - that is concerned with the motives, strategies and experiences of program makers (see Roscoe, 2001; Andrejevic, 2002). In the few studies

that include evidence from producers of reality programming, the focus is usually on the construction, boundaries and ethics of "reality".

In program makers' attempt to create a sense of authenticity, all evidence points to the importance of ordinary people. The striving for authenticity through the cast members is apparent, to start with, in the adverts for subjects to take part in reality programs; for example, the slogan of the Finnish *Big Brother* gives a promise that "the most authentic person wins"; the British *Experiment* asked "do you really know yourself?" (Biressi and Nunn, 2005, p. 27). Likewise, the participants are selected by the producers with an eye to authenticity. This is for instance illustrated in the following statement from Finnish reality TV producer: "You have to find different people with different backgrounds, different values and who look different. Screen charisma is important. Being authentic is most important; the character must endure through the whole series" (Producer of Finnish dating game show *Escort*). At the same time, however, the "casting" in the reality show is seen as one of the few justifiable means of creating drama and conflict in reality television, but these two interests are not seen as conflicting (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 104).

Ultimately, it is the idea of documentary truth upon which the program makers' claim to authenticity is primarily based. The guarantor of authenticity is the documentary format in the case of *Big Brother*, the objectivity of omnipresent cameras, which reveal authenticity and truth. This emphasis on "technological authenticity", that the truth will be revealed through the eye of the camera lens, seems to be an universal discourse among producers: the co-producer of *The Real World* (Andrejevic 2002, p. 261; 2004, p. 104; see also Holmes 2004, p. 128; Holmes, 2008; Biressi & Nunn 2005, p. 20) as well as the Finnish producer of *Big Brother* argue that perpetual observation makes it impossible to act in ways which are not true to oneself:

> Some *Big Brothers* have tried to put in actors to fool people in the house for a couple of days or for a week, and actually a professional actor cannot keep a mask longer than two days. Because you cannot, you are disclosed really fast as an actor. And it is really hard because it is 24 hours and you can't perform for 100 or 96 days. [--] Some people are performing more in normal life and, well, then they perform here too, they try to be a little bit not themselves. In normal life they can get away with it,

here they are revealed because we see them all the time, so it is impossible to keep up a role. (Member of the production team of *Big Brother Finland*)

Another common justification for authenticity concerns producers' limited power over what happens in reality TV - their "loss of control" (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 104). Producers claim that the "script" is ultimately written by the participants, rather than by them, even in international formats such as *Big Brother* that come with a "Bible", a detailed production plan (Roscoe, 2001, pp. 481-482). For example, the producer of the Finnish *Big Brother* describes the script as a "natural phenomenon" whose random moves can be controlled by the production crew only to a certain extent: the outcome is always unpredictable, and therefore authentic. Also typically, producers refer to uncontrollable moments of heightened authenticity, such as unexpected outbursts of emotion (cf. Grindstaff, 2002; Gamson, 1998, p. 91; Andrejevic, 2002, p. 262).

It is clear that program makers are also aware that authenticity provides a dilemma for reality TV. Finnish producers confessed that they constantly negotiate the contradictory views about influencing and "just observing" the interaction between participants. On the one hand, they see that the key for capturing authentic moments is that the production team is just observing the action; but, on the other hand, they also see that "pulling strings" or "throwing carrots" is a necessary part of making reality TV. Yet, paradoxically, the manipulation of action also forms a part of the producers' authenticity work. While the manipulation is ultimately explained by making reality programs that appeal to the audiences, the producers also believe that "real selves" are likely to emerge under pressure and that they can push the contestants to become more "authentic", understood in terms of conflict and uninhibited expression of emotion:

> At one point last year we noticed that the atmosphere in the program was flattening and so we decided that the contestants had to go on a 30 km march. Hard physical exercises and the tiredness caused by them create conflicts. Also the change in eating habits, or the lack of food, potentially generates drama. We do not want participants to get depressed, but we want them to be a bit… anxious (The producer of Finnish gamedoc *Extreme Escapades* [Suuri seikkailu])

The relationship between factual entertainment and its participants is often seen in terms of exploitation (Gamson, 1994, p. 89; cf. Teurlings, 2001), of which the above quote undoubtedly also provides an example. In her study on Finnish *Big Brother*, Minna Aslama (2009) however reveals that the ways in which the production team members relate to the participants is more complex and resembles Grindstaff's (2002, p. 141) findings about U.S. talk-show producers. On the one hand, members of the production team view participants as "the cast" or as "performers" who are evaluated, analyzed and controlled from a distance. This includes program makers also putting cast members' authenticity in question. For instance, the Finnish producers complained that participants are increasingly eager to perform in the ways they think the format requires, and that they sometimes also tried to direct producers in making appealing television (see also Syvertsen, 2001). On the other hand, program makers confessed that they are attached to the participants "as real people", and this evokes contradictory feelings in some situations such as evictions.

