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# Flagging Finnishness

## Reproducing National Identity in Reality Television

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The worldwide success of reality television has received plenty of academic and public attention. All the debates seem both implicitly and explicitly to address reality TV as a global phenomenon, but little attention has been given to any national characteristics that may emerge in its localized variations. In this article, using a Finnish adventure show *Extreme Escapades* as a case, we argue that national television still plays an important role in constructing national identities; that reality television as a popular cultural product should be viewed in the context of “banal nationalism”; and that the genre may indeed redefine the meaning of national television in the globalized media sphere.

**Keywords:** *reality television; national identity; global television culture*

**In the wilderness** of Finnish Lapland, two teams have completed a physically strenuous rafting competition. The losers stand quietly on the bank of the rapids. The winners, arms around each other, express their joy in a song: the “Finlandia Hymn” by Jean Sibelius. This scene is the end of one of the most dramatic episodes of the Finnish reality TV program called *Extreme Escapades* (*Suuri seikkailu*), which became an everyday ritual and topic of discussion, and thus, a television event not unlike its famous relative *Big Brother* (see, e.g., Scannell 2002). Some episodes exceeded the magical number of one million viewers, a figure seldom reached in a country of five million inhabitants.

In the show, broadcast daily for a month from May to June, two teams of “ordinary Finns,” nine men and nine women, compete in pursuing adventurous, sporty tasks. Viewers can select via e-mail or via mobile

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short message service (SMS, text message) who should be the captains of the teams for a period of a couple of days. Each time there is a vote for new leaders, one member of each team is also eliminated from the competition. Meanwhile, events in the *Extreme Escapade's* team camps can be followed both on TV and also via webcams, or more traditionally, in the pages of the tabloid press. As seems to be customary in many reality TV shows, the internet site of the program includes a chat room where viewers and participants of the show interact.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the competition, the team sport turns into an individual survival game as the last four remaining participants go for the prize of 30,000 euros.

*Extreme Escapades* (EE) can be viewed as a part of global television culture. It exploits the success of internationally formatted reality programs such as the American reality show *Survivor*, and consequently, it shares many common elements with them. EE is built around action-oriented competition between two teams, yet ultimately, it is a battle of individuals; its setting is in the wilderness, and in line with most reality programs, it seems to celebrate the emotional and the psychological along with the physical achievements. In EE and in *Survivor*, similar rites of passage, tribal councils, are organized when selected competitors need to leave the show. However, while American survivors—or their Dutch and Swedish counterparts in *Expedition Robinson*—travel to isolated islands and jungles half a world away and are watched around the world (see Hill 2002), EE takes place in the northern part of the country, in the tourist destination of Land of the Midnight Sun in Finnish Lapland, and is broadcast only nationally.

While the focus of recent academic interest in reality television has been in the definition of the new global genre as well as on the role of ordinary people as central participants (e.g., Bondebjerg 2002), relatively little attention has been given to how the phenomenon may be nationally specific. This is an interesting question, especially regarding many European countries that share a similar history of public television broadcasting with the nation-specific ethos entailed both in the traditions of policy making and program production (Collins 1990; Schlesinger 1991). The significance of national programs can be empirically verified by media consumption figures that highlight the degree of cultural proximity as a determinant factor in media use. In this light, the questions of how and to what extent the phenomenon of reality television is local as opposed to global and what kinds of mechanisms of nation building it may entail become both of great interest and of great relevance. This article aims specifically to locate reality television within the push-and-pull dialectic between national identity and cultural globalization and interprets it as a way in which nationhood is recreated in everyday context of a popular culture, or in Michael Billig's words (1995), as a manifestation of "banal nationalism."

We assume that popular television, even such a “cultural outcast” as reality television, can be seen as a stage on which national identity is represented, dramatized, and shared. To illustrate this argument, we retell the story of Finnishness as told to us in the thirty daily episodes of the *Extreme Escapades* of 2002. First, we contextualize it in relation to the national television and its role in constructing national identity. We then map some key features in the show, ranging from setting to interaction, that illustrate the ways in which EE reproduces national identity. Lastly, we offer an interpretation on how and why EE’s imagining of national identity redefines meanings of “national television” in the global genre of reality television.

