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Even Better than the Real Thing: Sadism and Real(ity) T.V.

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Las Meninas VELAZQUEZ (1656)

And so we set out on a journey, holding on to the Ariadne-thread, an open-sesame that will allow us to identify the object of this pilgrimage, no matter what form it may assume ... Umberto Eco (1987: 8)

... it is not so much the suffering of the other that is sought in the sadistic intention, as his anxiety ... the anxiety of the other, his essential existence as subject with respect to this anxiety, this is what the sadistic subject wants to make vibrate ... Jacques Lacan (1962/63)

Ironically, one of the reasons why Hegel is currently so out of synch with the *Zeitgeist* in contemporary philosophy is the unprecedented import he accords to the *Zeitgeist*. According to Hegel, ordinary culture and history is already philosophical, at least implicitly. After the dialectic has silently woven together the threads, it belongs to the dusk-borne philosopher to make explicit (or to ‘posit’) the presuppositions governing ‘the times’. If philosophers have hitherto only changed the world, Hegel might have answered Marx, the point is to interpret it. This conception of philosophy is why Hegel represents the often-disavowed foundational figure of modern social theory and also (*via* the critical theorists) the grandfather of today’s cultural studies. If Hegel is right, even the lowest artefacts of pop culture are objects of the highest theoretical concern. Each is to be read as an expression of the changing modalities of *Geist*.

Drawing on this inspiration, this essay proposes a theoretical reading of today’s reality television. Shows like *Big Brother*, and now *The Biggest Loser*, continue to rate highly at prime times around the globe, despite running into fourth and fifth series’ which – marketing notwithstanding – offer only variations on a theme. My opening question is the obvious one: *why on earth do people want, in very large numbers, to watch these programs?* For surely one can be forgiven, upon watching *Big Brother*, for making the following exclamation, in the mode of the Marx Brothers: *these people look like real people with real emotions, but we shouldn’t be fooled, these people are real people, with real emotions!* As Jerry Seinfeld once put it, talking of TV episodes that end with the promise ‘to be continued’: it seems irrational to want to watch interminable stories that seemingly go nowhere. Each of us has our own life to lead.

This article brings to this question perspectives brought from critical theory and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Several existing accounts of reality television (eg: Couldry 2004; Lewis 2004) have realised what the fact that our reality television ‘stars’ are *on television* indicates: namely, that the ‘reality’ at play in shows like *Big Brother* represents something minimally *different* from that of our ordinary unhappiness” (Freud). To invoke Hegel again, the very form at play here – that of being on TV – affects the content. In order to understand this different ‘reality’ in play in reality television, we will draw firstly on Umberto Eco’s famous essay on ‘hyper-reality.’ But in contrast to Eco, the point of our analysis will be to *historicise* today’s fascination for the hyper-real, including reality television. In the second part of the essay, we’ll argue that the way to

account for the fascination of reality television in today's world is to note its strictly perverse, sadistic structure – in contrast to the cliché that reality TV stages a paranoid, *Truman Show*-like scenario. In a context where the mass media increasingly saturates our shared life-world, it will be argued, a promise is held up in reality television which already animated the sadists' always-flagging desire in Sade's *boudoirs*: that here at last, via the conflicting demands the reality games bombard their "stars" with, we might confront something *irreplaceable* in the Other.

1. Sublimation and Its Discontents: or *Dreamworld*, Home of Big Brother

Umberto Eco's famous essay, "Travels in Hyper-Reality", is a blow-by-blow account of his tourist's pilgrimage to the wax museums, mansions, theme parks and art galleries of the United States, animated by Eco's own horrified, old worldly *Jouissance* at the decadent new world. America is a country obsessed with a kind of "realism", Eco contends. It is a culture "where[in], if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a 'real' copy of the reality being represented" (Eco 1987: 4). Yet only at first sight, Eco argues, do the exacting copies that fill the USA's museums appear like the strange maps Borges describes in one of his short stories *which are drawn to a 1:1 scale*. The focus of Eco's essay instead lies in what could be called (non-trivially, as we'll see) an "imp of *perversity*" that insinuates itself at the heart of the Americans' quest for absolute duplication. This 'imp of perversity' is exemplified in the central exhibit in Lyndon Johnson's Texas memorial, which ostensibly reproduces the Oval Office as it was during Johnson's Presidency. The issue however is that it is made "using the same materials, the same colours [as the original Oval Office]," but "*with everything obviously more polished, shinier, protected against deterioration*" (Eco 1987: 4-5 (our italics)). With things like the Johnson Oval Office exhibit, that is, Eco's "American" desire for absolute reduplicative fidelity issues in something like its own *opposite*. "The 'completely real' becomes identified with the 'completely fake'. Absolute unreality is offered as real presence ... The diorama aims to establish itself as a substitute for reality, as something *even more real*" (Eco 1987: 7-8 (my italics)).