Participants: the importance of being true

Most literature on reality TV shares the idea that the authenticity of reality TV is first and foremost based in real thoughts, emotions and behaviour of people allegedly like ourselves; that is, it is based in the participants' "ordinariness" (as opposed to professional actors) and willingness to be true to one's self (Andrejevic, 2002, p. 261; Aslama & Pantti, 2006). While the popular fascination with film stars or pop stars derives from revealing their authentic and ordinary self behind the public persona (Dyer, 1987), in reality TV the presence of "ordinary people", at the outset, lays audiences' expectations on the expression of the real self. As Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005) argue, "The contestant, as he or she appears before the media audience, can be courageous, bold, greedy, bitchy or ruthless but they cannot appear pretentious" (pp. 151-152). The importance of the "techniques of the self" are heightened in the reality shows that explicitly deal with self-expression, definition and development, namely therapeutic and "self help" programmes. Those subgenres, from *Dr. Phil* to Extreme Makeover, intend to assist the participants (and viewers) to be even more authentic or true to their "true selves" (e.g. Ouellette & Hay, 2008, pp. 63-98).

While there is a rich body of research on talk shows that discuss the presence of ordinary people on TV, there are only few studies that look at what kind of discourses the cast

members of reality TV produce, for instance, what their motivations to participate in reality programs are and what kind of authenticity work they are involved in (see Syvertsen, 2001; Teurlings, 2001; Andrejevic, 2004; Aslama, 2009). Empirical studies on participants reveal that not only audiences but also participants could appropriate mass media for their own goals, rather than participants producing identities in line with "the logic and rules sanctioned by the show's producers and director" (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006, pp. 197-198). The interviews with the cast members of *Big Brother Finland* participants provide rich material on participants' understanding of authenticity in reality TV. They focus on their own quest for authenticity but also discuss the quest of producers, audiences and the media for constructing, interpreting or distorting their identities and behaviour. Most importantly, while the cast members recognize the power of producers, as well as audiences and the media, to create meanings, they still see themselves as sources of the most relevant meanings and authenticity (Aslama, 2009). Regarding casting, for instance, some participants explained that different "types" were selected for the house in order to create tension and drama, while others felt that they were depicted according to certain pre-determined roles that did not correspond to their "real" selves. But, at the same time, they did not doubt their own power to resist the representational strategies "from above" by committing to be real:

> If I am there and I am who I really am they cannot distort that very much, can they? [--] But then I have discussed with them, I think it was with the scriptwriter... And he said that towards the end he wanted to make me a kind of dictator. And at that point I thought how could you possibly do that? But I suppose it did not work out because I did not do enough such things. [--] They think about everything and try but they did not succeed with me. (Participant (f) March 2006)

Above all, the cast members discussed the impact of an extraordinary setting, acknowledging that it blurs the borders between performing and acting in ways that are true to one's inner self. Regarding the quest and ideal of being oneself, there is an interesting difference between producers' and participants' understanding; whereas the producers claim that the participants simply cannot mask their real selves because of being under constant surveillance, the participants argue that they managed to be true to themselves despite the artificial setting. Thus, participants' claim of authenticity derives its

guarantee from a "real self" beyond the processes of mediation. The result of participants' authenticity work is that they act "authentically", yet a bit differently, than in real life:

> I don't think that anybody was like really on purpose acting. I mean that everyone was surely just being themselves; so much as it is possible in that situation. But now when I know the people outside the house I see that they are all somehow different. I didn't understand it there then, but it is those circumstances that make you somehow different. (Participant (f) March 2006)

