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Enjoying 'Reality TV'.¹

Ian Buchanan

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I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!

- William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*

Big Brother, *Boot Camp*, *Castaway*, *Shipwrecked*, and the oh-so-glamorous *Survivor*, how much 'Reality TV' can we stand? More to the point, why do we want any of it? In other words, why do any of these shows even exist, what fantasy need do they fulfil? The temptation to invoke 'voyeurism' at this point is almost irresistible and is to be resisted for precisely that reason; the ease with which it seems to answer the questions begged by 'Reality TV' should be sufficient to alert us that it is what de Certeau calls a 'black sun', that is, something which however much it warms us and makes us feel good inside in actuality sheds no light. And if that isn't enough, then one simply has to remember that in the Freudian scheme of things the naked satisfaction of our innermost desires always attracts self-reproach. So for 'Reality TV' to be truly voyeuristic it would have to provide the means of suppressing any knowledge of this particular desire: it could only be voyeuristic and truly satisfy the voyeuristic impulse insofar as it neither looked nor felt like voyeurism. But, to begin by assuming that the essential direction of the gaze is us looking at them, and in being so is exclusively uni-directional, is, as it were, to get off on the wrong foot.

We need to start by asking why do we want to look at people in a situation defined by its privations? Indeed, our first question should be why *this* situation and not another? *Big Brother* is exemplary in this respect because although it purports to be a house in the suburbs, thereby giving us a voyeur's glimpse of life behind the curtains, and doesn't seem to involve any particularly arduous or survivalist ordeals, it nevertheless imposes several privations on the contestants - they are denied any access to the 'outside' world, which means TV, radio, newspapers and so forth. What this does, primarily, by removing any possibility of contact between them and us, is make it seem that they cannot see us. This would seem to be a concretisation of the fantasy that our perception is one-way and because it thereby removes the threat of being caught out would seem to confirm the voyeurism thesis. Yet this is precisely why voyeurism must be excluded as an explanation: the very last thing the voyeur would want is to be immunised against being caught! Once again, this could only be voyeurism if it was clear that the looked upon could at any time look back.²

This is why it is necessary to concentrate on the situation of the looked upon: ultimately it is that which organises our fantasy involvement. The first of its defining features, as I've said, is privation: in *Big Brother* this is fairly minimal, the contestants are deprived of 'the media', their food and alcohol budget is restricted, their privacy both within and without the confines of the house is obviously severely compromised (indeed, it is an open question whether or not it is completely oxymoronic to speak of 'their privacy' in this context), they can neither choose nor escape their companions (this peculiar type of privation deserves special mention - and should be numbered as a defining feature in its own right - because it inflames all our

deepest and worst fears of 'the other') and boredom is a constant problem. *Boot Camp*, *Castaway*, *Shipwrecked*, and *Survivor* take all this to a higher level by removing the contestants from any semblance of civilisation - the fascinating horror of *Boot Camp* is precisely that the military is a 'lost world' straight out of the pages of science fiction pulp thrillers. And of course, on an island there is no escaping anybody, however much you detest them. Worse still, as the various 'challenges' serve to remind everyone involved, not only can you not escape those people you don't like, you can't escape the fact that there will come a time when you need them. But nothing evokes our horror so much as 'the vote', which I would count as the third of what I see as the situation's three key defining features.

No matter how aghast we were at how thin and gaunt the starved contestants of *Survivor* eventually got (and the producers helpfully provided bathroom scales so the last four could weigh themselves and thus satisfy this morbid horror as fully as possible), we were always more horrified, but also secretly the most thrilled, when one of those starvelings got the word to go at 'tribal council'. So thrilling in fact is this moment it has been incorporated into other types of game show (that *Big Brother*, *Boot Camp*, *Castaway*, *Shipwrecked*, and *Survivor* are all games shows is a point so obvious we need to remind ourselves of it!³) which do not involve marooning on desert islands. In this respect, the *Weakest Link*, which is sure to be only the first of many such uptakes of this principle, serves to underscore the fundamental weakness in the construction of the situations of the New Zealand derived *Castaway*, and the British derived *Shipwrecked*, and explains why neither manage to excite quite so much interest or attention as the others. *Castaway* botches things by turning the vote to get rid of people into a contest whereby people have to remember the location of certain 'places' and mark them on a map and guess the location of the buried treasure. This denies viewers the satisfaction of seeing people voted off and severely limits the importance of 'strategy' (a topic we will return to). *Shipwrecked* commits the even more basic error of using the vote simply to elect a leader and worse still nobody gets kicked off!

