

# **‘John, a 20-year-old Boston native with a great sense of humour’: on the spectacularization of the ‘self’ and the incorporation of identity in the age of reality television**

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## **Abstract**

*‘Reality’ television programming simultaneously narrates the conditions of the social factory and produces new forms of labour in and through them. This essay explores the nature of the labour performed by the shows’ participants and argues that it involves the self-conscious development and management of public persona based on templates of the ‘self’ supplied by corporate media culture. This labour of self-presentation operates simultaneously as work for the television industry and as a form of image-entrepreneurship for the individual participants. Insofar as this form of labour involves the alienation of embodied subjectivity into image commodities with recognizable market value, it constitutes a form of self-spectacularization. Reality television programming also provides templates for these spectacular selves within a distinct corporate culture, which aims to contain and control individuals’ virtuosity, thus ‘incorporating identity’. The Apprentice and Joe Schmo are explored as examples of ‘reality’ shows that dramatize and embody the collapse of any meaningful distinction between notions of the self and capitalist processes of production. This process of both narrating and producing a branded ‘self’ enacted by the ‘reality’ television might be seen as part of a broader multi-level marketing campaign we could call ‘the corporate colonization of the “real”’.*

## **Keywords**

reality television  
immaterial labour  
the social factory  
corporate culture  
persona  
the self

## **Introduction**

In the fall of 1996, Steelcase, a manufacturer of office furniture, installed an unusual piece of ‘art’ in the lobby of its headquarters: a giant colony of 1500 harvester ants encased in a large beveled steel and glass structure. According to company spokesman, Dave Lathrop, the colony was intended to function as a metaphor to describe how people work and live: ‘Work is dramatically different than it used to be. For more people, work and non-work are blending. Ants live to work, and work to live. We enjoy the ability of the ants to silently represent that, simply by doing what they do’ (Petersen 1996).

Multi-level marketing companies, such as Amway and Mary Kay, would certainly appreciate such a potent metaphor. After all, these organizations are notorious for encouraging their participants to integrate work into every aspect of their lives and to develop deep affective bonds to the

1. Nick Dyer-Witheford in *Cyber Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999) describes the process of subsumption as 'the degree to which labor is absorbed into capital's process of value extraction' (p. 57). 'Real' subsumption marks the phase of capital in which all human activity is subject to the extraction of value, and the individual laborer becomes a part of a collective worker 'made up of labor power, socially combined' (p. 57). All forms of labour are aggregated to generate the ever-expanding productive 'machine' of capital.

company. They employ very specific management strategies in order to 'transform work-family conflict and general ambivalence about work into commitment' (Pratt & Rosa 2003: 395). Like the colony of ants, these organizations 'harvest' ambivalence and conflict, recognizing that, once converted, conflicted participants adhere to their 'new faith more strongly than born members' (Pratt & Rosa 2003: 414). These harvesting strategies are intended to bind workers tightly, body and soul, to the company. As one enthusiastic Amway worker has said: 'People say we brainwash people. That's true! We are talking about brainwashing to make you all more positive people!' (Pratt 2000: 456).

In effect and unbeknownst to them, the ants at Steelcase and multi-level marketing companies like Amway work to signify the conditions of what Antonio Negri and other autonomist Marxists have famously called 'the social factory' (Negri 1989; Hardt and Negri 2000). Here work is dispersed into all areas of life and the social becomes the site for the creation of new forms of productive activity and their transformation into commodities. These new forms of productive activity involve immaterial labour, defined as the expression and development of human communicative capacity: 'the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and . . . public opinion' (Lazzarato 2005). Immaterial labour is based on what Paolo Virno has termed 'virtuosity' – 'an activity which finds its own fulfillment (that is, its own purpose) within itself' (Virno 2004: 52), which, under post-Fordist capitalism, has become waged activity. Immaterial labour, while often invisible, works 'to promote continual innovation in the forms and conditions of communication. It gives form to and materializes needs, the imaginary, consumer tastes' (Virno 2004: 52). It not only generates concrete products but new relations and conditions of production as well. According to autonomist Marxist critics, the conditions of the social factory, marked as they are by ever-developing forms of immaterial labour, constitute 'the real subsumption' of all social existence by capital.<sup>1</sup> Just as in the colony of harvester ants, or in an Amway marketing scheme, life in the social factory is, quite simply, all labour all the time.

What distinguishes the worst multi-level marketer from the best harvester ant, however, is that his work is formed, not only within his singular imagination, but also within the abstract, imaginative ethos of 'work' under capital: the *story* of the social factory, which depicts life as a non-stop entrepreneurial venture, predicated on virtuosic communicative capacity, inevitably leading to self-fulfillment and autonomy. While the harvester ant serves as a metaphor for work, the Amway participant embodies this new form of labour every day within an abstract imaginative ethos both modeled and produced by the paradigmatic industry of the post-Fordist era – 'the quintessence of the mode of production in its entirety' (Virno 2004: 60) – the culture industry.