Indeed, the core of participants' authentication work seemed to be in negotiating how being oneself in *Big Brother* house is different from being oneself in real life. Common ideas were that in *Big Brother* house one needs to be a bit more careful with his words and reactions than in real life and also a bit more pleasant or flamboyant. However, these minor adjustments in one's character and behaviour were not understood as a risk for being authentic. In contrast, acting understood as "role-playing" or being "two-faced" was not accepted (see also Andrejevic, 2004, p. 104; Holmes, 2005). For instance, participants who were revealed to be deceitful (pretending to be friends, faking emotions and talking differently behind others' backs or in the diary room) created the most negative reactions among the other cast members. This "being oneself" versus "role-playing" is discussed as a moral issue, but also as an issue which has direct consequences within the show. Some participants pointed out that one of them was (rightly) voted out early because his behaviour changed radically after one week. It is commonly believed that authenticity, remaining consistent, is the most important criteria for winning: "You win, absolutely, by being honest and being completely just yourself." (Participant (f), June 2006) (See also Andrejevic, 2004, p. 125; Holmes, 2005, p. 17)

The same special circumstances that were perceived to set some limits to their authenticity-as-in-normal life were, however, also commonly valued for providing an extraordinary opportunity for learning about one's true self, gaining insights about how one relates to others and reacts under special circumstances. The participants tend to highlight the "therapeutic" value of participating in reality program or their experience as means of self-discovery and personal development (cf. Andrejevic 2002, p. 265; Hill, 2002, p. 336; Couldry 2003, p. 124). The role of media in modern life as a place where the authentic self can be found and refined is clear in one participant's account of her two-step learning process;

first, participating in *Big Brother*, and second, watching herself in the show afterwards: "I expect to learn from there [video recordings] too, but it [*Big Brother*] has taught me a lot and is teaching more all the time. Like, how I behave when I'm anxious or how I want to deny something even if I know how things really are." (Participant (f) April 2006)

What emerges from the interviews is that even if cast members occasionally complain about producers' decisions and their power to influence their representations, they felt that they are "in a same boat" with them. Interestingly, comments on the possible power of audiences entail an understanding of different truths about *Big Brother*. The participants stated that audiences could easily misinterpret the characters and events in the house: because audiences did not know what was "really" going on and what kind of people participants "really" were, they made wrong choices in voting. Not even the tabloid press received as much criticism for misunderstanding or misinterpreting the truth as did the fans discussing in the chatrooms. This may indicate that reality TV contestants understand the extensive media coverage around the programs as another part of the entertainment business, while the fans are seen more as "peers"; their assessments of reality thus are more easily targets of contempt. Whatever the case, the participants blamed audiences not understanding the truth and even feeding distorted news to the press, as exemplified by a participant who talks about the chat room:

> When one reads the stories one really has to laugh about how they could possibly interpret something in that way? And then you see that someone had written something and then someone [else] reads it and has not even seen [the situation], for example, because it has been on 24/7. And then those stories escalate, like the snowball effect, and become totally ridiculous. [--] the press did not really bully us at all. And when the press wrote something negative it was basically based on the chatroom [discussions]. (Participant (f) March 2006)

Audiences: looking for authenticity

An area that has received most empirical attention is the "epistemology of reception": viewing experience and pleasure, fan culture and participation, and multimedia use (Andrejevic, 2002; 2003; Hill 2002; 2005; Holmes, 2004b; Jones, 2004; Mikos et al., 2000; Roscoe, 2005, in Finland, Hautakangas, 2006; Rasimus, 2006). The attention to audiences

makes sense because of the immense popularity of reality TV, and also because the claim to authenticity is ultimately directed at them. Two important points emerge from the existing literature regarding audiences and authenticity. First, audiences are highly "tele-literate" and critical regarding reality TV's authenticity claims (Andrejevic, 2002, p. 261). As Annette Hill (2005, p. 173) has noted, audiences judge the degree of authenticity in each reality format based on their experience of other types of factual programming and actively negotiate the tensions between the performance and authenticity, between the real and the unreal. However, the fact that the audiences question the authenticity of reality programming does not mean that they reject the idea of authenticity. On the contrary, this critical stance involves an essentialist idea of authenticity, that is, that each individual has a "true" self, and that feelings and actions are authentic when they are true to this inner self."