So, why do we want to look at people in *this* situation? Taking the three key features of the situation identified so far as my basic coordinates, I will discuss each one separately. To begin with, then, what is so satisfying about being able to switch on the TV and watch people voluntarily suffer the loss of all that we hold dear in the name of a greater good which for all but one lucky winner is an utterly illusory hope? Here a remark made by Žižek concerning the breakdown of 'actually existing socialism' in Eastern Europe serves to illuminate what is at stake.

Why was the West so fascinated by the disintegration of Communism in Eastern Europe? The answer seems obvious: what fascinated the Western gaze was the *reinvention of Democracy*. It is as if democracy, which in the West shows more and more signs of decay and crisis and is lost in bureaucratic routine and publicity-style election campaigns, is being rediscovered in Eastern Europe in all its freshness and novelty. The function of this fascination is thus purely ideological: in Eastern Europe, the West seeks for its own lost origins, its own lost original experience of 'democratic invention'. In other words, Eastern Europe functions for the West as its Ego-Ideal (*Ich-Ideal*): the point from which West sees itself in a likeable, idealised form, as worthy of love. The real object of fascination for the West is thus the *gaze*, namely the supposedly naïve gaze by means of which Eastern Europe stares back at the West, fascinated by its democracy.⁴

We turn on the TV not to watch people starve so much as to bask in the reflected warmth of their longing gaze - their unrequited but omnipresent desire for everything we have to hand that until we imagined we didn't have it seemed utterly banal is what we enjoy (in precisely Žižek's sense of the term) the most. Indeed, until that point, we had probably all but lost our taste altogether for these banal things. A Bud Light not only tastes better when it is imagined you've had to go without beer for several weeks, it is like the rediscovery taste itself. It isn't

just any beer, it is the *first* beer, i.e., the first beer that tasted like beer should, namely how the advertisements promised it would (most of us are still waiting for this moment). Suddenly, it feels as though being deprived of *that* beer, or whatever commodity-thing, is to be deprived of one of the essential coordinates of daily life: it feels like an amputation and the empty space in the fridge where *that* beer ought to be induces its own version of phantom-limb pain. This is the great discovery of 'Reality TV' and in this respect it perfects the logic of advertising, which, too, is constantly trying to achieve for us the rediscovery of our taste, but cannot do so with anything like the efficiency and efficacy of *Survivor*. In the imaginary eye-of-the-survivor our lounge-room, however crummy it is in reality, instantly feels palatial.

But this satisfaction is only temporary and wouldn't be enough to keep us going from week to week if it did not disclose a deeper thrill in the shape of a close-encounter with our innermost fear. More to the point, it forgets the crucial Lacanian point (which Žižek helpfully reminds us of in the pages that follow the quotation above) that all enjoyment is an enjoyment of the other. "What are fantasies about the Other's special excessive enjoyment - about the black's superior sexual potency and appetite, about the Jew's or Japanese's special relationship toward money and work - if not precisely *so many ways, for us, to organise our own enjoyment?*"⁵ By the same token, our hatred of their enjoyment is a hatred of our own mode of enjoyment. In other words, we are secretly taunted by the fear that these poor deprived souls (the contestants) are actually enjoying the fact that they don't have the very things their deprivation is apparently teaching us to enjoy all over again. Voluntarily giving it all up strikes us as excessive: as such, we cannot help but suspect that the survivors enjoy their renunciation! Which in turn strikes at the heart of all that we hold dear - What if going without 'all this' was actually more enjoyable than having whatever part of the elusive 'it' we've so far managed to get our hands on? This thought is intolerable, so it is with enormous relief that we watch them give-in to the gnawing cravings we hoped they harboured and scramble to achieve impossible tasks in the so-called 'reward challenges' all for the sake of a couple of lousy beers. Only in this way can we continue to bask in their covetous gaze.

