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# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# AND THE WINNER IS … AUTHENTICITY WORK AND GENDER IN REALITY TV

## LIESBET VAN ZOONEN AND MERVI PANTTI

The popularity of many different kinds of reality television has been identified as rooted in audiences' pleasure in distinguishing the real from the fake, and the authentic from the performance. In one of the first audience studies about *Big Brother*, German scholar Lothar Mikos and his colleagues (2000, 171-172) found that "what is real and what is staged produced much of the talk about the program" (translation by the authors). Similarly, the study of British reality audiences led Annette Hill (2005, 78) to conclude "whether people are authentic or not in the way they handle themselves in the *Big Brother* house, or on holiday in Ibiza is a matter for audiences to debate and critically examine on an everyday basis." Liesbet van Zoonen and Minna Aslama (2006, 92) conclude on the basis of a systematic review of audience studies about *Big Brother* that "the performance of self … is also crucial to understanding *Big Brother*'s audience appeal, especially in the form of assessing authenticity and realness." Many cultural theorists writing about reality television have articulated the audience search for authenticity to postmodern culture that no longer provides collectively anchored guidelines for individual fulfillment and the "good" life. Audiences, at loss about their everyday lives and identities in postmodernity, would find the necessary examples to explore and to negotiate in reality television (cf. van Zoonen 2001). The reception of reality television, therefore, always contains an element of moral reflection and judgment, implicit in some reality genres, explicit in others, for instance those about good parenting (e.g. McIlveny 2008; Krijnen 2008).

Although academic reflection and research on reality television has proliferated into an amount and diversity similar to that of reality television itself, the articulation of gender in reality television, especially the interplay between gender and authenticity, has rarely been discussed, let alone researched (for an exception, see Chandler and Griffiths 2004; Skeggs and Wood 2008). Yet, there are several obvious ways in which reality television is gendered. For instance, in the audience composition of particular programs there is an overrepresentation of women and many reality shows thrive in traditionally female domains of domesticity (e.g. *Extreme Makeover Home Edition*, *Clean House*, *Wife Swap*), of physical appearance (e.g. *The Swann, What Not to Wear*) or in a focus on romantic relations (e.g. *The Bachelor(ette), Blind Date, Joe Millionaire*). Other reality shows tend towards mainstream codes of masculinity in their competitive focus on extreme behavior (e.g. *Fear Factor, Dog Eat Dog*) or extreme circumstances (e.g. *Survivor, Boot Camp*). This is not to say that men or women dominate in these programs, or that they are appealing specifically to either men or women. It does, however, raise the question as to how culturally defined gender codes are articulated in the various genres of reality television, in particular with respect to its core value of authenticity. This is the question we discuss in this chapter. Obviously it needs to be limited and focused given the sheer volume of reality programming and the practical impossibility of covering the whole field. Conceptually, however, an attempt to analyze the whole reality arena would also be bound to fail, given the diversity of the programs that have until now escaped convincing academic, professional or audience categorization (see Carter 2004; Nabi 2007).

We therefore focus on two of the most well known, most popular and most widely spread examples of reality television: *Big Brother* and *Idol* (also called *Pop Idol* or *Superstar* in different countries). In the language of comparative research, they enable a “most different system” design, since the one program, *Big Brother*, concentrates on ordinariness and being true to oneself, in other words on authenticity, whereas the other program, *Idol*, centers on excellence and musical talent, in other words on performance. Yet, as we will see, in both programs “the real self” is a recurring and dominant trope in which gender is articulated, with *Big Brother* being about the *performance of authenticity* and *Idol* being about an *authentic performance*. We ask specifically how the authenticity and performance of male and female candidates have been judged by audiences in these vote-in formats. The shortest route to the judgment of audiences is the one we take in this chapter, namely, by analyzing to whom they attributed the greatest authenticity; in other words, who they voted as the final winners of *Big Brother* and *Idol,* in consecutive episodes across the world. Before we present and reflect on these figures, however, we need to take a closer look at the work involved in constructing authenticity, and at the performance of the self.