### Featuring Finnishness: Television, National Identity, and Popular Culture

*Extreme Escapades* is made at a time when the global nature of television culture seems to be both celebrated and loathed. A key fear about the globalization of culture is that there is a growing homogeneity in cultural representations under the influence of profit-driven supranational corporations. One recurring theme in these discussions has been the threat posed by global (American) popular culture to authentic national culture and identity. This debate, although decades old, has recently focused on the global phenomenon of reality television (Bondebjerg 2002; Glynn 2000; Sparks and Tulloch 2000). In recent times, the extremely popular reality television has functioned—and not entirely without a reason—as the “hate symbol” of this alleged cultural decline, even if the great success stories of the format, such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, were first created in European countries. There have long been fears in Finland, as everywhere in Western Europe, about loss of national identity brought about by threat from American mass culture. Such fears that position especially children and adolescents as victims of the American culture industry were repeatedly expressed, for instance, in Finnish art and cultural policy statements from the 1960s to the 1980s (Pantti 2000). On the other hand, some 60 percent of Finnish nationwide television output is of domestic origin, and the share of Finnish productions has been steadily growing in the 1990s and early 2000s (Aslama, Hellman, and Sauri 2002; Sauri 2002). Even if foreign fiction has the largest share of program time in Finnish television, the most popular TV programs of the twenty-first century are very much like those of previous decades. Year after year, the most-watched programs have a distinctive national character. They range from certain established newscasts, sports events, and domestic drama to some ritualistic program traditions such as the President’s Independence Day Reception and the Miss Finland competition.

Still, the fears of Americanization are not completely unfounded. Research on Finnish television programming of the past decade shows that the country shares trends with many Western countries: the growth of infotainment programming, the increase in talk-based programs, and the emergence of the so-called trash television. The reality television boom began in Finland some years later than it did in the United States and in many European countries. Yet, by 2001, the success of reality television was evident, especially on the two nationwide commercial channels MTV3 and Nelonen (channel 4); some 40 percent of the former's factual programming and almost 80 percent of the latter's could be classified as a mixture of information and entertainment; a kind of a "reality style" programming (Aslama, Hellman, and Sauri 2002). While different forms of American reality programs, from *Survivor* to *Temptation Island* and *Divorce Court*, were bought and broadcast by these two channels, they also began to modify formats such as *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* for domestic viewers—and thus reach out to broader audience segments. In the summer of 2001, MTV3 went truly national by showing the first round of EE.

In a small country such as Finland, with a unique language group, television bears a great importance in cultural debates and practices. While the concept of national television can be used to mean, for instance, the Finnish television industry in its entirety as well as all domestic programming, the ongoing debates on television in Finland address national television by linking it to its unique quality; that is, to the promotion of national culture, and thus, national identity. EE, a domestic modification of a globally marketed entertainment format, does not fit neatly into the traditional paradigm of national television. Accordingly, neither does it at the outset seem to belong to the television programs that could or should be referred to in the value-laden discourse of national culture. Yet, EE's most interesting features seem to be connected to its Finnish elements, which emerge at multiple levels. Already, the web site dedicated to EE emphasizes the national character of the program and calls it the first truly Finnish reality show. Furthermore, EE uses nationalistic rhetoric in advertising for new contestants: "We are seeking real Finns who celebrate their ancestors."

*Extreme Escapades*, then—not just because of its popularity as a mass mediated text but also for its explicit, marketing statement of Finnishness—can be suspected to mean something special in relation to national identity. National identity is understood here as an experience of belonging to a community through symbols and rituals. As David Morley and Kevin Robins (1995) have suggested, nationhood answers to a need for a rooted, bounded, whole, and authentic identity. Finnish identity means an identity shared by all Finns that is based on the idea of Finland's unique landscape, culture, and history and on the particular characteristics of Finnish

people. Therefore, the identity can never be a complex and mysterious phenomenon but formed through symbols and experiences related to them that are familiar to all, recurrent, and simple to the point of banality. It is widely acknowledged that mass communication plays a core role in disseminating representations of the nation and imagining the populace as a tight-knit, value-sharing community (e.g., Schlesinger 1991). The importance of mediated communication for national identity was already stated in Benedict Anderson's (1991) widely circulated notion of the nation as an "imagined community." This means that national identities must be constructed and reproduced through discursive practices instead of actual experiences. The aim of various socializing institutions, most importantly education and the media, is to spread knowledge of national symbols, narratives, traditions, and rituals to people and fuse personal experiences with the national experience so that discourses of national identity become part of people's everyday life (e.g., Billig 1995). Or, as Alex Law (2001), reporting on his study on "banal national identity" and the press, states, "national identity is not directly reducible to either state or civil society. Rather, it mediates them semiotically, hence the significance of mass communication for the national idea" (p. 302).