In what follows I will explore the ways in which 'reality' television programming, which has initiated a new business model for, and a new genre within the culture industry, works to harvest the conditions of the social factory by simultaneously narrating these conditions and producing new forms of immaterial labour in and through them. I will argue that the

form of work performed by the shows' participants involves the self-conscious development and management of public persona based on templates of the 'self' supplied by corporate media culture. I will trace some of the ways in which this work of self-presentation is understood to be the work of self-commodification: a process that operates simultaneously as labour for the television industry and as a form of image-entrepreneurship for the individual participants. I will also argue that this form of work, insofar as it involves the alienation of embodied subjectivity into image commodities with recognizable market value, constitutes a form of self-spectacularization.

Reality television programming provides the templates for these forms of tokenized persona within a distinct corporate culture, which aims to contain and control individuals' virtuosity. In light of this, I will explore some resonant connections between the content and labour practices of reality television and established corporate management strategies for successful employee socialization and commitment. *The Apprentice* and *Joe Schmo* are offered as examples of 'reality' shows that dramatize and embody the collapse of any meaningful distinction between notions of the self and capitalist processes of production. As narratives that both tell the story of the social factory and produce its social relations and conditions through immaterial labour, reality television programmes involve what we might call the 'incorporation of identity'. Finally I will briefly speculate about the ways we might understand this process of both narrating and producing a branded 'self' as part of a broader multi-level marketing campaign we could call 'the corporate colonization of the "real"'.

## The spectacularization of the self

### One

I am in Boston at a popular bar called 'The Rack'. The bar is full of young adults, all sitting at tables writing intently. These 18 to 24-year-olds are not studying for exams in this famous college town; they are filling out applications to audition for an MTV 'real movie' called *The Real Cancun*.

I slide in next to some kids at a booth and introduce myself. I have a tape recorder with me, am middle-aged and, I assume, reasonably legitimate-looking. Before I get a chance to explain my project and directly ask for their consent, one of them says, 'YES! I'd love to be interviewed, what do you want to know?' The others perk up and pay attention. I sense they think this is part of the audition. I turn on the tape recorder and ask for their names. They all reply eagerly, sitting up straight, flipping their hair, and, with cadences down pat, like car salesmen trying to close a deal, they offer me their best pitch:

My name's John and I'm a 20-year-old Boston native with a great sense of humour and an adventuresome spirit.

I'm Jenny. I'm planning to be a nurse, but being in this movie is my destiny! It would be a dream come true . . .

Hi, I'm Matt. I'm 19 years old and I really feel I have something special to share with the world . . .

2. Mark Andrejevic in his excellent book *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2004) makes a similar argument when he states that reality television 'serves . . . as a form of acclimatization to an emerging economic regime predicated on increasingly unequal access to and control over information' (p. 111). Andrejevic emphasizes the way in which reality television is embedded within a surveillance society based on 'mass customization' and 'hyper individuation'. While entirely sympathetic with Andrejevic's reading, the approach taken here focuses on the way in which reality television, a meta-genre that refers primarily to new types of production practices in the television industry, works to narrativize and enact the productive conditions of the social factory.
3. At the time of writing, there have been over 200 reality television shows produced and aired, and many of these have seen multiple seasons. For a reasonably complete list of these shows see: [www.realitytvworld.com/realitytvworld/allshows.shtml](http://www.realitytvworld.com/realitytvworld/allshows.shtml). Accessed 23 April 2005.

I recall Jean Baudrillard's, 'Disneyworld Company', in which he writes: 'We are no longer alienated and passive spectators, but interactive extras (figurants interactifs); we are the meek, lyophilized members of this huge "reality show"' (Baudrillard 1996). Lyophilized, meaning 'freeze-dried', seems an apt description of the responses I receive that day in Boston; they are pre-set, freeze-dried presentations of self, molded by prior knowledge of the dictates of the reality television genre and deployed strategically to garner attention, and potentially, profit.

## Two

One way to understand the work of reality television is as a narrative legitimating the cultural transition into the post-real visual world of new media technology and the new surveillance economy.<sup>2</sup> The rhetorical deployment of the term 'reality' as a name-brand for a genre of television shows, as signifying just another realm of image-making, might be read as ideological assurance that we are, indeed, beyond the 'real' in and of itself. This colonization of the word 'reality' by corporate media and its application to the processes of televisual image-making tacitly affirms the ascendance of the virtual-life, the priorities and values of techno-capital, and, more importantly, legitimates all forms of economic and political maneuvering being done in their name.

Part of the cultural work of the reality television, then, is to tell us stories about the new immersive experiences of online culture and virtual worlds. Reality television does this by self-consciously revealing the internal workings of its production practices, incorporating 'regular people' into the shows, and offering us facsimiles of technologies-to-come through voting rituals and interactive appeals. Insofar as these shows are crude imitations of immersive post-real environments, we might argue that participating in them is more akin to going to a theme park, such as Disneyworld, than anything else; participants on reality television are simply taking a trip to TVLand.

Exposing the inner workings of the television industry is not new. In his 1961 book *The Image*, Daniel Boorstin claims that 'some of the most effective advertising nowadays consists of circumstantial descriptions of how the advertising images were contrived . . . the stage machinery, the process of fabricating and projecting the image fascinate us' (Boorstin 1961: 194). He goes on to argue that 'paradoxically . . . the more we know about the tricks of image building, about the calculation, ingenuity, and effort that have gone into a particular image, the more satisfaction we have from the image itself' (Boorstin 1961: 195).