## Authenticity work in reality television

Authenticity remains an issue for different actors involved in reality television, including producers, participants and audiences, and for the wide variety of secondary media texts and discussions around reality programs (Pantti and Aslama 2008). We need to approach the question of authenticity in reality television as a cycle of "authenticity work," rather than as a given property of a reality program. In other words, instead of asking how "real" or "authentic" reality television programs are, we should look at the different practices and discourses of authentication surrounding them. Authenticity, then, is a socially constructed concept: it is "a claim that is made by or for someone, thing, or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others" (Peterson 2005, 1086).

In reality television the claim of authenticity is first and foremost anchored in the "subjective authenticity" of participating individuals; that is, in their willingness and capability to display real thoughts, emotions and behavior (Andrejevic 2002, 261; Aslama and Pantti 2006; Hill 2002; Jones 2003). Thus, the guarantee of authenticity in reality television—and increasingly in other television genres too—is the "authenticity of the ordinary." At the same time, under the conditions of increased competition, the claim to present ordinary people's "authentic" reality is aimed at sustaining legitimacy with audiences and to diffuse the charge of commercialism (Couldry 2003, 104). What we call subjective authenticity—arising when a participant succeeds in conveying the impression that her/his expressions and behavior are authentic—clearly coincides with John Dovey's (2000, 23, 25) claim of publicly mediated, individual experiences and emotions as a new regime of truth and guarantor of authenticity. It is also a strong belief among participants (and producers) that remaining true to oneself, as opposed to "acting" or "role-playing," is the only way to win in a reality-based game such as *Big Brother* (Andrejevic 2004, 125; Holmes 2005, 17; Pantti and Aslama 2008). The reception of reality television has gained ample scholarly attention that shows that audiences' emphasis on authenticity does not mean that they are being uncritical regarding the "reality" of reality television. As Hill (2002, 2005) convincingly argues, audiences actively negotiate the tensions between the performance and authenticity and value those moments when participants are perceived to be just themselves and not playing up to the camera (see also Andacht 2004; Andrejevic 2002, 261; Jones 2003; Mikos et al. 2000; Scannel 2002, 278;).

What are the reasons then audiences might have for finding a particular performance authentic in relation to selfhood? Here the emotional expressivity is crucial. Spontaneity and expressions of emotions are increasingly important in discovering the authentic self (Lupton 1998), and without doubt they also play a central role in assessing who is being true to oneself. Indeed, Hill (2002, 336) argues that the core question in audiences' search for authenticity is whether the contestants' behavior and emotions correspond to their, eventually at some point, disclosed true selves. The assessing of authenticity through emotional expression is in many ways facilitated by reality television's narrative strategies that are employed to construct the impression of emotional realism. For instance, different variations of the monologue, often combined with the use of close-ups, are employed to "force" participants into authenticity, that is, to produce moments when emotions appear uncontrolled and unpremeditated (Aslama and Pantti 2006; Holmes 2004a, 124). Moreover, part of the production teams' own authenticity work is to manipulate the action (for example, by adding "pressure" on the contestants through physically or mentally challenging exercises or by simply giving them alcohol) in such a way that the "real selves" are likely to emerge (Pantti and Aslama 2008).

The authenticity work done by audiences is about the power of assessment: whether about a situation, a person or an emotional expression. This authentication process, or discussion about what is authentic, is dynamic and dialogical, rather than static, since audience's sense making is connected to broader discursive fields as well as to the developments of the reality format. As we have argued, audience's authenticity work is mobilized by different "true-to-self" production strategies focused on revealing the "truth," as well as by new interactive opportunities for investigating and discussing what is authentic—and voting for it. In reality programming there has been a shift towards a multimedia 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 participants and events, as well as on the publicity around the shows through new interactive features such as chat rooms, message boards and weekly polls (Holmes 2004b; Jones 2003; Roscoe 2001; Tincknell and Raghuram 2002). As a result of her three-wave survey, Janet Jones (2003, 229) concludes that the variety of ways in which *Big Brother* fans can access "the house" is seen as increasing the "perception of witnessing reality."

Another element that should be taken into consideration is the extensive media coverage that is focused on articulating the "authentic" around high-profile reality shows like *Big Brother* and *Idol*, and arguably the complex intertextual relations play a role in audiences' assessment of authenticity. As Su Holmes (2004a, 122) argues, "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." 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.