But since not everyone wins these challenges and gets these rewards, the lingering fear remains that renunciation of such wants is a higher form of enjoyment.⁶ It is thus the plight of the losers that exerts the greatest fascination on us: "Do we not find enjoyment precisely in fantasising about the Other's enjoyment, in this ambivalent attitude towards it? Do we not obtain satisfaction by means of the very supposition that the Other enjoys in a way inaccessible to us? Does not the Other's enjoyment exert such a powerful fascination because in it we represent to ourselves our own innermost relationship toward enjoyment?"⁷ Our enjoyment thus comes from fantasising that the survivors actually enjoy their deprivation; this fantasy has strong appeal precisely because we wish we could enjoy our own version of deprivation, namely commodity lust. By seeming to be able to not only get by without the very things we think essential, but positively enjoy not having them, the survivor's enjoyment feels inaccessible and is thus a potent source of fantasy. Žižek's point, though, is that this fantasy works precisely because the Other's enjoyment is our own: the matrix of the game itself, insofar as it hinges on deprivation, represents to us what we feel is the truth of our enjoyment - the enjoyment of lack. And it is precisely this which we detest in the Other and therefore in ourselves and we would not be able to watch the show at all did it not avert this potential trauma of self-reproach in the gratifying gaze of the Ego-Ideal generated by the 'reward challenge'. These can now be understood as recurrent symbolic satisfactions to real anxieties.

Still, though, we have not touched upon what is doubtless the greatest of all the privations endured: the complete eradication of privacy. As much as we want to be able to witness every excruciating moment of the contestant's lives, we can only do so at the expense of their privacy, which is to say, at the cost of giving up what we generally uphold as everyone's right. We would feel utterly hypocritical in this respect if this invasion of privacy was not somehow

legitimated; by the same token, we could not escape the feeling that we were indulging in voyeurism if our look was not similarly legitimated (the irony is that actual voyeurs would not find this type of 'looking' thrilling enough to satisfy their particular fetish - for one thing, as I've mentioned, it lacks the excitement of the gaze's return). In this respect, the greatest achievement of the format of this style of show is the abrogation of the ethical demand we at least like to think we place on ourselves to respect the privacy of others and the absolution of the self-reproach we feel in the face of blatantly immoral activities such as voyeurism. The solution is the introduction of the game format: this is what makes *Survivor* and so forth utterly different from its apparent precursors like *Sylvania Waters*. Games are supposed to be watched, daily life is not. By converting the practices of everyday life into elements of a game, the curtain we like to imagine surrounds daily life can be lifted without self-reproach or ethical compromise, thereby enabling us to *enjoy* our voyeurism.

In this respect, the endless 'vox pop' segments which gather the contestant's opinions on their situation serve to reinforce that our viewing is legitimate: in speaking to the camera, the looked-upon acknowledge the presence of our gaze and make it clear that our gaze is one of the elements of their situation and that along with the various other hazards associated with being stuck in the outback (or wherever) they have accepted it. Not only does this free us to view their intimate moments of both pleasure and pain at our leisure, it provides yet another fantasy element in its own right. Once again, the Other seems to be enjoying something inaccessible to us, they are enjoying being looked at. Evidently, they yield to a kind of exhibitionism we would not permit ourselves. When one exclaims 'I just don't know how they could do that!' one is invariably referring to this: the contestant's agreeing to be filmed at every moment and to therefore have no moment to themselves, no moment they could call their own. If Zizek's rendering of Lacan's model of communication is correct in thinking "the speaker gets back from the addressee his own message in its true inverted form" then the exclamation 'I just don't know how they could do that!' has to be interpreted as meaning 'I want that!'⁸