What is new about reality television production is the way in which viewers themselves are summoned to get inside the mechanics of the industry and offer their bodies and labour up to the image-making machinery for free.<sup>3</sup> Much like donning Mickey Mouse ears at Disneyland, becoming a part of the immersive television experience involves adopting a 'persona' consonant with its dictates: the jock, the vixen, the asshole, the gay guy, the rich bitch, the grizzled vet, the buddy. Reality television entices viewers to go on its various 'rides' and calls this 'real'. As Baudrillard writes: 'It is no longer the contagion of spectacle that alters

reality, but rather the contagion of virtuality that erases the spectacle' (Baudrillard 1996).

### **Three**

While reality television programming works ideologically to legitimate the new surveillance economy and the ascendance of techno-capital, it also functions more concretely to produce new forms of labour. What is the nature of this labour and what kind of value are labourers hoping to produce?

In his essay 'Phantasmagoric Capital' (2001), Ernest Sternberg maps three distinct discourses of labour since the dawn of the industrial age. The discourse of romantic labour is based on the exhibition of 'character': depth, fortitude, moral upbringing, perseverance, obedience, and humility. All classes of workers labour to express these values. Modernist labour is embodied in the ideals of Taylorism. Here labour is atomized, individualistic and valued only in terms of quantitative outputs. Workers obey management not out of 'inner-developed' notions of loyalty and morality, but because it is patently in their self-interest to do so; submission to standardized systems increases output and benefits everyone eventually (Sternberg 2001: 3–21).

In the new phantasmagoric workplace, as Sternberg calls it, workers labour to produce persona consonant with the dictates of their particular jobs. Just as we accept the loading up of goods with evocative emotions and meanings by advertisers, we understand that we, ourselves, must also consciously self-present. We load ourselves up with meaningfulness; we work hard at issues of self-image in an effort to constitute ourselves as 'significant' iconic-workers. It is just as important to be seen as a good nurse, executive, flight attendant, as it is to actually do the tasks that make up the job; the 'capacity for calculated posing' has become a routine job requirement. Sternberg writes:

The new firm must reward the iconographic capabilities in the workforce. Whether the firm sells services, or packaged vegetables, or residences, workers must have the iconographic capability to heighten product value. Workers must act out their persona on the job.

(Sternberg 2001: 11)

Under phantasmagoric capitalism, notoriety and recognition serve as 'proxy indicators' of personal ability. If a person is well known, then their persona-producing capacity must be good; therefore they must be a good bet, a good worker and a good hire. In this new economy of the image, we are always already engaged in 'face-work' (Goffman 1967).

Paul du Gay and Colin Gordon have mapped the ways in which the workplace has become 'customer-saturated', arguing that the discourses of consumer society have infiltrated our approach to work. This results in a workplace where 'work becomes an arena in which people exhibit an "enterprising" and "consuming" relationship to self, where they "make a project of themselves"' (du Gay 2000: 70). Dominant forms of social control and governance express the logic of the market system and operate through the soul of the worker, thus promoting a view of the individual as

4. It goes without saying that debates about the nature and/or construction of the 'self' have preoccupied theorists for centuries. John Locke explicitly recognized the self as a form of property that can be put to work for capital in *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980: Chapter 5, Section 25). Recent and influential theorists such as Michel Foucault in *History of Sexuality Volume One: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978) and *History of Sexuality Volume Two: The Care of the Self* (New York: Random House, 1986) and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) have contributed significantly to debates about the non-essential self: its social construction or performative nature. These debates are not my focus here, however. I wish to describe a more conscious and instrumental human activity, which may or may not have anything to do with a 'deeply felt' self or even with some generic and deeply entrenched performative identity such as 'man' or 'woman'. This activity is an outer-directed process of highly stylized self-construction, a cynical kind of labour of the self directly tied to the promotional mechanisms of the post-Fordist market. We might understand

an 'entrepreneur of the self', engaged in the 'continuous business of living to make adequate provision for the preservation, reproduction, and reconstruction of (their) own human capital' (Gordon 1991: 44).

Sternberg's characterization of the phantasmagoric workplace as dependent on the persuasive performance of the self, and du Gay's and Gordon's description of the entrepreneurial self, resonate with Paolo Virno's claim that the post-Fordist workplace is marked by virtuosity put to work for capital.<sup>4</sup> For Virno, individual virtuosity involves a capacity for improvised performance, linguistic and communicative innovation, and inevitably requires the presence of others. Virno argues that, under post-Fordist capitalism 'productive labour, in its totality, appropriates the special characteristics of the performing artist' (Virno 2004: 54–55). Here Virno makes a link between the entrepreneurial self and the culture industry. He argues that it is the culture industry, in particular, where 'the virtuoso begins to punch a time card' (Virno 2004: 56). The practices of the cultural industry have become 'generalized and elevated to the rank of *canon*' (Virno 2004: 58). The culture industry, then, is the exemplary mode of production, as it provides templates for effective performance, communicative, and image skills, all requisite for the production of the entrepreneurial self.