As suggested by Tim Edensor in his inspiring work *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (2002), the significance of popular cultural products may even outweigh more traditional components and contributors to national identity. He emphasizes that national identity is grounded in the mundane details of social interaction, habits, routines, and practical knowledge. This line of thinking is close to Michael Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism. Billig introduces the concept to cover all unnoticed practices and representations that make the daily reproduction of nations possible: "The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is a flag hanging unnoticed on the public building" (p. 8). Banal nationalism involves the ongoing circulation and the use of the symbols, themes, rituals, and stereotypes of the nation.

Edensor's and Billig's arguments also make a significant contribution to debates on the relationship between "high" and "low" culture. The importance of "high culture" is widely acknowledged in the formation of national culture; certain works have been identified as projecting a core sense of national identity. Interestingly, Edensor's reading of the weight of popular culture in representing national identity also emphasizes the level of engagement; he sees that the involvement with popular culture is far more immersive than an engagement with "higher" cultural forms, and such affective involvement is as likely to produce a strong sense of belonging, or national pride, as the icons of cultural excellence. Such mundane media rituals as EE or the national hysteria when a Finnish

driver succeeds in Formula races prove that the sense of belonging is not by any means bound solely to authoritative, official version of culture and identity. However, tradition-bound symbols such as the “Finlandia Hymn” persist as they are circulated through popular culture and exploited as a raw material by commercial enterprises for commercial purposes (cf. Edensor 2002).

A sense of national belonging and engagement, then, needs to be triggered. It can only emerge, for example, in the course of a program’s viewing if some recognizable features of Finnishness are flagged. In other words, it is a matter of directing the audience’s attention toward those elements that signify the nation. We argue that EE is indeed this kind of a banal site—despite its strong links to a global television format—in which Finnishness is reproduced. The program’s flagging of nationhood is present at different levels, ranging from setting to thematic emphases to communicative conventions. As depicted in our close reading of EE below, the program producers have consciously created some of the national elements, while others derive more implicitly and spontaneously from the cultural practices that could be interpreted as Finnish. These “flags” of Finnishness, then, can be detected in (1) how the issues of technology and nature are addressed, (2) how the mythologies of Finnishness are circulated, (3) how the competitions are constructed and acted out, and (4) how the various modes of talk are created and realized.

## Farewell to Cells

“Last phone calls were made to loved ones before the long period of separation, by the campfire, before the bicycling challenge. After this, there were no more connections to the outside world. Saying goodbye was a tough call for many participants. The phone calls were very emotional, even some tears were shed.” (Description on the *Extreme Escapades* web site)

Jansku (talks directly to the camera): “That was it. How can one be without this?”

Anna (continues, with a sigh): “Goodbye, mobile phone.”

(A scene from the first episode of the 2002 *Extreme Escapades*)

The story of Finnishness in EE begins with the recreation of national identity in relation to high technology. The first 2002 episode of EE opens with a transitional journey across Finland from the civilization of Helsinki, the capital of this high-tech Nokia Nation, to the backwoods of Lapland. After a twelve-hour train ride, the excited contestants are thrown out in the middle of nowhere and transported to a midway stop in brand new four-wheel drives with the EE logo. Then, the most tragic moment of the episode is revealed: all participants must give up their

mobile phones. The camera zooms into soap-opera-style close-ups when documenting the contestants' last minutes with this most important of everyday gadgets. As a consolation prize for this sacrifice, the competitors receive amulets carved out of reindeer bones.

The branding of Finland as the model high-tech nation is a discourse naturalized and even glorified in many forums, from the business pages of newspapers reporting on Nokia's stock value to government policy statements to academic analyses such as that of Manuel Castells and Pekka Himanen (2001). In the back cover of the Finnish edition of their book *The Information Society and the Business Environment: The Finnish Model*, the authors claim to provide insight into "the new identity of Finland," that marked by Nokia and the computer operating system Linux. This identity, they argue, consisting of technological economic achievements coupled with the welfare society ideal, is the key factor distinguishing Finland in the globalized world. The authors conclude their analysis by hoping that Finland can teach the rest of the world a valuable lesson: that a national and cultural identity is important as a source of values and meanings but only as a basis for coexistence of different people and countries in a multicultural and multiethnic context (p. 186). This discourse is adopted also by the media. For instance, Marja Vehviläinen (2002) notes in her study on constructing nationality in the mediated texts on Nokia that the Finnish techno-heroes are represented as hard working, knowledgeable, and supreme in technology. They also seem to renew Finnish culture toward communal interaction. For the Finnish media, then, the "information society" is an attribute describing Finland's achievements, not those of a global village.