This is evident in the second key finding of the audience research. The findings of Mikos et al. (2000), replicated in Hill's (2002, 2004, 2005) multi-method research on audiences of popular factual television, is that the principal source of audience fascination with reality programs is that of assessing what is authentic in an artificial environment; of looking for moments when participants are being themselves and not playing up to the camera (cf. Andrejevic, 2002, p. 261; Hill, 2002, p. 327; Jones, 2003; Scannel, 2002, p. 278; Andacht, 2004). Of course, assessing what is not authentic in reality TV participants' interactions and emotions is part of the self-reflexive viewing strategy. An example from *Big Brother Finland* illustrates both points; audiences questioned not only the authenticity of the cast members but also the trustworthiness of the production, suspecting producers of manipulating the representations and of forging and concealing audience votes:

> And then there was the case when Mika votes Tiina, Kate and Perttu to be evicted, those were the moments when I thought: WHAT? We're shown these people who seem so close, Mika and Perttu always smoking together and everything. I thought they had a real friendship going. So THAT's the point where you can sort of see that what we are shown about the BB house. Things are not quite that way and then viewers are surprised like this. But that's again an issue of editing and manipulation. (Fan interview, m, January 2006)

What are then the moments or reasons audiences might have for finding, or failing to find, a particular performance authentic? Here the authenticity of emotional expression is crucial

(cf. Johnston, 2006). As Annette Hill (2002, p. 336) argues, the question in audiences' search for authenticity is not about whether a program depicts contestants in a faithful manner, but rather, whether the contestants' behaviour and emotions correspond to their true selves, eventually disclosed at some point. She suggests that the contestants reveal their "true" nature when they are facing emotionally difficult situations. Here the production tools of authenticity facilitate audiences' work as arbiters of authenticity. As we have stated, reality TV programs employ a variety of revelatory narrative strategies through which the impression of the "authenticity of expression" is conveyed. For instance, different variations of the monologue such as confession, often combined with the use of close-ups, are employed to display those moments when emotions appear uncontrolled and unpremeditated and to judge the authenticity of other contestants (Aslama & Pantti, 2006; Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2007, p. 379; Holmes, 2004a, p. 124). However, as we have pointed out, assessing whether a performance or an individual is valued as authentic relates to the socially and culturally specific norms and expectations of how one should act, and appearing "authentic" might be easier for some contestants than others; as several studies have shown gender and ethnicity seem to be crucial sites or markers of the authenticity production for the participants (e.g. Bell-Jones, 2008; Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008).

Importantly, this "authenticity spotting", looking for the moments of authentic expression, is connected to audiences' own authentication project. Hill (2002) suggests that assessing whether the participants are presenting an authentic self is connected to viewers' reflection on the performance of self and of authenticity in their everyday lives: "Viewers judge the moment of authenticity in a gamedoc such as BB by referring to their knowledge of the contestants coupled with knowledge of themselves, and how they would act in a similar situation." (p. 335) Correspondingly, Janet Jones (2003, pp. 407-408) argues that the fans use reality programs, the observation of the emotions and behaviour of others, as a "compass" that helps them make sense of their own lives. Thus, what emerges is a complex relationship between "real people" in the audience and "real people" on the television; scrutinizing the disclosed selves in reality TV presents an opportunity to reflect upon moral and social questions related to the self and acceptable behaviour and emotional expression.

In reality programming there has been a shift towards an interactive multi-platform world where audiences can choose to experience more "unmediated" access to "the real" through

24/7 live feeds, or to monitor and comment on the events as well as the publicity around the shows through new interactive features such as chat rooms, message boards and weekly polls (Tincknell & Raghuram, 2002; Jones, 2003; Roscoe, 2004; Holmes, 2004b; Hautakangas, 2006; Rasimus, 2006). These complex intermedial and intertextual relations in reality TV work to facilitate active viewing strategies that focus on negotiating the real and the authentic (Holmes, 2004b). As a result of her longitudinal web based survey, Jones (2003) concludes that the variety of ways in which *Big Brother* fans can access "the house" is seen as increasing the "perception of witnessing reality" (p. 229). In sum, the core authenticity work by audiences in the context of reality programs is all about the power of assessment: whether about a genre, a situation, a person, or an emotion. This is enhanced by opportunities offered in multiple media for investigating and discussing what is real and authentic. At the same time, it is about the proximity and distance needed for making the assessments. It is about identification with emotional or other aspects of content, and about recognition of generic conventions and production choices, but also about the power to step aside and judge.