At the level of narrative, reality television shows offer instruction about how to become a media celebrity. Many of these shows, such as *American Idol* (Frot-Coutaz, Warwick, Lythgoe, Fuller 2002); *Making the Band* (Singer & Mok 2000); *America's Next Top Model* (Mok & Banks 2003); and *Tough Enough* (Mok 2001) have the story of celebrity shaping as their central theme. The body makeover shows, of course, are the literal enactment of face work, involving the material construction of the body according to the dictates of celebrity culture, illustrated in shows like *I Want a Famous Face* (Sirulnick & Lazin 2004), or the beauty pageant standard, as in *The Swan* (Weed, Galan & Smith 2004). The endless list of transformation shows, such as *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* (Armstrong, Cramsey & Forman 2004), *Trading Spaces* (Cohen-Dickler et al. 2000), or *What Not to Wear* (Harvey 2003), to name only a few, offer instruction on how to achieve the appropriate body, home, and personality for success on the more general market in social status.

At the level of production, however, it is possible to argue that when viewers become participants they are not only labourers for the television industry, but have also become image-entrepreneurs, representing the ultimate socialization of labour, in which 'the activities of people not just as workers, but as students, consumers, shoppers, and, most notably viewers are directly integrated into the production process' (Dyer-Witheford 1999: 158). Reality television programmes provide the mechanism whereby participants can effectively construct personae and put them to commercial use. Participants are labouring to create a product they know has market value – fame.

#### Four

American courts have recognized fame as a commodity since 1953. At this time the courts established that the commercial use of an individual's persona without their consent did not constitute an invasion of their

privacy, but, rather, an appropriation of a valuable asset: 'the ability to profit from the commercialization of one's persona is less a privacy interest and more a kind of property interest, fully alienable, and, in many jurisdictions, descendible, as well' (Jacoby & Zimmerman 2002: 1229–330). The courts have called these 'publicity rights'. When a celebrity grants exclusive rights in his persona to someone else 'what has occurred is the transfer of his property' (Jacoby & Zimmerman 2002: 1330).

Recent court cases have underscored the notion of fame as commodity. Joe Piscopo's wife was able to sue for half his publicity rights in their divorce. Every time he trades on his name, his ex-wife gets half the profit (Jacoby & Zimmerman 2002: 1339). Other examples of the market in fame include David Bowie's 1997 offer of Bowie Bonds where his fame and iconic status were offered as bond security on the open market.<sup>5</sup> Product endorsement deals often constitute more income for sports and entertainment celebrities than the work that made them famous in the first place. Tiger Woods made \$63 million in 2001 trading on his fame alone (Craig 2002).

Fame is a saleable commodity in its own right. It can be reasonably argued that reality television provides a quick and easy way for individuals to self-commodify: to generate and brand their own personae and 'get' fame, which can be exchanged for cash down the line. Participants on reality television function both as image-entrepreneurs, as they work to produce branded versions of themselves, and as unpaid labourers for the networks who reap huge financial rewards as a result of lowered production costs. The immaterial labour of the construction of persona is simultaneously enacted in reality television's narratives and on their shop floors.

## Five

The notable thing about the kinds of personae generated on reality television is that they are not tied to any particular kind of work or specific skill set we might recognize. Instead they are lyophilized images of various types of 'modern individuals', versions of the everyday self, generated inside the structural limits set by reality television show producers and editors. Mark Burnett reveals his repertoire of sixteen character types in *Survivor 2: The Field Guide*: 'the entertainer, the leader, the flirt, the underdog, the professor, the zealot, the mom, the athlete, the wild and crazy guy/girl, the quiet one, everybody's friend, the feral child, the introvert, the redneck, the slacker and the snake' (Burnett 2001: 69). As Burnett describes them, these character types are strategic choices made by the contestants, generated out of their own unique personalities (Burnett 2001: 89). We might also see these character types as rendered from individuals' virtuosity; they are the result of creative and communicative improvisation, which takes place inside a tightly controlled corporate context.

The freeze-dried versions of the self that emerge in the finished product, however, are not freely chosen but are determined by agents of the industry during editing and eventually become fully alienable – legally subject to all kinds of ownership issues. Participants sign away control of their voices, images and likenesses, often in perpetuity. A section of an *American*

this process as involving the addition of a 'promotional supplement' to Locke's commodity-self, thereby extending and transforming its 'original' commodity form. This 'persona produced for public consumption' reflects a 'self which continually produces itself for competitive circulation . . .'. Andrew Wernick, *Promotional Culture* (London: Sage, 1991: 193).

5. The trend in bonds secured by the work of artists, musicians and writers is catching on. David Pullman, the Wall Street maven who developed the Bowie Bond has since done the same for James Brown, Marvin Gay and Motown songwriters Holland and Dozier. See Daniel Kadlec, 'Banking on the Stars', *Time.Com*, [www.time.com/time/innovators/business/profile\\_pullman.html](http://www.time.com/time/innovators/business/profile_pullman.html). Accessed 23 April 2005.

6. For a full description of this process of resistance and containment see Lazzarato, 'Immaterial Labor' and Dyer-Witherford, *Cyber Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism*.