It is, then, no surprise that the producers of EE build the first challenge on the fact that Finland is the country with one of the highest penetrations of mobile phones in the world. The idea may have come about not only because the program is in fact sponsored by Nokia but also because mobile phones are indeed, as Nokia's slogan goes, "connecting people," so at the moment of forced disconnection, drama was sure to emerge. Perhaps the participants are still media-shy in the first episode; everyone is chatting or sending SMS messages to their loved ones, but the intensity portrayed in the actual episode does not come close to the description of the web site. Contestants' comments remain at the level of "here we are now" and "soon I have to give up the phone." Perhaps they also realize that complete isolation is only an illusion; they are, after all, expected to participate frequently in the program's chat room discussions. In the later episodes, EE abandons explicit references to the new techno myth and addresses the audiences in more traditional discourses of Finnishness. Accordingly, participants make constant remarks on how surprisingly easy it is to live without modern luxuries. The only moments when technology

intensely matters bear resemblance to sportscasts: in every episode, there are trendily designed graphics depicting the exact air and water temperatures of the day. The results in orientation or rafting challenges are always reported and discussed by the teams with perfect accuracy: "The Orjas Team is leading the Nuortti Team by 9.4 seconds!"

Yet, more poignantly, EE plays down the multicultural aspect of the techno village. The Finnishness is created as a politically correct version of a society of ethnic diversity; one of the competitors is of non-Finnish origin, a fact that is clearly visible but never directly addressed in the show. The contestant in question, a well-educated black computer engineer with a strong regional dialect, is the only one who a few times, jokingly, ever refers to his ethnic origins. These remarks mainly evoke embarrassed silence and are not commented on by the hostess. The reality outside of reality television is quite different. In the online chat room of the show, a line of discussion on the contestant in question emerges. Comments seem to fuel one another and become increasingly hateful and racist.<sup>2</sup> Producers, faced by this aspect of expressions of national identity, shut down the service halfway through the series. As national identity is always based on the shared feelings and knowledge, a truly globally oriented "Nokia nation" may still be just an elitist notion that involves only a fraction of Finns working in multinational information technology (IT) companies. It could, then, be argued that EE, by playing down "otherness" to create a sense of homogenous nation, seems involuntarily to invoke reactions that wish to say farewell to the opening up of the Finnish society.

## Back to the Woods

Turo: Certainly, this [participation in EE] has been a kind of a new start . . . of going back to the woods where all of us Finns come from, and . . . and I have found my roots and I have found my way here to Lapland.

Every episode of EE begins with an insert showing a map of Finland, which gradually grows smaller, presenting in the end only the County of Posio in Lapland where the events take place. Moreover, Lapland is presented in numerous symbolic nature shots capturing running reindeer, immense forests, and white waters. In EE, the use of this iconic landscape, charged with symbolic and affective meaning, serves several purposes. To begin with, there is the apparent connection between the local tourist industry and the show. This is present not solely in the list of local sponsors at the end of the episodes, as EE sells these places and attractions by glorifying them throughout its narrative. The hostess Taru

Valkeapää, a former aerobics instructor transformed into a well-known TV figure, never forgets to name the places visited, and the titles of the sporty tasks are connected to the local names of places. The importance of the show in promoting tourist attractions and the image of locations was highlighted when the producers decided to move the show away from Posio for the year 2003. More than forty regions and travel businesses competed to become the hosts, and the final choice was the equally recognizable national scenery of the region of Koli in northern Carelia, the area known as the home of the Finnish national epos Kalevala (1835).

Secondly, the use of landscape is essentially connected to the reproduction of national identity. Landscapes, especially intact lake and forest landscapes, have been key symbols of Finnish national identity since the resurgence of Finnish nationalism in the end of 1800s. In Finland—where other means of validation (such as glorious history) have been scarce—the beautiful scenery was seen as a suitable vehicle for reinforcing national identification of common people (Honka-Hallila, Laine, and Pantti 1995). National landscapes are, as Edensor (2002, 40) appropriately writes, so ideologically charged “that they are apt to act upon our sense of belonging so that to dwell with them, even if for a short time, can be to achieve a kind of national self-realization, to return to ‘our’ roots where the self, freed from its inauthentic—usually urban—existence, is re-authenticated.”