Importantly, the search for the moments of authentic expression in reality television is connected to audience's own authentication project. Hill (2002, 335) suggests that assessing whether the participants are presenting an authentic self is connected to viewers' reflection on selfhood and 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." Correspondingly, Jones (2003, 407-408) argues that the fans use the observation of the emotions and behavior of the participants of reality program as a "compass" that helps them make sense of their own lives. Thus, scrutinizing the disclosed selves in reality program presents an opportunity for the viewers to reflect upon moral and social questions, for instance, regarding appropriate emotional expression and social behavior. What this means, then, is that the assessment of "subjective authenticity" is evidently connected to wider social norms and ideals regarding behavior and expression. What we could call "social authenticity" has been addressed in studies on indigenized reality television formats (Aslama and Pantti 2007; Dhoest 2005; Roscoe 2001). Social authenticity refers to an act of judgment which is based on cultural or ethnic identity. For instance, Finnish gamedoc *Extreme Escapades* (*Suuri Seikkailu*) aimed to differentiate itself from the flow of Anglo-American reality programming by drawing from national geography, traditions and stereotypes about national character (Aslama and Pantti 2007; see also Dhoest 2005).

Our argument here is that we should consider gender as one of those elements through which (social) authenticity is constructed. Regarding gender, a common claim is that reality television reinforces gender stereotypes by replicating ideas about women as sexual objects or as continuously preoccupied with relationships, family and motherhood (Dubrofsky 2006; Johnston 2006; Maher 2004; Stephens 2004). Elizabeth Johnston (2006), for instance, argues in the context of reality dating programs that the genre demands a particular kind of femininity; a conservative submissive femininity with a true commitment to love and family is rewarded while self-interest, autonomy and rebellion are chastised.

What existing research does not discuss is whether female participants are held to different standards of authenticity than their male counterparts. Given that uncontrolled emotional expressions are understood as providing access into the "authentic self," we suggest that the authenticity work in relation to gender could be examined from the point of view of "emotion work." Traditionally, the concept of emotion work refers to the efforts of individuals to manage their feelings in such a manner that are in line with the societal feeling rules that prescribe how they ought to feel in particular social situations (Hochschild 1983). What is important here is that there are gender differences in emotion work; women are more inclined to subject themselves to these rules, such as, keeping one's frustrations or feelings of anger to oneself, acting on behalf of others and avoiding social disharmony. The problem that arises is that those who do "emotion work" (that is, women) are in danger of behaving "inauthentically" (Duncombe and Marsden 1998, 216-225).

Emotionality is one of the most important dimensions on which sex differences have been constructed: for instance, one persistent sex stereotype is that women are—by nature—more emotional than men. In addition, the whole range of emotions is structured around gender. This means that certain emotions have been considered more appropriate for, or typical of, women or men. For women these have included grief, fear and envy and for men hate, rage and triumph (Lupton 1998, 105-107). As a study on Dutch reality programming shows, this gendered display of emotions is also evident in reality television: male participants in reality television show different emotions than their female counterparts (Krijnen 2008). At the heart of reality television is an apparent paradox of "emotion work." On the one hand, reality programming celebrates breakdowns in the control of one's emotions, conflicts and the very emotions (such as anger) that at-large in society are considered inappropriate since they work as markers of authenticity. On the other hand, a conscious emotion work—at the risk of appearing inauthentic—may be important for participants in programs in which there is a voting audience to convince.

## Can women win the reality audience vote?

When Angelica Freij won *Big Brother* in Sweden in 2000, she was headline news across the world for being "the first woman to win *Big Brother*." This "novelty frame" already suggests that a woman is an anomaly as a *Big Brother* winner. The initial *Big Brother* in the Netherlands in 1999 had a male winner and two male runners up. Audiences in other early adopting countries such as Germany, Spain, Belgium, the United Kingdom and the United States all voted in 2000 for male winners, making Frey's victory an apparently striking new development in *Big Brother's* conquest of global television culture. It was a development that would not hold, however. When looking at all the countries in which a first *Big Brother* season was aired, it appears that only 28 percent of them chose a female winner (12 out of 42). While this percentage went up in the second and third seasons, overall only 42 percent of the winners in 159 *Big Brother* seasons that have been produced across the world were women (see table 16-1). From the other side of the competition, the losers, it is also clear that women stand less of a chance. As Tony Johnson-Woods (2002, 144) says on the basis of her analysis of *Big Brother* in the Anglophone world, "Typically, a woman goes first," meaning that women are always the first to be evicted.