*Idol* contract reads: 'other parties . . . may reveal and/or relate information about me of a personal, private, intimate, surprising, defamatory, disparaging, embarrassing or unfavorable nature, that may be *factual and/or fictional*' (Olsen 2002). As Jacoby and Zimmerman warn:

the choice to convert the human persona into an asset subject to market exchange not only provides a vehicle for channeling extra benefits to the famous and to their voluntary transferees but also opens the door for others – whether spouses, the IRS, or unsatisfied creditors – to assert actual claims to the value of that fame.

(Jacoby & Zimmerman 2002: 1445)

Here we see persona tokenized. It is now a product with market value, forged in the machinery of the commercial television industry. The image-tokens produced are resonant with the image-thinking characteristic of phantasmagoric capital and its interests. Following Daniel Boorstin, these image tokens are 'synthetic, believable, passive, vivid, simplified, and ambiguous' (Boorstin 1961: 185), and they are thoroughly detachable, 'alienable', from the bodies that may have initially generated them. The successful work of persona is conflated with the production and circulation of the image in capitalist exchange.

If, with Virno, we allow that the spectacle involves 'human communication which has become a commodity' (Virno 2004: 60), and we maintain Debord's insistence that the spectacle describes both a process whereby 'images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream', and 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord 1994: 12), we might understand the creation of tokenized persona as constituting a practice we could call the 'spectacularization' of the self.

## The incorporation of identity

### One

In the past few decades we have seen the restructuring of capital to contain the insubordination of labour from below. New communication technologies produce increasing knowledge bases and the need for collective and cooperative innovation, but capital cannot allow their growth and development to go unchecked. Although human innovation and unruly virtuosity will always and inevitably exceed the reach of capital, capital continues to do its best to tame this growth of the general intellect and put it to profitable work.<sup>6</sup> Innovative knowledge, communication skills, and affective skills are contained and conditioned within traditional corporate work sites by participative management programmes such as quality circles, team concepts, and total quality management initiatives. Management works hard to incorporate workers through strategies of 'organizational seduction' (Lewicki 1981: 5–21).

These management programmes address the individual subjectivity and will of the worker. A worker's commitment to the organization is generated by involving them in small-scale decision-making, asking them to take more responsibility for quality control and to get involved in the



various relationships and hierarchies within the company. As Maurizio Lazzarato writes, 'the worker's personality and subjectivity have to be made susceptible to organization and command . . . today it is the soul of the worker which must come down into the factory' (Lazzarato 2005). In this way, while workers become master communicators and may feel as though they have become entrepreneurs of the self, they only do so according to the dictates of capitalist management structures. Charles Sabel argues that, while 'employees . . . are encouraged to think of themselves as entrepreneurs', their 'enhanced autonomy is simultaneously qualified by the same situation that produced it' (Sabel in du Gay 2000: 71). Participative management programmes remain authoritarian: 'one *has* to express oneself, one *has* to speak, communicate, cooperate, and so forth. The "tone" is that of the people who are in executive command' (Lazzarato 2005).

Studies of multi-level marketing companies, in particular, note the development of organizational socialization strategies intended to strengthen the affective bonds between workers and their organizations. Companies like Amway construct narratives that emphasize the importance of the link between familial bonds, self-expression, entrepreneurship, and capital. Amway participants are encouraged to get involved in an ongoing process of 'dream-building', which helps recruits set personal and sales goals, and 'positive programming', which involves surrounding recruits with uplifting messages and supportive people. Through 'dream-building' rituals these companies encourage 'seekership' in their members. 'Seekership' involves acknowledging the shortcomings of one's life situation, and searching for 'more meaningful meanings' through work for the company. 'Sense breaking' of previously held meanings is encouraged in recruits as they embrace their 'seekership'. Within the dream-building paradigm, a recruit is always running an 'identity deficit', striving to attain ideals that remain just out of reach. All dreams at Amway, however, are not created equal. Amway dreams must involve attaining financial security and personal autonomy through entrepreneurial rigor (Pratt 2000: 456–70).

In a foundational article of management literature entitled 'People Processing', John Van Maanen identifies several standard strategies of organizational socialization. These include 'collective' socialization techniques, whereby individuals are trained and socialized in groups. 'Tournament' socialization techniques involve tracking employees according to differences in skills, ambition and background, pitting them against each other, and offering no recourse should they lose: 'when you win, you win only the right to go on to the next round; when you lose, you lose forever' (Van Maanen 1978: 30). Van Maanen argues that this form of socialization 'can shape and guide ambition in powerful ways' (Van Maanen 1978: 30). Another well-known socialization technique involves the process of 'divestiture' where personality characteristics of the entering recruit are systematically dismantled. Recruits 'must often suffer considerable mortification and humiliation, to pay the dues necessary before they are considered equal and respected participants in their particular professions' (Van Maanen 1978: 33). In extreme cases, recruits are isolated from established friendships, put through initiation rituals, and

7. For an extended discussion of the history of financing practices of reality television, including innovative direct deals between producers and sponsors and the full integration of product placement strategies, see Ted Magder, 'The End of TV 101', in S. Murray and L. Ouellette (eds.), *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

forced to abstain from certain types of behaviour. They 'must publicly degrade themselves and others through various kinds of mutual criticism, and must follow a rigid set of . . . rules and regulations' (Van Maanen 1978: 34). The ordeal aspects of divestiture are identity building as well as identity destroying. According to Van Maanen, collective, tournament, and divestiture strategies, taken together, will deliver a 'passive group of hard-working but undifferentiated recruits' (Van Maanen 1978: 35). As Roy Lewicki notes in his article 'Organizational Seduction' if the socialization programme has worked, the organization 'does not have to kick you, you kick yourself' (Herzberg quoted in Lewicki 1981: 14).

