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# Talking alone

## *Reality TV, emotions and authenticity*

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines reality TV as an illustration of contemporary confessional culture in which the key attraction is the disclosure of true emotions. This article hopes to contribute to the understanding of the production of self-disclosure through a formal analysis of international and domestic dating, adventure and lifestyle-oriented reality shows broadcast on Finnish television between 2002 and 2004. The diverse programmes verify that reality TV shows capitalize on a variety of talk situations within one programme, but it is the monologue that is used as a truth-sign of direct access to the authentic. We also suggest that the power of monologue in the reality genre promotes the transformation of television from a mass medium to first-person medium addressing masses of individuals.

**KEYWORDS** *authenticity, confessional culture, emotions, reality TV, talk*

## Introduction

Interest in the emotions of other people seems to be very much a part of contemporary culture, as is a pressure to reveal emotions and talk about them in both private and public forums (Lupton, 1998). We are supposedly living in a 'confessional' (Foucault, 1978) or 'therapeutic' culture (Furedi, 2004) that celebrates individual feelings, intimate revelations and languages of therapy. The role of the media and particularly television as a central public site for confessing one's innermost feelings has been rightly stressed by media scholars (e.g. Dovey, 2000; Gamson, 1998; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Shattuc, 1997; White, 1992, 2002). After all, recent decades have seen an eye-catching rise of genres and programmes that offer opportunities for the public display of once-private feelings. Accordingly, we have witnessed an increase in the number of ordinary people who are willing to speak in a confessional voice (White, 2002). Confessional and



therapeutic strategies are perhaps most prominent in reality television – although certainly they are not absent from informative genres such as the news either – where the outbreaks of raw emotion figure prominently in the attraction and popularity of the genre (see Grindstaff, 1997).

Another current feature of the media in general, and of reality television in particular, is the ‘circular circulation’ (Bourdieu, 1998) of themes and expressive forms. In numerous studies it has been argued that reality television exploits the self-conscious interplay of television between different genres to appeal to diverse audiences and capitalize on different markets. It not only combines documentary aesthetics with soap opera plots and gameshow-inspired competitions, but also provides for an untraditional array of ways for constructing selfhood through the kinds of talk that it features (e.g. Bjondeberg, 1996, 2002; Coles, 2000; DeRose et al., 2003; Dovey, 2000; Roscoe, 2001).

In this article, we wish to address reality television as an illustration of contemporary confessional culture in which the key attraction is the revelation of ‘true’ emotions. We argue that the confessional monologue is one of the genre’s main features. Our goal is not so much to explore the private aspects that people reveal about themselves through reality television programmes or how true or false these disclosures are. Instead, we will concentrate on questions of form: we aim to explore whether and in which ways these televised monologues create the arena for simultaneously expressing the emotional and making claims of the authenticity of those emotions and, in the end, of the ‘reality’ of the shows.

The prominence of free-flowing, confessional talk in talk shows has attracted considerable attention (e.g. Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Lunt and Stenner, 2005; Masciarotte, 1991; Shattuc, 1997; White, 1992) but the study of the strategies used in displaying ‘real emotions’ through confessional discourses in reality TV is still relatively unexplored. We hope to contribute to the understanding of the production of self-disclosure through a formal analysis of selected international and domestic dating, competition and lifestyle-oriented reality shows broadcast on Finnish television between 2002 and 2004. When conducting the study in early 2004, we wished to review the array of programmes aired at that time on the four Finnish nationwide TV channels (two public broadcasting channels, YLE1 and YLE2; two commercial channels, MTV3 and Nelonen). The periods sampled comprised the last week of October 2003 (week 43; 26 October–1 November 2003) and the last week of January 2004 (week 4; 25–31 January 2004). We also wanted to include one entire season of a Finnish adventure show broadcast in summer 2002. We have examined altogether 39 episodes of reality programmes, as follows:

- *The Bachelor* (USA);
- *The Bachelorette* (USA);
- *Expedition Robinson* (Sweden);



- *Extreme Escapades* (*Suuri seikkailu*, Finland, all 30 episodes);
- *Faking It* (UK);
- *Fat Club* (UK);
- *Idols* (Finland);
- *Popstars* (Finland);
- *Shipmates* (USA); and
- *Temptation Island* (USA).

