



Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Faculteit Lettern en Wijsbegeerte
Vakgroep Communicatiewetenschappen

Dating Shows and the Production of Identities: Institutional Practices and Power in Television Production

Jan Teurlings
Promotor: Prof. Dr. Caroline Pauwels

Proefschrift aangeboden tot het behalen van de academische graad van doctor in de sociale wetenschappen richting communicatiewetenschappen
Augustus 2006

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Manual

Rather than making yet another contribution to the ongoing deforestation of our globe I have chosen to put all the appendices on a cd-rom. The added advantage of doing so is that video footage could be added. For those readers unfamiliar with Blind Date I recommend having a look at the three video fragments included in the cd-rom.

In order to access the data, insert the cd-rom in your computer and click the file `index.html`. This will open your web browser, and you will be presented with several tabs:

- **Questionnaires** shows the standard question sets used for doing semi-structured interviews with members of the production team, participants and viewers
- **Interviews** gives access to the transcripts of the interviews
- **Episodes** gives access transcripts of all the episodes of Blind Date during the 1999 season
- **Letters-of-application** is an Excel spreadsheet containing information on the letters-of-application as I found them
- **Video** contains video footage on Blind Date, encoded in Apple's Quicktime. The plug can be downloaded from Apple's website.

The video footage might take a while to start up. In case your computer has a slow cd-reader, it might help to copy the contents of the cd to your hard drive and then access the data.

Introduction

"For the moment we'll keep a low profile. Although, even in Blind Date some travel companions can be surprisingly stingy"
(announcement for Blind Date)

1. Flashback 1995

I don't really remember how old I was when I first watched Blind Date. In my memories I was in my middle teens, although chronologically that doesn't make a lot of sense: I know now, almost ten years later, that the year was actually 1995 - meaning that I must have been twenty when Blind Date was broadcast for the first time on VTM, Flanders' one and only commercial television station at the time. It was the time when commercial television still stood in its infancy, VTM having only hit the market in 1989 with an enormous splash, leaving the public broadcasting company VRT behind in a bewildered state of confusion, abandoned by its audience and its collaborators who defected *en masse* to the green pastures of that young and dynamic competitor. It was also the time that heated debates about the "infantile" and "shamelessly commercial" programmes ruled everyday conversations and the opinion pages of the broadsheets. Little did they – we – know that only five years later Blind Date would be a comparatively innocent dating programme, that Big Brother, Temptation Island and The Bachelor were still to come, formats that were to push the barriers of commercial television in ways that we couldn't possibly imagine at the time.

But let us abandon for a moment the comforts of hindsight and let us return to that mythical moment in 1995. Since by that time I was in my second year communication studies I probably had heard already of cultural studies, but it surely hadn't made a big impression on me. The work of Michel Foucault on power was completely unknown to me and so was actor-network theory, a particular approach within science and technology studies (to be entirely honest: I probably didn't even know there existed something like science and technology studies, let alone that it had sub-branches). Feminism definitely was something of the past, because all of its goals had been reached and our generation had overcome the gender gap, hadn't we? My general outlook on media and society at the time can be characterised as a vague amalgam of mass society theory, some Frankfurter school and a pinch of political economy. It was a popular discourse amongst undergrads in media studies, not really refined nor elaborated, and it can best be described as the kind of generalised cultural pessimism which can be found in magazines like Humo: popular, commercial culture aims at the common denominator in society and thus it has stupefying effects, bringing down the average level of society.

It is with this general look upon television and society that my first encounter with Blind Date took place. Although my memory proved to be wrong about the date I still remember vividly how I felt. When I saw the participants play

the dating game, the short and supposed-to-be-witty answers to questions that were supposed to be tongue-in-cheek, the sometimes emotional but often crude statements participants made about each other, the words that best describe how I felt were *vicarious shame*. I simply could not understand why on earth people would want to make themselves the laughing stock of the country while apparently not feeling any sense of shame at all. It was poignant to see rejected participants applaud with a barely held up smile *while being rejected*. It was painful to see participants stammer themselves through sentences which obviously weren't theirs and hence missed entirely their comic or romantic effect. It was excruciating to see somebody being killed off verbally while obviously being in love. But above all I was fascinated by the why of it all: why are people willing to go on Blind Date?

"They don't seriously mean this, do they?"

2. Fast forward 2003

On September 19, 2003, VTM broadcast an episode of Blind Date, which - even after nine consecutive years - remains one of the company's strongholds in a radically changed industry. VTM is no longer the only commercial broadcaster but is faced with increasing competition from other commercial broadcasters, and it has since long lost its reputation as a scandalous sender, marketing itself as "the family channel". The public service broadcaster has made a spectacular come-back, nibbling even larger parts of VTM's already declined market share. And in the mean time I have embarked upon a PhD in media studies, so I have digested lots of cultural studies, Foucault and actor-network theory, and I no longer think feminism is something of the past.

It is in this context that the "historic" episode of September 19 2003 is broadcast. In it, we see a female participant who enthusiastically dances to music. She does so because Blind Date has slightly changed format. Nowadays "Preys" - Blind Date's carnivore terminology for the three participants that are hidden behind The Wall - are no longer supposed to present themselves by talk alone but they have to do a little act: something "special", something which they are good at. And so this girl decides to dance, and she does it enthusiastically. In fact, she does it so enthusiastically that one of her breasts slip out of her T-shirt, first subtly, later quite explicitly. The studio audience is in fits, many of them pointing their fingers while laughing. The girl, who initially didn't realise anything abruptly stops dancing and puts everything back where it belongs. In the background we see how one of the other "Preys" unwittingly checks whether *her* breasts have remained in place.

Almost instantly a thread called "Anyone seen Blind Date? Jeezes!" appeared on a Belgian web community called www.zappybaby.com. It is worth quoting the different comments at length, though I have edited some of the posts because they were referring to another incident¹¹ not immediately related to this:

¹¹ In the same episode a Flemish celebrity called Eva Pauwels participated. She is mostly known because of her (short-lived) marriage with one of Flanders' longstanding entertainers, Jacques Vermeire. The fact that she participated in Blind Date caused some consternation

Poster 1: I was laughing my tits off! If I were that girl I would never ever want to show my face in public again...

Poster 2: TV is on here, but muted. I have to say that I was blushing in her place.

Poster 3: It's a shame that VTM doesn't cut out things like these. They only ridicule themselves – and the girl. But of course they lack any taste whatsoever.

Poster 4: You have to take the channel into consideration. Quality and good taste don't go together well in the case of VTM.

Poster 5: What's all the fuss about? Went to the toilet and missed it.

Poster 6: What happened?

Poster 7: One of the girls tried to impress the "Hunter" by dancing enthusiastically, but after two waves of her arm her left breast became visible. She didn't notice anything until she finished dancing but the audience was overcome with laughter. The whole of Flanders was ashamed in her place and asked themselves why that lady had forgotten to wear a bra.

Poster 8: I think audience ratings are down, that's why VTM retains the "nudity" and the arrogance of Eva. Have you noticed how ridiculous some of them are when doing their act!!

Poster 9: I never laughed so hard in my life.

Poster 10: I have seen the part with the breasts: it's hilarious! The "hunter" wouldn't have fitted with the girl anyhow, I think. He was rather decent, she was more of a cheap slut, I think. Who on earth doesn't wear a bra on television, especially if you have hanging tits like she has??

Poster 11: Is there a movie somewhere on the internet?

Poster 12: Sorry, I just had to do this: [inserts a link to her homepage containing the movie clip]

Poster 13: Poster 12: thanks!! I hadn't seen it on telly but now... I'm in fits!! The reaction of the audience, hilarious!! Thanks for making my day!

Poster 14: Did she get elected?

Poster 12: Whether she won I don't know. It was only hearsay until I received a mail with this movie! I have to say it made my day: I was rolling on the floor laughing...

Poster 15: Thanks poster 12, had a good laugh. My God, if this would happen to me I wouldn't dare coming out of the house!!!

Poster 16: No no, she didn't win.

Poster 17: I mean, all the people that participate in such a programme seriously lack something, they are not normal. You have to be seriously desperate for love if you go on this show.

Poster 18: Unbelievable! I just saw that movie!!! Oh boy, I was in fits. Can you imagine VTM broadcasts this? But did you see this week's Blind Date? The lady that wanted to be a politician? Oh my God, she looked like such a "b***h" [sic]. I would never vote for her...

amongst the posters because it was interpreted as a desperate attempt to get media attention at all costs.

Poster 19: Do you still have that movie? I've heard lots about it but alas I can't find it anywhere.

Poster 20: The link is on the first page!

The nine years that separate my first exposure to *Blind Date* from the breast incident don't seem to have changed a lot. Commercial television is still considered to be "bad taste", the initial feeling of vicarious shame I so vividly remember is very much present in these posts, just like the idea that you have to "seriously lack something" for appearing on *Blind Date*. In short, *Blind Date* participants have retained their less-than-enviable status of laughing stock of the country, it is a freak show one tunes into to have a good laugh. But it is also a thoroughly *gendered* and *moralistic* universe composed of "decent guys" and "cheap sluts", who are "desperate for love". And we can laugh relentlessly, without mercy, because after all, as Poster 10 remarks, "Who on earth doesn't wear a bra on television, especially if you have hanging tits like she has??". If someone is to blame it is the girl, isn't it?

But perhaps 2003 is not completely like 1995. Poster 3, for example, remarks that "VTM" should have cut out the scene or give the girl an opportunity to do a second take. For this poster the girl was not so much making a fool of herself; she was made to look foolish by the broadcaster, who consciously decided to include the fragment knowing very well that it would be an instant hit. Although it is dressed up in the language of quality and "good taste" Poster 3's remark differs from the others because it directs attention away from the girl and towards the organisation that makes the show. For him or her – the public forum does not say what gender its participants are – *Blind Date* is not so much a place where people make a fool of themselves, it is place where people are *made* to look foolish. The difference in terms of attribution of guilt – who is responsible, who is to blame? – with the other contributors to the forum is striking. For example, Poster 7, though remaining quite polite, puts all of the blame on the girl: how could she forget to wear a bra on television! The moral economy of the incident, then, works differently for both posters: for Poster 3 it is "VTM" who is to blame, whereas for Poster 7 it is the girl and the girl alone, who is responsible for being made a fool.

The "breast incident", as I will call it from now on, is anecdotic and extreme, but it contains many of the elements that I want to raise in this PhD. In the most general terms, what will follow is an analysis of how dating shows are being produced and how the audience relates to this production process. Like Poster 3 I don't see a girl making a fool of herself, I see a director rubbing his hands knowing that he has hit the televisual equivalent of the jackpot – "oh man, this going to be the talk of the town when we get it out". I also see that the director could not script this – there are moments that reality surpasses your wildest expectations – but once it was caught on tape it was irrevocable, and no matter how hard the girl objected the director could use it at his own will. The image was, quite simply, *his* – directors in my experience are invariable male –, and *he* decided to put it in the final version that penetrated Flemish households and was emailed from inbox to inbox (that is at least how I got hold of the fragment). Yet none of the posters even mentions the director, who remains invisible and anonymous behind his editing table.

3. Televisual power relationships

The relationship between the girl and the director, then, is a particular instance, a moment frozen in time, of a wider phenomenon I will call *televisual power relationships*, or the power relationship between media and non-media people. In recent years, characterised by a veritable explosion of reality TV, this televisual power relationship between media professionals and “ordinary people” has become more and more significant. Whereas in 1995 *Blind Date* was the scandalous bastard child of commercial television it nowadays has something endearingly naïve, perhaps even respectful. OK, the breast incident was perhaps slightly over the top, but apart from that it is still quite a descent show, isn’t it? After all, shows like *Big Brother*, *Temptation Island*, *Idol* or *Extreme Makeover* have pushed televisual power relationships to an entirely new level. In shows like these “ordinary people” are willingly and intentionally ridiculed, set-up against each other and – in the case of the latter – cut up into bloody pieces and reassembled into a body that better fits the norms of beauty, including a recap on how the operation has changed the participant’s life. In comparison to contemporary reality TV, then, *Blind Date* is the Elvis Presley of commercial television: once rebellious and scandalous it can now be heard in shopping malls or elevators as music that is intended to sooth us – or worse, as a lubricant for consumption. *Blind Date*’s televisual power relationships are, in other words, rather innocent, aren’t they?

Well, yes and no. There are indeed programmes that are far more extreme in their televisual power relationships, but its fundamental rationality and functioning is already very present in *Blind Date*, and even before *Blind Date* the fundamental dynamics of televisual power relationship had been already set in place. From its inception the television industry has had an anxious “fort-da” relationship with “ordinary people”: they were “catering for the people”, as a former BBC slogan put it, and they would occasionally even make a programme on “ordinary people”, but the latter were certainly not expected to have a say in it all. To paraphrase enlightened despotism’s slogan: “for the people, about the people, but not by the people”.

It is because of this fundamental *asymmetry* in the relationship between media people and non-media people that I take issue with it. Once having flashed her breasts the girl from the breast incident was no longer in control of the footage that she had provided, and by implication she lost control over her public identity. The media people, to the contrary, were free to do with “her” at will. Also, the production team tightly controls the spaces in which televisual power relationships take place – in this case the *Blind Date* studio – and *they* define the rules of engagement, not the participants. *They* define the studio space as a functional space, *they* determine who comes in and out, *they* decide when the camera is on, and *they* put the footage together into a coherent story.

Through a study of two particular Belgian dating shows, *Blind Date* and *Streetmate*, I explore and elaborate in this thesis how the televisual relationship “functions”. I examine its fundamental rationality, the particular setting in which it takes place, what procedures are set in place in order to obtain its aims, what the effects are on the performances of the participants and how the audience reads these performances. Though it is a study of dating shows, that is, a particular genre of the whole gamut of genres that make use of “ordinary people”, I think its mode of analysis and the general thrust of the findings are applicable to other, newer genres

like reality TV or docusoaps – without losing the specificity of dating shows out of sight. To advance the main argument: I will argue that the aim of the production team and the institutional regime they have set in place to obtain this aim can best be described as making participants perform “strong identities”, identities that are “out of the ordinary”, spectacular or extreme (like participants flashing their breasts, for example) for the simple reason that such performances – besides the “eternal” appeal of love – are the stuff that makes audiences tune into the show.

What language does one use in order to make such an analysis? How does one “unpack” the televisual power relationship? One of the problems I encountered is that most of the vocabulary of cultural studies, the field of study that has shaped my thinking profoundly, did not seem very adequate to answer such questions. For example, the Gramscian emphasis upon power as a question of hegemony (that is, power as psychological consent) did not seem very apt for analysing how the production team made participants do the things they wanted them to do. It quickly turned out that participants were actually not consenting at all; participants often did not believe in what they were doing, and at times they were even downright critical of the way they were treated by the production team; yet despite this critical attitude, despite this complete lack of consent, they behaved in a very “dating show” manner. In short, the idea that they were “interpellated” into the ideology of *Blind Date* or *Streetmate* proved useless, and I needed another model for explaining why the participants do the things they do once they appear on television. What was needed, in other words, was a model of power that was not constructed on the idea that power is first and foremost ideology.

Another problem I encountered was that televisual power relationships seem to operate across and upset the different moments of the communication process by which we have come to think in cultural studies – roughly production, the text, and reception. Take for instance the position of the participants. On the one hand they belong to the “text” – they appear on the show – but they also participate in the production process and are thus “cultural producers”. Moreover, they are also part of the reception moment, since everybody who goes on *Blind Date* has already seen the show. In short, participants are literally “spread” across the different moments, being a cultural producer, a textual “character”, and a member of the audience – and all of this at once. This made the analysis a very messy affair that seemed very far from the neat divisions of the encoding/decoding model. What was needed, in other words, was an approach to communication that focussed on the *interconnections* between the different moments rather than on what separated them.

The answer presented itself in the form of what I will call “the materialist approach to power”, which in fact is not one but *two* approaches blended together. The first is the *analytics of power* as developed through the work of Michel Foucault. His 1970s work on power, and particularly the idea that power is “the conduct of conduct”, has been enormously helpful to me in providing a framework for analysing the televisual power relationship between production team and participants, one that moreover did not rely on notions of psychological consent but focussed instead on the institutional regime in which power relationships take place. The second component of the materialist approach to power is the notion of *network* as developed within actor-network theory (ANT), an approach to the sociology of technology and science as developed in the works of Bruno Latour, John Law and

Michel Callon. Whereas the work of Michel Foucault is well-known and well-read within cultural studies, the latter is still relatively unknown, so I dedicate a great deal of attention to what ANT is and how it can be helpful in the study of television. More specifically, the idea that all forms of social organisation require the establishment and maintenance of a network between actors of a different kind has been particularly useful for helping me think the interconnections between the different moments of the communication process.

When I take the two approaches together into one materialist theory of power I do not wish to imply that they are similar, or that the one can be equated with the other. Rather, I have extracted out of both approaches those elements that were useful for the questions that I wanted to address – and vice versa, their analytical framework has made me ask certain questions. Neither do I think that both approaches are unproblematic enterprises that challenge and eventually will replace the cultural studies doxa (whatever that might be). For example, I do not think that ANT, though having been very useful for me in seeing and developing certain lines-of-thought, is an unproblematic enterprise, and I do agree with many of the critiques that have been levelled against it, especially by feminist writers. The analysis should therefore be seen as a kind of exploration of the theoretical and analytical possibilities that ANT has to offer to cultural studies, an invitation also to other scholars to further explore these possibilities. But I do not embrace it wholeheartedly, for reasons that will be elaborated extensively later on.