**Table 16-1. Female winners in *Big Brother* and *Idol* across the world**

| | **BIG BROTHER*** | | **IDOL** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ***Female winners*** | ***Number of countries*** | ***Female winners*** | ***Number of countries*** |
| **Season 1** | 28 % | 42 | 44 % | 41 |
| **Season 2** | 40 % | 30 | 36 % | 36 |
| **Season 3** | 57 % | 21 | 50 % | 24 |
| **Season 4** | 44 % | 18 | 36 % | 14 |
| **Season 5** | 38 % | 13 | 30 % | 10 |
| **Season 6** | 33 % | 9 | 50 % | 4 |
| **Season 7** | 14 % | 7 | 0 % | 1 |
| **Season 8** | 43 % | 7 | | |
| **Season 9** | 66 % | 3 | | |
| **All Seasons** | **42%** | **159** | **38 %** | **141** |

* Not including *Celebrity Big Brother* or *Teen Big Brother*

Is this is a statistical artifact caused by the first seasons? One would then expect a regular oscillation of male and female winners in the consecutive seasons, and as Figure 16-1 clearly shows, this is not the case.

Only in the third seasons in the 21 countries that had *Big Brother* still on air was there a more than fifty-fifty chance for women to win. In later seasons the percentage went under equal opportunities again. Do men have particular qualities and competencies that make them more likely to meet the challenges of living in a secluded house for a prolonged period? It is hard to imagine what these qualities would be, all the more since the *Big Brother* setting and agenda is so typically domestic and aimed at building and breaking social relations. Could it alternatively be that mass audiences around the world are so deeply sexist that they do not acknowledge women's qualities, or that they are even so misogynistic that they do not grant women the joy of winning? There is indeed much anecdotal evidence of sheer hateful and aggressive reactions to female *Big Brother* housemates, especially on the many online fan forums (Johnson-Woods 2002). Yet, anecdotal evidence needs to be substantiated further to warrant the conclusion that audiences across the world suffer from gender prejudice. For this to be a feasible assessment, we would have to find similar tendencies in other reality programs that depend on audience votes for their outcome. The only reality shows that can be compared to *Big Brother* in terms of global proliferation, audience success and participation is *Idol*, the talent show to find the next national pop idol, which has had many spin offs since its beginning in the United Kingdom in 2001, including *X-factor* and *Got Talent*. While the first national seasons across the globe had 55-45 distribution of male and female winners, over time, a percentage of around 35 percent is more common, with the exception of the third seasons that had a fifty-fifty chance for women to win.

It is interesting to see that the percentages of female winners of *Big Brother* and *Idol* rise and drop in an almost identical way until Season 6 of both programs, when the number of countries airing a sixth season has also considerably fallen, suggesting a pattern of gender prejudice in the responses of audiences that can only be speculated about. Like in the *Big Brother* case, there is also much anecdotal evidence of *Idol* audiences having an unjustified preference for men. In India, for instance, when the fourth season of *Indian Idol* was again won by a man, discussion emerged among the judges and showbiz experts about the sexism of the Indian voting audience because, as professionals, they had consistently rated a number of female candidates higher than the male ones remaining. A Dutch judge became so angry when the audience voted for a young male singer at the expense of an older female candidate whom he thought to be the better performer, that he threatened to withdraw from the program ("Gordon: 'Jury Idols moet veto krijgen'" 2008). What is the nature then, of audience prejudice against women in reality programs? Why is it that they tend to attribute authenticity more to men than to women? To answer these questions, we have to put both formats in their wider generic and cultural context.