Media publicity: what really happened?

A point seldom addressed is that the active participation by audiences is also supported by the extensive media coverage surrounding many reality programs. Biltereyst (2004), for instance, argues regarding *Big Brother* publicity that the whipping up of moral panics in the media is an extension of the marketing of reality programs. Public debate was characterized by controversial arguments about, for instance, exploitation and voluntary participation, which certainly contributed to the popularity of the program. In broader terms, inter-media coverage and promotional materials work to enhance the commercial viability and life-span of the program. The many-sided publicity, from chat rooms and sponsors' advertising to gossip and participants' revelations in the tabloid press and critical columns in quality news papers, is a central part of the programs – and also central to authenticating reality TV programs. Yet media publicity has received little sustained analysis in general, let alone in terms of what kind of authenticity work media coverage of reality programs engages in, or in terms of what kind of role it plays for other parties involved in reality TV's quest for authenticity.

What should be considered is how media coverage shapes the audience-text relations, namely, audiences' understanding of what is authentic. As Su Holmes (2004a) suggests, "most sustained and self-conscious attempts to articulate 'the real' around Reality TV take place at the level of its intertextual circulation – in the popular press and magazine" (p. 122). An analysis of the media coverage of the first Finnish *Big Brother* (Herkman et al., 2005) reveals that the media publicity extended from political cartoons to interior design magazines. However, the main divide was straight-forward: the "serious" media engaged in critical readings and even moral panic, while the popular press capitalized on the "untold" and "true" stories from the lives of the new BB celebrities. The intensity of the quest for authenticity is perhaps the most curious phenomenon about the media publicity surrounding reality TV. One reason may be, simply, that the marketing machinery of most large-scale reality programs builds up the momentum and few media outlets can refrain from commenting and capitalizing on the hype.

From the point of view of authenticity discourses, most important studies about the relationship between reality TV and media publicity concern the "ordinary" participants' celebrity status. Due to the intertextual circulation of reality TV programs, appearing on television exposes "ordinary people" to a scrutiny that exceeds the original act of disclosure. As Nick Couldry (2003, p. 127) argues, the press "tend to monitor quite close 'ordinary people' as they pass backwards and forwards across the media/ordinary boundary; not surprisingly, because it is the boundary on which the media's own authority, in part, depends". Couldry's insight on the question of authority is significant here. However, what is also at stake in the popular media's coverage of reality programs are the boundaries between different media (television/press) and the seeking of cultural legitimacy and therefore capital value. In her study about ordinary/extraordinary paradox in *Big Brother*, Su Holmes (2004a) analyses the intertextual relations of the program, namely, the commentary on *Big Brother* that is produced from a range of different media sources (e.g. Internet, the popular press, celebrity magazines). She argues that "In a bid to differentiate itself from the televisual text, running throughout the press and magazine coverage is the claim to offer a higher form of 'truth' on the program, the 'reality', as it were, 'behind' the reality" (p. 122). Thus, the popular press seeks to challenge reality TV's claim to authenticity by using different strategies to reveal the "true story" behind the events in the show; for instance, by interviewing the evictees or by disclosing the authentic selves behind the

screen persona by putting emphasis on the participants' past prior to their entrance into the *Big Brother* house, and, thus, prior to their mediated and manipulated identity (Holmes, 2004a, p. 125)

The popular press thus challenges the surveillance system of *Big Brother* as a guarantee of authenticity. By shifting the focus away from the screen events and characters, for instance, through the use of autobiographical rhetoric or by seeking gossip from the fan chat rooms, the popular press claims for the ultimate truths. At the same time, the critical analyses of the "serious" media often concentrate on revealing the manufactured authenticity and manipulative power of commercial reality TV productions, or the causes and curses of the celebrity-obsessed contemporary culture. The arguments or "tools" may be different, but their role as cultural gatekeepers who declare what is authentic, and what is not, seems to be very similar for both the popular and quality media. In other words, the media needs to engage in authenticity work to validate their own authority and to secure audiences. What this also clearly demonstrates is that claims about authenticity are deeply implicated in attempts to create differentiation and legitimacy in media production at large.