It should be noted that the so-called makeover reality shows appeared *en masse* on Finnish screens only in late 2004. Genre labels such as 'dating show', 'lifestyle show' or 'competition show', which are quite vague, draw attention to the fact that reality TV is an extremely complex concept that unites a variety of programmes and subcategories (see Holmes and Jermyn, 2004). All our programmes belong to the 'third phase' of reality programming, mixing the earlier 'action/incident' programmes (e.g. the BBC's *999*) and 'docusoap' formats (e.g. the BBC's *Hotel* and *Airport*) with gameshow interest in tests and challenges and incorporating elements of the talent contest (Corner, 2004).

In the following, first our theoretical framework is laid out, as well as the debate over commodified and mediated emotions. Second, the basis for the structure of our empirical analysis is depicted, that is, the centrality of talk in emotional expressions and its realizations in various situations. In our approach, we leave aside discourse or conversation analyses and any linguistic generic studies of talk, viewing talk situations as formal elements of reality television and as pre-arranged platforms that facilitate different purposes. The categorization that emerges from all the programmes examined is by the number of participants: reality television talk can be divided into multiparty conversations, dialogues and monologues. The diverse programmes that we examine seem to verify the following, that reality shows indeed capitalize on a variety of talk situations within one programme, but the monologue is the dominant form through which moments of self-disclosure are constructed.

## **Reality television in the age of commodified and managed emotions**

Right now I'm so sad. My heart is broken. I go from a limo towards the man I'm in love with thinking I'm going to spend the rest of my life with him. Next minute I was walking away with nothing. I'm just so mad and shocked and really sad. I feel so alone. (Kelly Jo, *The Bachelor* (USA), broadcast in Finland, 2003)

Reality television's rise to prominence among contemporary television formats resonates with the validation of emotional talk in politics and culture. Attributes such as 'confessional', 'therapeutic' and paradoxically



'postemotional' (Mestrovic, 1997) that have been ascribed to the times in which we are living are related to the notion that we are witnessing an emergent preoccupation with emotions and authenticity of the self (see Furedi, 2004; Giddens, 1991). According to Furedi (2004: 30), 'therapeutic culture promotes not simply emotionalism but emotionalism in an intensely individualized form'. Certainly, an essential part of the strategies of finding the authentic self is the confession of one's innermost feelings to others. Indeed, Mestrovic (1997: 71–100) claims that there is a special industry today, the authenticity industry, by which ordinary people as well as celebrities – such as 'the postemotional President Clinton' – can disclose intimate feelings. Television, accurately named as a 'therapy machine' (White, 2002), is the major institution among these therapeutic mechanisms in contemporary society. As Mestrovic writes:

Almost every hour of every day, Americans and other Westerners can tune into a television program that either offers some sort of self-help therapy or presents someone confessing how they engaged in or overcame drug abuse, rape, adultery, obsessions, psychotic symptoms, or whatever. (1997: 87)

In Mestrovic's analysis, however, the obsession with manufacturing real feelings, the 'McDonaldization of emotions' (1997: 98), creates only artificial realms of desire for authenticity.

It is not difficult to see reality TV as a part of this authenticity industry. It must use strategies that encourage people to express and manage their emotions and problems, since it depends on the belief that 'real' emotions and conflicts will arise. Kelly Jo's sobbing directly to the camera after being rejected by the bachelor Bob in the final 'rose ceremony' of *The Bachelor* provides for a moment of self-disclosure, what Laura Grindstaff (1997: 168) calls the 'money shot' in her article on the production of talk shows (see also Gamson, 1998). These are the moments when allegedly authentic displays of emotion emerge, confirmed by tears or other bodily signs of true feelings and when emotive confessions become commodified, working to entertain and attract ratings. Often the emotional content of reality television has to do with romantic or sexual relationships, either explicitly through the storyline as in *The Bachelor/ette* and *Paradise Island*, or more implicitly as a potential outcome of human encounters. Finding true love in a globally viewed television show, more generally, placing real people in unreal situations such as a specially-constructed house or wilderness, offer a context where extreme emotions may be considered normal and where emotional realism may be achieved even in the midst of the overly melodramatic setting and plotting of the show.