## Two

These socialization strategies resonate strongly with the narrative themes and labour practices of reality television shows such as *The Apprentice* (Burman, Trump, Burnett 2004) and *Joe Schmo* (Ross et al. 2003). Originally aired in North America during the 2003–2004 season, both of these 'reality' shows tell stories about work. Both shows employ many of the management strategies described above, including collective training, tournament play, and identity breaking and building practices.

These strategies are most obvious with *The Apprentice*, a reality show about corporate training, in which contestants compete to win a job from uber-corporate persona Donald Trump. The show demands that contestants work together, competing in teams on a series of 'business' tasks. The losing team must meet with Trump, where they are asked to evaluate and betray each other. Finally one member of the losing team must submit to the ultimate degradation of being fired by Trump. The aspirational discourse of *The Apprentice* reflects the strategies of dream building and seekership. As winners of challenges are treated to the high life aboard helicopters, in country clubs, and lavish restaurants, participants are constantly exhorted to 'get into the mindset' of being rich.

While *The Apprentice* requires the same gaming skills as shows like *Survivor* (Burnett 2000), it abandons their highly fictionalized conceits by situating the game inside its presumed natural habitat – the cutthroat world of corporate capitalism. With the tagline 'It's nothing personal, it's just business', *The Apprentice* markets itself as the real face of contemporary competition, eschewing all other reality television diversions, such as interpersonal melodrama or physical stunts. *The Apprentice* appears to transcend its role as entertainment and move into the realm of public pedagogy, as business schools across the United States have used it as a teaching tool in the classroom (Associated Press 2004).

Pedagogical merit aside, the fact remains that the show itself is an exemplary business venture, offering a distinctive line of products. First, *The Apprentice* functions as an extended advertisement for Donald Trump's own various business interests: golf courses, casinos, hotels, bottled water, as well as for his own branded persona. Through the use of strategic product placement and narrative design, the show produces an elaborate marketing campaign for Trump.<sup>7</sup> *The Apprentice* also self-consciously produces itself as a branded form of entertainment or 'advertainment' by integrating other corporate brand names and their products into the narrative

of the shows. Contestants must develop an advertising campaign for Crest toothpaste, or a new toy for Mattel as a part of the job competition. As a form of branded entertainment, *The Apprentice* serves as a commodity in itself; it now exists simply as branded format, available for sale in media markets across the globe.<sup>8</sup> The sale of cultural content to corporate sponsors functions in tandem with the show's more traditional work of carefully targeting and capturing audiences and selling them to advertisers. The audience commodity is created by producing a distinct cultural text that, on the surface, tells a story about how to succeed in the corporate world as a hard worker. As a constructed narrative, however, the show still functions metaphorically, no matter how appropriate its setting might seem. So, behind the story of work, lies another story for the viewers: a story about who can most successfully construct a notable image persona, which will, by extension, produce profit. Most of the cast members from the first season have gone on to lucrative jobs and endorsement deals based on their 'realistic' portrayals of high-flying corporate wannabes on television. As Omarosa, the 'bad girl' of the first season of *The Apprentice* has publicly stated:

The best thing about the experience was my great sense of accomplishment after (1) being selected out of 250,000 applicants (2) participating in such an awesome game show and (3) truly turning a bad situation into a very lucrative one!! Who knew that being soo bad could be soo good\$!!

(Anon. 2005)

Here we can see corporate socialization practices hard at work. Omarosa has been flattered by her selection to be on the show. As a result, she expresses her allegiance to the 'awesome game show' and its corporate bosses, while simultaneously recognizing that her labour is actually immaterial at its core. Omarosa's performance of herself as 'bad' proved to be a 'good' (read profit-producing) decision. Herein lies another product of the show; while labouring at performing themselves as corporate moguls-in-training, contestants produce their own branded image-tokens.

*Joe Schmo* tells a story of a 'real' person, Matt Kennedy Gould, who believes he is a participant on a reality show entitled *The Lap of Luxury*. The show, however, is an elaborate ruse designed to trick Gould. All the other participants on the show are paid actors. The premise of the 'faux-show', *The Lap of Luxury*, is that contestants are locked into an extravagant mansion and must endure grueling competitions and intense psychodrama in order to 'outdo, outshine and out perform' their opponents. *Joe Schmo* narrates Gould's experience as he participates in what he believes to be a 'real' reality show, as well as the trials and tribulations of the actors, producers and writers as they continually try to keep Gould from catching on. In this way *Joe Schmo* also tells a story about working. The site of this work, however, takes place not in the corporate boardroom, but on the set of a television show.