Apart from being an analysis of two dating shows, then, this PhD also wants to make a theoretical contribution to cultural studies, by injecting it with what I think is a healthy dose of materialist thinking that is *not* marxist in origin. This theoretical argument runs parallel to the empirical analysis, because I have always thought that doing theory is being empirical, and vice versa, that doing empirical analyses is inherently theoretical. At times I think I have managed to combine the materialist approach to power and cultural studies' marxist legacy in an elegant fashion, but at other times both approaches sit uneasily, and I have deliberately chosen not to hide these tensions from sight. Perhaps this makes it at times incoherent, even contradictory, but I have always preferred productive encounters above the orderly but sterile systemic. That is, after all, the *fun* of doing a PhD: being challenged and having to rethink your unquestioned assumptions. The necessary messiness that this brings along and the feelings of despair and fragmentation that accompany it at times make it difficult to keep the fun in focus. But in the grand scheme of things (and especially *after* "the damned thing" is finished): nothing a good holiday can't solve.

4. Overview

Having described what this PhD is about and what theoretical tensions it aims to explore, what remains to be done is an overview of how the argument advances throughout the different chapters. The structure is a rather classic one, in that I start with a theoretical part followed by an empirical investigation.

The first two chapters are two theoretical chapters in which I lay out the contours of the materialist approach to power and situate it within cultural studies,

the paradigm from which I write. Chapter 1, "Meaning and power", is a short historical overview of cultural studies, in which I argue that the cultural studies project of the 1970s and 1980s (the model that became such a successful academic export product) has advanced an approach to power that defines the latter in psychological/ideological/discursive terms: the power to create a common sense. This way of conceiving of power lead to a reading of the work of Michel Foucault that was not necessarily "wrong", but it downplayed his critique of Marxism and tried to fit Foucault into a structuralist-Gramscian framework. However, through subsequent modifications of the structuralist-Gramscian approach, and the feeling of disciplinary crisis that followed, an opening was created for a reading of Foucault that *did* take his critique of Marxism seriously, enabling a new way mode of looking at power that did not psychologise it but stressed the institutional and strategic component of power relationships, as exemplified by *governmentality*-type of work within cultural studies. This Foucaultian approach to power is far more useful for analysing televisual power relationships because it focuses on institutional settings and the rationalities by which they are governed.

Chapter 2, with the admittedly somewhat enigmatic title "Transmission, circuits, networks and assemblages" brings ANT into the theoretical mix. It critically reviews the two dominant models of conceiving the communication process within cultural studies – the encoding/decoding model and the circuit model – and argues that despite important differences between them both remain too rooted into the structuralist-Gramscian problematic in order to be of much help for the materialist approach under development. Consequently the ANT notion of network is introduced and critically discussed. This theoretical discussion is accompanied by the application of the actor-network perspective on *Blind Date*, one of the two dating shows under scrutiny. From this application, and its preliminary exploration, the weaknesses of the ANT approach are brought to the fore. Especially its rejection of structural power relationships, and the feminist critique that ANT reproduces the viewpoint of the powerful through its analyses is developed and elaborated upon. In order to evade the latter problem I argue that the notion of assemblage, which shares some common ground with the notion of network, is a better category to think with, one that is moreover politically less conservative.

These two first chapters provide us with the conceptual apparatus to start analysing the televisual power relationships in both dating shows. The main body of analysis, then, is a production analysis of *Streetmate* and *Blind Date*. In it, I examine the *modus operandi* of the production team through observations, letters-of-application and interviews with participants and all kinds of media people (ranging from sound recordists to associate producers). I focus on how this institutional regime aims to take the performance of the participants into the direction of strong identities. But besides this production analysis I also included a rudimentary textual analysis, and an equally rudimentary reception analysis with viewers of *Blind Date*. In chapter 3 I outline which methodological choices I made and why I have chosen for some options while neglecting others.

Chapters 4 and 5 should be taken as a whole, and consists of the production analysis of *Streetmate* and *Blind Date*. "Televisual power relationships and strategies" is a meticulous analysis of the production practices and the various strategies behind them. Drawing on the work of Foucault, this chapter argues that the

production team is confronted with a series of problems and makes an analysis of the ways in which they try to solve these problems through the use of managerial strategies, all of them geared towards making participants perform strong identities. These strategies can be divided into five groups: selection strategies, strategies of televisual form, strategies of self-presentation, interactional strategies, confessional strategies and editing as a signifying practice. Through an analysis of some of the changes made to the format in recent years we will also see that the format in itself is one of the prime "identity generators". In other words, not all strategies require active intervention by the production team: some of them are inscribed in the format itself.

Chapter 5 "The materials and spaces of televisual power" continues on the same road but uses concepts from ANT rather than Foucault in order to deepen our understanding of how televisual power relationships work. It examines how both the *Streetmate* and *Blind Date* production team structure the assemblage so that they become "obligatory passage-points", or nodal points that one has to pass through if one wants to be part of the network. It also examines how the production team creates spatial constellations and uses the agency of the materials in it in order to obtain their managerial aims. For example, we will see that the agency of the camera, its capacity to create continuous time, is skilfully used by the production teams in their quest to extract strong identities. In order to counter the idea that the production team is all-powerful in making participants doing what they want them to do, and also in order to redress the balance away from the viewpoint of the management, the chapter also examines the moments when the production team fails in their managerial attempts, and offers an inventory of such moments. The chapter concludes with a way to think such a "balancing act" by thinking the performances of the participants as "actualised but sticky identities".

Chapter 6 next switches perspective and moves to the other side of the screen: the viewers that watch *Blind Date*. Though the reception analysis is not the centrepiece of this PhD I nevertheless felt it was necessary to include it. After all, participants are managed because the production team thinks it will appeal to the viewers at home. The question in this chapter, then, is to what extent the managerial relationship is a/ visible to the viewers at home, and b/ whether this visibility matters in their appreciation of the show and the participants. As we move through the audience interpretations of *Blind Date* and "its" participants – an experience which is accompanied by a surprising amount of irritation – we will see that viewers oscillate between two modes of viewing, the naïve one that takes the performances of the participants at face value, and the "savvy" or demystifying mode that sees "beyond" appearances and includes the production process in their explanations of participant behaviour. We will see that the savvy mode, though at first sight a critical mode of reading, is actually a politically debilitating mode, because it stimulates viewer involvement. The naïve mode, to the contrary, is less critical of the machinery behind *Blind Date* but is also a mode of viewing that a/ puts all responsibility on the shoulders of the participant (in other words, the televisual power relationship is deleted from sight) and b/ is also a very moralistic reading, making the dating show into a moralistic universe that enhances rather than subverts the dominant norms of society.

“The gender game and the moral audience”, the final chapter, is an exploration of how the naïve mode of watching is thoroughly moralistic by examining the double standard by which men and women are judged. Indeed, participants are not only “ordinary people”, they are also men and women that play the “game of love”, which is the gender game *par excellence*. Through a study of the different parts of Blind Date and the kind of gendered discourses and gender performances it enables we will see that the theme of romance is a thoroughly normative theme, but that despite this normative dimension occasionally heterosexual masculinity and femininity are challenged. Or, to put it more precisely, the format allows for performances that disrupt hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity, but the moral audience, the audience that judges and attributes guilt, employs a double standard that privileges men and doubly taxes women. In short, though Blind Date appears to be disruptive of the patriarchal gender hegemony – at least textually so – the moment of reception shows that it actually reinforces it.

The conclusion of this thesis ends with an investigation of the morality of televisual capitalism, in the double meaning of the phrase: first, in the sense of how televisual capitalism is a moralistic system, in that it attributes guilt and responsibility differently for the actors that function within it; but the morality of televisual capitalism also refers to the ways in which televisual capitalism is able to hide its *own immorality* from sight. Much to my own surprise the issues of responsibility, accountability and morality kept emerging out of the analyses. I for once never thought I would write a critique of televisual morality, but in a sense the object under scrutiny has taken me there, like a storm takes a ship of its course and takes it to unexpected places. I can only hope the voyage is as fascinating for the reader as it was for me.

Chapter 1: Meaning and power

"[C]ultural studies is not about applying theory, and it is not about the purity of theoretical positions. It is about struggling to make whatever theoretical resources one has say something useful about whatever it is one is investigating. Particular theories pull you into specific directions, they lead you to ask certain questions, make certain observations, as well as providing certain kinds of insights" (Grossberg 2001: 134)

1. Introduction

Larry Grossberg's quote reminds us that no research project falling from the sky, nor does it operate in a vacuum. Rather, it is the product of constant interaction between social problematics, theoretical debates and the practice of empirical work. The research questions that originally drove this project have changed over the course of time. Some have been abandoned, other have been rephrased and new ones have been found. Therefore it is important to situate oneself and the research one has conducted within the theoretical and empirical works that have shaped – some would even go as far as saying constituted – the PhD project which you are about to read.

This is a cultural studies-inspired PhD. The choice for cultural studies as the main theoretical framework through which to approach dating shows didn't happen haphazardly. First of all there is the obvious observation that cultural studies, since its spectacular lift-off in the 1970s, has taken popular culture seriously. Although throughout the 20th century academic attention had turned sporadically towards popular culture it was only within 1970s cultural studies that popular culture was made a systematic research subject. The main argument that separated cultural studies from its contemporary and often critical interlocutor, political economy, was the idea that popular culture *mattered*. Throughout its history researchers stressed that within popular culture "the hearts and minds of the people" (Bennett, 1986a: 6) were conquered. From this viewpoint the choice for cultural studies is logical, because it is the most elaborated body of work on popular culture and thus offers the concepts and tools that I needed in this study of dating shows. The second reason – and related to the first one – for situating myself within the field of cultural studies is that its politics (as far as disciplines can be said to have one singular political orientation) are to a large extent my own. I do think indeed that popular culture matters, that it *is* a terrain on which important political struggles are being fought, and that the case for/against popular culture cannot be settled by stating that it is merely an ideological apparatus that reproduces a dominant ideology. That is why this PhD is inspired by cultural studies: because it raises important questions about the relationship between popular culture and power, questions that have to do with today's political struggles.

On the other hand inspiration is not (or should not be) mere admiration. I *do* have problems with some of the central concepts within cultural studies, and this PhD is in a sense an attempt to come to terms with them, to offer conflicting views and show how these challenge *and* complement the existing analyses. Put in the most general terms: throughout these pages I will argue that the structuralist-Gramscian paradigm that dominated research on culture has gradually been eroded by its subsequent permutations, and that new problematics and approaches have arisen which can't be fully apprehended with the concepts of the old paradigm. Furthermore I will advocate a more materialist analysis within the field of cultural studies, as can be found for example in Foucaultian analyses of culture as a sphere of government (Bennett 1995, 1998) or in *actor-network theory* (ANT), because I think such perspectives have important insights to offer. The first two chapters aim to flesh out these claims, by focussing upon two concepts that have been of paramount importance in defining what cultural studies is or was about. The topic of this chapter is the emphasis upon meaning that has characterised so much theoretical and empirical work in cultural studies. The second chapter deals with the spatiality of communication, that is, the way communication has been spatially imagined, starting from the encoding/decoding-model, the modes of analysis that followed from it and the subsequent change towards more circuit-like approaches to culture. Both chapters occupy the middle ground between historical overviews and critical assessments, offering at the same time an account of the theoretical problematics from which these concepts emerged and a critique of them from a materialist perspective.

Historical overviews, however, are problematic enterprises, and this one particularly is. The object under scrutiny – cultural studies – is for starters not a single object, but a loosely connected body of work produced by many different people with many different agenda's, in many different places in many different contexts. The emphasis upon interdisciplinary research and the rejection of canonisation further complexify the attempt to write "a" history of cultural studies. In short, cultural studies is a house with many different rooms, and any attempt to define it will inevitably hegemonise a field that is by definition divided and therefore contested. Historical overviews are particularly prone to what Haraway calls the "god-trick" – the illusion that knowledge is disembodied and impartial, the eye that sees "everything from nowhere" (1991: 189). The history of cultural studies as a gradual discrediting of the structuralist-Gramscian framework is very much a situated account, that is, it is *my* history, written from *my* perspective and with a particular case and set of arguments in mind. Many different histories could be produced, for instance one in which cultural studies' narrow class biased analysis got disrupted by the waves of postcolonial theory and feminism; another history of cultural studies could be written in which a textualist approach was replaced by an ethnographic move towards the audience, and so on. In brief, this account is a partial one, although I do think its relevance extends well beyond the narrow preoccupations of this particular PhD.

2. The structuralist-Gramscian framework

The spectacular 1970s turn in cultural studies from (marxist) culturalism to (post)structuralist marxism and its benevolent or baleful effects on the state of the discipline is well documented by now (e.g. Thompson 1978, Hall 1980b, Carey 1995),

so we will not dwell upon it too long. Rather, I will briefly sketch the love-hate relationship between cultural studies and marxism, starting from the culturalist period over to Althusserian structuralist marxism and ending with the structuralist-Gramscian framework. The main point that I want to raise in this section is that this intellectual trajectory has given rise to a very specific conception of the relationship between culture and power, namely the idea that power in contemporary societies mainly takes an ideological/psychological/discursive form. Though original and productive, this particular combination of marxist and (post)structuralist insights also led to a narrow conception of what power is, thus neglecting other, more materialist approaches towards power, as can be found for example in the works of Michel Foucault. The remainder of this chapter will then be used to outline the difficult relationship between Foucaultian “analytics of power” and the cultural studies project as it was conceived in those early years.

Colin Sparks has written that cultural studies’ intellectual career has been characterised by a peculiar tension, described by him as “the move towards marxism and the move away from marxism” (Sparks, 1996: 71). In an impressive overview of almost four decades of cultural studies Sparks argues that cultural studies never wholeheartedly embraced marxism, and his overview is a good starting point for our analysis. In his account the culturalist period (Hoggart, Williams, Thompson) represents a discontent with Stalinist marxism, propagating instead a humanist socialism in which working class culture – the main object of analysis in those times – was conceived mainly in expressive terms (including the notions of authenticity which were to become the object of intensive criticism after the arrival of deconstruction). The big break with this culturalist tradition came with the arrival of structuralist marxism *à la* Althusser, which represents for Sparks a movement *towards* marxism. The Althusserian moment also was the moment that “the problem of ideology” (Hall 1996a) entered the cultural studies arena (and was to stay there for a long time, cf. below). The Althusserian moment however did not last long, since together with the notorious anti-humanism of structuralist marxism came the problem of determination. Althusser’s concept of overdetermination was indeed highly ambivalent in trying to give the superstructure some relative autonomy while at the same time insisting on economic determination “in the last instance”. As Coward puts it:

“[T]he social formation is understood in terms of an essential division between capital and labour which is directly reflected in economic classes, which themselves are reflected at the level of culture and ideology. Thus, the theory remains fundamentally committed to a conception of economic determination, with the economic understood, not as production and exchange relations, but as relations between monolithic classes [...]. Even though the analysis appears at first to give attention to the ideological level, it becomes clear, when its conception of the social formation is analysed, that there is no autonomy attributed to the inscription of ideological or political representations which become simply functions or expressions of economic interest” (Coward, 1977: 90, quoted in Sparks 1996: 85-86)

Hence “the turn to Gramsci”, in whom cultural studies scholars found a less deterministic marxist approach. In his notion of a “historical bloc” Gramsci (1973) attacks those class reductionist positions that hold that the revolution can only come from the workers because of their position in the relations of production. Although similar positions had been taken by other marxists – even in Lenin’s and Mao’s writings “class alliances” play an important role – Gramsci drove this to the limit. He

argues that hegemony is more than the mere forging of political alliances between classes, but that it involves “intellectual and moral leadership”. Drawing on the distinction between domination and leadership Gramsci argues that a hegemonic project has to win the *consent* of other groups in society, that it has to create a *collective will* by incorporating aspirations of other groups into its demands rather than limiting its aspirations to narrowly defined corporate (that is, class-based) interests. The ideological field in this account has a precise function: it is the glue that binds different social groups together into one apparently coherent historical bloc. So in a way Gramsci reverses the relation between base and superstructure¹: by giving the superstructure the function of creating the historical blocs through the creation of a common outlook the classical marxist position (base determines superstructure) is reversed. That is why Sparks (described in the “notes on contributors” of the volume as “a low-flying materialist”) considers the arrival of the Gramscian moment as a move away from marxism: in Gramsci the orthodox marxist categories are displaced to the extent that they become subverted, and new, other terms are introduced to replace the old ones.