According to a myth, the Finns originally lived in forests (Peltonen 1998). In Finnish literature, the forests are usually presented as places that offer escape and shelter; for instance, Aleksis Kivi, the creator of Finland’s modern literary language, depicted in his novel *The Seven Brothers* (1870) the brothers’ social maladjustment in the village and their flight to the wilderness to evade the Lutheran Church’s requirement that they learn to read and write before confirmation. Even to this day, the Finns escape from urban stress at weekends and during holidays to their summer houses in the midst of the forests. Thus, the creation of Nokia nation has not done away with the Finnish “backwoods heritage,” which is not only experienced in everyday life but also widely circulated in popular culture.

National stereotypes as well as national self-images are long-standing cultural representations supported by media. While national stereotypes are typically negative depictions of other nationalities, national self-images tend to create more flattering pictures of nationalities. Interestingly, however, the Finnish national self-image has been exceptionally belittling, to the point of “self-racism,” compared to other European nationalities (Apo 1998, 83–128). In value-laden comparisons made on mythical and stereotypical levels, the Finnish backwoods culture has been represented as uncultured, uncommunicative, impolite, culturally and biologically pathological

(leading the statistics for alcoholism and suicides, for example), too straightforward, and far too serious compared to the civilized and well-behaved urban cultures of other European nations. Despite the current high-tech hype, this negative discourse of Finns does not belong to the past; the idea of Finns as backwoods people was widely circulated, for instance, at the beginning of the 1990s when Finland joined the European Union (see Kivikuru 1996).

In EE, the wilderness of Lapland is presented as the genius locus of the nation, the place from which all Finns have sprung, a view that EE contestant Turo quoted above seems to share fully. Moreover, Lapland is represented as the locale of a mythical past. It serves as an exotic and wild "other" and is thus not unlike the settings of *Survivor* and *Expedition Robinson*. However, where the participants of these shows encounter "ancient rites and rituals" of African tribes or Australian Aboriginals, the teams of EE are surrounded by a pop lore version of shamanism and Sámi mythology. In addition to landscape, shamanism and folklore have been traditional solutions to the Finnish identity problem, which stemmed from the fact that Finland did not have a literary language or national high culture before the early modern period. EE builds bridges between the past and the present by using several shamanistic props and themes. The audience becomes familiar with a magic Sámi drum and with amulets carved out of reindeer bone symbolizing survival. The teams are also given Sámi names: Orjas (West) and Nuortti (East). The most visible and dramatic reference to the past is a recurring "witch insert." It is shown in episodes in which two participants will be voted off in the Seita Council, Seita being a holy place in Sámi culture. The witch insert features a noaidi (shaman), a person with a special gift to foretell future events, surrounded by flames. The soundtrack is a combination of yoik (traditional Lappish singing) and drumming. The mystical atmosphere is strengthened with slow-motion camera techniques and overlapping pictures of shaman, flames, reindeer, and wilderness. The shaman is represented more or less like a Native American chief in a classic Hollywood western: a spectacular character with reindeer horns and reindeer-skin cape. EE overly dramatizes mythological and symbolic elements of Lapland, bypassing any historical accuracy. In doing so, the program follows a long tradition. Lapland, as a genius locus, a paradise lost, where good old comradeship flourishes, has been recreated through the decades in Finnish cinema and television.

### Sauna, Sisu, and the Swamp

Edensor (2002, 92–96) singles out "everyday performances" as one way in which everyday life contributes to national identity. These include

popular competencies that are not limited to practical tasks such as parking the car or driving on the correct side of the road but are also inherent in leisure pursuits. Edensor refers to Kayser Nielsen (1999, 286), who writes that Finns express in their leisure activities "such as sauna bathing, hunting or fishing . . . Finnishness, not as an idea but as a competence acquired through activity and outdoor life." From this point of view, reality television could be seen as an ideal place for reproducing national identity through everyday performances, as it is based on the actions of ordinary people, and national identity is, accordingly, performed and represented in the these actions. The leisure activities mentioned by Nielsen are indeed those that are practiced in EE. Between competitions, the participants are shown taking saunas, fishing, picking mushrooms, cutting wood, and suchlike. Unlike in *Survivor*, for example, EE participants do not need to find their food themselves, and they perform these typical Finnish leisure activities solely for enjoyment.

While in *Survivor*, everyday life of the camp is given plenty of airtime, in EE, the competitions are emphasized. Finns have an extremely serious attitude toward sports, and it is on this ideological ground that EE maneuvers. As described earlier, the results of competitions are always reported and discussed by the teams in fine detail, in the style typical of professional sports. In Finland, sport has been an important tool in the production and reproduction of a collective national identity. There is a national myth, for instance, that claims that sportsmen like Paavo Nurmi "ran the Finnish state onto the world map." Even if sports victories are no longer considered indispensable to the nation's existence, they still—even after several doping scandals at the beginning of the new millennium—form an integral part of the national identity and create common experiences that regularly bring the nation together in joy, shame, and sorrow.