Eco coins his famous term 'hyper-reality' to describe such *Unheimlich* cases of copies more like the real thing than the thing itself. The paradoxical premise of this idea of hyper-reality is that, as Orwell might have put it: *all objects are real, but some objects are more real than others*. There is indeed something ironically *Platonic* about the 'hyper-reality' Eco aims at in this essay. The philosophy of such 'memorials' as the Johnson home in Texas:

... is not: 'We are giving you the reproduction so that you will want the original', but rather, 'we are giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel any need for the original' (Eco 1987: 19).

One is reminded, in this way, of Lacan's reading of Plato's thesis on imitative art in Book X of *The Republic*. Lacan notes that Plato could not reasonably have been so anxious that artworks manifestly *fail* to approximate the supratemporal majesty of the Ideas, as is usually held. The true source of his anxiety must rather have lay in how closely artworks *double* the philosophers' transcendent, orienting Ideas, and thereby threaten the claim of the philosophers in their ancient "culture war" with the poets:

The picture does not compete with appearance. The picture competes with what Plato designates as beyond appearance ... the Idea. It is because the picture is the appearance that says it is that which *gives* the appearance that Plato attacks painting, *as if it were an activity competing with his own* (at Žizek 1989: 197 (italics ours))

The point of interest for us here is that Eco describes the (hyper-)Platonic hyper-reality he discovers in America as marked by a peculiar, and oddly *anxiety-provoking*, type of *over-presence*. Commenting on the bizarre mansion of William Randolph Hearst, reconstructed stone-by-stone from buildings in old Europe, Eco says that what above all impresses itself upon you is *the lack of any lack*:

The striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity of antique furniture plundered from half of Europe, or the nonchalance with which the artificial tissue seamlessly connects fake and genuine, but rather *the sense of fullness*, the obsessive determination not to leave a single space that doesn't suggest something, and hence the masterpiece of *bricolage*, haunted by the *horror vacui*, that is here achieved (Eco 1987: 23).

Nothing is omitted – in all the senses of this sentence. Objects from different times and cultures, and even fantasy stories like *Alice in Wonderland*, are blithely juxtaposed in a kind of spurious earthly equivalent to the Christian vision of bodily eternity – if not, as we will see, the uncanny bodily immortality of the victims in Sade's *boudoirs*. In Eco's words, there is an "insane abundance" about the place that makes it "unliveable" (Eco 1987: 23). Moving about in Hearst's mansion:

... is like making love in a confessional with a prostitute dressed in a prelate's liturgical robes reciting Baudelaire while ten electronic organs reproduce *The Well-Tempered Clavier* played by Scriabin (Eco 1987: 23-24).

From a Lacanian perspective, Eco's descriptions here of an "insane", "obsessive", or *anxiety-provoking fullness* strike deeply suggestive echoes. According to Lacan, for subjects to be anything like ordinarily unhappy, their desire must be structured around an elementary sense of *lack* – that the things s/he encounters *are not It*, the Thing s/he truly desires in the unconscious. Freud from the start emphasised the need for the child to have renounced certain of its desires in the service of the reality principle. Lacan specifies that we must all have been subjected to at least *one absolute prohibition* if we are to accede to socially and linguistically competent subjectivity – principally the prohibition of the infant's incestuous desire to *Be* the fully satisfying Thing for the mother. If the child is to avoid the paralysing subjection of its desire to the whims of its primary (m)Other, Lacan argues, it must become the subject of a social law which will *mediate* her relations with others. With the paternal *Non!* to incest comes the *Nom-du-Pere* which inscribes the child in the network of kinship exchange, and marks all those sharing this sir-name as off-limits to her sexual desire. The result is that the child's infantile wishes are repressed to form the bases of its fantasies concerning the *Jouissance* (sexualised enjoyment) of the Others, of which it takes itself to have been unjustly deprived.