Two discoveries are made here: first of all, we discover the truth of Zizek's claim that sometimes power has to be taken at the word if it is to be subverted.⁹ If, as Foucault has so fascinatingly insisted, the cruel horror of the panopticon is not the certain knowledge that one is being watched but rather the uncertainty that arises from never knowing if or when one is being watched (an uncertainty which, on Foucault's view, exacts the cruellest toll on the inmate because it compels him to internalise the gaze), then *Survivor* reveals that this anxiety is relieved the minute we know we are being watched all the time. In other words, if we wanted to we could learn that we are not made anxious by the fact of being watched, but by the possibility that we might not be. This anxiety, as Zizek explains, is peculiar one: our concern is that the so-called Master of the gaze is an impostor, someone not able to measure up to the demands of the category they purport to occupy, namely that of the big Other. But it is precisely this possibility which power exploits in order to exert its fullest level of control. If it were to trade this uncertainty for certainty, or actual and known levels of surveillance for unknown and possible levels of surveillance, it would lose its phantasmatic force.¹⁰ That we consistently fail to learn this lesson indicates that we are not ready to give up on our paranoia. This points to a second discovery, which is the truth of Jameson's claim that paranoia is in fact a form of narcissism whose secret fear is that no-one *is* watching.

The fear that Big Brother is not watching is in effect a desire for one's ongoing and conspicuous subordination to His gaze. This desire may well be a desire for a relief from not knowing, but that just raises the question of why relief would be sought in *that* direction, meaning more surveillance rather than less. This, in turn, raises a bigger problem, one that Zizek, among others, including Deleuze who found the first form of it in Spinoza, has raised in the form of a perennial question: 'why do people desire their servitude?' Zizek poses the problem in terms of giving one's life for the despot who rules over you, rather than the

subversive or revolutionary power that would overthrow that despot. "What, exactly, is the difference between the two sacrifices? Do we not find ourselves here in a vicious circle characteristic of obsessional neurosis: I am ready to do anything, inclusive of X (in this case self-sacrifice), only to avoid X? In sacrificing myself for the despot, I retain my place in the big Other, whereas risking one's life against the despot entails the loss of my support in the big Other, i.e., my exclusion from the community, from the social order epitomised by the despot's name."¹¹ The truth of Žižek's answer hinges on the degree to which the centrality of the big Other to our enjoyment of daily life can be determined. To a limited extent, 'Reality TV' offers the opportunity to do precisely this if we ask, simply, why do we seem to enjoy having the possibility of absolute surveillance presented to us? In effect, this amounts to treating the very technological conditions of possibility the show itself relies on as a kind of allegory, which is to admit, once more, that it is the situation which exerts the greatest fascination.

Surveillance technology and the implied loss of privacy is, Jameson says, a potent means to hand for figuring what we fear is lost anyway, namely civil society. But whereas in the 1970s 'conspiracy' movies Jameson speaks of - *The Parallax View*, *All the President's Men*, *Three Days of the Condor* and so on - it serves to prove that civil society has ended, in 'Reality TV' it undergoes an unexpected reversal into opposite and becomes once more the representational device that suggests to us it might still exist, albeit in a form that George Orwell depicted as a nightmare. This is because it rapidly becomes clear that it is the inability to escape the other contestants that amounts to the greatest invasion of privacy. Eventually, we sense that it feels like a relief to be watched by a mere, barely intruding, camera - better than people! It is worth noting, too, that *Survivor* is particularly careful to keep us from ever seeing the cameras, even going so far as to hire body doubles and re-shoot certain scenes. The camera thus seems benign by comparison to people; but more importantly, the vox pop or throw to camera segments make it plain that the camera affords the only opportunity the contestants have to speak their mind. Not only is this their only moment of genuine privacy, stranger still this fact no longer seems paradoxical. We as viewers function as the much needed addressees enabling the contestants to maintain perspective; we are party, then, in a way that nobody else is, to their exclamations of loathing.