There is yet another myth closely related to the role of competitions, also relevant in the context of everyday performances and their contribution to the national identity. It could be said that the most beloved myth among Finns concerning Finnishness is about a special Finnish characteristic, *sisu*. *Sisu* is a word that cannot be fully translated. It stands for the philosophy that what must be done will be done, regardless of cost. *Sisu* is also something that the participants in EE often refer to. For instance, the EE participant Jaana, leaving from Helsinki, is confident that "*sisu* will bring victory home once again." Finnish *sisu* is inherently connected to other key mythologies of Finnishness, Finnish wars, and sports; it is said that this feeling has sustained the Finns in fighting Russia through many wars, and it is also used to describe a special Finnish willpower needed to win gold medals in sports competitions.

The stubborn Finnishness of *sisu* is an element brought up in every competition but can be said to crystallize in the biathlon and baseball

competitions organized in swamp playing fields. EE makes the most out of the connection between swamp and Finnishness.<sup>3</sup> When the participants are told that a baseball game will be the next challenge, one of them immediately identifies the swamp as the most obvious place for it. The game in question turns out to be one of the most strenuous competitions of the show, as the players struggle, constantly slipping, stumbling, and half-drowning in the mud. The cultural knowledge that is embedded in the odd connection between the swamp, *sisu*, and Finnishness is routinely created in a multitude of popular discourses in which *sisu* is referred to with a perverse kind of pride associated with a special form of madness. The participants know it, and most importantly, the audience knows it.

### Silence Falls in Posio

Nina: Up to now I have kept my mouth shut about 95 percent of the events in our camp [i.e., haven't talked about them to the teammates] and in turn, told 95 percent of everything to the camera. The first time I said something directly to somebody here I realized that I should have kept quiet even then. (From the 20th episode of the 2002 *Extreme Escapades*)

If *sisu* is the characteristic emerging in competitions, the “quiet Finn” is a myth that pervades situations of verbal interaction. This is an image reproduced again and again; it emerges in the proverbs and is confirmed by outsiders. For example, in his *Conversations among Exiles* (Flüchtlingsgespräche), the German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht described Finns as people “who are silent in two languages” (referring to Finland’s two official languages, Finnish and Swedish). In pervading stereotypes, a Finn is taciturn and incapable of handling small talk, and thus, the new information society citizen is marvelled at because of his or her ability to babble publicly on the mobile.

This national stereotype could be expected to pose a problem for a reality television series such as EE that derives from the new tradition of shows such as *Survivor* (which celebrates verbalized dramas resulting from various competitions as well as from interpersonal conflicts) and *Big Brother* (which basically consists of talk, talk, and talk in a closed laboratory setting in which there is not much else to do). Drawing from Murdock’s (2000) categorization of the kinds of verbal interaction found in talk shows, it could be argued that reality television has taken them all in. First, there is conversation at the core of even the most competition- and action-based reality television shows as, according to Murdock, commercial television in particular builds imagined communities around talk about the basic experiences of everyday life and on the features central to

common sense. At the core of the creation of these communities are, among others, the talk show hosts, game show presenters, and entertainment show participants, who use conversation to connect the worlds behind and in front of the screen. In Murdock's (2000, 199) words, "they offer themselves as media friends . . . they address us in familiar, conversational tones, sharing jokes, gossip, good-humoured banter, homely advice and offering catchphrases for everyday use." In EE, this kind of verbal interaction by the participants can be traced to their cheery messages in the program's chat room. Yet, in the show itself, the mode is mostly reserved for the hostess, who addresses the audiences directly and keeps them updated on the past, ongoing, and forthcoming events. She also creates the popular catchphrase of the summer, repeated daily at the end of each episode: "Silence falls in Posio, but only for a moment."

Confession, to use Murdock's definition of another televised talk mode, is a convention very clearly embedded into many forms of reality television worldwide. *The Real World* and *Big Brother* may have one of the most established formats for revealing oneself to the camera, but also, in EE, there are sequences that are designed for these lonely revelations. While the participants do not engage in the conversational mode, a part of the game is that they provide monologues to camera. And the viewers are given clues as to what kind of talk to expect. A red dot on the right-hand corner of the screen marks the recording function, in home-video style. The problem here is only the quiet Finn. Murdock suggests that confessions, often of painful experiences, are "central to the promise of intimacy and authenticity" (2000, 199). One can guess that this is what the producers also had in mind for EE, but in the program, these sequences turn out to be an uneasy part of the protocol that the competitors follow out of duty. Negative feelings about others are often muted and mostly argued with facts; positive statements stress the competitors' respect for their teammates as well as for the adversaries.