Since 1989, Slavoj Žižek has made this Lacanian account of subjectivity the bases for his series of wide-ranging cultural interventions. Psychoanalysis, Žižek notes, is far from licensing an un-nuanced celebration of the contemporary breakdown of the nuclear family and the advent of imputably “post-Oedipal” subjectivity (Žižek 1999b: ch.6). The problem with the newly-possible realms of “virtual reality” that are today proliferating, Žižek argues in *Plague of Fantasies*, is that *they are not virtual enough* (Žižek 1997: ch.3). Žižek’s position focuses upon how contemporary cyber-technologies like virtual reality allow subjects more and more *immediate* and unlimited access to representations of anything they desire to see, including the most extreme forms of sex and violence. In this context, the *space* for people’s fantasies and *desire* for what remains lost, absent, possible or “virtual” is increasingly filled, engendering what Žižek dubs “an unbearable closure of being”. How can one covet one’s neighbour’s wife or oxen, when one can upload their like or better in a few short moments? What becomes, for that matter, of the biblical prohibition of murder in an age where VR allows us to serially indulge our repressed murderous fantasies for the smallest cost? Like Eco in Hearst’s Xanadu, the possibilities the new media allows contemporary subjects to act out their every whim in truth promises not to liberate their desire (“this place has everything ...”). It promises to enclose subjects in an “insane abundance” (“so there is nothing *new* left ...”), or what Plutarch called a “plague of fantasies” (Žižek 1997: 1).

So any adequate account of reality television must surely account for its having emerged exactly in the period of the internet, virtual reality, and the unprecedented availability of images answering to the most diverse, and *perverse*, whims of contemporary subjects. As Žižek comments in *The Fragile Absolute*, in this current neo-liberal or postmodern period, the old lament that the all-commodifying economy has increasingly colonised high culture is no longer sufficient. Every bit as evident now as this “economisation of culture” is the increasing “culturalization of the economy”. As writers such as Baudrillard, Debord, and more recently Naomi Klein have charted, companies in the first world no longer sell anything as earthly as material products with old-time use values (Baudrillard, 2004a, 2004b; Debord, 1983; Klein 2002). As marketing “creatives” move into the post-Fordist production process, so companies have begun to sell their products by mining the paths of our desire, associating their products with images of “lifestyles” they hope will *pique* our want-to-be (*manqué-a-tre*). *Coke* for example is no longer only a drink, if we believe the hype. Some time in the last fifty years it became a sign *meaning* being young, attractive, probably a surfer (in Australia at least). *Ikea*, meanwhile, has everything to do with thinking creatively (“outside the square”) ... In a word, as Jameson concurs, today the very stuff of culture and the psyche is being colonised by the market in order to “grow” consumer demand (Jameson 1981). The question we need then to answer to comprehend the reality television phenomenon is *what effect* has this altered cultural situation had on subjects’ abilities to “get into” traditional stories and programs, via the mechanisms of sublimation and identification?

Walter Benjamin laid out in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” how, until the invention of mechanical reproduction, the structural *place* of art objects in Western culture – as auratic or singular – was taken for granted (Benjamin 1992). The task of the traditional artist was to create objects sufficiently beautiful or sublime to be worthy of filling out this taken-for-granted, elevated cultural space. Lacan’s definition of sublimation in *Seminar VII* – that sublime objects are objects “elevated to the dignity of the [lost, prohibited] Thing” (Lacan 1992: 111-112) – stands in this classical lineage. By contrast, Žižek argues that in later capitalism, it is *this very structural place*—an accepted place where objects *could* appear as sublime—that is in jeopardy. In light of this cultural situation, Žižek argues, many of the apparently extreme and patently *unartistic* moves of contemporary art make sense – like artists displaying mutilated animal carcasses in spaces traditionally allocated for *objets d’art*. The point is that what “takes place” with these objects is *the place itself*. By presenting objects which are so fractiously unartistic in the place traditionally allocated for the presentation of sublime objects, Žižek means, *this very place is indirectly delineated for us* (“that shouldn’t be *there!*”), despite the all-levelling commodification of culture in later capitalist marketing (cf. Žižek 2000: 5/35).

My contention is that reality TV, in a similar way, should be seen as a response to what might be called *the increasing implosion of sublimation in late capitalist culture*. The point behind my bemused opening question concerning reality television – *why do we want to watch these people?* – is then this different enquiry: why is it that people today seem less and less inclined to “suspend disbelief” about fictions and fictional characters, so that they are so evidently fascinated with the possibility of seeing ‘the real thing’ when they tune in to be entertained? The popularity of reality TV shows with contemporary audiences takes its place in a world wherein each of us knows that *everything* we encounter can (and probably has) been commodified and re-presented on film, in television or advertising. In such a cultural context, subjects’ ability to “invest” in fictional characters must be increasingly exhausted or ‘overburdened’, as our economists say. Why after all should a subject identify with any one character in any one fiction, when *so many other* representations are available at the press of a button or mouse? And how can any one fictional object be “elevated to the dignity of the Thing”, when all manner of prohibited Things are “virtually” available *ad nauseum* (sic) on-line?