Some argue that, while celebrating the ability to display spontaneous feelings is valorized in these discourses, contemporary culture is also wary of uncontrolled emotions, especially negative feelings (e.g. Furedi, 2004; Lupton, 1998; Mestrovic, 1997). For example, Lupton states that there is a



growing concern in western societies about negative emotions such as anger, jealousy, hate and rage, since generally these emotions are viewed as personally and socially destructive: 'It is no longer thought acceptable to display violence, to inflict humiliation or express arrogance or feelings of superiority; to do so is to risk a loss of face and status' (1998: 171). Mastering one's emotions, keeping one's feelings of anger and aversion to oneself, requires 'emotional management', including unconscious, culturally and historically-determined responses and calculated strategies (Hochschild, 2003[1983]; Lupton, 1998). This dilemma of managed and unmanaged feelings can be seen at the core of reality television. However, without doubt it also celebrates the loss of emotional control, emotional conflicts and the very emotions that are considered inappropriate in society at large (see Couldry, 2003; Lunt and Stenner, 2005). Highly conscious emotional management may be of vital importance not only for the television medium but also for participants, especially those involved in sub-genres such as game-docs, in which there is a prize at stake and/or a voting audience to convince.

### **From conversation to monologue**

Discussions on hybridization most often refer to the phenomenon as a blurring of generic boundaries between factual programming, fiction and entertainment or the vast array of interrelated media texts (sub-programmes such as *Big Brother: The Talk Show* and websites). However, as Bjondeberg (2002) argues, hybrid features can be seen in other realms as well. 'Aesthetic meta-hybridisation' is the term used by Bjondeberg to define the play between different staged realities: it may be 'a game within other games which are part of a reality show, which is a combination of several genres, which reflect, mirror and comment on a wider social reality' (2002: 185). Both the participants and viewers are involved in and move skilfully from one reality to another, forming a continuous play between authenticity/reality and staged role playing/staged reality. Consequently, the participant is caught up in a variety of differing encounters and situations, each of which may call for different forms of appropriate emotional expression and behaviour. The dimension of hybridization that explicitly connects with the emotional is something that Bjondeberg (2002) calls 'discursive hybridization'. Most reality shows offer a mixture of different talk situations and many rely specifically on verbal interaction. Even 'action shows' such as *Survivor* and *Fear Factor* celebrate the verbalized dramas resulting from various competitions as well as from interpersonal conflicts. Shows such as *Big Brother* basically consist of talk in a closed laboratory setting in which there is not much else to do, and in which the management of one's emotions is the key to the participants' success.

It can be argued that reality television owes much to its trash-television



predecessor, talk shows, since both celebrate topics, participants and communicative situations formerly excluded from the public sphere. Accordingly, reality TV mimics the ways of talk present in the other hybrid talk shows – from conversation and confession to interview, therapy, sales pitch and storytelling (Aslama and Pantti, forthcoming 2006; Murdock, 2000). In addition, as with some talk shows, reality shows may utilize a feature traditionally associated with factual programming: they include expert assessment talk where, for example, a studio psychologist assesses the mental welfare of the *Big Brother* participants. Programmes such as *Idols*, but also lifestyle shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, rely greatly on expert evaluation. But in their search for ultimate hybridity, reality programmes often go even further. They also draw from the fictional traditions of television – for example, with the melodramatic love declarations seen on *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. The above examples suggest that, depending on their central idea, different shows emphasize different ways of talk. Some talk situations are direct imports from traditional television genres, but some are modifications or even new inventions. In fact, it seems that reality television has reinvented and refined what we call a confessional monologue which, along with its multiple variants, becomes the stage for emotional expression and self-disclosure.