The variant of the communicative stereotype, namely the "modest Finn," emerges when a talk mode that Murdock (2000) defines as "sales pitch" is expected from the participants. Similar to confessions, this mode is often more or less explicitly present in reality television shows, especially in the kind in which audiences have the power to vote for or against competitors. The purpose of pitching in this context is to ensure one's survival, to promote oneself as the most socially, psychologically, and physically competent contestant. Yet, in EE, no participant really masters this strategy. A poignant example is the situation in which the last four members of the winning team must begin the individual battle against one another. Instead of elaborate marketing speeches, the team produces a mock home video in which they take an ironic stand to self-promotion:

Aleksi: "I'm a balding husband from Lempäälä."

Jaana: "I'm almost forty years old, tidy, a white-collar worker, not sporty, a single mother from Espoo."

Tomppa: "I'm a black computer nerd from central Finland."

Markku: "I'm a silent production manager, thirty-four years old, a quiet father of two kids, and a husband of one wife."

In EE, many other modes of popular television talk also seem to suffer from the action orientation of the show coupled with the myth of the quiet Finn. The show stages a special segment for open confrontation, argument, and debate when the teams meet specifically to discuss each other's weaknesses and strengths. This, too, fails, as even the support of one's team does not turn the contestants into mean, passionate, or otherwise daring communicators. Instead, the situation resembles a business feedback meeting in which both sides politely and constructively offer some advice as well as give credit to the opponents' good work. Furthermore, while *Survivor* capitalized on the United States talk show tradition and provided a discussion program featuring its own psychologist to analyze the events and people, so-called therapeutic talk is practically nonexistent in Posio. The analyses produced by the competitors address various practical tasks and future competition strategies in a technical and clinical manner: They speculate on the nature of upcoming challenges and compare their knowledge on how to build a raft. There is also very little storytelling, something that Murdock (2000, 200) calls "raw slices of lived experiences." The participants do not refer to their experiences outside the show in their everyday life. EE, then, seems to form a microcosm; or, as EE participant Mikko states, "Here we live with a new value hierarchy, as crazy as it may sound, competitions and such [are what matters]." The television talk mode, then, that seems to come most naturally to the participants is that of interviews, namely, when the hostess questions them after a challenge: "How do you feel now?" In those situations, the competitors produce answers that could be taken out of sportscasts. It is as if they take on a role as a "professional contestant," a position that allows them to express joy or disappointment, as emotions are now connected to factual statements on how hard it was to climb a hill or on what kind of strategy was used when crossing the stream.

In analyzing national television and cultural identity, it is clear that television talk is always a part of the broader conversational culture. EE is an example of the phenomenon that Nuolijärvi and Tiittula (2000), who have researched Finnish and German televised talk, formulate as follows: although program formats are often borrowed from another culture, interaction still happens in the style of one's own culture. Many models, such as certain talk shows, come from the Anglo-Saxon sphere. However,

heated debates and arguing, for instance, easily imported from the United States to Germany, have not been successful in Finnish discussion programs. In Finnish culture, then, open confrontation is not accepted. This conclusion pertains to both mediated and face-to-face interaction. Talk on television is not an isolated island but tells something about the entire culture; what is possible or not possible on TV is connected to the mainstream values of the broader culture. In this light, it is no surprise that although *EE* tries to break the stereotype of the quiet Finn for dramatic reasons, it ends up emphasizing the difference between *EE* and its talkative global relatives. Nina's comment ("I should have kept quiet") can then be interpreted as indicative of the tension between conventions of a global genre and an aspect of national characteristics: you do not directly confront others, but you do your duty and talk to the camera, as expected in this game.

## Conclusions

Our reading of *EE* demonstrates that the show reproduces Finnishness in more than one way. First, its construction of national identity can be interpreted as calculated intentionality. The singing of the "Finlandia Hymn" may have been just a spontaneous act of the participants, but more likely, it was a very carefully planned move on the part of the producers. Here, the producers as stage managers are able to manipulate the show to consciously represent certain aspects of a national identity, such as the national landscape, that are believed to constitute shared feelings and knowledge. From this angle, *EE* can be seen as satisfying a need that is presumed to exist and that is thereby also presumed to arouse sympathy in the audience. These presumptions are, of course, confirmed if one looks at the audience ratings.