So reality television is not simply one more example of the increasing *colonisation* of everyday life by the “culture industry,” as we might be tempted (after Habermas) to claim. Our “reality” characters are after all generally still taken *out* of their regular environments – since few of us live on desert islands or houses like gyms, whose every wall is a mirror. On the contrary, the *appeal* of “reality television” in the contemporary context is instead that it *promises something that might ‘stand out’ in and against today’s ‘precession of simulacra’* (Baudrillard 1992) – like a mutilated carcass hanging above our heads in an art gallery. To schematise, the dialectic involved in the genesis of reality TV, and our *desire* to watch it, is this:

1. There is reality which is distinguished from fiction/entertainment/television
2. In later or post-Fordist capitalism, entertainment/television increasingly colonises peoples’ culture and real life-world
3. Reality television then promises to *re-establish* the distinction reality/entertainment in these altered surrounds, *by (paradoxically) showing ‘reality’ on television.*

To be facetious, the version of Descartes’ *dubito-cogito-sum* appropriate to the times of reality TV is perhaps *mass media-reality television-we Are*. Only in contemporary mass-mediated society, wherein reality without television is experienced as blind, and television without reality is increasingly empty, does reality television emerge as so *captivating* to audiences. The twist is that, in order to restore the stable distinction reality-fiction in these surrounds, we inescapably require *more* than we previously bargained for.

2. Sadism and (The) Real TV

Probably the most common reading of reality TV points out how it purely exemplifies a *paranoid* scenario. Sometimes this reading is coupled with recourse to analyses of Foucault's panopticon, or Deleuze's society of control. (eg Bratich 2006; Grindstaff 1995; Jagodzinski 2005). Like such films as Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*, in reality TV the archetypal paranoid delusion that *everything we do* is being observed by some malign Other is directly staged. The omnipresent icon of the *Big Brother* show, which shows an all-watching eye, encourages this response. Is not *Big Brother's* own invariably monotone voice a pure exemplification of the *Unheimlich* voices paranoid subjects hear in their heads? In *Did Anyone Say Totalitarianism?*, even Žizek presented a version of this common-sensical understanding of reality TV (Žizek 2002: 249-251). What is the problem with it? Principally, it fails to account for (1) the nature of the exhibitionist desire of contestants to *voluntarily* enter into this paranoid scenario (*che vuoi?*); (2) how reality television is after all a game not just for contestants, but something in which *we*, the audience, have been factored in from the very beginning. Indeed, as in Velasquez's masterpiece *Las Meninas* (whose hidden truth is that we the audience are in the position of the King), with *Big Brother*, we the audience are equated with the all-powerful, all-observing agency whose hidden presence structures the entire frame and what appears within it. To schematise, reality television is not simply about the contestants and the omniscient Other (for instance, "Big Brother") that films them. Three subject-positions are involved:

1. the contestants
2. the host and pre-fabricated rules governing the contestants
3. we the people who *decide!*, as *Big Brother* promises

In order to solve the *Seinsfrage* concerning the reality at stake in reality television, then, this peculiar inter-subjective structure must be accounted for. In what school can we learn this mystery, or where can its paradigm be found? The proposal here is that we must follow Lacan back into the Sadean *boudoir*, not for low kicks, but as a place of the highest theoretical interest:

The notion that Sade's work anticipated Freud's ... is a stupidity repeated in works of literary criticism, the blame for which goes, as usual, to the specialists. / I on the contrary maintain that the Sadean bedroom is of the same stature as those places which the schools of ancient philosophy borrowed their names: Academy, Lyceum, and Stoa ... (Lacan 2006: 645/765)

- Sadism as "Pere-version": Laying Down the Law

According to the popular understanding, the sadist is a figure of masterful subjective assertion who derives *Jouissance* (sexualised enjoyment) from reducing his/her partner to being as slave. Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* presents such a colourful account, in the context of his black Hegelian understanding of inter-subjectivity (Sartre 1969). For Lacan, by contrast, to suppose the sadist the master of his own *jouissance* is to give in to the sadist's own imaginary misconception. In *Seminar X: On Anxiety*, where Lacan deals most extensively with perversion, he stresses that neither the masochist nor the sadist fully know *what* they do, or *why* they need ritually to do it. Consider, for example, the archetypal sadistic villain in a typical B-movie. What does he do when he captures the hero? If he is truly a sadist, he will never do anything as utilitarian as simply *kill*ing the good guy. One of the most frustrating things about James Bond movies is that the villain never simply maims or kills Bond. As the *Austin Powers* films so beautifully lampoon, *007* is instead treated to a free-of-charge tour of his foe's means of production, offered a martini, before being subjected to some elaborately drawn out mode of torture. In one case Bruce Fink describes, the villain "ties [the hero] up in such a way that if he tries to free himself, his beloved falls into a pool of boiling acid." (Fink 1997: 190-1) What Fink's case and the case of *007* indicates, then, is that the sadist is *not* primarily interested in exercising brute physical force, or eliciting pain from the other. "[I]t is not so much the suffering of the other that is sought in the sadistic intention, as his *anxiety*" (Lacan 1962/1963). If violence is involved in the sadist's activities, that is, it is typically violence in the service of this quite different, 'meta-psychological' end. To be more precise, the sadist's victim is tendentially forced into a 'double bind' or 'lose-lose' situation. Its result is that *the hero-victim is forced to consider what Really matters to him* – in Fink's case, either his own life or his beloved's, but in more "ordinary" Sadistic cases, continuing *Jouissance* or bodily survival.