Economic determinism however was not the only reason why in the early 1980’s the Gramscian variant of marxism became more popular than Althusser’s. Although the fights between culturalism and structuralist marxism were sometimes bitter in tone – see for example Thompson’s *The Poverty of Theory* (1978) – both paradigms shared some similar assumptions about the ways cultures are structured. Both culturalism and structuralism oppose working class culture and bourgeois culture, where working class culture of course is in the weaker position, in need of defence. Of course the terms in which this opposition is evaluated differ. In structuralist marxism –the Althusserian variant – popular culture is an extension of bourgeois culture, the place where “subjects” are “interpellated” into a dominant ideology. Moreover, this act of interpellation is defined in rather pessimist terms: to be a subject means to be “in ideology”, in other words, in order to be able to speak, feel and hear (to experience) one needs to be interpellated. Hence ideology is inescapable, it is the necessary precondition for becoming a subject. No such pessimism in culturalism. Working class culture is the place of authentic experience, unspoilt by bourgeois values and capitalism. It is true that “popular culture”, that Americanised post-war *pharmakon* is threatening working class culture in its existence, but with the adequate help of left-wing intellectuals (and the educational project that goes with it) this realm of subordinate and authentic knowledge would be able to survive and, eventually, win the struggle with bourgeois ideology. These important differences notwithstanding, it becomes clear that both paradigms share the idea that bourgeois culture and working class culture are two opposing sides in the great battle between labour and capital. They also share the idea that popular culture is the threatening “third man”, the instrument of domination in this great battle. In the words of Tony Bennett:

¹ I use “in a way” because Laclau and Mouffe argue convincingly that “through the concepts of historical bloc and of ideology as organic cement, a new totalizing category takes us beyond the old base/superstructure distinction” (1985: 67). They argue so because in Gramsci’s account ideology is not primarily a “system of ideas” but “an organic and relational whole, embodied in institutions and apparatuses, which welds together a historical bloc around a number of basic articulatory principles” (ibid.). In other words, ideology is not so much a set of ideas but rather a collection of practices, fabricated in the institutions of civil society (see e.g. Gramsci 1973: 12).

"[T]he two approaches share a conception of the cultural and the ideological field as being divided between two opposing cultural and ideological camps – bourgeois and working class – locked in a zero-sum game in which one sides gains only at the expense of the other and in which the ultimate objective is the liquidation of one by the other so that the victor might then stand in the place of the vanquished" (Bennett, 1986b: xiv)

In Gramsci we do not find such nicely delimited and war-like classes. Certainly, he remains locked in the marxist discourse of the 1930's when he posits the existence of two fundamental classes, working and bourgeois class, but his notion of historical bloc can be seen to complexify this beyond repair. In a historical bloc social groups join together in a hegemonic project by creating a *common* world-view, a set of shared experiences that need to be articulated. And this means that the identities of the social groups get changed in the course of the act of articulation, with the result that it becomes useless to speak in terms of "pure" cultures. In Gramsci we find an account that stresses that hegemony is a messy business, that the purity of order does not work in the case of cultures. There is no necessary class belongingness to an ideological representation; rather, one needs to take into account the specific historical *régime* in which a hegemonic project takes place. In other words, Gramsci offered cultural studies for the first time an account in which popular culture was not only worth studying but also politically important, since it was *in* popular culture (as opposed to *through* popular culture) that consent was created. Instead of being a threatening carrier of bourgeois ideology, popular culture became the locus where hegemony was negotiated, meaning a dynamic two-way process rather than a unilinear one, and in the course of this process the identities of the social groups that partake are changed. In brief, Gramsci redrew the mental map of culture, blurring the safe borders of "working class versus bourgeois culture" and placing popular culture firmly in the middle.

Thus the turn to Gramsci implied three main changes in cultural studies' marxist inclinations. The first was a loosening of the base-superstructure model up to the point that it became displaced by a set of new terms, like social groups, historical bloc and hegemony. This was accompanied by a critique of class reductionism and the essentially Hegelian view of history as a necessary sequence of stages that had dominated marxist thinking for so long. The third change – related to and a consequence of the former – consisted of a new topology of social relations, in which classes or social groups are bound together into a hegemonic project, incorporating each other's demands and thus changing the identities of the groups in the course of this process.

However, it would be wrong to assume that cultural studies took a "purely" Gramscian stand. Althusser's legacy proved to be much more lasting than the account thus far suggests. Together with "the return to Marx" – and all the problems of ideology and determinism that came along – Althusser had put structuralism on the agenda, and it proved to be an important event that was to influence cultural studies for a very long time. Culture was not only conceived in Gramscian terms like hegemony or historical blocs. Culture also became increasingly a question of texts and discourses, of connotations and denotations, of subjects that are interpellated into subject positions. Along with Marx, Althusser and Gramsci came Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida. The border disciplines that were plundered were semiotics, linguistics, literary theory, and philosophy of language. Nowadays it feels as if the combination of Gramscian marxism and the structuralist feel for

signification is a "natural" fit, but it took quite some time and lots of theoretical work to make it work – hindsight always naturalises and unifies what was once artificial and dispersed. In this articulation of structuralism and Gramscian marxism the role of Laclau (1977) and Laclau & Mouffe (1985) can hardly be underestimated. Although strictly speaking these works do not belong to cultural studies' classical texts they have been instrumental in joining together discourse theory and Gramscian analysis. And Hall for example acknowledges the tremendous impact their work had on him (Hall 1996b: 142) – after which he castigates them for reducing all practices to nothing but discourses. This is not the time and place to elaborate the differences between Laclau's and Hall's concept of articulation (see Hall 1996b, Slack 1996), but since the differences between both approaches are relatively minor, I will use Laclau and Mouffe's work in what follows.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) Laclau and Mouffe argue that the logic of hegemony is not so much a revision of the marxist framework, but rather a deconstruction. In their book Gramsci is presented as the logical end point of an internal critique within marxism of the basic presuppositions (historical necessity, economic and class reductionism, the base-superstructure constellation). In Gramsci they find a substantive critique up to the point that the classic marxist categories are deconstructed so that the contingency of the social is given its rightful place. However, Gramsci's insistence on the existence of fundamental classes represents for Laclau and Mouffe:

"the inner essentialist core which continues to be present in Gramsci's thought, setting a limit to the deconstructive logic of hegemony. To assert, however, that hegemony must always correspond to a fundamental economic class is not merely to reaffirm determination in the last instance by the economy; it is also to predicate that, insofar as the economy constitutes an insurmountable limit to society's potential for hegemonic recomposition, the constitutive logic of the economic space is not itself hegemonic (ibid.: 69)

It is at this moment in the book that they introduce their own, supposedly non-essentialist version of hegemony, one that is highly indebted to poststructuralist thought. To summarise, they argue that, in order to get rid of the last remnants of essentialism we have to understand that an articulatory practice is the contingent act of linking up several "entities" (or elements, as they call them). Put into classical marxist terms this means that there is no necessary correspondence between an ideological element and a class, nor that classes "in themselves" exist (that is, constituted by something which stands exterior to them, e.g. the economic). Rather, it is in the act of contingent articulation that politics resides. The structured totality that results from an articulation Laclau and Mouffe call a *discourse*. A discourse is similar to "ideology" in classical marxist terms but with some important differences – and these can be seen to formulate an answer to "the problem of ideology".

First, contrary to ideology a discourse is not the all-pervasive "false consciousness" so important in vulgar marxism. Ideology in its classical formulation gained much of its critical potential by juxtaposing it against the objective laws uncovered by historical materialism (and, of course, the analyst): if the workers don't see where their objective interests are it is because they are deceived by bourgeois ideology. A discourse theoretical approach on the contrary makes no such claims to truth. For Laclau and Mouffe every object could – at least potentially –

mean anything, depending upon the discursive conditions of emergence. "Truth", in such an account, is not something that is determined by something exterior to it (as for example in classic epistemology where the truth status of a statement is determined by the objects it designates) but is the result or effect of signification – in short, truth is a discursive effect. Second, ideology and superstructure in its classical formulations were always defined in rather monolithic, undifferentiated terms: "the ruling ideas of a society" in Marx' terms. A discursive approach on the contrary looks at society as an *ensemble* of different discourses, each trying to hegemonise a particular field. In other words, contrary to ideology the concept of discourse sees the social space as a set of particular, often competing discourses, while at the same time not being blind to its overdetermining effects, "mutually reinforce[ing] and act[ing] upon each other" (ibid: 118). Furthermore, Laclau and Mouffe stress that a discourse as a structured totality is never "complete" or fully stabilised, that it is in constant danger of being overflowed by what they call "the field of discursivity" – here Laclau and Mouffe's rearticulation of Gramsci's insistence on the precarious nature of hegemony is very clear. Again this is a departure from the concept of ideology, where superstructures have the tendency to be monolithic and consistent across time. Third, whereas ideology is within classical marxism nicely locatable in the superstructure, discourses encompasses the base-superstructure distinction altogether. Laclau and Mouffe stress that a discourse is not a merely linguistic nor mental matter but that it encompasses institutional settings, practices, and rituals. Discourses are in their views the answer to impossibility within marxism since Althusser and Gramsci. Both writers insist on the *material* character of ideology but at the same time are incapable of conceiving that materiality since it must necessarily belong to the superstructure (that is, situated at the level of ideas). Therefore Laclau and Mouffe insist on the fact that discourses are "better to think with" than ideologies, since in discourses the problematic (essentially modernist) distinction between matter and mind, between reality and concept is dissolved.

It needs to be stressed at this point that the history here presented is not the only one available. The combination of Gramscian analysis with poststructuralist discourse theory à la Laclau and Mouffe is in a sense a very particular moment in the history of cultural studies, be it that it was taken up by some of the important writers in the field (for example, both Stuart Hall and Tony Bennett have written extensively on this particular combination). But the "Gramscian discursive turn" was not the only paradigm emerging from the early eighties. For instance, the advent of "pure" structuralism as exemplified best by the work of the early Barthes (1967, 1973) and Lévi-Strauss (1967) signifies at least an equally important moment in the history of cultural studies, influencing for example Hebdige's work on youth cultures (1979) or the encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980a). Furthermore, it needs to be emphasized that the theoretical soup was never eaten as hot as it was served: most empirical studies work with a *vaguely* structuralist-Gramscian framework, one moment using Althusserian concepts like interpellation or imaginary relationship, the other moment drawing on Gramscian terms like hegemony or consent. In sum, Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory was influential as were many others, and I use it here as an example of the general tendency within cultural studies to combine marxist theorizing with (post)structuralist sensibilities. Therefore we will now turn our attention to some examples of empirical work that were generated by this general and "vague" structuralist-Gramscian framework. In them we can see how these theoretical debates influenced the empirical work being done, and vice versa, how

the empirical work drove the structuralist-Gramscian framework to its limits and eventually undermined its central assumptions. This is important for the main line running through this chapter, because it will reveal the conception of power that has guided cultural studies-influenced research.

3. Examples of studies

Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980a) is often cited as one of, perhaps *the* most important work being done within the area of cultural studies. Though it was never intended to be a paradigmatic model (cf. Hall 1994: 255) it became extremely influential, both in the way it set the research agenda as it pushed cultural studies towards the study of audiences (which was eventually to lead to the abolishment of the encoding/decoding model altogether, cf. below). Although it has often been criticised and although its end has been announced several times (cf. Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998) there's no real contender to the throne. In brief, the encoding/decoding model is a good place to start our analysis of the empirical works and the way power has been conceived.

The first thing which needs to be said about the encoding/decoding model is that it is a good example of the above-mentioned "theoretical impurity" so characteristic for empirical cultural studies. At first sight it corresponds closely to the structuralist-Althusserian moment already sketched. First, the encoding/decoding paper is an attempt to think the mass media communication process as "structured in dominance" while at the same time insisting on the relative autonomy of the different levels. This Althusserian problematic of the relative autonomy of the ideological field *vis-à-vis* the economic is complemented with a structuralist sensibility for the arbitrary nature of the television sign. Basically Hall argues that during the productional phase an event has to be encoded, that is, it has to be put into a textual or discursive form. The particularity of the television discourse, however, is that it consists of iconic signs, signs whose signifier resembles the referent, thus lending the television discourse a naturalising capacity. Drawing on Barthes (1973) analyses of popular culture he argues that such an encoded, naturalising television discourse can be analysed at the denotational level (the supposedly "literal", uncontested meaning) or at the connotational level (the associations that come along with it, for example a forest signifies "nature"). Hall then contends that the television discourse is characterised by "polysemy" at this second, connotational level. For instance, nobody will "deny" that the X-Files is a series about two FBI investigators and their struggle against the secrecy-keeping activities of the US federal government. However, whether this denotative meaning is framed in a right-wing paranoid discourse about the federal government interfering in the lives of the free citizens, or in terms of a democratic struggle for the right to know what the government is doing, is a question that is undecidable – both readings are possible, and both readings are "true" at the denotational level. In short, television discourse is characterised by a polysemous quality at the connotational level, which is why Hall considers it to be relatively autonomous: it is produced within an industry with its own professional codes, values and routines, yet the meaning of a particular text cannot be fully determined by this productional context.

See here the ingenious way in which Hall combines structuralist and Althusserian elements in his – in those times – new approach to the communication process. But it is also an “impure” model. This becomes clear when Hall describes the polysemous character of the television discourse. In a crucial move he stresses that polysemy cannot be equated with pluralism, since:

“Connotative codes are *not* equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested” (Hall, 1980a: 134, italics in original)

In this sequence Hall introduces a decisively Gramscian element. By stressing that the dominant cultural order – or hegemony as he later on calls it – is not univocal he refers to the Gramscian observation that a hegemonic project is necessarily plural, that a ruling class needs to incorporate other classes’ demands in order to maintain moral leadership in society.

The introduction of a plural and open yet dominant cultural order – hegemony – allows Hall to deduce three hypothetical positions during the decoding moment (the moment of “consumption” of the televised message). He differentiates between a dominant-hegemonic position (the message is being read in accordance to the hegemonic order), a negotiated reading (the legitimacy of the hegemonic message is not contested but neither is it fully applied to the reader’s own conditions of existence), and an oppositional reading (where the hegemonic message is read as an hegemonic message, that is, the message loses its taken-for-grantedness and hereby becomes politicised beyond repair).

The emphasis upon the decoding moment as at least as important as the other communication “moments” (production and the text) in the consolidation or disruption of hegemony is nowadays very common but revolutionary in the 1970s. The encoding/decoding model carved cultural studies a particular space in between two of its contemporary paradigms. On one side of the spectre was the political economy approach. Political economy approached media from a reading of Marx that prioritised production as the defining moment of the communication process – the reason why this approach is often characterised as economic and class reductionist. Political economy was also very modernist in the sense that it was rather hostile towards the anti-humanist strands of (continental) philosophy, relying instead on unproblematised notions like human experience, consciousness or alienation. The other contemporary paradigm was the “orthodox” structuralist-Althusserian approach, dominant in film studies and exemplified best by the Screen-approach. Here we found no such unexamined humanist notions like human experience; indeed, the theoretical sophistication (some would argue obscurity) of these readings of films was notorious. Drawing on a mixture of Althusserian and Lacanian sources² “texts” were analysed as constructing subject positions for viewers from which the portrayed world makes sense, and viewers are invited (hailed) to take up these subject positions. This process however is concealed from sight for the subject being produced – the notorious “structure of misrecognition” at work in the subject.

² Although Althusser himself claimed to have drawn on Lacanian psychoanalysis his use of terms like “subject” or “misrecognition” does not correspond to the Lacanian use of them. See for instance Hirst (1979) or Cousins and Hussain (1986) for an elaboration of this point.

Although *Screen theory* was at the philosophical level closer to cultural studies than political economy these debates were also high-pitched. The textual determinism that characterised this approach (texts are powerful devices capable of producing subjects-in-ideology without the individual ever being aware of it) ran counter to cultural studies' self declared commitment to critique the "cultural dupes"-scenario. Furthermore, so the criticism went, *Screen Theory* was in danger of equating "individuals" with "subject positions-inscribed-in-texts", ignoring the complex ways in which people are social subjects and thus encounter many different discourses in the course of their lifetimes. Or, as Morley (1980: 151) puts it succinctly, Screen theory posits:

"a model in which the text is the total site of the production of meaning rather than working within a field of pre-existing social representations, and the production of the subject is placed entirely on the side of signification, ignoring the social construction of the subject outside the text"

Thus the encoding/decoding model differs from other approaches within marxist theorising about ideology, by positing a gap between "real" social subjects (you and me watching a particular programme) and subject positions-inscribed-in-texts. It does so by decentring the text and granting audiences some autonomy during the interpretation process, focussing on the determining effects of "pre-existing social relations" rather than those of the textual. In this sense the encoding/decoding model is very much a sociological model, focussing on "real" people "out there", whereas Screen theory resides in with a more textual-oriented tradition in literary studies.

By problematising instead of presupposing the link between social positions and textual subject positions (how and under what circumstances is a subject position being taken up?) the encoding/decoding model firmly put audience research on the agenda, and it inspired the next generation of scholars to go out and study audiences instead of texts. Active audience theory, as it later came to be known, became such an important body of work within cultural studies that both terms were often used interchangeably – and the shortcomings one were used to castigate the other. Active audience theory, however, was – and still is – *not* a unified field of investigation, and the meaning of the word "active" changed in the course of time. Therefore I will focus in what follows on the different ways the active audiences has been conceived.

As described above the encoding/decoding model replaced a textual determinism with a social determinism, arguing that when people encounter "texts" they are already constituted by other social and discursive formations, which are ultimately bound to questions of class, ethnicity and gender – in short, which are socially determined. The first generation of audience research therefore tried to investigate empirically the three "hypothetical positions" that Hall had delineated in the paper. The seminal *Nationwide* study (Brundson and Morley 1978, Morley 1980) is probably the most well known of this early work, but there are other examples (e.g. Lewis 1991, Liebes & Katz 1985). The *Nationwide* research tried to "map" decodings of a programme onto different social classes, differentiated by class and race. Morley indeed discerns the different hypothetical positions, but insists that there is no

deterministic causal relationship between social position (class and ethnicity³) and decodings:

"the problematic proposed here does not attempt to derive decoding directly from social class positions or reduce them to it; it is always a question of how social position *plus* particular discourse positions produce specific readings; readings which are structured because the structure of access to different discourses is determined by social position" (Morley 1980: 134, italics in original).