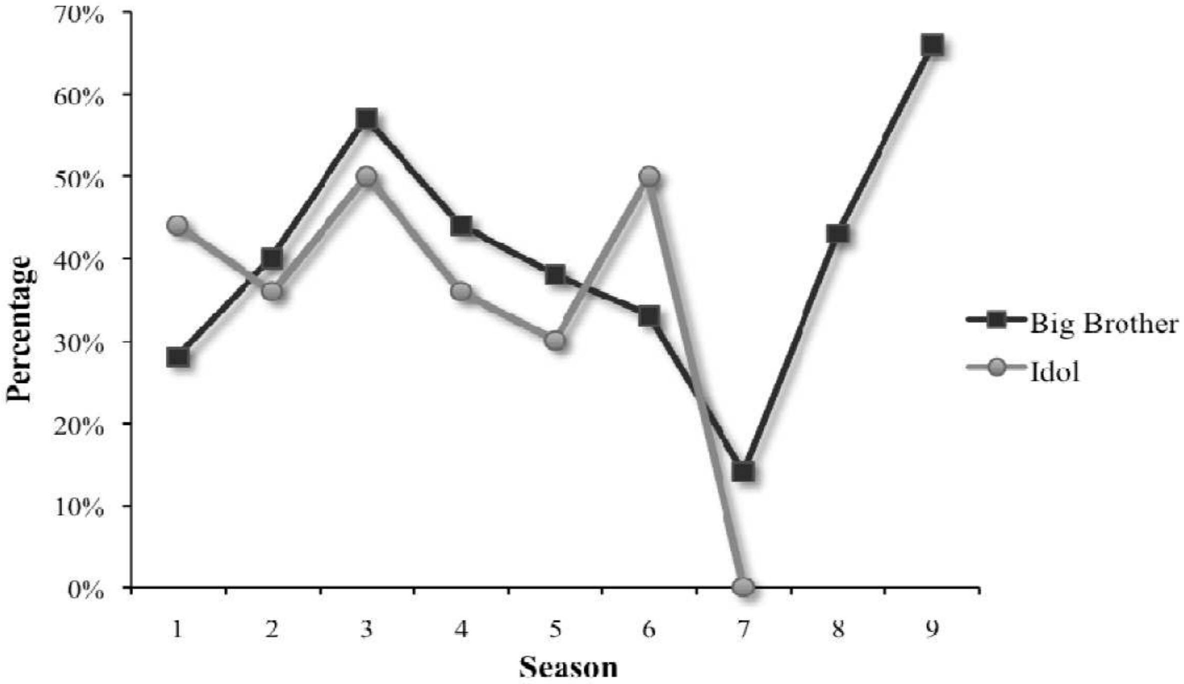

Figure 16-1. Female winners in *Big Brother* and *Idol* franchises

## Attributing and appreciating the performance of authenticity in *Big Brother*

Before we discuss the articulation of gender, authenticity and audience preferences in more detail, we first need to dismiss possible alternative explanations for the *Big Brother* victories. A first possibility to consider would concern the gender of the *Big Brother* producers across the globe. A certain bias of male media makers against women, whether as news sources, news objects or drama characters, has been established systematically through time and space (van Zoonen 1994). It would therefore not be unexpected in the various national *Big Brother* production teams. Their conscious or unconscious preferences could, for instance, extend to more favorable casting and editing of male candidates. Yet that is an unlikely explanation, since most *Big Brother* crews consist of women and men, with women regularly in crucial decision-making positions. In the first Dutch season of *Big Brother*, the favorite housemate of *Big Brother* inventor and Producer John de Mol, was a woman. Regardless, she did not get further than fourth place. The influence of the producers obviously does not extend to the audience vote.

The generic ingredients of *Big Brother* do not seem to provide a likely explanation either. As several audience researchers have found, audiences appreciate *Big Brother* for its relentless exploration of the authentic, of the developments and breakdowns of interpersonal relations in the house and of the reactions of ordinary people to uncommon challenges. In terms of genre therefore, *Big Brother* resembles the soap opera, the talk show and women's magazines; all genres that have historically provided arenas where men are marginal, where women's culture dominates and where women can excel (e.g. Brown 1990). In such a generic context, one would have expected female housemates to have a bigger chance at success than our figures show. However, audience appeals notwithstanding, *Big Brother* was not a women's genre at all. It started in all countries where it was broadcast as a media event without precedence. Public debate, political interventions, attempts to ban it, demonstrations and other kinds of societal uproar firmly located the program in the wider realm of national society and culture. As a result of that location, audience reactions will have been discursively organized along the gendered lines of these national cultures. In other words, the way in which male and female audiences watch women and men are likely to have been patterned in line with existing gender discourse, particularly with respect to the narrative roles women can credibly take up in the *Big Brother* house and, in connection, the perceptions of their authenticity. Gareth Palmer (2005, 49) argues that participants in reality television, and especially in *Big Brother*, are offered "a strict framework of limited roles of which the boundaries are fiercely guarded," for instance, through the surrounding programs, tabloid coverage and internet discussions. As a result, many contestants have left the house complaining that the audience has not been able to see their selves, as they had become caught in gendered archetypes such as the "blonde bitch."