So note that the sadist is far from "masterfully" *unconcerned* about what his victim wants, despite how he first presents himself to our view. On the contrary, the sadist aims to *elicit* from the other an *expression of their Real desire as subjects*: some sign showing that Thing they *cannot bear not to have*. Using the other's "objective" fleshly weakness as his means, the sadist "zeroes in":

... at the exactly adequate limit where there manifests itself, where there appears in the other this division, this gap there is between his existence as subject and what he undergoes, what he can suffer in his body (Lacan 1962/63).

This is how Lacan explains the mysterious feature of Sade's books, that no matter how many times they are violated, Sadean victims always retain their touching "incomparable (and, moreover, unalterable ...) beauty", a kind of immortality in suffering:

We ... see that there is a *statics* of the [sadistic] fantasy ... the moment of [the heroines' death] seems to be motivated merely by the need to replace them in a combinatory, which alone requires their multiplicity. Whether unique (Justine) or multiple, the victim is characterised by the monotony of the subject's relation to the signifier, in which ... she consists ... (Lacan 2006: 654/775; cf. 1992: 202).

The sadist is then, contra Sartre, not the *subject* in his archetypal fantasy. Rather, the sadist *subjects* the other to his endless and inconsistent demands so as to divide *them*, elicit *their* lack as a subject, and "render the other visible in his or her shameful impotence ...". (Žizek 1999: 294).

And why then does the sadist do this, and why is *this* of all things an “altogether required condition” for her, if she is to be able to sexually enjoy? (Lacan 1962/63). To understand this, Lacan draws our attention what he ironically terms the “preachy” dimension to Sade’s texts (Lacan 2006: 664/787). *Philosophy in the Bedroom* is not lightly named: the detailed “pre-match” inventories Sade’s heroes invariably feel obliged to give their victims (first, we will ..., then you will...) are invariably rationalised in the most philosophical of terms. Alongside the “Supreme-Being-of-Evil” dear to Saint Fond in *Juliette* (Lacan 1992: 197), the most developed of such Sadean metaphysical justifications for *Jouissance* is that put by his Pope Pius VI in *Juliette*. It enjoins the most scrupulously sinful performances by recourse to no lesser authority than *the desire of Nature* Herself: “for nature wants annihilation; it is beyond our capacity to achieve the scale of destruction it desires” (at Lacan 1992: 211). What then does Lacan assert that Sade was about?

Sade .. stopped at the point where desire and the law became bound up with each other [*se noue*]. / If something in him lets itself remain tied to the law in order to take the opportunity, mentioned by Saint Paul, to become inordinately sinful, who would cast the first stone? But Sade went no further. / It is not simply that the flesh is weak, as it is for each of us; it is that the spirit is not willing not to be deluded. [Sade’s] apology for crime merely impels him to an oblique acceptance of the Law. The Supreme Being [as for instance the Nature of Pius VI] is restored in Evil Action [*le Maléfice*] (Lacan 2006: 667/790).

Sadism is a “pere-version”, Lacan quips (version of the [law-giving] father). The sadist does not – alas for all concerned! – enjoying the unlimited *Jouissance* lost to us neurotic souls. Having not been subjected in infancy to the Law of an Other creating the *lack* in which his desire might have insinuated itself, the sadist’s libido is in fact a singularly tepid affair – thinly disguised in Sade’s “typical dream of potency,” that by “replacing repentance with reiteration he can be done with the law within” (Lacan 2006: 687/790). In fact:

[Sade] cannot take a single step forward without this reference to the supremely wicked being and it is just as clear for him as for the one who is speaking [Sade] that it is God that it involves ... (Lacan 1962/63)

In the absence of any founding prohibition which would have named certain objects as ‘off limits’, that is, for the sadist the ‘lost object’ becomes conflated with the Law itself. This is why we can be sure his victims will always have been very *naughty* girls ... The “ritual” component of sadistic acts – another otherwise senseless vicissitude of the perversion – also becomes legible in this register of *reinstating the Law of a fantasmatic, Supreme Other*, who the sadist takes to enjoy the spectacle. The sadistic fantasy stages the “laying down of the [hitherto absent] Law”, in this way positioning the sadist herself as the humble object-servant of the Evil Other’s *enjoyment* (“for nature wants annihilation”):