For example, the readings of the photography students in the sample are particularly inflected by the technicist discourse of professionalism – Nationwide is in their eyes first and foremost an audiovisual product that is judged in terms of well/badly-made. This does not mean, however, that they are not critical of the programme's preferred reading (it's "ideological" content). Rather they produce a negotiated reading *through* the discourse of professionalism. Similarly the readings of university arts students were inflected by both their class position and their training in art criticism, combining what Ang (1982) calls "the ideology of mass culture" (mass culture is mindless, degenerating opium for the masses) with a negotiated reading of the program in terms of the preferred message it articulates (sometimes accepting, sometimes refusing the preferred meaning). In short, Morley argues that people are indeed "active" vis-à-vis the text, be it in general framework in which a non-reductive social determinism is of crucial importance.

This is the reason why Bennett defines this first generation audience studies as working with a model of "the determined active reader" (Bennett, 1996: 152). He quotes the Nationwide study and his own work together with Janet Woollacott on James Bond (Bennett & Woollacott, 1987) as examples of such studies. In this approach audience research is a matter of investigating the complex ways in which audiences are active towards the structuring attempts of the text without equating this activity with voluntarism. In a sense these studies remain the closest to the letter of the encoding/decoding model, with its complex levels of social determination.

These first generation audience studies in its "pure" form did not last very long, however. The "discovery" that audiences were active, meaning-making subjects vis-à-vis the text soon began to lead its own life, gradually transforming the encoding/decoding model (and with it, the cultural studies project) up to the point that it became subverted. (At this point I want to stress that it is not a question of researchers "betraying" the original model of the father (even – or perhaps especially – cultural studies cannot escape its Oedipal drama); rather it is a question of how scholars from different theoretical backgrounds all around the world took up the model in order to forge new entries and find new problematics in their studies of popular culture. This history does not bemoan the gradual subversion of the encoding/decoding model but uses it for genealogical purposes). We can distinguish between three such shifts in the post encoding/decoding era: the dissolution of the text, the focus on pleasure, and the celebration of resistance. Of course neat,

³ Although Morley always mentions the gender composition of the focus groups the actual analysis does not focus very much upon it. When presenting the interview material the references to gendered interpretations are scarce (e.g. p.79), and in the analysis and concluding remarks they do not surface at all. In his later subsequent work on the practice of television viewing (Morley 1986) he became more attentive to the gendered aspects.

assuring divisions like these are rarely found in their pure form out there. Many of the works cited below combine several tendencies, and they often overlap, so that it is difficult to delineate the approaches that disrupted the encoding/decoding model.

The first of these shifts in audience research was the *gradual dissolution of the textual*. Although the encoding/decoding model proposed a theoretical informed approach of production and consumption (and the text as the link between them) the production-side of things attracted few scholarly attention during the 1970s and 1980s (a notable exception is Hall's (1973) work on how journalists over-access official sources, thus reproducing the official definition of the situation). As mentioned above the novelty of the encoding/decoding model lay in the way it rethought the text/reader relationship within an ideological problematic, and scholarly attention thus focussed on the interaction between texts and audiences. The first generation of audience research emphasized the relative impotence of a specific text to impose its meanings on the audience, since the viewer is constituted as a social subject prior to its encounter with the text. Subsequent researches, however, stretched this relative impotence of the text to its theoretical limit, arguing that audience activity was absolute *vis-à-vis* the text. The most extreme example is Fiske's contention that our current postmodern, pluralist society can be characterised as a "semiotic democracy" (Fiske, 1987: 236), because the cultural forms it produces are characterised by egalitarian reader relationships: the text is conceived as a mere empty signifier which can be made to mean anything by an audience which is not only active but unrestricted, even omnipotent (at least at the interpretative level). By now it is common to criticise such excessive, populist formulations (and Fiske himself has become an icon of "bad, populist cultural studies"), but tendencies towards the dissolution of the text and the overemphasising of audience interpretativity can be found in other cultural studies work of the time.

A second move away from the encoding/decoding model consisted of an increasing insistence on pleasure as the key term in the analysis. However complex the mediations and determinations were, the encoding/decoding model conceived media essentially in terms of the *transmission* of ideology: it provided a tool for analysing to what extent a dominant cultural order was able to reproduce itself (without guarantees, of course) through the transmission of "ideological" messages (see also chapter 2). In this sense the influence of marxism is still very strong, in that it is concerned with ideological reproduction/disruption. The media are conceived in terms that focus on the problematics of how ideological messages are being transmitted and accepted (or not – it is indeed on the level of reception/acceptance that the novelty of the encoding/decoding model is to be situated). This focus upon the transmission/reproduction of ideology gradually was displaced by a focus upon *pleasure*. The impetus for bringing in pleasure rather than ideology came mainly (though not only) from feminist work on media genres – the study of soap opera and Harlequin novels proved to be a particularly important influence. The theoretical tools that shaped the new focus on pleasure in popular culture were very diverse. Psychoanalysis provided scholars with a set of concepts for analysing the relationship between identification, fantasy and pleasure (Modleski 1988, Stacey 1994); other researchers turned to the melodramatic in order to understand the pleasures these "feminine genres" offered (Ang 1982, Geraghty 1991); anthropology and the move towards ethnographic research methods were important in looking at

the practices surrounding them, and their complex relationship with pleasure (Radway 1987, Brown 1994 – for ethnographic approaches to media consumption that focus less on pleasure see for instance Morley 1986, Gray 1992).

Of course the foregrounding of pleasure was not entirely divorced from the concept of ideology, and most of the studies considered themselves to be operating within a roughly defined structuralist-Gramscian framework (for an explicit example see Brown 1994). In fact, what these studies did can best be described as “linking politics and pleasure” (O’Connor & Klaus, 2000: 378). By focussing upon the pleasures that fictional texts (and the practices that surrounded them) offered its readers they opened up the space that had been created by the encoding/decoding model, redirecting its emphasis on the transmission/reproduction of ideology towards the ways in which pleasures and politics are interlinked. To give an example: in *Loving with a Vengeance* (1988, orig. 1982) Modleski argues that the never-ending-story character of soap opera resonates strongly with women’s daily practices, where work is never finished. Thus soap opera disrupts male hegemonic genres like that of the classic cinema, driven as it is towards the resolution of conflict – closure. In her view the pleasures of soap opera constitute a kind of alternative knowledge with potentially disruptive effects for male hegemony.

The redirection towards pleasure was not without criticism from a number of writers who felt uneasy about the road the “orthodoxy” had been taken. For instance, Corner’s (1991) often cited distinction between what he perceives to be different traditions within the cultural studies research tradition, namely the “public knowledge project” and “the popular culture project”, can be seen as an attempt to save the encoding/decoding model from the baleful influences of the move towards pleasure. Whereas the former refers to analyses mainly concerned with current affairs programmes and the way how such shows have the ability to define “what’s at stake” in a given historical conjuncture, the latter is associated with the study of fictional genres and pleasures. Whereas there is some strength in the distinction from an analytical perspective, it isn’t difficult to see how the binary distinction splits the discipline into a “good” and a “bad” part (corresponding to other oppositions like serious/trivial, critical/populist, rational/emotional, male/female), effectively making the public knowledge project the norm to which the popular culture project fails to conform (Gray 1999).

The third and last displacement of the encoding/decoding model is the *celebration of resistance*, which can be seen as the political outcome of the two above-mentioned analytical moves. It needs to be stressed that the celebratory mode represents only a short period in the cultural studies trajectory, and that it is rarely found in its pure form; nevertheless it is the figure that attracted the most ardent defences (myself as an undergraduate student included) as well as grim criticism from its opponents (e.g. Ferguson & Golding 1997, Garnham 1995). The active audience, after being separated from the polysemous text (let alone the production context), and after being conceived in pleasure-terms, was very far removed from the “structured in dominance”-aspect that still dominated Hall’s formulation. Resistance to hegemony (be it capitalist, patriarchal, white – in Fiske’s (1989) terms “the power bloc”) was found everywhere in popular culture. In its (culturalist-turned-awry) eager to dissolve the hierarchical distinction between high and low culture popular culture became a site of resistance, up to the point that popular

culture, in order to appeal to different groups in society, *by definition* had to contain resistant elements (e.g. Fiske 1989). In these formulations the Gramscian theory that a ruling class had to incorporate elements of subordinate classes in order to obtain moral leadership is taken to its logical limit and turned upside-down: only the *formal* aspects of the theory are withheld ("popularity is a messy business"), and the general marxist framework of ruling/subordinate classes, consent and the likes are bracketed or used *ad hoc* so that they lose their meaning. Furthermore, these analyses tend to rest on rather naïve, undertheorised notions of resistance: resistance is, quite simply, "good", something which needs to be enhanced, without interrogating for instance what the effects of resistance might be. Yet early work, like Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1977) had warned for equating too easily resistance with liberation. In his compelling account, working class lads reproduced their class position exactly by being resistant against "the power bloc" and its representants – the schoolteacher, the police officer, and the likes. In section 5 we will get back to the point of resistance, and offer a different account of resistance when we get to Foucault's theorisations of power and resistance.

4. Power and meaning

We have now come to the point that we can clarify the central argument of the chapter, namely that cultural studies throughout its trajectory has put *meaning* at the centre of inquiry into popular culture. As diverse as the approaches may have been (and as fierce the debates between them) the "common denominator" is that culture is intrinsically bound up with processes of signification. Furthermore this centrality of meaning is complemented with an insistence on its link with power. Power, within the cultural studies project, was mainly defined as the power to *signify* – and resistance the ability to resist signification. Encoding/decoding, discourses, audience activity, resistance, in short all the important concepts in cultural analyses can be seen in the light of this link between power and meaning. In fact, power and meaning are so intertwined in the cultural studies project that they become indistinguishable. This has had several consequences for the way power has been theorised.

First of all, power is psychologised. It is, so to speak, something that passes through the head, captivating the heads of the people that are subjected to it (or else they resist it – in their head). In this sense the cultural studies project links up with a long tradition within the social sciences that defines power as a "heady" affair. From early opinion research over applied persuasive communication models to marxist theorising on ideology, power and communication have been thought in *mental* terms. The terms in which cultural studies approached this problematic were new and inventive (as for example in the insistence on the relative autonomy of the different moments) but it offered essentially a Gramscian model in which the creation of *consent* – a psychological concept – is the pivotal term. In short, power works by "capturing thought" (hence the enormous importance attached to "the subject" and "subjectivity produced in/by discourse").

Second, the emphasis upon meaning has led cultural studies towards a conception of politics that could be dubbed "politics of the signifier". Here politics resides in what Terranova (2004) calls "the gap of presentation", namely the gap

between sender and receiver that is never fully bridged in communication. In such a vision, politics is given a liminal space:

“Political opposition can only be produced by undermining the smoothness of communication, opening up a gap between sender and receiver, but also between referent and sign, what is represented and the way in which it is represented. Oppositional consciousness thrives in the gap, in the space in-between, in distance and non-correspondence. The only way to resist the assault of ideologically inflected media messages, whether they are the news or a film, is by undoing identification, undoing the search for noiseless agreement and consensus [...]” (ibid.)

This also had consequences for the way intellectual practice was conceived. Because power captures thought and because politics resides in “the gap of representation”, cultural studies scholars saw themselves in the role of “organic intellectuals”. This term is directly derived from Gramsci and points towards the importance he attached to culture as the connecting salve of a historical bloc. Organic intellectuals (not only “classic” academically trained intellectuals, but also writers, artists, journalists, musicians) are for Gramsci instrumental in organising and structuring the aspirations of a fundamental class towards a hegemonic project. Therefore cultural studies scholars saw themselves as “organic intellectuals”, providing and elaborating the conceptual framework that would allow subordinate classes to undo their subordination in society.

The effect of the centrality of meaning and its relationship to power, politics and intellectual practice is that different accounts of power have been relatively neglected within cultural media studies. One such an account (but not the only one) is represented in Foucault’s seventies work. Because Foucault’s work has been pretty influential on the analyses in this PhD I will elaborate in the next section the ways in which his approach to power differs from the one that has dominated cultural studies during the seventies and eighties.

5. Foucault

To argue that Foucault holds a radically different approach to power than cultural studies might seem surprising at first, since his works belongs since the seventies to the “classics” of cultural studies. The arrival of (post-)structuralism through Althusser and Barthes had also brought along Lacan, Foucault and Derrida, and Foucault’s concept of discourse was taken up enthusiastically. With the demise of structuralism and semiotics, which were – rightfully – criticised for being formalist and aspiring scientific status, the door was opened for less rigid approaches to meaning. Discourse analysis filled in that gap perfectly. Less formalist than semiotics and even explicitly hostile towards the “euphoric dreams of scientificity” (Barthes 1971: 97, quoted in Culler 2001: 439) that had plagued structuralism (or *semiology* as it was then called) it seemed the perfect theoretical tool for maintaining meaning on the theoretical agenda without continuing the errors of the previous paradigms. In a relatively short term “discourse” had replaced “text” as the new catchall term in cultural studies, and Foucault became a prominent and often-cited author within cultural studies⁴.

⁴ Of course “discourse” was not Foucault’s exclusive property. For example, in linguistics “discourse” was used to designate an utterance larger than a sentence. However, since

As a result of this trajectory Foucault became first and foremost the theoretician of discourse, and by implication a theoretician of representation. This can for instance be seen in Hall's (1997) text in the Open University text book called "Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices". In Hall's contribution Foucault is represented as one of those theoreticians that approached meaning from a constructionist perspective. In this account Foucault figures as the end point of an intellectual tradition that started with structural linguistics and Saussurean semiology and made a detour through the early Barthes. Although Hall asserts that the concept of discourse in Foucault's account entails both language and practice, he also argues that discourse, for Foucault, is "a system of representation" (1997: 44).

This interpretation of Foucault as a theoretician of discourse and representation is of course not "wrong", nor is it only within cultural studies that this interpretation is dominant. But it also misses a substantial turn in Foucault's intellectual development, to be situated in the early 1970s, after the publication of his methodological book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972, orig. 1969). Amongst commentators it is by now commonplace to distinguish between an early Foucault, working with and around the concept of discourse, and a middle Foucault, who focuses on questions of power. This corresponds with the change from an archaeological to a genealogical method of inquiry, inaugurated by the publication in 1971 of the essay *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* (reprinted in Foucault 1998). Foucault gradually abandoned the archaeological project because it haunted by difficulties from the start. A radical critique of scientific discourses and its truth-effects, it was ambiguous about its own status as a discourse. As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 88) write: "neither the serious scientist nor the archaeologist could do their work if it weren't for the illusion that there is serious meaning. Indeed, archaeology is the discipline of listening sensitively to the very monuments one treats as mute". Also, archaeology practices a bizarre form of detached objectivism, because it favours "a pure description of the facts of discourse" (Foucault, 1998: 306). But of course it cannot escape the problem that it has precluded from the analysis "pure descriptions" – even those of the facts of discourse. This is why Dreyfus and Rabinow write: "Foucault, when he is a consistent archaeologist, cuts himself off from all seriousness" (1982: 88). The switch to genealogy must be seen in the light of these difficulties. Unlike the archaeological method it doesn't make claims for a detached descriptivism, the kind of ambiguous free-floating intelligence that characterised the archaeologist. Consistent with his claim that knowledge and power are intrinsically linked and feed upon each other, genealogy does not eschew or deny its own politics. The aim of genealogy is not to write a "truthful history" in the way that empirical historians would describe their own activities. As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* (orig. 1975) the aim is to write "the history of the present" (1991: 31) – an analysis which realises and recognises its own situatedness, that there is no way of standing outside what we are studying⁵.

it was exactly the formalism of linguistics that cultural studies tried to escape this branch of discourse analysis (or "critical discourse analysis" as it is now called) never really took ground. Some people in the field of linguistics have later on moved into the field of media analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1995, Van Dijck 1988) but these approaches are rather different from cultural studies-inspired approaches because of their exclusive focus on language.

⁵ Because the switch from genealogy to archaeology meant a switch from discourse (and the epistemological problematic upon which it thrives) to power/knowledge (where the

As a result of the turn to genealogy the terms of Foucault's analyses started to change. Instead of structuralist terms like "discourses" or "conditions of possibility" new, war-like terms like power, discipline, political technologies and strategies surfaced from his analyses. This does not mean that he consigned his previous work to the waste-paper basket. Rather, he tries to reformulate the questions he was tackling before in a new vocabulary – a characteristic aspect of his work. As the man himself states: "When I think back now, I ask myself what else it was that I was talking about, in *Madness and Civilisation* or *The Birth of the Clinic*, but power? Yet I am perfectly aware that I scarcely ever used the word and never had such a field of analyses at my disposal" (Foucault 1980: 115, italics in original).