A case in point is Sabine, a high-profile housemate in the very first *Big Brother* in the Netherlands. A young, attractive and very assertive blonde, she became the centre of audience hostility, especially because of her affair, starting in the house, with Bart, the later winner. While she herself continuously stressed the sincerity of her feelings to the other housemates and in the diary room, audiences suspected that she allied with the most popular character to boost her own audience appeal. Sabine, however, felt audiences projected a stereotype of conniving blonde onto her, rather than appreciating her own unique and outspoken personality. The issue is not whether the audience or Sabine was right, but rather that Sabine's performance of authenticity was subjugated by a much stronger cultural frame of deceiving women. That frame of deception is inherent to what John Berger (1977) has called patriarchal ways of seeing, rooted in the sexualization of the female body and articulated with voyeuristic male desires. Woman, he argues, is the monitored sex, scrutinized incessantly for appropriate gender identity, behavior and sexuality. Women themselves may not necessarily be aware of this process in everyday life; it is rather an internalized part of being female in patriarchy. In a famous phrase, Berger (1977, 47) summarizes: "Men act, women appear. Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at." Applied to the situation of the female housemates in *Big Brother*, what Berger says is that their position in patriarchy implies that they will be inevitably more aware of being under surveillance 24/7, since this is their "condition feminine." Audiences, and women in particular, immersed in that same cultural logic of seeing, will easily suspect the female housemate—especially if she is in her sexually-active years and good-looking, as Sabine was—of performing for the gaze of others, and thus of being inauthentic.

One would expect the restrictions resulting from patriarchal culture to operate less strongly in societies that are more egalitarian in gender terms. Indeed, the Scandinavian *Big Brothers* all had female winners in the first season. Yet something else played a role here too: what enabled the first female winner of *Big Brother*, Swedish Angelica, to escape the patriarchal ways of seeing and to win? Angelica came into the *Big Brother* house with one clear and explicit goal: to win money for her six children. She entered the competition as a mother, pursuing motherly goals. That identity pulled her out of the patriarchal ways of seeing because "mother" as a cultural category is deeply a-sexual, as is apparent, among other things, in the dichotomy mother-whore, which pervades Christian symbolism. Is it a coincidence, to stress our argument to its limits, that her name was Angelica, angel?

The articulation in the public domain of archetypes of women with the patriarchal gaze of men and women, thus apparently produced limited narrative and visual options for the female housemates in *Big Brother* to perform authenticity convincingly, especially in the first seasons. Performing "mother" in the house provides one of these options, as was also evident from another early successful female candidate, Karen, the best woman in the first Dutch season of *Big Brother*, and mother of four. Another possible role might be that of a confessed victim. As Anne Jerslev (2004) has illustrated, the Danish 2001 *Big Brother* winner, Jill, gained sympathy votes by disclosing a rape trauma in her history. Her "emotion work" was successful since it was about revealing and reflecting on difficult personal experience and demonstrating "female" emotions such as grief.

After all public controversy had died down, and countries started their second and third seasons, the forceful order of the patriarchal gaze also seemed to move back, and women did have greater chances to win, up to about equal opportunities in the third seasons across the globe. This change in women's fortune is likely to be connected to the diminished public visibility of *Big Brother*. Outside the lime lights of national public controversy, the confines of patriarchal culture apparently made way for a more relaxed set of gender standards that enabled female housemates more often to win the audience assessment of authenticity.