What is important for today and the only thing I want to add ... is that what characterises the sadistic desire is properly that he does not know that in the accomplishment of his act, of his ritual ... what he is looking for, properly speaking, is ... to make himself appear ... *to realise himself as pure object, black fetish* ... (Lacan 1962/63)

- From the Sadean Boudoir to the Big Brother House

Despite appearance, this detour *via* the Sadean *boudoir* has never taken us far from our final destination. In contrast to Sartre’s and other accounts, Lacan shows that sadism is always a *game that takes three*, and that only this structural account enables us to explain the staged, ritual component of sadistic acts, or the philosophical pretences of Sade’s villains. The three positions in the sadistic *denouement* are these:

1. the sadistic agent himself, who acts as the object-instrument of the *Jouissance* of the Other supposed to enjoy (3)
2. the victim, subjected to the painful and/or contradictory demands by the sadist, and on to whom the sadist displaces the division constitutive of normal subjective desire, in order to reveal it there at the hands of his “lawful” exactions
3. The Other supposed to *Enjoy*: an agency of Law which, far from repressing enjoyment, *enjoys repression* (“for nature desires annihilation...”), and thereby ‘justifies’ the exertions of the sadist

Yet does this structure not uncannily anticipate the three subject-positions involved in reality television, recounted above? i.e.:

1. the sadistic agent (or ‘object’) position mirrors that of *the host*
2. the position of the sadistic victim mirrors that of *the participants* in reality TV shows subject to the “rules of the game” in the name of
3. the ‘Other supposed to enjoy’, being *us*, the audience

Consider first the subject position of our hosts (1), those who do the narrative voice-overs on reality TV shows, and “*BB*” himself. The most striking thing about these figures is the absolute ‘objective’ certainty that characterises everything they say, often reaching to the point of painfully slow enunciations – especially when an eviction is announced. This certainty has two sources. Firstly, like the proverbial super-ego, the *hosts can* truly claim knowledge about each contestant’s situation that is not known by the subject himself – since s/he has, for example, access to all the footage concerning what housemates are saying about each contestant, and what Big Brother has in store next. The second source of our reality host’s certainty however is that we the audience are *enjoying the show*. We the people, in short, are (3): the reality host’s ‘Other supposed to enjoy’, and whose supposed enjoyment provides them with their *raison d’être* in administering the rules of the game. “What could I do: I was only administering the game” is the message of the reality host as they announce the latest eviction or punishment, or recount in titillating detail the sexual or other encounters of the contestants. Behind this plaint, however, one does not need to be Jacques Lacan to sense the *Jouissance* our hosts take in prosecuting the demands, rules, and punishments of the game, all of course *on our behalf*.

So what then are we to say of (2), the position the contestants voluntarily place themselves in, delivering themselves over to their cold and cruel hosts? It is surely remarkable that, rather than just filming people in their “normal lives”, the contestants

are invariably subject to sets of rules expressly designed to place the reality contestants in an irrevocable *double bind*. Consider shows like *Big Brother*, *Survivor* or *The Mole*. Each contestant in these shows is faced with two, potentially contradictory types of demand. The first set of demands comes from the fact, as in ordinary game shows, that the show is a game where there can be only one winner. With prizes of up to millions of dollars in play, the incentive involved here is often considerable. The second contrasting type of demand comes from each being a member of ‘the house’, ‘team’, or ‘tribe’, where “everyone is in this together”, and equally subject to the same exacting demands. Beyond people’s invariable desire to “fit in”, contestants may be encouraged to act selflessly or in concert to contribute to a kitty (say, for extra beer in the *BB* house) or to “grow” the final prize pool.

In other words, as in classical ‘game theory’ scenarios, each contestant is placed in a situation whereby she cannot reasonably just do what is necessary for him *directly* to win. Take, for example, the housemates on *Big Brother*. Each of them enters the game with the possibility of individually becoming a millionaire. In order to do this, they must not be voted off. The final vote is taken by we the people. Accordingly, an individual might want to try to stand out in some way to make a name for herself with the audience, thereby garnering ‘democratic’ support. However, to be nominated for eviction by the public in the first place, one need only aggrieve one’s housemates or threaten *their* calculated chances of winning the final prize. Hence, if any contestant *does* succeed in standing out *too much* from his fellows, s/he can also reasonably be sure that any housemate who is clever and wants to win the cash herself will put him up for eviction, as a legitimate threat to their chances. Little wonder then that many of the *BB* stars break down at various times, and some come very soon to wish to ‘return to reality.’ Such a situation is artificially geared to divide a subject’s loyalties, or – in Lacanian *parlance* – to show them as a divided subject.