Foucault's "move to power" in the 1970s was accompanied by a stronger critique of marxism. Although he never was much of a marxist (which in pre – May 1968 and its immediate aftermaths came close to blasphemy⁶) the new conceptual framework provided him with a set of tools for qualifying his reserves towards marxism. His insistence throughout the 1970s that power works upon and through the body rather than through the seizure of consciousness brought him in direct conflict with marxist theories of ideology (cf. also below). As he explains in an interview:

"As regards Marxism, I'm not one of those who try to elicit the effects of power at the level of ideology. Indeed I wonder whether, before one poses the question of ideology, it wouldn't be more materialist to study first the question of the body and the effects of power on it. Because what troubles me with these analyses which prioritise ideology is that there is always presupposed a human subject on the lines of the model provided by classical philosophy, endowed with a consciousness which power is then thought to seize on" (Foucault 1980: 58)

It is obvious that statements like these don't fit in very well with the structuralist-Gramscian framework within cultural studies. Indeed, Foucault's project in the 1970s (abolishment of discourse, move to power, critique of marxism) can be seen as critique of two of the central tenets of the structuralist-Gramscian framework: the emphasis on meaning, and the marxist "problem of ideology". Consequently, cultural studies' reaction towards this "middle Foucault" was rather

epistemological problematic has been replaced by the question of the *effects* of power/knowledge) the problem of the truth status of Foucault's own discourse became less urgent. Although I do agree with Dreyfus and Rabinow – whose views I have reproduced here – that genealogy meant a move away from the detached descriptivism of the archaeological period his work remains characterised by a peculiar form of "objectivism". To give but one example: in *Two Lectures* he writes that subjugated knowledges are "the *immediate* emergence of historical contents" (Foucault, 1980: 81, my italics) that hitherto had been buried in the systematicity of history. The use of the word "immediate" at least suggests that Foucault believes in immediate access to such subjugated knowledges.

⁶ It is one of the ironies of history that the student revolts at the end of the 1960s are nowadays seen to be one of those events that disrupted the hegemony of marxism within the West-European intellectual classes. For instance, the work of both Foucault and Deleuze has been heralded as theoretical works that tried to come to terms with the new times. At the moment itself, however, marxism benefited most of the revolutionary feeling that accompanied the May 1968 uprisings, since it was perceived as an action-oriented philosophy with a political zeal that other paradigms were lacking. For example, in May 1968 a famous graphito read "Le structuralisme ne descend pas dans les rues!".

dubious. Tony Bennett, writing on Foucault's reception within cultural studies, characterises the then-prevailing attitude as follows:

"Foucault was 'OK' – but he had no theory of the state; his substitution of the couplet knowledge/power for the distinction between truth and ideology committed him to a politically paralysing epistemological agnosticism; his conception of the micro-physics of power allowed no way in which little struggles might be connected to form the basis for a society-wide struggle with revolutionary potential. In short, all those aspects of Foucault's work which he had directed, polemically and strategically, against Marxism were directed back at him as criticism because they were not Marxist! In effect, Foucault was admitted into the cultural studies roll-call only on the condition that he brought no troublesome Foucaultian arguments with him. The role accorded his work was not that of reformulating received problems so much as being tagged on to arguments framed by the very formulations he questioned, lending them a spurious Foucaultian pedigree. Quoted extensively, he was used very little" (Bennett, 1998: 63).

The above quote sums up nicely which aspects of Foucault's work were taken up and which ones were rejected. Essentially the structuralist-Gramscian framework remained intact and was complemented with the use of the term "discourse". In this cultural studies approach "discourse" functioned in roughly the same way as "ideology" or hegemony – an ironic interpretation, given Foucault's commitment to elaborating a non-marxist approach to power. Sometimes the link between discourse and ideology was explicitly made, as for example in *Key Concepts in Communication*, a book aimed at students. After having associated discourse with Foucault, the heading says:

"Thus discourses are power relations. It follows that much of the social sense-making we're subjected to – in the media, at school, in conversation – is the working through of **ideological** struggle between different discourses: a good contemporary example is that between the discourses of (legitimated, naturalized) patriarchy and (emergent, marginalized) feminism" (O Sullivan et al., 1983: 74, bold in original)

This example is a particularly clear one, but others are possible as well. For instance, in *Media Matters* Fiske defines culture as "a river of discourses" (1994: 7), explicitly referring to Foucault as an inspirational source for his approach. However, in the analyses that follow the term discourse is used in a similar fashion as marxists use the term ideology. The same can be said about Laclau and Mouffe's already cited discourse theory – which prepared the theoretical grounds on which many cultural studies scholars built their analyses – where the term discourse is taken from Foucault but the critique of marxism is rejected in favour of a Gramscian approach. In sum, in cultural studies Foucault's work is only taken up at the level of terminology, and the Althusserian or Gramscian fundamentals remain intact.

As argued above, this interpretation neglects the extent to which Foucault was trying to develop an alternative model of power – a model which has influenced the analyses in this thesis profoundly. Therefore we will now turn our attention to the exact way Foucault redefined power during his genealogical period.

5.1 Power during the genealogical phase

A first thing which needs to be stressed is that Foucault didn't see himself as developing a *theory* of power. Rather, so he argued, his main problem was the development of "an 'analytics' of power" (Foucault 1990a: 82), that is, a framework for analysing power relationships that needs constant checking and rechecking (see

also Foucault 1982: 209). Thus his analytics of power comes closer to a methodology, “a series of methods for examining the operations of power” (Brooks 1997: 57) rather than an ontology of power. This means that we have to assess critically the ways in which power has been defined before. Foucault argues that our theories of power have been based upon what he calls a juridico-discursive model, in which terms like law, prohibition, liberty, and sovereignty figure prominently. The most well-known example is the thesis he elaborates in the first part of his trilogy *The History of Sexuality* (1990a, originally 1976). In it, Foucault argues against the widespread idea that sexuality during the Victorian period was repressed and that we had to wait for the sexual revolution of the 1960s in order to liberate our “natural” sexuality from the burden of repression. This view, which can be found in areas as diverse as sexual counselling books, educational programs, Wicca, and popular psychology books, is essentially a juridico-discursive model, because power is something which represses, inhibits and limits, something which takes the form of the interdiction. Foucault insists that these models are flawed because they only reveal one aspect of what power is.

Against such “destructive” definitions of power Foucault argues that power mostly is a productive force, that it is creative rather than destructive. To stay with the history of sexuality, Foucault argues that “natural” sexuality has never been repressed, not even during the Victorian age. What actually happened, he contends, is that in the 18th and 19th century sexuality was *created*. Through the system of inhibitions, rules, problematisations and secretcies that came to surround sexual practices “sexuality” as that secret inner core of our being was forged. Sexuality was not “muted” or muffled in the vast networks of the social that were set up to control and regulate sexuality, like boarding schools, the family, the prison, or committees to prevent moral corruption – it was created *exactly* through these disciplinary and confessional technologies. Subtly drawing on the difference between “le sexe” and “la sexualité” (which regrettably gets lost in the English translation) he argues that sexual practices were linked up to discourse and became an identity. From this viewpoint the recent “liberation of sexuality”, the assertive, taboo-breaking declaration of sexual freedom is but the next step in the interlocking of power and sexuality, the only difference being that external control mechanisms have been replaced by internalised forms of self-government. It is as if Foucault is saying that the more we feel free, the more we are “in power”.

This emphasis upon the productivity of power rather than its repressive/delimitative aspects is accompanied by an insistence on the situatedness of power relationships. Arguing against views that define power in structural terms (as for example marxism, in which a social actor’s place within the system of production relations provides them with more or less power) Foucault asserts that power relationships always operate at a *local* level, in a multiplicity of nodes within the networks of the social. This doesn’t mean that systemic effects don’t exist; rather, it means that even structural power relations are grounded in and through local relationships. In his own words:

“Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix – no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body. One must suppose rather that the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of

production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole" (Foucault, 1990a: 94)

A number of consequences follow from this necessary situatedness of power relationships. The first is that power is a *material force*, operating upon bodies rather than "minds". Foucault works this out most explicitly in *Discipline and Punish* (1991, orig. 1975), and it is necessary to sketch the general argument of the book in order to flesh out this materiality of power. In this book Foucault traces a history of the penal system from the viewpoint of discipline. "The disciplinary society" is the name he gives to the particular forms that modern power relationships have taken since the end of the 17th century throughout Western Europe. Around this time – which coincides with the gradual decline of absolutist monarchies and the slow but steady rise of liberalism that would eventually culminate into the French Revolution (1789) – the old power models based upon sovereign-vassal relationships became obsolete and were replaced by a more widespread form of control. To put it simply: whereas in feudal and absolutist regimes power was individualised only in the higher strata of society the modern, liberal forms of power are characterised by its ubiquity, encompassing all the social groups. The characteristic Foucaultian twist in the argument is clear: whereas our traditional history represent this liberal struggle against absolutism as an evolution towards freedom and emancipation – generally a more humanitarian (or is it humanist?) society – Foucault points towards the forms of control built into the new regime. To summarise the argument somewhat: Foucault argues that the disciplinary society is characterised by widespread forms of control that operate in local settings, and that attempt to regulate the behaviour of individuals or the population in its entirety⁷, in contrast to previous forms of power where the display of sovereignty was more important than the regulation of behaviour. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault sketches a genealogy of the disciplinary society by focussing upon the *modus operandi* of closed institutions like the school, the factory, the army, the prison.

Whether Foucault's discouraging account of modernity and its disciplinary features is exaggerated is a question beyond the scope of this PhD, and is eventually

⁷ After finishing *Discipline and Punish* – which focussed mainly on the means through which individual behaviour was regulated – Foucault turned his attention to the way the population *in its entirety* became a governmental problem. In these writings, which were never published as a book but are known mainly through the publication of his courses at the Collège de France (published in French as the *Hautes Études*-series (e.g. Foucault 1997); some of these lectures have been translated into English, gathered in Burchell, Gordon & Miller 1991) he describes the ways in which "the population" became a problem for 17th century policy-makers. He argues that this governmental logic differs from its predecessors because it aims at the government "of all and of each", combining massifying (at the level of aggregation) elements and individualising elements (at the level of the individual), resulting in a meshwork of control mechanisms across society. He was brought to this study of governmental rationality, or governmentality as he called it, because of marxist criticism of *Discipline and Punish*. For them, Foucault's sketch of the disciplinary society, and his emphasis upon the microphysics of power had neglected the role of the state in organising these local forms of domination. Foucault's answer was that governmentality was not restricted to the state, but that it operated across the state-civil society division (see Gordon 1991 for an excellent overview of the governmentality period; see Peters 2001 for an excellent application of governmentality on welfare and neo-liberalism).

of minor importance for what is to follow. Suffice it to say that criticism came from various sources: some argued that Foucault had pointed towards a tendency of modern institutions, but that the rhetorical excess of the book lead to an exaggerated account (McNay, 1994); others argued that Foucault's interpretation was correct at the level of the disciplinary ideal (that is, the ideal that had motivated the big-scale reforms) but that the actual conditions and practices in these closed institutions were far removed from how the reformers imagined their projects (Alford 2000, Dews 1987: 188); some even argued that Foucault was only able to describe the disciplinary mechanisms because power in that form – perhaps power itself – had ceased to exist (Baudrillard 1980). Instead of entering the debate on to what extent our society today is a disciplinary one I will focus on the way Foucault redefines power when compared to other perspectives on power.

We've come now to the point where we can specify why Foucault sees power as operating upon the body rather than the mind. Discipline, in his account, works through the training of the body, it so to speak installs itself into the body by directing and modifying its behaviour. *Discipline and Punish* can be seen as a detailed account of the mechanisms of discipline, of the different technologies that are used in order to regulate behaviour. It is impossible to do justice to the detailed analyses that can be found in *Discipline and Punish*, so instead I will single out one part and use this for elaborating. In a section on "the control of activity" Foucault discerns several technologies that regulate behaviour (1991: 149-156). First there is the timetable, which organises the movement and appropriate behaviour of bodies in time. Then there is "the temporal elaboration of the act", the rule that breaks up an act into its elements, resulting in an "anatomy-chronological schema of behaviour". The aim of these prescriptions is "the correlation of the body and the gesture":

"In the correct use of the body, which makes possible a correct use of time, nothing must remain idle or useless: everything must be called upon to form the support of the act required. A well-disciplined body forms the operational context of the slightest gesture. Good handwriting, for example, presupposes a gymnastics – a whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety, from the points of the feet to the tip of the index finger" (ibid.: 152)

Finally there's the "body-object articulation", the ultimate aim of disciplinary logic, since it is the moment in which human and object become indistinguishable in the act of performing a function: both human and object are first disassembled into their constituent parts and are then made to function in a machinic assemblage, ultimately dissolving themselves into a pure function. Foucault concludes:

"One is as far as possible from those forms of subjection that demanded of the body only signs or products, forms of expression or the result of labour. The regulation imposed by power is at the same time the law of the construction of the operation. Thus disciplinary power appears to have the function not so much of deduction as of synthesis, not so much of exploitation of the production as of coercive link with the apparatus of production" (ibid.: 153)

Small extracts like these show the extent to which Foucault links power to the body, rather than the mind. It is the body, not the mind or consciousness, which is the bearer/object of power relations up to the point that it becomes invested with power. The aim of disciplinary power is to change conduct, and whether soldiers, prisoners or school children actually believe in the system is of lesser importance

than the results it wields. To put it bluntly: power doesn't need to convince in order to function properly; it is, as one commentator has put it "the brute outcome of praxis" (Nixon 1997: 317) We are very far removed from those approaches that put subjectivity at the centre of academic attention, or better, "subjectivity" is in Foucault's account a by-product of a more primordial relationship with the body – it comes in handy but is not necessary for power in its functioning⁸. (Note also the critique of Marxism in the above quote: disciplinary power encompasses economic power completely).

This brings us to the second consequence of thinking power relationships as productive and situated in local and material contexts, namely the relational character of power relationships. In an interview Foucault objects to being called a theoretician of power because he has always been concerned with power *relationships* rather than power as such, and then goes on to argue:

I mean that in human relationships, whatever they are, power is always present: I mean the relationship in which one wishes to direct the behaviour of another. These relations of power are then changeable, reversible and unstable. [...] In order to exercise a relation of power, there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty (Foucault 1988b: 11)

The relational character of power is an aspect of Foucault's thinking which is often misunderstood, especially when it is combined with his often quoted statement that "wherever there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 1990a: 95). Thus the image arises of a writer who first sketches a detailed (and pessimist) account of the many ways in which power relationships invade every aspect of our lives, but then, as if worried by his own analysis, reassuringly states that all these technologies of power *do* encounter resistance: it's looking grim but at least in theory resistance is possible. The use of the word "relationality" in the context of power relationships indeed suggests two possible (and in my opinion, flawed) readings: first there is a structuralist reading, that is, a conception of power as a system of reciprocal, binary terms that constitute each other (as for example in Saussurean semiology). Even if one does not adhere to such a structuralist reading and instead chooses to interpret relationality as "the reciprocal play of forces" the danger is that power becomes a pluralist zero-sum game, exemplified best by what system theorists and cyberneticians call a stable system. This, however, is not the relationality Foucault is after. Relationality in Foucault's account simply means that it must be exercised in *relationships*, that is, in situated social interaction between different actors (be it

⁸ It is true, as many commentators have noted, that during the genealogical period the focus on the body led Foucault to almost abolish the question of subjectivity (e.g. McNay 1992, Grosz 1994: 138-159). In the work that was to follow, however, he returned to the problematic with a vengeance. In part two and three of the *History of Sexuality*-trilogy (Foucault 1992, 1990b) he turned his attention to practices or technologies of the self, by which he means those reflexive practices "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault 1988a: 18). Subjectivity had already surfaced in his archaeological period (mainly as the effect of discourses), but the later Foucault, for the first time in his intellectual career, attempts to describe the subject in terms of "an interior landscape" (Hall, 1996c: 13), rather as the effect of exterior forces (be it discourses or the material operation of power).

individuals, groups or institutions and their respective combinations). Thus Foucault distinguishes between “strategic games between liberties” and “states of dominations” (1988b: 19): both are power relationships, but in the former the possibilities for individuals to modify the relationship are difficult if not impossible to overcome. In sum, every human relationship in which one tries to change behaviour of the other is always a power relationship but not every power relationship ends in a state of domination.

From this follows the third characteristic: power relationships are in Foucault’s approach always to a certain extent *strategic*. Because power relationships have as their aim the modification of behaviour (Foucault speaks about “the conduct of conduct”) it always contains a strategic, instrumental component. He describes these strategies as “intentional and nonsubjective” (Foucault 1990a: 94), by which he means that power relations have a very clear aim that is openly proclaimed (nothing hidden about the goals and means of power relationships), yet nobody can be said to have invented them – there’s no equivalent to the cigar-smoking capitalist pulling the strings behind the screen. His insistence on the calculated and open character of power relationships (what he calls “the local cynicism of power” (1990a: 95)) can – again – be seen as a critique of marxism, where the unveiling of hidden power relationships is an important task of intellectual critique. Marx’ theory of the market exchange relationship as the place where unequal power relationships are naturalised is an instance of such an approach. Marx’ theory is essentially structured towards a moment of revelation: what appears to be a relationship of free, autonomous agents is in reality (that is, after Marx’ analysis) an unequal power relationship. Foucault is not interested in revealing the hidden depths of surface events, since for him the surface events *are* the reality. Power relationships don’t work by hiding their dynamics but by propagating it out in the open, stating it loud and clearly from the start (“our aim is to transform this or that behaviour”). Of course there is something “hidden” about them (or else we wouldn’t need a Foucault to show us) but power relationships don’t hide *their rationality and functioning* from sight. So the figures of concealment and revelation serve a different purpose in the marxist and the Foucaultian account: whereas the market relationship pretends to be the opposite of what it actually is (a coercive instead of a free relationship) and the analyst’s role is to display the hidden aspects of this false rationality, the reformatory relationship displays its rationality openly but the analyst is needed to show that it actually is a *power* relationship, rather than a humane intervention.