Discussion: Authenticity Work, Research and the "Ontology" of Reality Television

Why focus on studying authenticity work? We argue that understanding authenticity work and the epistemology of reality TV matters for and as cultural criticism at large. Reality TV epitomizes not only the rise of mediated authenticity but also the paradox of authenticity in contemporary culture. As more or less explicitly noted in most studies on reality television, while "real" and authentic traditionally refer to the opposition between the commercial and the authentic, authenticity is increasingly constructed within commercial processes—the idea of authenticity being increasingly important to the production of cultural objects and consumer choices (e.g. Brown et al., 2003; Grayson & Martinec, 2002). As Richard Peterson (2005) has argued, claiming, defining and manufacturing authenticity through different strategies is the central work of all cultural production today. In addition, while the very idea of authenticity has been claimed to stand in opposition to mass-mediated, highly individualistic (post)modern life (Baudrillard, 1988; Berger, 1973; Boorstin, 1964), at the same time the interest in authenticity has increased (e.g. Boyle, 2004; Erickson, 1995; Taylor, 1991). For instance, studies on tourism have emphasized the searching for authenticity as a modern embodiment of the religious pilgrim and illustrated a new type of

tourist who seeks real locales and people behind the artifices of mass tourism (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1989; Urry, 1990). As Espen Ytreberg (2007) has stated, "the concept of authenticity seems to describe a communicational climate, a certain current mentality".

Authenticity as understood in terms of being true to one's self is both an ideal and a quest: a true self is something to be constructed or to be discovered (Giddens, 1991; Nicholson, 1999). Increasingly, spontaneity and exposures of emotions are seen to play a central role in discovering the authentic self (Lupton, 1998). New monitoring practises and professions have developed to support the authenticity work of the self; in addition, we have witnessed the creation of new forms of public spaces that are explicitly devoted to the analysis of emotion (Nicholson, 1999, p. 152). Certainly, reality TV has contributed to the increased cultural and social value of authenticity by offering individuals' unscripted talk and their emotional self-disclosures as "real" (Aslama & Pantti, 2006).

Given the importance of authenticity work in contemporary societies, it is crucial to map and understand the epistemological processes involved. Interestingly, in the case of reality television, the above discussion of the different dimensions of authenticity work illustrates how authenticity is not constructed as a unified concept around reality TV. The analysis of existing research, complemented with our own analysis, clearly indicates that rather than looking at truth or falseness of the "authentic", one needs to approach authenticity critically as a cultural work that is established through discourse and remains in process. While the question regarding how audiences use authenticity as an important framework for interpreting reality television has been addressed by research, other spheres beyond audiences remain unstudied and need further empirical research.

In the context of reality TV, and particularly in *Big Brother*, authenticity work is focused on the idea of being true to one's "core" self. Accordingly, the tension between the "authentic" and the performed self is crucial for all different classes of actors involved in the authenticity work. Their labour might not be constant or straight-forward, but there are still discourses and strategies typical to each group. A couple of specific observations can be made. First, interestingly, reality TV seems to enhance or underline "conventional" positions in authenticity construction. The *production team* discusses the authenticity in terms of technology-based claims (surveillance technology; other conditions that make "performing"

impossible) and generic conventions ("documentary"; unscripted production). The *participants*, then, unsurprisingly concentrate in their efforts to remain true to their authentic selves in the artificial reality TV setting and claim authenticity both within and outside the program. *Audiences* gain pleasure by analyzing and judging the authenticity of the disclosed selves. The surrounding *media coverage*, whether critical commentaries or tabloid stories, justifies its claim to authenticity by the critical "watchdog" discourse, that is, by revealing the truth behind the scenes. It is curious, yet perhaps symptomatic for a popular cultural product that these positions are not anything new if we consider any work of the culture industries such as movies or pop music. These positions, however, are intensified especially in the case of *Big Brother* and other reality programming that is distributed intensely during a period of time.

At the same time, these conventional positions or different epistemologies are also leaky. They are self-contested within the different spheres we have looked at and they fluidly shift from one sphere to another. A typical case-in-point is a *Big Brother* fan who suspects that voting results are manipulated by the production team but is still voting frantically for his favourite participant (and puzzled why he is acting that way). Yet another typical example is audiences producing content and acting as "watchdogs"; for instance, giving tips in the chatrooms for the popular press to follow in their stories (Aslama, 2009). Similarly, the media coverage, at least in the case of the Finnish *Big Brother*, included stories on the *Big Brother* production, emphasizing the technological aspects of the 24-hour *Big Brother* production team. The producers, then, sometimes admit to their paradoxical position, proximity and distance to the participants, and analyse the participants' psyches as well as speculate about their future actions ("I know how Terhi really is, she's just acting nice now"). Furthermore, the participants both claim to be "true" to themselves, but act "untypically" in untypical circumstances. Some also note that they watch themselves (on taped episodes) afterwards, as audiences, to learn about themselves.