While it can be argued that *Joe Schmo* is of a different order than *The Apprentice* because its appeal is not competition-based and it overtly recognizes its strategic and satirical deployment of the 'reality show' motif, its aesthetic markers – music, editing, use of the confessional camera – are all

8. For more on the trend to branded entertainment, or 'advertainment' which essentially names the flurry of cross-promotions, synergies, and sponsorships now marking the work of the culture industry, see: J. Deery, (2004), 'Reality TV as Advertainment', *Popular Communication*, 2: 1, pp. 1–20; Mandese, J. (2005), 'NATPE: Branded Entertainment is Topic A', *Broadcasting and Cable*, 17 January, [www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA496808.html](http://www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA496808.html). Accessed 23 April 2005; Schiller, G. (2005b), 'Product Placement in TV, Films, Soar, Study Finds', *Reuters.com*, 30 March, [www.reuters.com/newsArticle.jhtml?type=industryNews&storyID=8031889](http://www.reuters.com/newsArticle.jhtml?type=industryNews&storyID=8031889). Accessed 23 April 2005; or Lasswell, M. (2004), 'Brand Me Baby!', *Broadcasting and Cable*, 23 August, [www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA446675.html](http://www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA446675.html). Accessed 23 April 2004.

9. This phrase is drawn from Dallas Smythe's famous 1977 essay on the audience commodity 'Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism', *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 1: 3, pp. 1–27.

standard reality show style. The confessional camera captures the actors talking about their acting troubles and their concerns about deceiving Gould. Split screen shots regularly depict the producers and director in the control room, nervously conducting what they have called their 'elaborate social experiment'. The opening credits display the actors as their clichéd characters – the bitch, the vet, the buddy, the gay guy etc. – and a voice-over describes the complicated deception being undertaken by the producers of the show.

The dramatic content of *Joe Schmo* does not come from games or competition, or even from social conflict, but from watching Gould participate in what everyone else knows is an illusion, from witnessing his attenuated duping, and from the struggle by the actors and producers to make sure that the deception is not revealed. The central theme of the show, then, becomes the challenge of its own construction. This is most pointedly illustrated at the climax of the show when the 'truth' is revealed to Gould. Here the host states over and over again that the whole ruse has been for Gould's *good*. They have done it all *for* him. The cast and crew, the producers and the network have selflessly constructed this elaborate ruse in order to turn 'the nice guy next door, into television's hottest new star' (*Joe Schmo*, Episode 9).

*Joe Schmo* is not a satire of reality television, but a story about the challenges of reality television production. It asks for viewers' emotional investment in a story about how to succeed on that terrain, and focuses on narrativizing the difficult kinds of face work and persona construction required by TVLand. It employs methods of tournament socialization, and, most notably, of divestiture to bring Gould into the fold of the television industry. And, in the end, after destroying his identity, it dream-builds with him, hoping to encourage his seekership in the world of the image industry. In many senses, *Joe Schmo* is a more honest representation of the contemporary working world, as it fixes our gaze and interest away from the boardroom and onto the television studio as the real site of cultural competence and success.

### Three

Given these descriptions of the labour and narrative practices of reality television programming and their resonance with corporate socialization strategies, it makes sense to consider the ways in which we might see reality television itself as part of a multi-level marketing campaign for the corporate 'real'. Multi-level marketing depends upon the recruitment of participants to initially buy a product, and then to become distributors themselves. It has been defined as 'a way of distributing products or services in which the distributors earn income from their own retail sales and from retail sales made by their direct and indirect recruits' (Vander Nat & Keep 2002: 41). 'The party who recruits another participant is the "upline" of the recruit. The recruited party is the "downline" of the recruiter' (Koehn 2001: 153). Each person down the chain receives a percentage of the sales of all those they have successfully recruited, while those at the top of the chain of distribution reap the majority of the profit.

With the growing recognition that television content can no longer simply function as a 'free lunch inducement'<sup>9</sup> for viewers to watch advertisements,

television producers increasingly see programming as a clearing house for products and services and as a source of diverse revenue streams beyond the shows themselves. For example, the profit-making opportunities attached to Mark Burnett's latest reality series *The Contender* (Burnett, Katzenberg & Stallone 2005) include: 'the sale of ads, an equity stake in boxing brand Everlast as well as more traditional product integration fees, ticket sales from *The Contender* boxing finale at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas and future rights to the fighters who star on the show' (Schiller 2005a).

The most lucrative and long lasting of these revenue streams involves securing 'rights' to the people labouring on the programmes, their production as minor celebrities, as well as the dissemination of a more general set of guidelines about how to become an image-entrepreneur. Similar to the singing contestants on *American Idol*, struggling boxers on *The Contender* not only participate in the reality game show, but also allow producers Burnett and Jeffrey Katzenberg to control their future careers. Burnett and Katzenberg have become registered boxing promoters in the State of California in order to create live boxing events featuring contestants from the series; these live events will have network specials and pay-per-view deals attached to them (Carter 2005). In their attempt to 'resurrect boxing as a sport' (Carter 2005), Burnett and Katzenberg effectively colonize it by producing and shaping potential boxers within their strict commercial controls and spectacular logic.