It has been claimed that mediated conversation dealing with the basic experiences of everyday life constructs imagined communities and that today, commercial television has taken a key role in their creation. In this process, at the core are the talk show hosts, gameshow presenters and entertainment show participants who use talk 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.' However, a casual conversation with several participants is not the main communicative situation of reality shows. Interestingly, although most reality programmes involve scores of participants, they interact surprisingly little in larger groups and the multiparty situation can be divided roughly into two main categories. One is the casual 'dinner-table talk' or other similar small-scale talking that occurs when a group is planning a wood-gathering excursion, or waiting for the next competition to begin. This communicative situation is common in programmes such as *Survivor* or in its Swedish and Finnish sister programmes, the *Expedition Robinsons*. The only programme in our sample where such conversation has a central role is the *Fat Club* (UK, broadcast in Finland in 2002): in that show, participants are often filmed while dining together for the simple reason that food and dieting are the main ingredients of the show.

The second multiparty situation is the town hall meeting of the new millennium, the Tribal Council (and its multiple equivalents), which



feature in *Survivor* and its many clones. These situations consist of a quick assessment, guided by the host, of the episode's events (as well as of personal plotting and politicizing), followed by some kind of ceremony. The council meeting seems to be a central element of reality television, since it also appears in singles' shows such as *Paradise Hotel* and in the weighing session in *Fat Club*. The main purpose, evidently, is to create suspense over the prospect of winning and losing. Perhaps not dramatic and intimate enough on their own, these segments are relatively short compared to the duration of most reality TV episodes. Although statements with strong feelings are uttered when one of the participants is voted out, in a multiparty situation verbal comments are kept short while the camera shows the tears in close-up. After all, it is usually the follow-up of the situation featuring participants talking alone that is the point of highest drama: one-by-one the participants step in front of the camera and proclaim their difficult decisions, broken hearts or remark on the joy of revenge.

The multiparty conversation may be too public and official a situation or simply too hard to control for the purpose of most reality shows. Instead, the dialogue – the very foundation of the television drama – emerges in several variants. Many reality programmes, dating shows in particular, include two-party conversations that have little to do with the carnivalesque shocker fights of some talk shows; instead they follow the melodramatic scenes known from soap operas – even to the extent of visualization by means of traditional shot/reverse-shot camera work. These talk situations involve declarations of love, honesty, friendship and the like; they convey a semi-official tone of declaring some kind of a vow while the other party silently listens, thus coming close to the monologue situation and its multiple modifications.

First, the confrontational dialogue: a kind of verbal duel is clearly in place to support the competitive aspect in the shows. Consider the following example:

Annelie: We meet again. [tries to hug Charlie]

Charlie: Don't you hug me. It's a Judas kiss. Let's not pretend. You deceived me, voted me out . . . you stabbed me in the back and now we should pretend to be friends?

Annelie: This doesn't have to be this hard. I didn't like you either. But there's such a thing as good manners. I follow my way and you, yours.

Charlie: I think honesty is what matters.

Annelie: Don't you want to hear the news [from the camp]?

Charlie: You talk if you want. I'm not interested in chatting. I've managed to be away from all that plotting for a few days now. There is no room here for





intrigues and lies. This is a duel. It started from the first moment on. [Charlie walks away]

Annelie [alone]: What an asshole. I knew it from the beginning. The poor man won't have it easy.

(*Expedition Robinson* (Sweden), broadcast in Finland, 2003)<sup>1</sup>

At the core, the underlining purpose of confrontations seems to be to allow the display of anger, rage, accusations and all kinds of negative emotions. In dating shows, the confrontation may have little to do with winning or losing but is included simply to facilitate the melodramatized presentation of feelings, a propos of *Jerry Springer*. Toni gives a prime example in her discussion with Keith after a dinner at the *Paradise Hotel*:

Toni: If you ever disrespect a woman again like you did tonight, so help me God, I'm gonna flare up on you.

Keith: This can't be true. (*Paradise Hotel* (USA), broadcast in Finland, 2004)

Besides these two types that seem to dominate the dialogue in reality television, other supporting dialogue conventions can be found. One is a news-like interview, conducted by the host. The Finnish adventure show *Extreme Escapades* (*Suuri seikkailu*, 2002, 2003) made an art of making references to sports interviews: after challenges, the host questions participants with clichés such as: 'How do you feel now?' Interestingly, the interviewees' role as 'professional athletes' evoked some of the most colourful expressions of joy or disappointment from Finns, otherwise somewhat lacking in emotional expression, since emotions were connected to factual statements about how hard it was to climb a hill or what kind of strategy was used when crossing a stream (Aslama and Pantti, forthcoming 2006). In a similar vein, the Finnish version of *Popstars* (2002) included 'professional interview sessions' in the recording studio during which the members of the girl band-to-be seemed to try to construct their image furiously as serious musicians.