- That’s IT! From the Hyper-real to the Real

It might be protested: ‘but isn’t this correlation between reality TV shows and ‘game’ scenarios where contestants are subjected to conflicting demands merely contingent or unnecessary? Can’t we imagine reality shows that do not adopt it?’ Against such objections, we can show the sadistic structure of such shows in the following table sampling five ‘really existing’ reality shows, where “purer” exemplifications are shown further down:

	Subjects’ Desire 1	Subjects’ Desire 2	Object-agent(s)
Quiz shows	Win	NA	NA
<i>Idol</i> shows, <i>Bachelor/ess</i>	Win, satisfy one’s deepest desire	Friendship with other contestants, living in same “house” or “HQ”	Hosts (Judges ambiguously situated)
<i>The Mole</i>	Win money, competing with others	Team membership, fitting in, so others don’t vote you off as a rival or hindrance to team’s earning of kitty moneys	Host
<i>Big Brother</i>	Win money, stand out from the others to be popular with the home audience	Fit in, don’t “tread on others’ toes”, or be seen to be “playing the game”, lest you be nominate by others	Host, psychologists, Big Brother Himself
<i>You are the Weakest Link</i>	Win most money, answer most questions	Don’t get too far ahead of others lest you are voted off	Host
<i>Temptation Island</i>	Survival of one’s troubled love relationship	Sex with glamorous models	Hosts, Psychologists

As we saw above in our tour of the Sadean *boudoir*, what the sadist wants to get from his victim is some expression of his victim’s *anxiety or lack*. In order to achieve this end, he subjects the other to physical demands or contradictory imperatives aimed to bring forth some expressions of this *lack* from the victim. Putting things more pointedly, Lacan’s argument is that the sadist wants to elicit, beyond the run of his ordinary wishes or expressions, something that is absolutely non-fungible, non-virtualizable, and irreplaceable. He wants to be the cause of the Other’s desire, in a black parallel to the subject-position of the psychoanalyst. Beyond all the whims and wishes the other might *contingently* have, the sadist is after what Alcibiades calls the *agalmata* or ‘hidden treasures’ in Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium* – that Thing which, in the subject’s fantasmatic imagination, founds who the Other is, and makes him or her tick (Lacan 2006: 699-700/825-826). In Lacan’s technical language, this foundational Thing that drives the sadist is of course one manifestation of what after 1960 he called “the Real” (with a capital ‘R’). The Real, for Lacan, is what insists at the limits of what subjects can publicly symbolise or “put into words”. It is the realm of transgressive *Jouissance* that the subject can only access at the cost of “losing [the] face” of his normal identity – and which, if revealed publicly, would ordinarily (i.e. unless we are dealing with a pervert or psychotic) be the source of deep *shame*. Importantly for our account, then, it is also that dimension of our human-being wherein, as Eco noted concerning William Hearst’s mansion, the dimension of lack – of something remaining off limits, hidden or impossible – is itself lacking. And it is this ‘hyper-real’ Real, I would contend that is the ultimately ‘reality’ at stake in reality TV.

In order to reinforce this argument, we can recall the genealogical predecessors of today’s reality shows. The first of these

precedents is the game show. In TV game shows, there was already a component of ‘reality’: with no acting nor scripts for contestants, and a degree of contingency over the outcome. The second similar precedent is TV sport. But what is the third precedent? By pointed contrast, it is of course video pornography. As is often remarked, what is ‘edgy’ about pornography is that the couples, trios, or whatever and whomever, are actually doing *It*, and *enjoying* doing *It*. While some elements of porn can thus be rehearsed (like game shows, if not sports), at another level they cannot be rehearsed. The invariable terminus of what pornography shows, however, is exactly the one Thing which it is strictly speaking impossible for a man to fake, simulate, or dissemble.

So my contention is that we should not *believe* our reality television hosts – as if anyone does – when they express pain, dismay or shock when one or several of the contestants either (i) has sex (and in Australia we think of the infamous ‘bobbing blankets’ in the ‘uncut’ Big Brother series II) or performs some perverse activity (like the “turkey slaps” of series IV); or (ii) or breaks down. Strictly speaking, *this is the whole point*. What after all is ‘more real’ – as we say in our continuing resistance to Kant – than these moments in people’s lives. In Deleuzian language, it could be said that reality TV is an elaborate “machine” to provoke such ‘real emotions’, ‘raw passions’, etc. This is why, when a contestant bursts into tears or into rage, or when they confess to some usually-hidden desire or anxiety, that the whole recording apparatus is primed to its fullest, and the cameras close in. It is of course also these Real moments that also are those talked about in offices around the nation the following morning, and that fuel the next round of tabloid sensations.