Fourth, power is exercised in network-like arrangements. Foucault uses the metaphor of the capillary to describe the many ways in which power relations surround us. Criticising top-down approaches to power he argues that power circulates locally throughout the networks of the social rather than originating in a social group, a system or a base. In his view, the social is a vast network of many social actors trying to influence each other’s behaviour, and consequently there are multiple points of contact rather than one single source from which all power relations flow. Foucault’s analytics of power thus pulls our attention to the manifold (institutional) interactions in which we try to govern ourselves and “others” (and are governed by ourselves and others): from big-scale university reforms to nagging about household work not being done, all of these activities contain in some way or another (and with different means) attempts to direct other’s behaviour, and thus the social can be seen as a network of power relations, or better, as a field of forces

that act upon each other. In chapter 2, when we get to actor-network theory, I will get back to this important point.

5.2 Criticism

Of course Foucault's work on power during the genealogical period did not go without criticism (nor, for that matters, his archaeological period). It is not my intention to give a complete overview of all the critical assessments that have been made of Foucault's work. By now there is a vast – and still growing – collection of work on Foucault from many different perspectives (see for instance McNay 1994, Simons 1995, Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982, Davidson 1997, Hindess 1996, Burchell *et al.* 1991 to name but a few) and it would lead us too far in summing up all the criticisms that have been levelled against him. Instead I will take up those arguments that are relevant for our history of cultural studies, and the arguments that are to follow.

A recurrent theme in Foucault criticism is that "his descriptive analysis of power provides us with no criteria for judgement, no basis upon which to condemn some regimes of power as oppressive or to applaud others as involving progress in human freedom" (Patton, 1998: 64). The critique has been particularly strong on those sides of the academic spectrum that mourn the advance of poststructuralism at the expense of modernist perspectives based upon a universal human subject endowed with the capacity of reason (see for instance Habermas 1987, Dews 1987). In Foucault's analytics of power they find the impossibility to discern between different forms of power. His "behaviourist" (Hall, 1996c: 13) approach to power ("to direct or influence behaviour") is indeed characterised by the detached descriptivism referred to earlier. To put it simply, there is no way to decide – with the analytical tools that Foucault provides – whether a relationship (and for Foucault, this is almost always a power relationship) is oppressive, tolerable or positive. Power, in his account, comes close to the normatively neutral concept of "force" in physics and is indeed not something that is inherently "good" or "bad".

Whereas the criticism is in my view correct – and it is something that we will get back to repeatedly in the empirical part – it also is in danger of throwing the baby away with the bathwater. First of all it should be mentioned that Foucault was aware of the problem. In an already quoted interview that, it has to be admitted, was recorded five years after the publication of *Discipline and Punish* (and hence the criticism of his work on power was already well-established at the time) he makes a distinction between "strategic games between liberties" and "states of domination". In the latter the subject of power has no means available to change the system in which the relationships take place. He gives the example of the situation of women throughout the 19th century, which was indeed oppressive, that is, leaving them very few options to fundamentally change their situation (which doesn't amount to saying that women didn't have strategies of resistance at their disposal – see Foucault 1988b: 11–12). Hence Foucault *does* have a set of normative criteria by which to judge power relationships, namely the extent to which they are symmetrical and/or open to reversal, but admittedly this was not made explicit in *Discipline and Punish* and *The Will to Knowledge*. The criticism actually forced him to articulate this minimal normative basis from which to judge power relations. But it is by and large a limited

and *ad hoc* normative basis, depending upon place and time of the analysis, rather than the eternal and universal law that his critics seem to expect from him⁹.

Thus the criticism underestimates the extent to which Foucault's account *reworks* rather than rejects the entire modernist notion of politics based upon a universal humanist subject and the accompanying discourse of human rights, emancipation, autonomy, and the likes. For starters, Foucault takes issue with the equation of power with "bad" and resistance with "good", a fundamental assumption of most modernist critical theories. Foucault is critical of those emancipatory discourses that see resistance as standing outside of power (as for example in the repressive hypothesis on sexuality that is his target in *The Will to Knowledge*). He insists that resistance in itself is an absurd idea, that it is always implicated in the power strategies it resists. This implication can take many forms: modification, transformation, deployment, reinforcement, complicity, mobilisation are terms Foucault uses to describe the manifold interconnections between power and resistance. Hence resistance should be taken carefully, it should not be celebrated as virtue in its own right and it certainly cannot be *the* norm by which to judge power relations. Secondly, he asserts the importance of autonomy but does so by trying to redirect it, away from its humanist roots. As Patton puts it far more eloquently than I can:

"Foucault's appeal to a principle of autonomy is not grounded in a metaphysical conception of human being as essentially free but in an analytics of power. From at least 'The Subject and Power' onwards, Foucault suggests that freedom is the ontological precondition of politics and ethics. However, this is an historical rather than a transcendental ontology. Freedom here is not the transcendental condition of a moral action, as it is for Kant, but rather the contingent historical condition of actions upon the actions of others (politics) and of action upon the self (ethics). Just as for Foucault political power exists only in the concrete forms of government of conduct, so freedom exists only in the concrete capacities to act of particular agents" (Patton, 1998: 73)

In sum, these "modernist" critiques underestimate the extent to which Foucault tries to develop a critical, alternative Enlightenment project (that is, based upon the ideals of the Enlightenment but without its claims to universality and a common human essence) starting from a historical analytics of power rather than a transcendental human subject. Criticism needs to deduce its normativity (that is, the norms by which to judge a power relationship or situation) from the local, concrete and situated practices one examines, and any attempt to formulate it in universal terms, once and for all, will inevitably validate a particular viewpoint that limits the freedom of others¹⁰.

⁹ This will be the problem to which the "later Foucault" will turn his attention: to formulate a critical, nonhumanist theory of power and subjectivity. His work on practices of the self (Foucault 1992 and 1990b) and other essays from the same period (e.g. What is Enlightenment?) are an attempt to come to terms with the legacy of the Enlightenment. This work is notorious for the change of tone, for Foucault abandons his usual critical-antagonistic style and becomes milder, sometimes even generous to those that preceded him.

¹⁰ This strongly resembles the debate between Benhabib (1995a, 1995b) and Butler (1995a, 1995b) on the merits of poststructuralist theory for feminism. In this debate, Benhabib argues that a feminist project is impossible without some notion of the feminist subject (that is, some shared agreement on who the project is supposed to represent) and therefore poststructuralism, with its deconstruction of the subject, is damaging for the feminist political project. Butler on the other hand contends that any such attempt to ground feminist politics in a

Within feminism the usability of Foucault's analytic of power – and his work in general – has been highly debated. Although many feminist writers (especially those who are sympathetic towards the poststructuralist project in general) have to some extent acknowledged the importance of Foucault for their work the relationship never was a perfect fit. At first sight there are numerous points of convergence between the feminist and the Foucaultian project: Foucault's distrustful attitude towards knowledge and its power-effects resonates strongly with the feminist critique of "objective" knowledge as male-centred. Also, Foucault's criticism of the unitary subject offered feminism tools for showing how this unitary subject was always modelled upon men, or better, how "Man" was – indeed – always male. Third, Foucault's specific approach to constructivism, where even the body is imprinted by history has offered some feminists ways to attack "the female natural body" and show how the female body is the result of different, gender-specific disciplinary regimes (e.g. Bartky 1997). Fourth, Foucault and feminism share a politicisation of the personal: in Foucault the local, situated character of ubiquitous power relationships makes that even those relationships that are traditionally considered to be "beyond politics" (e.g. intimate or sexual relationships, but also pedagogics) are politicised, which resonates well with feminist concerns about the personal being political. Fifth, Foucault's rather critical attitude towards emancipatory discourses – how they sometimes are implicated in the power strategies they oppose – has helped those feminists writing "from the margin" in articulating their concerns about the white, heterosexual middle-class bias in socialist feminism.

But Foucault also posed problems for those feminists engaging with his work. First of all it is clear that Foucault himself wasn't a feminist, nor was he particularly attentive towards gender as a category in his analyses. Though not unsympathetic towards it, the references in his work to gendered power relationships are rare (even in *The Will to Knowledge*, a book that engages with sexuality, women receive far less attention than for example children). Therefore even those feminists most sympathetic to Foucault's work (e.g. Sawicki 1998, McLaren 1997, Bartky 1997) are critical of his gender blindness. Bartky, for instance, writing on the ways in which feminine ideals lead women to discipline their bodies up to the point of self-starvation, argues:

"Women, like men, are subject to many of the same disciplinary practices Foucault describes. But he is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine. To overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed. Hence, even though a liberatory note is sounded in Foucault's critique of power, his analysis as a whole reproduces that sexism which is endemic throughout Western political theory" (Bartky, 1997: 132)

The problematic relationship with Foucault, however, goes further than his gender blindness. It is no surprise that within feminism the same concerns about

fixed, stable identity will always be normative and exclusive from the start. Butler's "solution" to this foundationalist logic is that the signifier "women" should be kept "open", that is, it should be kept open to resignification/contestation. Such a project, Butler argues, would mean that the "radical democratic impetus of feminist politics" (1995a: 51) is valorised, even if it is a risky procedure. It is clear that the Butlerian and the Foucaultian project, though working on different fields, share the same refusal of normative foundations of the subject.

Foucault's refusal to formulate a normative framework have been raised (e.g. Fraser 1989, Grimshaw 1993). In Foucault, so the reasoning goes, it is impossible to distinguish between different forms of power, resulting in a (politically dangerous) position from where it is difficult to argue against the oppression of women in a male-dominated society. As Moi (1985: 95, quoted in Brooks 1997: 65-66) puts it succinctly: "If we capitulate to Foucault's analysis, we will find ourselves caught up in a sado-masochistic spiral of power and resistance which, circling endlessly in heterogeneous movement, creates a space in which it will be quite impossible to argue that women under patriarchy constitute an oppressed group, let alone develop a theory of their liberation". Positions like these fear that Foucault, apart from bringing in a handy tool for analysis will bring along a relativism to the detriment of the feminist political project, leading ultimately to an abolishment of all politics. Although these criticisms can hardly be said to overlap with the modernist project like Habermas', they share with the latter a common understanding of politics, based upon emancipation, autonomy and a grounding subject.

In Nancy Hartsock's article "Foucault on Power: a Theory for Women?" (1990) we find another powerful critique of Foucault which is specific to feminism. Whereas authors like Fraser, Brooks or Bartky are critical of Foucault but at the same time have used some of his concepts, Hartsock is downright critical of the Foucaultian project. From what could be called a standpoint epistemological viewpoint, she argues that Foucault's account is dangerous because it is a theory of "the colonizer who resists" (1990: 164). This position is ambiguous, because it is critical of existing power relationships (like colonialism, but by extension any other unequal power relationship) while at the same time it is incapable of fabricating an alternative vision: it "fails to provide an epistemology which is usable for the task of revolutionizing, creating, and constructing" (ibid.: 164). The coloniser who resists is too enmeshed in the power relationship he is critical of – the gendered pronoun is no accident. Hartsock's underlying assumption is that feminist theory must start from the experience and point of view of the dominated, since it is through the validation and mobilisation of the experience of subjection that feminism will be able to empower women.

What elements of his account make Foucault a coloniser who resists? First of all it is clear that experience, coming straight from phenomenology, is a very unFoucaultian term that hardly surfaces in his work. The concept that comes closest is the category of subjectivity, and staying true to his poststructuralist roots (the term might be badly chosen) Foucault sees the subject not as the origin of meaning, but as an effect of power/knowledge constellations. Although in his later work he will start to develop a minimal theory of the subject, he sees disciplined individuals – at least at the time of *Discipline and Punish* – as "docile bodies", that is, as passive social agents (McNay, 1994). Hence experience for Foucault needs to be treated with suspicion, and it can impossibly form the foundation of a political project. Secondly, although Foucault's analytic of power is indeed a critical apparatus (that is, aimed at critically analysing power relationships), it is also an apparatus that "understands the world from the perspective of the ruling group" (Hartsock, 1990: 167). Foucault's account, although critical of official knowledge is also an account which reproduces in its analyses time and time again the viewpoint of the victor, of the officially sanctioned knowledge, and thus it fails to provide an alternative epistemology and/or ontology. The detached descriptivism that characterises his work (the meticulous

and descriptive analyses of power/knowledge constellations and their institutional settings) is in this sense a sterile “apparatus”, great for dissecting but lousy at imagining alternative worlds.

Hartsock’s critique is in my view a powerful one. From her conviction that theory must validate the experiences of women it follows that the Foucaultian stance is dangerous. Foucault’s refusal to formulate a *positive* political theory, that is, the provision of an alternative “utopia” (etymologically “a better place”) is indeed frustrating for those engaging with his work. Ultimately the conflict between Hartsock and Foucault stems from contrasting political strategies: whereas Hartsock is interested in theory as a tool for mobilising women (through the validation of and connection with women’s experience of subordination) Foucault believes in local struggles against particular forms of domination. The difference between both authors is that between the vanguard party and the action group, between consciousness raising groups and activism.

My personal stance on this subject is that Foucault’s analytics of power is a powerful critical tool for analysing institutional and/or *local* relationships, no more and no less. It is an approach that comes in handy for particular analyses and is less useful for other goals. In chapter 3, when we get to the research design, I will specify this claim. For the moment, suffice it to sketch the rough lines of the argument. Foucault provides a powerful critical tool for analysing power relationships that operate within specific, local settings. The terms he provides are excellent for analysing institutional power relations and the strategies that are at play in such settings, and the question whether one agrees with the Foucaultian political project is eventually of minor importance in such concrete analyses. For other types of power relationships, say for instance, the structural subordination of immigrants on the labour market, or the question of how governments convince their populations to go to war, the Foucaultian analytics of power is less appropriate. While I do believe it is important to keep the debate going about Foucault’s general political project (something with which I keep on struggling myself) I also believe that “politics” is not a singular thing, that politics can take many forms at many different levels, and hence it requires multiple analytical tools. Foucault’s analytic of power provides one such tool, no more but also no less.

6. Cultural studies and “the Foucault effect”¹¹

If we return now to our history of cultural studies it becomes clear to what extent the Foucaultian project posed serious problems for the structuralist-Gramscian project that had become the cultural studies *doxa* by the end of the 1980s. The marxist component of cultural studies, though complexified with (post)structuralist theory, had oriented cultural studies towards an ideological problematic, that is, the question of how consensus was created (through, for instance, the media). The bitter debates with political economy on the effectivity of “ideological state apparatuses” in assuring the creation of consent and the question of economic and class reductionism had blindfolded the extent to which both were

¹¹ This section is a shorter version of an argument I have made elsewhere at length (Teurlings 2002a). The title of this section is taken from a chapter of Tony Bennett’s *Culture: A Reformer’s Science* (1998), which in turn refers to Burchel et al. (1991).

operating within a marxist problematic. As with most rear-guard actions the end result was that the big picture became rather obscure. Foucault's enrolment into the structuralist-Gramscian framework was probably a direct consequence of the quarrels with political economy. Cultural studies scholars took those aspects of his work that could be fitted into the structuralist-Gramscian framework while ignoring his critique of marxism. Most importantly, his emphasis upon power relationships operating upon bodies rather than minds, as well as his materialist-institutional approach were less favoured aspects of his theorising.

By the mid 1990s this interpretation of Foucault started to change, however, because of several reasons. The most important of these was the general state of the discipline. Cultural studies had undoubtedly become an academic success story throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and its rapid internationalisation and institutionalisation was somewhat *blitzkrieg*-like. But this popularisation came with a price: not only became the discipline because of its internationalisation more plural and fragmented (which in itself is a positive thing), it also became subject to a much more stringent critique. The emphasis upon textual polysemy and the active viewer (which for the critics was what cultural studies was all about), accompanied by the gradual dissolution of the structuralist-Gramscian framework into a more populist project mentioned in section 3, made that cultural studies in its more extreme formulations sounded like an apogee for the neoliberal market discourse which had conquered the world since the 1980s. The reproach of "cultural populism" (McGuigan 1992) started to sound louder, even from those practitioners that were formerly sympathetic towards the discipline. Even some of the key scholars expressed concerns about the road the discipline had taken (e.g. Grossberg 1998, Hall 1992). It is no surprise, then, that the structuralist-Gramscian project and its related emphasis upon meaning increasingly became subject to criticism and/or revision. As Grossberg (2001: 138) puts it:

"Too often, we assume culture is ideological, but ideology was basically an invention of modern Europe, closely articulated to formation of modern democratic civil societies. It was the idea that power works through the construction of meaning, through the imposition as it were of mediating structures of meaning by which we live our lives, without any direct contact with the world outside of meaning. It was the creation of a new mode of power, along the lines of what Gramsci calls consensus. But I think if you look at the world today, you have to at least think about the possibility that the ideological articulation of power is weakening (not disappearing, at least for the moment)".