Although interviews remain more the exception than the rule in reality shows, they also play a role in dating shows such as *The Bachelor*, when the host poses simple questions: 'Are you ready?'; 'How did you arrive at this decision?' In this context, the interview brings a more factual contrast to the melodramatic declaration. Although no clear line can be drawn between a more factual or official and a more intimate interview situation, another supporting type of interview dialogue that emerges could be called the 'therapy interview'. This kind of talk situation has been made famous already by talk shows (Bruun, 1994; Murdock, 2000): here, the journalist gives subtle, supporting cues to the participant, so that they can work through difficult situations. In the Finnish version of *Survivor, Robinson* (2004), the therapy talk was given its own weekly 30 minutes. As the show



had been recorded some six months in advance, the producers could stage therapeutic interviews in which the participant voted out in a given week appeared in their own way to analyse their key strategies and emotions in hindsight.

Yet another form of dialogue is the one between the expert assessor and the assessed. Shows such as *Idols* are built largely on this way of talk:

I'm your fan. You've been damn good from the start. And I, somehow . . . I want to thank you . . . your whole attitude, that humility that you've had all along the way . . . I think it's incredibly great. The man comes here, sings, leaves. That really hits me, deep down inside. I'm gonna cry soon, but you get all the points because of that humility and the attitude, how you approach singing. Rock 'n' roll! (Hannu, music producer and member of the jury, *Idols* (Finland), 2005)

The above example poignantly illustrates the kind of assessment required in reality programmes: emotional expression that does not solicit a reply.<sup>2</sup> Often, situations that appear to be dialogues are either well-prepared, witty one-liners solicited by the host, or monologues where the other participants serve merely as an audience, waiting for their own monologue. Regardless of the type or origin of the reality show and, accordingly, of the action taking place (be it a worm-eating competition or a hot date), the dramatic culmination comes when participants face the camera alone.

## Talking alone

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 directly to the camera. The first time I said something directly to somebody here I realized that I should have kept quiet even then. (Nina, *Extreme Escapades* (Finland), 2002)

Traditionally, in drama as well as prose, single-person speech situations have served to reveal the inner life, secret thoughts and feelings of the characters. Interestingly, reality shows have reintroduced this out-of-date staged talk situation into the context of television. Indeed, it can be argued that it is precisely the monologue that is at the core of reality television, as it provides for those moments when emotions run free and a person's true self appears. We argue that the specific moments of talking alone are used on the whole as a truth-sign of direct access to the 'real'.

Reality television has produced a multitude of variations of the monologue. The most obvious may be the staged confession, which is illustrated by Kristen in the following:



[Crying] It's kind of all set in . . . like things might get to the end. And it really bothers me a lot because I met lot of true friends and I don't want, I don't want to leave. I cried tonight knowing that Tommy was the only person I ever wanted truly to know what I was about. I love him to death for being that person. (Kristen, *Temptation Island* (USA), broadcast in Finland, 2002)

This is a talk situation that *The Real World* made famous in the early the 1990s and which has figured subsequently in most reality television formats worldwide. The confession clearly borrows its video-diary expression from factual genres, specifically from 'performative documentary' (e.g. Nichols, 2001). Indeed, a form of monologue could be called the 'diary confession', as it is used in a documentary manner to encounter events rather than reveal the speaker's inner secrets, as for example in *Faking It*. In the following, 22-year-old Sian, a student of classical music, is to be transformed into a top DJ:

I've always felt that maybe I'm entering into an old profession. So yeah, I think it's quite an advantage for me to actually explore youth and what young people are enjoying doing . . . When I woke up this morning I felt sick and thought about not coming . . . for a second. Then I just thought, yeah well, let's do it now, I've got to do this now. And I'm quite excited. (Sian, *Faking It* (UK), broadcast in Finland, 2004)

If distinctions are to be made, a video diary includes a narrative purpose: it develops the story. In contrast, a confession may look the same visually, but the content and form of talk resemble more closely the melodramatic declaration – as their main content, confessions feature emotional revelations, speculations and analyses.