3. Conclusion: You Are the Weakest Link

So from our perspective, the fact that reality TV shows place contestants under observation “24-7”, as if they were paranoid, and as if this were the truth of our disciplinary-surveilling society, is beside the real point. Emerging against the background of the ever-accelerating collapse of reality into entertainment in late capitalism, we are rather dealing with a properly sadistic cultural phenomenon. What we, the Other supposed to enjoy, are drawn to look for when we watch this genre of TV is analogous to what the sadist actively looks for in his victim. Reality TV holds out the promise that we might be the witnesses to contestants’ Real pain or enjoyment: pain or enjoyment that, in the strictest Cartesian fashion, would admit of absolutely no doubt. As we put it in closing Part 2 of this discussion, so now we can repeat with a different and more psychoanalytically compelling sense: *Big Brother is shown, therefore the Real exists*.

In Australia and elsewhere, one of the new breed of game shows that emerged at the time of reality TV was *You are the Weakest Link*. In this show, the same sadistic apparatus we have disclosed in looking at *Big Brother* was in play, only in a somewhat purer form. Only one person was to win the final prize each night, as in any other quiz show. Yet *You are the Weakest Link* was not just another, simple game show like *Sale of the Century*. Like in *Big Brother*, in *You are the Weakest Link* too much individual success could always count against a contestant, insofar as the other contestants – each of whom also wants to win – also have a say. If any one contestant was too evidently *better* than her fellows, she risked being voted off by her fellows. Yet neither could each contestant simply ‘stand back’ and desist from correctly answering questions. Each question that a contestant answers adds to the kitty the final winner would take home, so failing to ‘chip in’ to the kitty could also well provoke the wrath of one’s fellow contestants. Presiding over this double bind was of course our host, whose job it was – in true Sadistic fashion – not only to ask questions, but to mercilessly criticise each of the contestants at the end of each round, no matter how they had fared. The moment of absolution (sic) would come only when, after the contestants’ votes had been taken so each knew who among her fellows had ‘ratted’ on her, that the hostess would pronounce the famous verdict that put an end to the uncertainty, and gave its name to the show.

In the (now-defunct) Australian version of *The Weakest Link*, our superb hostess Cornelia did not give equal weight to each of the words when she pronounced the fatal last judgment to each evicted contestant – *viz.* ‘you are the weakest link’. In a way that gave her pronouncement an almost oracular edge, she instead would emphasise what Heidegger called the most wondrous of verbs, the verb ‘to be’. The way Cornelia pronounced this phrase suggested that each victim was not just the ‘weakest link’, as though this were just one of the person’s features, alongside their hair colour, fashion choices, etc. Each *was* the weakest link, as if this description, like some Kripkean rigid designator, somehow rendered shallow any other qualities to which the contestant may lay claim. At this moment, as many of the contestants’ downcast eyes attested, there was really nothing they could say in their defence. Cornelia would accordingly not fail to admonish them without pity, like lovers who have failed to perform or who have performed too early: *goodbye!*

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- Scan is a project of the Media Department @ Macquarie University, Sydney*

Share this Rating. Title: Even Better Than the Real Thing (15 Sep 2004). 7,7/10. Want to share IMDb's rating on your own site? It showed how working close to people can make you have feelings for them. Showed real life issues that occur in families and showed the anger part as well as the loving part in handling the situations. Very entertaining and enjoyable. You fall right into the story. Great for the teens to watch. We really needed that playful thing to balance what was at the heart of the album and make the bitter pill a little sweeter to swallow." The video was directed by Kevin Godley, who with his creative partner Lol Creme, had made a number of groundbreaking videos, including Herbie Hancock's "Rockit" and Frankie Goes To Hollywood's "Two Tribes." U2 performed this on their 1992-1993 Zoo TV tour with huge monitors flashing messages and video clips behind the band. This was one of the most daring and technically sophisticated tours of its time, bombarding the audience with a barrage of visuals to parody the way advertising messages were being thrust on the public. In a Songfacts interview, Godley talked about making the "Even Better Than The Real Thing" video. alternative worlds are even better than the desirable outcomes experienced, affect and cognition may be more strongly linked to the magnitude of. alternative realities than to obtained outcomes. Keywords: Counterfactual thinking; Outcome bias; Decision-making. Decision evaluations are common in both professional and personal settings. The nature of our decision evaluations can have major consequences. for our future behaviour, such as investment strategies, and our physical.