In such conditions of disciplinary impasse the Foucaultian critique of marxism gathered momentum, since it suggested an alternative way to do theory (and politics). The work of the middle Foucault (the analytics of power) encouraged some scholars to approach culture in other, non-discursive terms. In Foucault they found a new approach to culture in which terms like governmentality, administrative routines or power/knowledge constellations replaced encoding, hegemony or preferred meaning. This is what Bennett (1998) calls "the Foucault effect": the idea that Foucault offers cultural studies an entirely new model of culture, a model in which culture is a strategic resource deployed in function of social management. In order to specify this I will limit myself to two such studies so as to explore in what ways this approach to culture differs from the structuralist-Gramscian approach.

The first of these studies is Sean Nixon's *Hard Looks: Masculinity, Spectatorship & Contemporary Consumption* (1996), a study of the ways in which

during the 1980s the “new man” imagery came into being – an imagery which received a lot of academic attention (e.g. Mort 1988). It is in a sense a true transitional work, operating on the border between the structuralist-Gramscian framework and the governmental model of culture (actually, given the direction to which his later work evolved – the role of cultural intermediaries in cultural production – I doubt whether he would agree on being called a “governmentalist”). The book combines some typical structuralist-Gramscian concerns, like for instance an interest in the ways in which representations within popular culture articulate new gender identities. But it also differs from it in the way it grounds these articulatory practices in institutional contexts.

Nixon traces the history of the “new man” throughout the different institutional sites where he was fabricated. He takes the new man as a Foucaultian “regime of representation” that isn’t limited to one specific medium (for instance style mags like *The Face* or *Arena*) but gets constructed in a wide variety of interconnected institutional sites. Nixon indeed goes at length to document this history and comes close to what anthropologists call “a thick description”. He starts the book with a sketch of the way in which the menswear market was restructured during the 1980s. The traditional British men’s market had been in gradual decline because of its outdated image and the general restructuring of manufacturing towards countries where production was cheaper. Thus there was need of new markets, markets that were to be found with young, style-conscious men, accompanied by the introduction of newer, more flexible production technologies. But the retailing practices also changed: at least part of the success of the new man imagery can be explained by the novel ways in which shop outlets displayed the products on offer. Nixon even analyses how these shops created new “technologies of looking” (ibid.: 61-72) by the organisation of the shop’s space. Furthermore, one needs to take into account the rise of creative ad agencies, like *Saatchi & Saatchi*, who developed new ways of advertising, based upon style and sphere (*emotional selling points*) instead of the communicating of a clear message (*unique selling points*) (ibid.: 77-90). The creative practices in these agencies were backed up by so-called psychographics, a new more qualitatively oriented way to classify consumers not relying on the standard “class, sex, age” – demographics. Instead of the usual sociological categories like A, B, C1 or C2 these agencies worked with exciting sounding categories like the “inner-directeds”, the “outer-directeds” or the “sustenance motivated”, categories which ad agencies in their turn used for making creative choices (ibid.: 91-122). Last but not least, there were some young entrepreneurs who started a men’s magazine (a market which was said not to be non-existing), backed up by young stylists and photographers giving these magazines a distinctive style (ibid.: 145-195). All these actors (and I’ve left out a few for the sake of clarity) with their specific knowledges and professional practices were in some way or another instrumental in proliferating “the new man” imagery. It is important to stress that all these different actors, often without having explicit knowledge of each other, were needed in order to make the new man imagery “work” (that is, to make it circulate as a cultural form).

As mentioned before Nixon’s book contains some elements from the structuralist-Gramscian framework: an emphasis upon representations as carriers of meaning that have real effects, an emphasis upon popular culture as the place where “new” gender identities are being articulated... But at the same time it is far

removed from the encoding/decoding model. First of all Nixon situates these discursive practices firmly in the institutional contexts from which they arise: the new man imagery was not so much a question of "dominant cultural orders" (though he doesn't exclude this possibility) but of specific knowledges within specific institutional contexts (the ad agency, the shop, the editorial board). Second, whereas the encoding/decoding model still is mainly located within a marxist framework of production/consumption (and the text as the mediating instance between both) Nixon's account shuns these categories. The Foucaultian emphasis upon institutional practices displaces the economically oriented production/consumption axis, thus offering Nixon a way out of the "in the last instance" dilemma that continued to haunt cultural studies. As he states himself:

[I]n opening up for consideration the forms of knowledge and expertise that shape representations, Foucault's account of discourse has directed me towards a consideration of the economic calculations and practices that figure prominently in the production of commercially produced representations like the "new man" imagery. Though Foucault's own work generally sidesteps these economic practices and tends to consign "the economic" to the domain of extradiscursive practices, his conception of discourse has nonetheless prompted me to analyze economic practices discursively. This has, in particular, led me to challenge the tendency within the post-Althusserian tradition of cultural analysis to play up the "relative autonomy" of cultural processes, while maintaining the epistemological guarantee of economic determination in the last instance. It is this ordering of different social practices that Foucault's work clearly problematizes and that in turn opens up the possibility of another model of determination within cultural analysis" (ibid., 12-13)

It is clear that this interpretation of Foucault differs substantially from the preceding ones. Gone is the castigation of Foucault for not complying with the marxist problematic of "in the last instance"; instead, it is welcomed as a handy way out of a problematic that had troubled cultural studies for so long. With Nixon we witness the first steps, be it timid¹² ones, for rethinking "culture" along Foucaultian lines.

Tony Bennett elaborates the governmental model of culture most explicitly. Actually, his work is most interesting for this chapter because his career path is exemplary for the evolution of cultural studies as it has been sketched on these pages. Having published extensively on Gramsci during the 1980s - as well as applying it to popular culture in his co-authored book on James Bond (Bennett & Woollacot 1987) - Bennett came to believe that "Foucault is better to 'think with' than Gramsci" (Bennett 1998: 62). Having studied both authors in depth Bennett is able to articulate clearly the extent to which they differ in the way they think the social.

But what exactly is this governmental approach to culture? Bennett draws on Foucault governmentality-writings (see footnote 7 for a contextualisation of this period in Foucault's intellectual development) in order to understand the ways in

¹² I consider Nixon's attempt a timid one, because of the mixed character of his enterprise, relying both on structuralist-Gramscian elements and Foucaultian ones. Moreover I haven't got the impression that Nixon is very interested in "the state of cultural studies": the book is rather empirically oriented, favouring the thick description of institutional contexts, and theory receives relatively little attention. Thus it is mostly *my* interpretation of Nixon that makes him a "governmentalist".

which "culture" has been an instrument of social management. In *The Birth of the Museum* (1995), for example, Bennett traces the many ways in which culture (especially in its "high" forms) was perceived - by reformers of all kinds - to be an excellent tool for elevating the masses. Culture, as it was increasingly displayed in publicly accessible spaces, was seen to be a means to an end, and that end was no less than the moral elevation of "the people". Throughout institutions like the museum, the library or the public park the contours of a governmental project, aimed at the management and regulation of the population in its entirety become visible. The aim of these reformatory/transformatory measures was the production of a new kind of subjectivity, the instalment of a new ("better, more moral") relation to oneself. Thus the governmental rationality aims at "producing a citizenry which, rather than needing to be externally and coercively directed, would increasingly monitor and regulate its own conduct" (Bennett, 1995: 8). Paradoxically (although, from the Foucaultian viewpoint this is no paradox) this self-governing relationship was produced by the material contexts of places of culture: libraries and museums are highly managed contexts, with a fixed trajectory and rigid codes of conduct. Thus the strategic deployment of culture works at at least two levels: as a general governmental principle for the population in its entirety (a "macro-level"), but also at a material-individual level, as the regulation of behaviour.

It is obvious that the governmental approach to culture differs substantially from the structuralist-Gramscian approach. Cultural artefacts are not "carriers of meaning" sustaining or disrupting hegemony; rather they are tools deployed in social management. Whereas Nixon sees culture as a strategic field of power/knowledge relations, Bennett takes the Foucaultian twist a step higher and argues that culture *itself* is a governmental tool, aimed at the regulation of behaviour and the creation of self-governing subjects. The critical questions that we need to ask ourselves, as cultural studies scholars, differ substantially from those in the structuralist-Gramscian framework. The question is not how to articulate, in a given culture, a counter-hegemonic project, but rather to what extent culture is used to govern, and what modes of subjection follow from this strategic deployment of culture.

Bennett's project is an interesting one, because it offers a novel and exciting approach to culture. There are, however, some problems with it that have to be addressed before we can cheerfully proclaim the death of the structuralist-Gramscian framework and welcome the new prodigy. It is clear that Bennett's governmental approach works well for his particular case study. The distinction between high and low culture has always been normative from the start, hence it is no surprise that Bennett discerns regulatory ideals in high culture's functioning. I find it harder, however, to think what a governmental analysis of, say, club culture would look like. This does not mean that there is no regulation of behaviour in clubs: as anyone who has visited a club knows they are tightly controlled areas (the cue and the bouncer, the spatial organisation of dj and crowd, the "no drugs" policy ...) with a strict code of conduct. However, it is less clear in what regulatory ideal this particular subculture can be inscribed, since club culture, unlike "museum culture", is not inscribed in a generally acknowledged political *rationality* - indeed it is often perceived as a threat to it. To give another example closer to the subject of this PhD: the television production set is a highly managed and regulated environment, but the aim and scope of the management being done by the production team doesn't fit into

a “grand”, macro-level regulatory ideal. In sum, whereas I would agree with Bennett on the notion that culture and the regulation of behaviour are intrinsically intertwined, I doubt whether every cultural form can be reduced to an attempt to govern entire *populations*.

7. Two approaches to culture

What to conclude then, from this history of cultural studies as it has been sketched in this first chapter? Although I have structured the chapter thus that the governmental approach comes after - and can be considered a thorough critique of - the structuralist-Gramscian framework I didn't want to imply that the days of the latter are counted. The governmental approach is still in its infancy, has gathered a relatively small number of scholars around it (with a heavy geographical emphasis upon Australia), and I find it yet lacking in theoretical and empirical diversity, nor has it been subjected to intensive criticism. It is very much an emerging approach, promising but not fleshed out, and certainly not deserving the status of paradigmatic “break” - yet. In a sense, this PhD can be seen as an attempt to apply some aspects of the governmental approach to the field of media production, and I leave it to the reader to judge to what extent it is helpful in our analyses of popular culture.

The structuralist-Gramscian project, on the other hand, has been around for more than two decades, and has proven to be an inspiring framework, generating many empirical studies and theoretical insights. I doubt whether cultural studies would be as popular and widespread as it is today if it wasn't for this particular combination of marxism and (post)structuralism and the pivotal role of meaning and signification processes that came along. But because it has been around for quite some time the paradigm has also been “worn out”, and criticism has had the time to outline its weak points and inconsistencies. Although - as one probably might guess by now - my personal affiliations are closer to the governmental approach I don't think we should throw away the baby with the bathwater and reject all concepts from the structuralist-Gramscian framework. For instance, I find it very hard to think of popular culture, and television culture in particular, without a concept of signification, for the simple reason that watching television is in large part an *interpretive* practice (with which I do not want to imply that this is the only relevant aspect). I fully agree with Joke Hermes' contention that the cultural studies project is flawed by “the fallacy of meaningfulness” (Hermes 1995), that is, the idea that media consumption is always a conscious, meaningful practice. But to move towards the opposite position (the assertion, for instance, that media use is nothing but practice) seems like a bridge too far to me.

As a consequence this PhD will sit uneasily between the two above approaches, at times borrowing from one paradigm, sometimes from the other. I do not wish to hide this tension and will return repeatedly to it, because I think the tension is productive and also because I am convinced that both approaches have important things to say about power and/in popular culture - be it for different kinds of questions. In chapter 3, when we get to the research set-up I will specify this claim. For the moment, suffice it to say that the governmental approach, with its emphasis upon the management of behaviour, is well suited for analysing the production process of dating shows. On the other hand, when one wants to understand how viewers engage with these programs, the vocabulary and conceptual

apparatus of the structuralist-Gramscian approach is more appropriate. Doing thus, I have been shamelessly pragmatic in my choices: if one paradigm fell short to address a certain question, I switched to another one, and *vice versa*. Before doing so, however, we need to add another chapter to our history of cultural studies, namely on the spatiality of the communication process.

Chapter 2: Transmission, circuits, networks and assemblages

"To concentrate on the problematic of affect involves a break with those forms of (interpretive, functionalist, (post)structuralist) cultural critique which are bound into the problematics of meaning. It involves a shift away from semiotics to pragmatics, from the analysis of the putative relations between cultural practices and social formations, between "texts" and "readers" towards a critical engagement with those processes through which libidinal and "information" flows are organised via networks in which "meanings" and "affects" circulate, form clusters, separate in a flux combining signifying and asignifying elements" (Hebdige 1988: 223)

This chapter is concerned with the spatiality of different communication models within cultural studies and media studies, or better, the different spatial metaphors that underpin models of communication within media and cultural studies. All forms of mass media communication involve the traversal of space between at least two, but often more social actors, and the way one conceptualises this geography is of considerable interest for the way power/resistance is thought. After assessing some of the key works within cultural studies (notably the encoding/decoding model and the idea of culture as a circuit) I will argue that the notion of network, as it has been developed within actor-network theory (ANT) can offer cultural studies interesting insights. Although ANT's disciplinary origins lie in science and technology studies, it has developed an interesting vision on the social that can be inspiring for other fields. In this chapter I will make use of ANT to argue that the communication process can be seen as the establishment and maintenance of a network between actors of different kinds, and that such an established network is a precarious achievement. Furthermore, I will also argue that the ANT-approach to power, when combined with a Foucaultian "analytics of power" forms a productive analytical tandem for analysing institutional power relations. In order to make the argument more concrete we will describe Blind Date, one of the two dating shows under scrutiny, as a network and we will illustrate and flesh out how such an actor-network approach differs from the encoding/decoding model and the circuit approach. However, such a concrete application will also bring out the criticism that has been levelled against ANT, and in a final section we will see that the term assemblage allows us to accommodate this critique.

This chapter has not as its aim to propose an alternative "model" of communication, one based upon the assemblage rather than, for example, the transmission model that underpins the encoding/decoding model. Rather, it shows how the cultural studies approach exemplified best by the encoding/decoding and circuit model is not satisfactory in the study of dating shows, and it explores how the application of the ANT perspective can make contributions to a deeper

understanding of the problems at hand. It does not, however, propose a general ANT-model of communication: it is too specific and too applied to a specific case to serve that purpose. In a way, then, this chapter is a hybrid between theoretical exploration and empirical description, one that investigates existing communication models and the spatial metaphors that underpins them, but it does not propose an alternative model for communication that can be applied to other cases.

1. Encoding/decoding and transmission

Where else to start an overview of the implicit spatiality of communication processes than with the encoding/decoding model? As we have seen in the previous chapter it is a model that has influenced an entire generation of cultural studies scholars. Moreover, it is also one of the few attempts within cultural studies to describe the communication process in its entirety, covering both media production and consumption. Whereas most of the subsequent work tended to focus on the textual or on the audience, the encoding/decoding paper also offered an account of media *production*, an aspect of his work that received relatively little attention and certainly generated much less enthusiasm.

Ann Gray (1999: 26) has recently voiced her concern about the way the encoding/decoding model has been simplified in student textbooks, with the ironic result that it has acquired the same common sense status that once surrounded Shannon's mathematical approach to communication (1948), one of the first communication models one learns as an undergraduate student. The irony lies in the fact that the encoding/decoding model aimed at disrupting this common sense that surrounded former communication models, namely the idea that the "problem" of communication consisted in getting this message across with the least amount of noise interfering. The mathematical approach to communication, it might be remembered, defines communication in technological terms: it describes the communication process in terms of its constituent parts (sender, receiver, signal, a feedback loop) and is essentially interested in the extent to which a message is able to cross space while not losing its initial strength. It is against this conception of communication that Hall directed his polemical thrust. As Hall states in an interview taken in 1989, the problem with this approach is the following:

"Now, do you see that the implication of that model is that all communication is perfect communication? The only distortion in it is that the receiver might not be up to the business of getting the message he or she ought to get. But if he or she was intelligent enough and wide-awake enough, obviously there is no problem about meaning: Meaning is perfectly transparent, it's a message the receiver either gets or doesn't get. The communicator wants to get the message through, so he or she wants to know what the blockages are to the perfect transmission of meaning" (Hall 1994: 254)

This idea of communication as the transfer of transparent meaning is a powerful one and can be seen at work in studies on media effects or uses and gratifications (U+G) research. As we have seen in the first chapter the novelty of the encoding/decoding lay in the way it problematised this notion of transparent meaning, arguing that texts are polysemic and that audiences are interpretatively active towards the text. This offered Hall a way to criticise both effect studies and U+G inspired research: "Before this message can have an 'effect' (however defined),

satisfy a 'need' or be put to 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences" (Hall 1980a: 130).