Arguably, a confession resembles therapy talk, but a distinction can be made: clearly, the therapeutic situation is conducted with someone (even if the 'therapist's' questions may be omitted in the final version), whereas the confession is a self-induced examination of one's prior actions and, even more importantly, of one's thoughts, feelings and relationships with others. Christy, who has taken part in a dating cruise with Roger on *Shipmates*, illustrates this:

Roger likes me and I would bet my life on the fact that he does. If you like me, you like me. You need to be upfront with me and tell me that you like me. Don't play games with me; leave that back in elementary school, where you learned it. Roger does not have what it takes to be a part of me. (Christy, *Shipmates* (USA), broadcast in Finland, 2005)

A dialogical variant of the confession is the video greeting. It differs from confession in that the former is directed to the audience directly, whereas the latter makes them eavesdroppers on a monologue targeted at



a certain someone within the programme (be it another participant or relative, etc.). The analysis that Christy offers alone in the confessional monologue takes the following form when directed at someone special:

Roger, I just want to say to you, while it hasn't (or these haven't) been the best days of my life, I have had a decent time. I think it could have been better had you been more honest, more upfront and more frank with your feelings. I think that you like me; you told me that you do. (Christy, *Shipmates* (USA), broadcast in Finland, 2003)

A talk situation that Murdock (2000) defines as the 'sales pitch' also resembles the confession: often the pitch is present more or less explicitly 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 enrolment (such as the showreels of the aspiring inmates of *Paradise Hotel*) or one's survival, to promote oneself as the most socially, psychologically and/or physically competent contestant. The Finnish *Idols* provides an example that is both typical for the situation and typically subdued, representing Finnish communicative culture (see Aslama and Pantti, forthcoming 2006):

I like to teach and I like that line of work, but somehow I feel I'm not living to my full potential doing that. I want something else still. I'm no longer 15 years old, I have life experience. And I believe that I have good prerequisites to endure this [competition and stress] and enjoy everything this brings along. The thing is, regardless of everything, I have my feet on the ground. (Maria, teacher, *Idols* (Finland), broadcast 2003)

## Monologues, emotions and authenticity

Surely the distinctions between various talk situations may not be as clear-cut as they appear. Reality television is ambiguous as a genre – if it can be said to be one at all – it is constantly evolving, as new variants are cooked up in the entertainment industry, new staged situations of reality TV talk consequently emerge. Reality television seems to be a hybrid in many ways, but it is one-dimensional in its focus on the emotional. The question of emotion-based authenticity is crucial to reality television, as all talk situations seem to have one more implicit or explicit mission. They claim to disclose what truly occurred and how it was experienced.

One aspect at stake here is the medium's 'reality'. Television's reality claim intensified in the 1990s when the medium was facing increased competition. For the first time it also had an audience, the vast majority of whom had grown up with television and therefore had a high degree of interpretative sophistication. This explains to some extent the growing reflexivity in programmes about the fact/fiction boundary (Couldry, 2003),



but also the naturalization of the ‘unnatural’ monologue that exceeds the limits of everyday verbal interaction.

The salience of the monologue can be explained in numerous ways. One of the most obvious and significant is that a monologue equals importance: the participant given a voice alone with the camera is empowered. In the case of reality television, it can be argued that the monologue is a way to make an ordinary person into a star. Yet perhaps the main reason for monologue mania in reality shows can be explained by its subjective, emotional power. Emotions presented on camera in monologue form may be the ultimate combination of the private topic and the confessional, first-person way of talk in the public medium. As Murdock suggests, televised confessions, often of painful experiences, are specifically ‘central to the promise of intimacy and authenticity’ (2000: 199).

In our sample of reality shows, the real-life prince and princess sagas *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* best exemplify the value of having genuine, authentic feelings. The participants affirm repeatedly that their feelings are real, despite the acknowledged artificiality of the setting in which these feelings arise:

Amy: It’s no more funny games. Our relationship with Zack is not a game. You know, it’s not for pretend, it’s . . .

Toni: . . . for real.