## Attributing and appreciating authentic performances in *Idol*

As with the explanation of the gender bias in the *Big Brother* outcomes, the preference of audiences for male candidates to win *Idol* across the world seems hard to attribute to possible prejudice of producers and jury members. In fact, as we discussed earlier, judges have complained about their own assessment of female talent not being shared by audiences. Neither will the generic features of *Idol* be very helpful: framed as a talent contest explicitly meant to discover a new pop star, it falls squarely in the realm of a specific mode of producing "pop music," which has demonstrated itself to be amenable to female artists. It exists alongside a more general process of the manufacturing of pop singers and bands, groomed and commodified to produce a fan following that will not only buy records, but also merchandise, fan media and other money-making attributes. It is hardly coincidental that the inventor of the format, Simon Fuller, had a history in the music industry of creating stars and bands, most notably the *Spice Girls*, and that its most famous judge, American Simon Cowell, was a previous producer of boy bands like *Westlife* and *Five*.

Such manufactured pop music has historically been criticized for its lack of authenticity, and its goal to reach commercial success rather than express one's inner artistic musical drives. The latter kind of performance is perceived as following "an early stage of innocent creativity and aesthetic renewal" (Peterson 1997, 206). In such a discourse of authenticity, manufactured forms of pop music have been associated with commercialism and artifice, whereas rock music was considered the "real thing." This division between real and fake tends to concur with respectively masculinity and femininity, a division also present in more general perceptions of mass culture and consumption (cf. Huyssen 1986). For the longest period in music history, the presence or performance of women in rock music was thus considered to endanger the authenticity of bands (e.g. Bayton 1998; Whitely 1997).

The cultural location of *Idol* was clearly in this domain of "artificial" pop music, a domain historically articulated with women and femininity, just like the closed-off domesticity of *Big Brother*. And yet, as with *Big Brother*, female candidates had and have a hard time winning *Idol*. Several stories about the fate of female candidates suggest that this lack of success is contingent too on the expectations and assessments of authenticity that run through the format, notwithstanding its place in the wider realm of pop artifices. The contestants of *Idol* are not generally seen as ''real'' musicians, mainly because the process of becoming a celebrity is so transparently commercial (Fairchild 2007). However, despite the fact that "everyone knows" that *Idol* is a strategically manipulated pop culture phenomenon, the negotiating of authenticity and pursuit of authentic identities plays a central role in this music spectacle, and involves diverse elements of production, such as interviewing judges, the production team and potential "Idols" about particular performances, covering backstage reactions and showing a montage of the critical moments the contestants have faced in the show (Carah 2008, 6).

As Charles Fairchild (2007) has argued, the participants must embody an identity building process of "becoming yourself," that is, rising through the "ranks of pretenders" and gradually growing into authentic—as well as commercially viable—performing personae (Carah 2008; Fairchild 2007, 360). And in *Idol*, that musical talent is never enough in itself to become a real pop star. The ideal and norm of authenticity building in *Idol*, as summarized by one Canadian judge, concerns all different dimensions of the stage performance: "You have to be authentic and you have to make people believe what you're doing. It's about your performance. Performance has to do with how you sing, how you look, how you move, whether you choose to move." (Kubacki 2008.)

A case in point, as Nicholas Carah (2008) has illustrated, is the fate of Zimbabwe-born Tarisai Vushe, semi-finalist in the fifth season of Australian *Idol* (2007). Generally considered to have the best voice of all finalists, she was nevertheless expelled by the audience after two of the three judges criticized her for not being able to perform real feelings, and expressing fake sentimentality in her song, rather than true experience. While Vushe was admired for her "real and authentic African immigrant story" and her vivacious performances, she was increasingly criticized by judges for putting on a persona when performing and not expressing her real feelings—her real anger—on stage. Ultimately, she was labeled a fake because of the discrepancy between her meek on-stage performance and aggressive backstage performance. After her final performance she was described by judges as an "angry Bratz doll" and told that "you have to be you, be the nutter we know backstage, and don't put on a persona when you perform" (cited in Carah 2008, 11).

Vushe's case gives insight into how "feminine" authenticity work (being too amenable on the *Idol* stage) was seen as failing both by judges and audiences, despite—or because of—her furious pleading "I am real!" backstage (Carah 2008, 11). A similar case comes from the voting off of Jaana Leiniäinen, a finalist of Finnish *Idol* (2008). The judges crushed her for a too "ladylike" and sophisticated performance that did not resemble the bouncing and dancing the judges had witnessed in the training sessions. Here the question is not only the relation between back and front stage, like in Vushe's case, but also how there might be different standards of authenticity for men and women regarding their performance. While Leiniäinen was seen to lack "the right attitude" because she did not move enough on the stage, the male winner Koop Arponen was seen to deliver an authentic experience by just "standing like a block."