In a recent *New York Times* article Burnett laments the fact that he has been unable to control the future earnings of the non-actors on his other reality shows who have since become famous. About Omarosa, the celebrity villain from the first season of *The Apprentice*, he muses wistfully, 'She's not an actress. I don't have access to her future value' (Carter 2005). Burnett recognizes that the profit-making potential from participants on shows like *The Apprentice* extends only as far as the specific 'reality' they have been recruited to enact.

What Burnett does not recognize, however, is that the logic of the branded or promotional self is being extended further and further into the population at large through the production and distribution of his shows and their colonization of generalized character types. As previously mentioned, participants on reality shows frequently go on to 'represent themselves' in the industry as image entrepreneurs via speaking tours, corporate engagements, and diverse business ventures.<sup>10</sup> As they do so, they indirectly produce profit for those in the industry who are 'upline' of them by summoning others to join them 'downline'. They do this by recounting their experiences and offering instructions on how to engage in the practice of self-branding via the opportunities on offer through 'reality' television.

As the practice and promotion of self-branding works its way down the chain of distribution, it eventually ends up in the minds and bodies of non-spectacularized individuals, like John, Jenny, and Matt, the young people I met in Boston. While they have not yet been 'chosen' to 'seek', and 'dream-build' with the corporate culture industry, it is clear that they have already learned to emulate its discourses and values. In mimicking the cadences and platitudes characteristic of the lyophilized character types produced by reality television conventions, they clearly recognize that these corporatized,

10. Booking agents such as Nykole Lynne, [www.nykolelynn.com/tvstars4.html](http://www.nykolelynn.com/tvstars4.html); All-American Speakers, [www.allamericanspeakers.com/celebrity\\_booking\\_agency/Reality\\_TV\\_Stars.php](http://www.allamericanspeakers.com/celebrity_booking_agency/Reality_TV_Stars.php); or Reel Management, [www.reelmanagement.net/](http://www.reelmanagement.net/), promote reality TV stars for all kinds of speaking engagements, campus visits and corporate events.

11. It is beyond the scope of this essay to tackle the sociological effects of this form of programming. Certainly more work is to be done to determine the degree to which this 'multi-level marketing campaign', as I have chosen to call it, is catching on. The goal here is simply to draw attention to the ways in reality television programming is putting virtuosic communicative capacity to work for capital at the same time as it is 'mythologizing' these same processes.

promotional versions of the self constitute a distinct form of labour, have market value, and, as such, constitute the only 'reality' that matters.

## Conclusion

While not all participants on reality television happily accept their constructed image-persona or go on to claim their fame, and viewer response is, inevitably, diverse and uneven, this form of programming continues to successfully recruit 'image entrepreneurs' into its service.<sup>11</sup> Both the labour practices and narratives of reality television are a part of the broader aesthetic, institutional, and structural 'make-over' of the television industry in recent years. As a medium-in-eclipse, threatened by legislative deregulation, global competition, neglect of public broadcasting, new media technologies and online grass-roots forms of entertainment, mainstream network television in the United States, especially, has focused on developing its role as a promotional and commercial vehicle par excellence. We have seen how reality television programming, specifically, expresses the logic of commodification and promotion in all of its facets: its institutional origins and processes of production, its narratives and aesthetics, its strategic management of audience attention and savvy and, most notably, its production of new forms of virtuosic labour. Indeed, the growing trend in branded entertainment marks the overt mythologizing of promotional culture itself, whereby the values and logic of promotional activity within the social factory become the content and message of the stories being told, as well as their end product.

Paolo Virno contends that communicative ability is the primary skill required under the post-Fordist mode of production. The 'mode and action of the culture industry' then becomes 'exemplary and persuasive' (Virno 2004: 58). The spectacle, as expressive of the logic of the post-Fordist system, 'portrays labor in itself, the present tense of labor' (Virno 2004: 61). 'Reality' television programming both generates and portrays new forms of immaterial labour. In this way, it plays a central role in containing and controlling individual innovation and virtuosity in the post-Fordist era, subjecting them to incorporation inside the logic of capitalist management conventions and generating narratives and guidelines for a more generalized form of self-branding.

We have seen how the internal needs and logic of reality television summon a notion of the self as a strategic image-invention devised for future profit. As the work of persona becomes both a form of spectacle and an overtly recognized form of labour, we might say, in true postmodern fashion, and not very interestingly, that subjectivity ceases to be a concept located in the body, warranted to an individual, but is displaced, indeterminate, multiple. Certainly subjectivity is an ideal, a 'truth' about the self that has been displaced and fractured, but it is also a 'truth' that has been overtaken by the logic of the image and put to work for capital. The constitution of the self is now an outer-directed process, which involves our skill at self-production as saleable image tokens. The 'self' has become yet another commodity-sign, generated and deployed in a manner akin to other multi-level marketing campaigns.

Unlike the silent demonstration of the harvester ants, the people we see on reality television are involved in a kind of labour that is simultaneously defined by and defining of the imaginative ethos of capital as it takes place within a corporate colony called 'reality'. As these workers craft their individual persona with an overt understanding of the power and profit associated with notoriety and branded subjectivity, they must also recognize that their labour does not produce commodities *per se*, but 'first and foremost, produces the capital relation' (Lazzarato 2005), furthering the corporate colonization of the 'real', the elision of person and thing, the reach of reification, and the real subsumption of social existence by capital.

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