As noted, a "new" aspect of the authenticity work regarding reality TV, in contrast to more conventional television genres, for instance, is the multimedia component. Options to follow and to comment, even to create contents (for instance, by voting) are produced and offered for audiences. Consequently, they affect and intensify the authenticity work by audiences. It could be argued that audiences' search for authenticity is increasingly met by offering more

opportunities to enter the Goffmanesque "backstage", a space of intimacy, closeness and (prior) reality. As MacCannell (1976), referring to Goffman (1959) argues, what is at stake in a quest for authenticity is a desire to be part of the backstage rather than observing it as an audience. This is an important aspect exemplifying how the authenticity work in general rests with individuals, rather than being based on predefined notions of the authentic.

At the same time, this can be a larger phenomenon regarding mediated realities. Nick Couldry's (2003, p. 116) idea of the media as the "exemplary centre", representing the essence of today's societies, resonates here. He argues that fame is not what allures people to become contestants of reality TV; rather, it is the idea of being in the inner circle of the most important social centre. To follow this line of reasoning, perhaps the producers' self-conscious and conflicting assessments of their role in manufacturing authenticity, or, for the matter, the frantic media publicity around many reality shows, all signify that everyone wants the access and the right to be at the very core of that mythical centre. Producers need to know the best, even about the inner life of the housemates, and work to entertain the audiences, although they claim they cannot control the reality of their shows. Similarly, the press and other coverage about reality shows seem to entail the argument that the real core of the centre is with them, not within a staged reality show.

The discussion presented in this paper clearly highlights the importance of empirical research and, specifically, of media anthropology / ethnography. As Charles Lindberg (2008, pp. 52-64, 144) claims in his recent anthropological research on the idea of authenticity in different cultures: Ontologically, humans invent the world as they go along and collectively construct cultural frameworks of meanings that are external to them, and a certain idea of authenticity is the one of the core aspects of every culture in defining the identity of its members. Consequently, we argue that studying reality TV either narrowly as a part of "the culture of television", or, more broadly, as a part of mediated culture, empirical analyses are critical in unveiling authenticity work and frameworks. This kind of research agenda would go beyond narrowly focused and deductive cultural criticism—and expand the understanding of mediated authenticity in and for the everyday meanings and practices, for different stakeholders.

In other words, the ontological claim of most research on reality TV seems to be the "manufactured" nature of authenticity. Most of the discussion ends up addressing the way audiences do authenticity work. It bears uncanny resemblance to the notion of "audience work" introduced in critical cultural studies in the 1980s, referring to the notion that audiences "work" for programmers and advertisers by watching (e.g. Jhally & Livant, 1986). The discourses around reality TV and authenticity work tend to indicate the same; that audiences work for commercial media enterprises when they are seduced by the manufactured authenticity of reality programming. Yet, as illustrated in this article, the empirical analyses of audiences seem to indicate that a part of the authenticity work is a work that deals very much with the self—self-development, discovery, identification, and the like. Moreover, there are several other parties that engage in contradictory authenticity production practices. What we hope to have shown is that a cycle of authenticity work, embedded in complex intertextual relations in and around reality television programs, takes place in reality TV and involves all different classes of actors,. While the notion of "manufactured authenticity" is surely a valid observation and result in many respects, the leaky, multi-dimensional and self-reflective discourses, emerging from the empirical analyses depicted in this article, might suggest a need to re-think and empirically examine the core notion of authenticity, in reality television and in mediated culture in general.

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[1]The *Big Brother* interviews are a part of a larger project, engaging several postgraduate and Masters' students in 2005–6 with the first Finnish localization of BB. A major part of the research design was to conduct interviews with the three groups most involved in BB; that is, with members of the production team (including the executive producer, casting director and ''script writer'', and editors and production assistants), with some 30 fans and with all 12 housemates (see Aslama, 2009). Interviews with other Finnish reality program makers (10 interviews in total) have been conducted in 2005.