Authenticity and especially the capability of suggesting an *authentic performance* is thus a paradoxical, yet key factor, to success in *Idol*. As our analysis of *Big Brother* has shown, gendered cultural processes of perception make it difficult for women to win when the game is about authenticity: women are the (self)-monitored sex and they operate in a cultural framework in which the archetypes of female success are limited. In addition, and specific to *Idol*, is the opportunity the program and pop music in general offers to young girls as audiences to explore and experiment with their emerging sexuality, by making boy bands or boy performers into the object of their fantasy and desire. When Jim and Jamai, the remaining two male finalists of the first Dutch *Idol* appeared on the Amsterdam Dam Square to meet and greet their fans, unexpectedly thousands of fans appeared, mainly girls in their early teens and their parents.

## Concluding remarks

Reality programming epitomizes the salience of the quest for authenticity in contemporary cultural production and, at the same time, it has without doubt contributed to the increased social value of "being true to oneself" or finding one's authentic self. In our analysis of how authenticity is articulated with gender in reality television, we worked from the concept of authenticity work, involving different classes of actors, embedded in complex intertextual relations in and around reality television programs. Moreover, we have argued that 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. The most striking find of our analysis, however, is that the cycle of authenticity work is deeply gendered and at odds with mainstream discourse about women and femininity, making it harder for women around the world to win the audience vote in *Big Brother* and *Idols* than for men. The overrepresentation of male winners may suggest that men are better at being "just themselves" (*Big Brother*) or becoming an authentic performer (*Idol*). The more precise articulation, however, is that audiences apparently ascribe these qualities more easily to men than to women, since, as we argued above, both authenticity and performance are attributed qualities instead of inherent ones. This audience prejudice is neither due to production bias nor to generic conventions, but is, as we argued, deeply contingent on wider cultural archetypes of women and female success, and on the conventions of the patriarchal gaze, making successful authenticity projects in *Big Brother* and *Idol* much harder achievements for women than for men.

An additional phenomenon to take into account in trying to analyze and to understand the biased audience preferences has to do with the different ways in which men and women have been shown to form parasocial relations with media characters by identifying with those who are like themselves or who they want to be like. Since Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) presented the first ideas in this area, it has been established widely that the one exception is formed by sex, especially because girls and women are more likely to appreciate and to identify with male characters, than men are to appreciate and to identify with female characters. David Chandler and Merris Griffiths (2004, 57) assessed on the basis of survey and interview data that among *Big Brother* audiences in the United Kingdom, "significantly more female viewers were prepared to relate to another sex character onscreen than male viewers were." While they add that the observation itself "does not go very far in explaining it" (58), it does complicate the matter at hand, because not only is there the question regarding why audiences attribute authenticity more easily to male than to female contestants in reality TV; it also suggests that women in the audience may have the greatest part in this because of their capacity to form transgender preferences. This complex articulation between deep-rooted cultural expectations, authenticity and reality television seems to have produced its most limiting effects in the initial seasons when *Big Brother* and *Idol* were extraordinary television events accompanied by fierce public debate. We see that gender bias among audiences tends to fade in the second and third seasons, most likely as a result of the "normalization" of the program becoming one of many similar contests. Yet, this normalization does not explain why after the third seasons, the number of female winners drops again, both in *Big Brother* and in *Idol*. This question cannot be addressed through the global, bird's-eye approach we have taken here, simply because after the third seasons both programs loose their status as global phenomena, and remain on screen in half or less of the countries that initially adapted the programs. Further analysis should therefore take national cultural and media specificities into account.[2]

## Notes

1. We would like to thank Gary Carter, CEO of FremantleMedia and former international supervisor of *Big Brother* for Endemol for being an ongoing source of information and inspiration to write about reality. Part of this chapter is based on initial discussions with him (Carter and van Zoonen, 2004).

2. An excellent example of such an approach is the project *Screens of Contentions: reality television and Arab politics* by Annenberg Scholar Marwan Kraidy, in which he shows how public uproar in the Arabic world about reality programs was rooted in societal contradictions about reality, women, and Islam. http://tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall05/Kraidy.html

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