Amy: It’s for absolute real. And my feelings for him aren’t fake, they are real.

Toni: We’re gonna get through this together. And we’re gonna get rid of him. Period. (*Paradise Hotel* (USA), broadcast in Finland, 2004)

Another allure of the emotional monologue may be found in the Foucauldian idea of the central role of confession as a purifying and liberating act for the confessor in the formation of social subjectivity (Foucault, 1981[1976]). In the following monologue confession delivered en route to the ‘rose ceremony’, there is a heightened sense of intimacy as Charlie shares with the audience his painful memories of past failed relationships and current feelings of insecurity and fear. This confessional monologue scene is shot in the close-up style typical in soap operas, as are several identical ones in the show. The close-up is used to make all Charlie’s minute facial expressions visible:

I’ve always approached relationships wearing my heart on my sleeve. And many times I’ve got hurt from that. If I’m out of this with broken heart then so be it. I’ll deal with those consequences at the time, but I won’t regret that. (Charlie, *The Bachelorette* (USA), broadcast in Finland, 2004)

Yet Charlie’s monologue is one of the media age. As Mimi White  
178 (1992) notes, television-mediated confession differs significantly from a



therapeutic confession before a priest or psychoanalyst (see also Shattuc, 1997). Television transforms conventional distinctions between public and private. It is not only that the interlocutor – the audience – who witnesses the confession is multiple, but also that the confession is performed within a more complex power hierarchy than that which exists between the authority and confessor. According to Nick Couldry (2003: 123) it is not even the authority of the host of the show or the audience that sanctions the confession; rather, ‘the authority who requires the confession’ is the authority of *television itself*.

On the face of it, the ‘free’ talk of reality TV may appear to resemble the spontaneous talk of informal everyday conversation, with its spur-of-the-moment displays of emotionality. Yet they differ structurally. Television shows are edited to foreground moments in which self-control is lost. However, there is the question as to what degree the displayed emotions, interactions and confessions can be understood as true or merely as a media construction, perhaps a result of the internalization of the instructions offered by producers or the cumulative experience of the genre’s conventions (see Couldry, 2003). Monologue is, after all, originally a literary, scripted situation of talk, rarely occurring in natural talk situations, so its frequent manifestations in reality shows are curious but perhaps less ‘authentic’.

### **Discussion: first-person talk, first-person culture?**

In analysing reality television and emotional talk, it is clear that television talk is always part of the broader conversational culture. Although programme formats are borrowed from another culture, interaction still happens in the style of one’s own culture and it can be expected that the tension between the conventions of a global genre and aspects of national characteristics will emerge. However, the global uniformity of manufactured emotionality in interactive situations seems to emerge regardless of the origin, be it American, British, Finnish or Swedish.

Curiously, the confessional talk produced in the staged realities does not occur mainly between participants but rather through the monologue, where the imagined recipient is the viewer. The claim of extreme intimacy and authenticity seems to be at stake – the audience and the audience ‘only’, will get to know their raw emotions and naked feelings. This stands in contrast to the development of broadcast talk, which quickly abandoned the monologue form lectures of the early days and engaged in more informal and interactive ways of verbal interaction to suit domestic listening and viewing situations better (e.g. Scannel, 1991). Still, the power of monologue in the reality genre is undeniable, supporting Jon Dovey’s (2000) thesis that a shift seems to have occurred towards a first-person media. Instead of ‘we’ talking to ‘us’, television features individuals addressing individuals. Dovey argues that various programme formats and



different ways of speaking are distinct dimensions of television's matrix of producing selfhood. His analysis of self-talk in various reality-based sub-genres suggests that monologue promotes the transformation of television from a mass medium to a first-person medium addressing masses of individuals.

During the 1980s and 1990s, talk shows were labelled a prime example of hybridization, since they brought a new set of people, topics, voices and ways of talk from the sphere of the private to the public medium of television. Feminist scholars in particular celebrated talk not only for addressing women's issues topically, but for bringing new ways of talk into the mainstream media, for example by allowing expression of feelings (see Brown, 1994; Masciarotte, 1991). Some have argued that soaps and talk shows indeed provide talk that relates to 'women's oral culture' and thus provide a contrast with bardic, 'masculine' genres. In a similar vein, for example, Livingstone and Lunt (1994) have noted that talk shows weaken the patriarchal enlightenment ethos and authority power of television – instead, a person, an individual and their experiences began to be valued as the most valid and authentic information.