The Finnish television landscape has, as in most European countries, gone through major changes in the past decade. These transformations include legislative deregulation as well as commercialization—tendencies that on one hand have enhanced the international character of the television culture, yet on the other hand have supported domestic television industry (Dahlgren 2000). It can be argued, then, that because of the ever-increasing competition in the field, the idea of national television's recreating and canonizing what is considered to be essentially Finnish is transferred from the mission statements of public service broadcasting to the public relations (PR) departments of commercial television stations. For them, Finnishness is a powerful marketing tool with which programs can be diversified from the global flow.

The media have an essential function of constructing and maintaining a nationally bound audience, but they also have a profit-oriented function

that may define different kinds of national identities. In the national versions of reality television shows, both the performers and the spectators are assumed to share the same national values and intertextual references. A diverse and often antagonistic group of people is thus invited to recognize itself as a singular body with a common culture and to oppose itself to other cultures and communities. Here, we also need to underline one infamous "national" characteristic of Finnish television: as opposed, for example, to British or German television cultures, Finnish television has been national in the specific sense that it has not, or to only a very limited extent, been exportable to other countries (cf. Soila, Widding, and Iversen 1998). One of the consequences of this cultural isolation is that Finnishness can be emphasized without any consideration of the way it might be received by non-Finnish audiences. On the other hand, it may also mean that the television industry has to defend its home markets fiercely, given that the foreign markets are culturally impenetrable. The creation of a large European audiovisual market without frontiers does not change this situation: even in the era of the free circulation of media products, somebody must want to buy those products. Thus, Finnishness can be seen as a combat flag with which domestic television industry fights for the popularity of its productions. In the case of cinema, Andrew Higson (1995) notes that the concept of national cinema has traditionally been mobilized as a strategy of cultural and economic resistance in the face of Hollywood's international domination. The media of today may not be American but global, and the economic and cultural threads are the same for a small television market.

Yet, there is another level of Finnishness emerging in EE that, ironically, has little do with the Lappish props and matches poorly the embedded ideals of globally popular reality shows. EE constitutes a realm of banal nationality that reproduces national identity in multiple taken-for-granted, invisible, or unnoticed details. The global generic conventions of reality television and the banal national characteristics of EE clash perhaps most pointedly in the sequences in which participants are portrayed in situations based on talk. Modesty (as opposed to frantic plotting and conspiring, individualism, and self-promotion in *Survivor* and *Big Brother*) is perhaps the most detectable characteristic in interaction. Even if commercial imperatives of increasing competition are at the core of the program's Finnishness, EE still offers an interpretation of a new national identity in which globalizing cultural conventions (in this case, the reality television format) are coupled with some of the most fundamental traditional stereotypes and myths, in good and bad, from appreciation of Finnish nature to racist chat room debates. EE, then, fits into Barker's (1999, 42) thesis on the relation of local, national, and global in television culture: "The outcome may be both a range of hybrid forms of identity and the

production of traditional, 'fundamentalist' and nationalistic identities. Nationalism and the nation-state continue to coexist with cosmopolitanism and the weakening of national identities." Formats may escape national boundaries, but the need for national belonging remains. Thus, the intentional and unintentional constructions of national identity in EE may just prove to be one of the best marketing tools as well as survival strategies of popular Finnish television.

## Notes

1. For example, in various countries, versions of *Survivor* and *Big Brother* have net-based chats that, after the end of the season, are often removed from the official web site but that continue to exist elsewhere as discussion groups for fans. See, for example, [www.realitytvlinks.com](http://www.realitytvlinks.com).

2. In the third season of EE (summer 2003), the discussion in the chat room took a similar path: the Asian background of one of the participants again generated plenty of racist comments.

3. The Finnish word for Finland is *Suomi*, which, according to one explanation, derives from the Finnish word *suo*, meaning swamp. The most important work of fiction in twentieth century Finland, Väinö Linna's trilogy *Täällä Pohjantähden alla* (*Under the North Star*, 1959–1962) opens with the words "In the beginning there were the swamp, the hoe—and Jussi." Jussi Koskela, a farm laborer, drains a bog on a property belonging to the local parsonage. Through his hard work, he comes to regard the land as his own. Thanks to the famous opening line, swamps and the concept of *sisu*, the virtue of perseverance and hard work, have been closely connected in the Finnish national consciousness.

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