The camera thus serves as a kind of instrument for weeding out the undesirables. A fact confirmed, alarmingly enough, outside the confines of the game-show arena, by the rapidity with which civil liberties are traded for enhanced, or intensified security. Thus we acquiesce to a loss of privacy for the gain of knowing that the big Other does exist and is looking out for us by constantly looking *at* us.¹² This brings us to the second dimension of the situation I wanted to discuss, namely the fact that one neither escape one's fellow survivors (one cannot even elect to leave) nor escape one's dependency upon them. We might refer to this as a problem of inescapable *Mitsein* (it would be interesting to explore Lacan's communication model here and see whether or not 'Reality TV' enacts a reversal of Heidegger's concept and thus reveals its essential truth as a kind of Conradian horror of others). Before the shortage of food that the survivors are certain to know has become manifest, before even the hardships of having to do without proper shelter and so forth have actually hit, the first and in its own way the most enduring shock of the situation into which the survivors - but also the flatmates and the basic training candidates - are thrown is the encounter with others it necessitates. Indeed, the very first problem they must overcome, if they are to have a hope of overcoming any of the other problems, is how to get along with the those strangers who make up their new tribe, household or platoon.

The contestants in *Survivor* referred to it as the problem of strategy, but this is fundamentally misleading because it assumes one's very being, one's very subjectivity, is not at stake in the so-called strategising, which is very far from true.¹³ As I will explain in a moment, the notion of strategy is a necessary self-deception. What this self-deception papers over is the yawning

hole in one's sense of personal space. In this respect, the horror of inescapable *Mitsein* is precisely that which Jameson suggests can be thought in terms of demography: the xenophobic and class-bound fear of those multiplying others which seem constantly to be threatening to swamp us, and in doing so, seem to threaten to steal what is rightfully ours.¹⁴ From this point of view, one can straightaway see the fantasy attraction of the vote: it is a direct means of solving the apparent problem of overcrowding. The game-show reality in which there can only be one winner means that we never have to stare this unpalatable reality in the face, never have to bite down on this indigestible kernel of the Real. But that only enhances its appeal. The point I want to make, though, is that here we see that the reconstruction of surveillance as a positive is compelled and made possible by the intensification of demography. Surveillance is what saves us from others: the multiplicity of cameras enables us, alone, to keep an eye of those multifarious and pesky others; it also means we can maroon ourselves in our living rooms (like David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* who watches 50 odd televisions at once) and never have to venture forth into the world and actually encounter the others we fear and loathe so intimately. Thus it is true: the enjoyment of others, in this case desert island survivors, is the truth of our enjoyment. What we enjoy is the thrill of figuring out who is to be eliminated next, but by thinking it is all just a matter of strategy we can deceive ourselves that the core of this fantasy is not xenophobia.

But strategy is also a fantasy element in its own right. Here a remark by Jameson may help to shed light on what I mean: in postmodernism, he says, what is lost from view, which is to say, what has strictly speaking become un-representable, is the process of decision making on a world-historical level. For instance, who made the fatal decision which resulted in global warming? Of course such a question is unanswerable - indeed, unaskable - because global warming is the end product of a well-nigh infinite chain of unintended consequences that over time have coalesced into the ecological nightmare we now face. No-one decided to warm the globe, so to speak, it just happened. By the same token, no-one can decide to cool it down, as it were, because the action such a decision would call for is largely unknowable to us at present. You can decide to end global warming all you want, but what order would you give and who would you give it to that could effectuate that decision? We are thus alienated in an absolute sense from the world-historical as such; we cannot even determine how things got this complicated.¹⁵ What games do, which cannot but be felt as a kind of relief from this kind of angst, is restore consequences to actions. Thus, in the case of 'Reality TV' I would say it is we who strategise! As we watch the show we can take delight in thinking what the outcome of an action will be - the game format delimits the variables for us. More importantly, thanks to the surveillance cameras, we are the only ones who know what all the variables are: therefore, we are the only ones who can legitimately be said to strategise (everyone else, to use de Certeau's distinction, is stuck with mere tactics).