Undoubtedly, talk shows paved the way for the reality television boom. The latter has borrowed tricks from across the spectrum of television production, especially those related to talk, from *Oprah*, *Jerry Springer* and others. However, the trademark of reality show talk, the monologue, is a novelty that engages the viewer differently than ways of talk in talk shows. In audience participation talk programmes, the viewer can feel as though they are a part of the crowd. This is enhanced by the mediator role of the show's host. In therapy-style talk programmes, the viewer might have an experience that makes them believe that they are a part of a small, close circle of friends. The monologue, however, is a direct one-to-one address, often resembling either a confession or defence. It is exactly in this kind of formula, which valorizes the private space of the confession and thus creates intimacy and authenticity, that the power and the weakness of the reality show lies. The viewers want to witness the talk but they remain detached, even an arbiter – they do not commit themselves or participate. Drawing from Dovey (2000), the first-person genre in the first-person medium does not support the collective and shared but reflects and recreates a first-person, individualized society.

It may seem contradictory that despite its individualizing features, reality TV attracts immense audiences, creates virtual fan communities and provokes viewer participation such as voting that borders on 'collective frenzy' (Corner and Pels, 2003: 1). Yet curiously, the mass attention that reality programming receives, the first-person address of the genre and the monologue as a literary form of expression all match the metaphor that Zygmunt Bauman (2000) uses when he compares today's media to theatre, in which audiences watch staged spectacles in silence. Consequently, the media facilitates only 'cloakroom communities': communality



is experienced for a few minutes when people applaud after the show; when they meet each other in the cloakroom to fetch their coat and leave, each and every one is alone, not in dialogue.

It is no wonder then that there are not too many who would celebrate the emancipatory power of reality shows, since they grant airtime to those outside the decision-making élite. Self-disclosure as the invasion of popular voices into a previously closed public domain seems very limited in reality shows. This is aptly described by Couldry:

To speak in your own name is to be categorised in terms over which you have very limited control, categories (for example, the misfit, the eccentric, the waster) that are entangled with the more general categories of media rituals ('ordinary person' versus 'media person'). (2003: 127)

So in spite of being the popular television phenomenon of the 21st century so far, reality shows just may defy the promise of 'democratization' (Hartley, 1999). Preoccupation with the internal life of the individual leads to a new representation of self in terms of emotional determinism, which celebrates public displays of feeling as a means of therapeutic disclosure and regards one's feelings as a foundation of authenticity, the true self.

However, the interpretation of emotional talk and the monologue in reality television need not be entirely pessimistic. Evidently, the power of the popular, the visibility of the ordinary and the acceptance of emotional expression in prime-time television provoke public and private discussions of the ethics of reality shows (Hill, 2005). The power of the monologue in reality TV can be seen as a parallel to the fascination of the entire genre for its audiences. The monologue, as with reality programming in general, contains an ambiguous interplay of the pre-scripted and non-scripted, individual and collective, performed and non-performed and fake and real. Consequently, the thrill for viewers is to hunt for the few rare authentic moments when the participant seems to reveal their 'real self' (e.g. Hill, 2002). The monologue situations hardly resemble any everyday talk events, but the literary way of talk does not diminish the claim for authenticity. Rather, the form serves the purpose of giving the viewers the ultimate opportunity to assess the key characteristic of authenticity: the participant's integrity and credibility when it comes to feelings. The paradox of an individualized society is that while one is talking alone about one's deepest emotions, at the same time one is selling one's authenticity to viewers.

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## Notes

1. The participants who are voted out get yet another chance on the 'Island of Solitude' where they can try to manage alone, and duel with the next one out who also wishes to have a second chance. Charlie, the current inhabitant, meets Annelie who previously voted him out and is now competing with him for the right to stay on the island.
2. However, the assessment cited above differs in tone from the remarks that have made it infamous: from *Idols* to *Fat Club*, most often assessment serves the purpose of public humiliation.

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