The game structure converts the actualities of everyday life we rely upon into possibilities all over again. In other words, if everyday life was a game as certain theorists have speculated, it would be a nightmare. Game theory as the basis for cultural studies is thus revealed for the dystopian fantasy it is. What this type of 'Reality TV' illustrates is that everyday life can only be thought of as a game by actively imposing a game structure on it and the second we do that it ceases to be everyday life and becomes something else.¹⁶ More importantly, it illustrates that no useful estrangement of everyday life is engineered by this, except for what it tells us about the critics who think that everyday life is a game. The game structure perverts all interpersonal relations to the point even of perverting the subject's own sense of self as a being-with others. All the contestants are caught in a classic double bind: be themselves and risk being alienated from the rest of the group and voted off; or not be themselves and risk being alienated from the rest of the group and voted off. If you dislike someone and you act on it, then (a) you might win the support of the rest of the group because they dislike that person too, or (b) lose the support of the rest of the group because they happen to like that person, or (c) divide the group's allegiances into factions which you would then have to try to

figure out how to use to your advantage, or (d) have no effect at all since you were going to be voted off anyway. Doubtless there are many more permutations than this, but the point I want to make is that this would hold true no matter what action you took, whether it was calculated to please or not. Because there is no absolute way to delimit the variables, it cannot be called 'strategy'.

The vote must, for all its horror, be felt as a moment of respite from this completely alienating situation. From the point of view of the viewer at home, the necessity of the vote is what maintains in our minds the fact that it is all just a game.¹⁷ This is important because only in this way can we keep at bay those intrusive pricklings of self-reproach that our headlong flight into voyeurism, Schadenfreude, sadism and assorted other such perverted pleasures would surely induce. The thing I fear, though, is the eventual crossing-over of this fantasy structure (in the manner of a vanishing mediator¹⁸) into daily life: one can readily imagine the day when Department meetings will think of themselves 'tribal councils' with all that entails. On this point, let me add one final grim observation: it is never the weakest link that is voted off. If the key strategy of the game is to vote off anyone who impedes *in any way* your chance of winning, then almost by definition everyone who is voted off is in fact the strongest link, that is, the one who is stronger than me and must therefore be eliminated. This reveals the inner truth of Nietzsche's seemingly paradoxical axiom that it is the strong who must be protected from the weak.¹⁹ 'Reality TV' legitimates and normalises a degree of brutalisation that one would prefer to think unthinkable. Thus, it seems timely indeed to ask what enjoying 'Reality TV' means?

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Notes

- ¹ For E.M., a true friend and colleague.
² As Zizek's discussion of pornography makes clear: what the voyeur wants is to be the object of the others gaze. Zizek 1991: 110.
³ Speaking of science fiction, it is telling indeed that despite their obvious similarities, no-one seems to see these games as dystopian in the way the survivalist games in *Logans Run* and *The Running Man* once were.
⁴ Zizek 1993: 200.
⁵ Zizek 1993: 206.
⁶ Zizek goes so far as to say, our strongest identification (in the fascistic sense) is with losers rather than winners, weakness rather than strength. Zizek 1989: 106.
⁷ Zizek 1993: 206.
⁸ Zizek 1993: 207-8; Zizek 1991: 78.
⁹ Zizek 1993: 237.
¹⁰ Zizek 1993: 160; Zizek 1991: 92.

¹¹ Zizek 1993: 235.

¹² In this respect, one can certainly see why Zizek (1993: 237) links the big Other to fascism and suggests we do better to tarry with the negative.

¹³ On this point, see Zizek's discussion of decision-making which shows that free choice and predestination are strictly equivalent. Zizek 1999: 18.

¹⁴ Jameson 1991: 286; 1992: 2-4. See also Zizek (1993: 201-5) on 'the theft of enjoyment.

¹⁵ Jameson 1991: 351-2. See also Zizek 1999: 336 on risk theory.

¹⁶ By the same token, as Zizek (1999: 190) shows, conceiving the political field as a game is in fact an effective strategy for disavowing the political altogether.

¹⁷ This is what made *Pop Stars* so excruciating: here the vote worked in the opposite direction, to remind us that the arena the contestants competed in was not a game, but real life. Indeed, the winners were the ones who were finally able to get in on the game.

¹⁸ Zizek 1993: 231.

¹⁹ See Deleuze 1983: 167.

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