Hall thus installs a kind of protective barrier between the viewer (receiver) and the text (message): the field of meaning that surrounds both viewers and texts, a field that prevents messages from having direct behaviourist effects, or that messages have to pass through before they can be put to use. This field of meaning, or discursive field, is thus in Fornäs (2000) words "the crucial in between". (Not unlike ether in 19th century's physics it surrounds us but is invisible and intangible.) And, as we have seen in the first chapter, it is in the field of mediation that the politics of cultural studies (and the encoding/decoding model) resides. It is exactly *because* we are surrounded by a field of meaning that there is a "gap" between sender and receiver, and that the possibility of disagreement, of interpretive "freedom" and of negotiated or oppositional readings exists. Thus Hall breaks with the notion of perfectly transparent communication, arguing instead that "what [we] have to confront is 'systematically distorted communication'" (Hall 1980a: 135).

To what extent does this model differ from its precursors? In order to answer this question we have to make a distinction between transfer and transmission models of communication. The former stands for the cybernetic approach to communication: the problem of communication is basically a technical problem, boiling down to the question whether the receiver receives the exact message as the sender emitted it. The problem of semantics (what does the message mean and does the receiver understand this meaning?) doesn't enter into the cybernetic framework (Terranova, forthcoming). The question of the meaning of a message is evacuated from the cybernetic approach because it is assumed that both "terminals" (sender and receiver) possess the appropriate "dictionaries" (in informatics: libraries) in order to translate the message, thus reducing communication to a matter of technological success or failure¹. I use the term *transmission* in a much broader sense, namely for any model that conceives of the communication process as the unidirectional "traversal of space" by a message, between a sender and a receiver. In other words, transmission refers to a spatial or geographic constellation, whereas transfer is used for the same spatial constellation *plus* the neglect of semantics – the mathematical model, in short. From this it follows that all transfer-models are transmission-models, but not vice versa.

¹ Shannon insists that "semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem" (Shannon 1948: 1). This can best be exemplified by the telephone. From the cybernetic's point of view a "successful telephonic act of communication" consists of a voice being transmitted across space with the least amount of information lost during its course (for instance, because of noise on the line, or the transformation of the voices). Whether the two people on the telephone actually *understand* each other (for example, when one speaks Dutch and the other speaks Hebrew) is completely irrelevant; what matters is that the "voices" have been transferred "as they were sent".

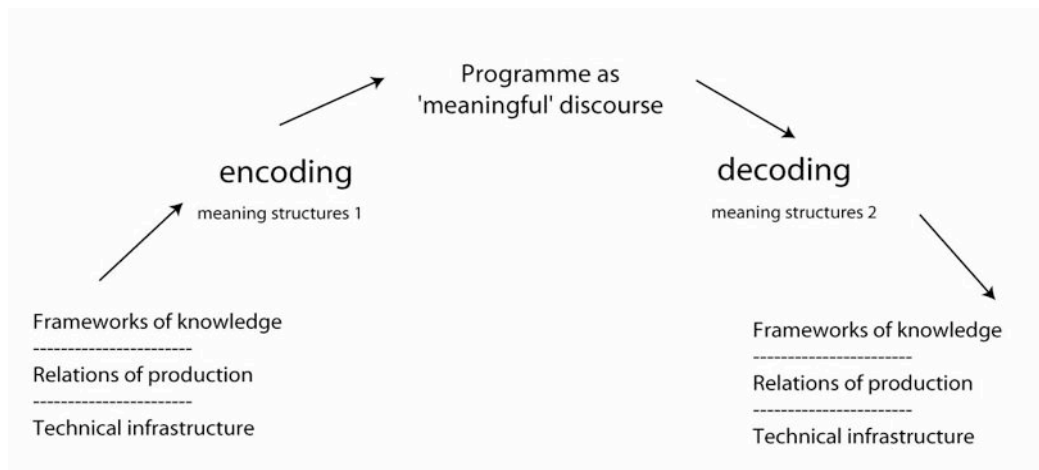


Figure 1: Encoding/decoding (source: Hall 1980a: 130)

It is clear that the encoding/decoding paper does not go together with the transfer model of communication, because of the latter's rejection of semantics. However, I would also like to insist that despite Hall's opening remarks about circulation and reception being different moments of one totality², it remains caught in a transmission-model of communication. Although encoding/decoding was hailed as a model that restored the audience to its rightful place it is very much a unidirectional model, where audiences don't do much more than the decoding of a presignified message. The arrows in the famous model (see Figure 1) go from the encoding moment to the programme and then to the decoding moment, and any reference to what cyberneticians call "a feedback mechanism" is absent, so that the image arises as if the different moments are independent of each other. Hall has admitted in an interview that there is indeed a problem with the implicit spatiality of the model, but - in typical fashion - he relates this back to the problematic of meaning:

"I make a mistake by drawing that bloody diagram with only the top half. You see, if you're doing a circuit, you must draw a circuit; so I must show how decoding enters practice and discourses which a reporter is picking up on. The reporter is picking up on the presignified world in order to signify it in a new way again. And I really create problems for myself by looking as if there is a sort of moment there. So you read the circuit as if there is a real world, then somebody speaks about it and encodes it, then somebody reads it, then there's the real world again. But of course, the real world is not outside of discourse; it's

² Hall draws on Marx to argue that the communication process should be approached as a social totality, rather than cut it up into its constituent parts. The production moment is the departure point of the analysis but it is not a self-sufficient nor extra-discursive: "it [...] is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme throughout this production structure. Further, though the production structures of television originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, 'definitions of the situation' from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part" (Hall 1980a: 129). Hall concludes that "[p]roduction and reception of the television message are not, therefore, identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole" (ibid.: 130).

not outside of signification. It's practice and discourse like everything else" (Hall 1994: 260-261)

The above quote is interesting because it shows the tensions between "the totality" and specific encoding practices that haunt the encoding/decoding model. In the first few sentences Hall says that both the encoding and decoding moment are misrepresented in the model, that they actually form part of a circuit but that the "arrows" suggest a linear model. Hence the lack of feedback, however defined, in the graphic representation of the model. But Hall, after having said this, turns to meaning, the "crucial in between", to reconnect the different moments. It is the field of *meaning* which makes the moments into a totality, not, for instance, the material interconnections between the moments – there is no suggestion that receivers of the message might actually encounter the people that produce the message. Ultimately, in Hall's account, it is discourse that is the connecting salve between the different moments, it is discourse that makes the encoding and decoding moments into a totality. The focus of the model is on the ideological system as a whole, not on individual practices of production or consumption. Although the encoding/decoding model seems to offer an approach for specific encoding and decoding practices (and was mainly taken up that way) it can only "work" if one conceives of the social formation as a totality, of which the media system is a subsystem³.

This is not, however, how the model was taken up. Most scholars who actually applied and tested the model used it for analysing *particular* programs (e.g. Morley 1980, Lewis 1991). But the result of this is that those researchers were actually implying a transmission-model of communication, be it a sophisticated one. The *Nationwide* research, for instance, takes the *Nationwide* text as a starting point and then investigates how different social groups interpret the programme (see chapter 1). But by this operation the communication process effectively becomes a one-direction flow, reducing "audience activity" to the rather passive role of *interpreting* the message. There is no attention for how audience interpretations "flow back" into the encoding moment, nor for the way audience members try to influence encoding practices (e.g. by writing letters of the audience). The communication chain, in these interpretations is a rather direct unidirectional flow, with no "feedback mechanisms" (either indirectly, as a "loop" in the field of meaning, or more directly, as the material practice of audience members contacting or trying to influence media producers).

As a result of this interpretation, the different "moments" were cut off from their place in the totality, so that production, the text, and the moment of reception were rigidly separated from each other, thus installing an almost "transcendent" barrier between them. In fact, it was the rigid separation of production/text/audiences that offered cultural studies its most powerful arguments in its debates with political economy. Both start from a notion of social totality (Mosco, 1996: 29-33), but whereas the latter approach took the system of production and distribution relations as the

³ This ambivalent view on the relationship between particular (situated) cultural processes and the general social totality is a problem not limited to the encoding/decoding model, but to the general structuralist-Gramscian approach (Gibson 2000). Wood, arguing from a less empathic position argues that Hall even "lacks a developed notion of the social totality" (1998: 408).

point of departure (and maybe not in theory, but at least in practice claimed that such an analysis in itself was sufficient to deduce its ideological effects) cultural studies, because of the pivotal role ascribed to meaning and polysemy, could claim 1. that texts were more complex than that (because the link between production and text was not straightforward), and 2. that the ideological effects of “texts” were not guaranteed (because texts are interpreted differently by different viewers). Thus the rigid separation between the different moments was exactly cultural studies’ strongest argument against political economy’s “totality” (the economic media system, solely defined as a system of production and distribution relations). Moreover, the preference in cultural studies for small-scale qualitative research methods, known to be time-consuming and labour-intensive, reinforced the separation of production/text/reception. Whereas everyone agreed that a complete study should encompass or supersede the three moments (Kellner, 1997) there are few that actually did this. Most cultural studies work limited itself to the study of either texts or audiences. At its best textual and reception analysis were combined, but even those are rare. And it is only recently that cultural studies has started taking production “seriously”, conceiving it as something worthy of analysis in its own right (e.g. Du Gay 1997a, Nixon 1996, Negus 1992, Du Gay and Prike 2002).

Let me resume the argument thus far. Although the encoding/decoding model seems to criticise transmission models of communication it somehow remains stuck in the transmission logic of communication. It is true that the model attacks the notion of transparent communication (the effortless *transfer* of a clear-cut message) but the spatial metaphors are still based upon the transmission model: during the production phase the text is put together into a programme which is consequently spread across space, into the homes of the television viewers. This “spreading across space” is conceived in unidirectional terms with the result that, when combined with polysemic texts and active audiences, a rigid separation between production/text/consumption comes into being, which actually cuts the “totality” into moments that are hardly interconnected at all – the only continuity between the moments being the surrounding field of discursivity. Thus production, text and consumption became reified objects of study that could be studied in their own right.

2. Circuit

The encoding/decoding model was important for what it set in motion, but there are relatively few studies that applied the model strictly. As we have seen in the first chapter the model opened the pathway for new audience studies, which quickly opened up the study of audiences into new and uncharted territory. The so-called second generation of audience studies, for example, abandoned the “problem of ideology” that had inspired the encoding/decoding model, instead studying consumption (or media use as they preferred to call it) as a practice, embedded in daily life (Morley 1986, Lull 1990, Hermes 1995). Although Morley has recently argued that he saw the move to ethnography not as a “supersession of the one concern by the other”, but rather as an “attempt to move towards a model of media consumption capable of dealing simultaneously with the transmission of programmes/contents/ideologies (the vertical dimension of power) and with their inscription in the everyday practices through which media content is incorporated

into daily life (the horizontal dimension of ritual and participation)” (Morley, 1999: 197) it is doubtful whether the vertical and horizontal dimensions are as easily integrated as Morley argues. For the move to ethnography undermined some of the central assumptions about ideological transmission/reproduction that was typical for the encoding/decoding model.

Joke Hermes (1995), for instance, has argued that media use (in particular reading magazines) is not the conscious activity that is required for ideological reproduction to take place. Magazines are flexible media: they are picked up, glossed through and put aside, so that they are seldom “read” the way an ideological analysis presupposes. Magazines are inserted into the flow of everyday life, and articles are rarely read in their entirety. By extrapolation the same could be said about television. In times of increasing pressure from advertisers on commercial broadcasters an average evening of television watching is rarely spent on following a single programme entirely, instead flicking through the channels at the moment a commercial break starts (the much dreaded evasive behaviour of “unruly” consumers, see Ang 1991). The result is that television viewing is an increasingly fragmented experience, what Williams (1975: 91-92) has called television’s characteristic “flow”:

“I began watching a film and at first had some difficulty in adjusting to a much greater frequency of commercial “breaks”. [...] Two other films, which were due to be shown on the same channel on other nights, began to be inserted as trailers. A crime in San Francisco (the subject of the original film) began to operate in an extraordinary counterpoint not only with the deodorant and cereal commercials but with a romance in Paris and the eruption of a prehistoric monster who laid waste to New York”.

Observations like these sit uneasily with the whole notion of ideological reproduction or hegemony. Most of the theories of narrativity that cultural studies draws on, for example, start from the assumption that a story is followed from beginning to end (with the narrative’s end being the moment of ideological closure, the moment that the preferred meaning is established – e.g. Kozloff 1987, Fiske 1987), but the fragmentary nature of media use suggests that viewers rarely reach the actual end, thus rendering the entire encoding/decoding model and its spin-offs problematic. Morley’s hopeful comments about the integration of the vertical and horizontal axis notwithstanding, I would argue that the move to ethnography formed a substantive challenge to encoding/decoding⁴.

In fact, the move to ethnography displaced the entire problematic of “media use”, situating it much more in the flow of everyday life, rather than reducing it to the decoding of a message. Within cultural studies, it was soon realised that

⁴ For an opposite take on my argument, see Gray (1999). She stresses the continuity between the encoding/decoding paper and the “new audience research” that it inspired. In her account the encoding/decoding paper was first and foremost an attempt to think media use as taking place in a “negotiated space”, as taking place in between powerful institutions/structures and autonomy. In this view, the new audience research is “concerned to place media readings and use within complex webs of determinations, not only of texts, but also the deeper structural determinants, such as class, gender and, still to a lesser extent, race and ethnicity” (Gray 1999: 31). Whereas I understand her point I think that, in the light of the first chapter’s argument about the centrality of meaning in cultural studies, the shift between first and second generation audience studies is of considerable importance.

“encoding” or “decoding” were too narrow and limited as categories: the “social totality” Hall had invoked in the original paper just wasn’t captured by the encoding/decoding model. Furthermore it was realised that encoding and decoding remained stuck in older communication models, incapable of grasping the complex interdependencies in communication. Alasuutari, for instance, has argued that despite the controversy surrounding the model it actually didn’t differ radically from earlier communication models:

“Like the older models, it approaches (mass) communication as a process whereby certain messages are sent and then received with certain effects. For instance, it does not approach television and other mass media in themselves as part of modern society and its structures, and neither does it address the fact that the media are constitutive of or at least affect the communicated events” (Alasuutari, 1999: 3)

In these circumstances, the notion of culture as a *circuit* (see figure 2) gained momentum (du Gay et al. 1997). Replacing the orderly, unilinear transmission-like encoding/decoding model it tried to capture some of the complexities involved in culture and communication. Unlike encoding/decoding, the circuit is less geared towards mass communication *per se*, offering instead a framework for analysing all kinds of cultural artefacts or processes. Furthermore it reflects the gradual dissolvment of the structuralist-Gramscian framework as described in chapter 1, by devoting less attention to issues of representation and integrating some of the key terms that emerged during the late 1980s and early 1990s (“identity” or “regulation” for example). This might need some clarification.

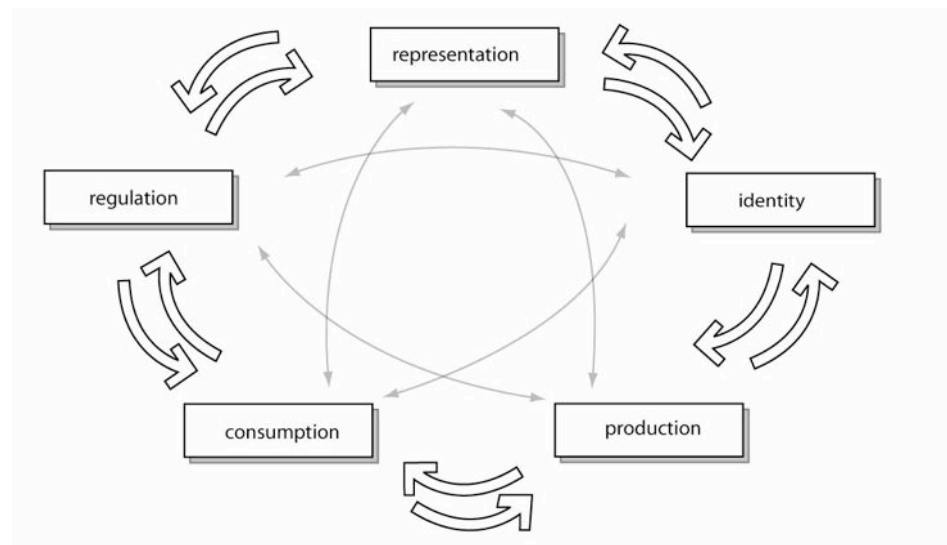


Figure 2: the circuit of culture (source: du Gay et al. 1997)

The notion of circuit is described by du Gay (1997b) as an attempt to think cultural processes in a non-reductionist way. Arguing against approaches that privilege one of the five “elements” or “moments” (as for example, the privileging of production in orthodox marxist approaches) he insists that we should study the ways in which consumption, production, identities, representations and regulations are *articulated*. The use of the word articulation implies the contingent linking of disparate “moments” or processes, that is, there is nothing natural or given about them: they have to be made, fabricated, established. Thus it wasn’t written in the stars that the Sony Walkman – the cultural artefact that is used to illustrate the circuit

of culture – would be an instant success. Rather, it was a consequence of a number of decisions, ranging from product design and marketing to advertisement strategies, but also the way it was linked up with – articulated – young people's lifestyles, the moral panics that surrounded it (rendering the Walkman even more attractive to young people) and so on. None of these elements were sufficient on their own, nor were they necessary; rather, it was their articulation that created the cultural hype around the Walkman. Furthermore, du Gay insists that it is a circuit: all the phases or moments have to be passed through to make a complete analysis, and the five moments are also interconnected. The attempts to regulate Walkman use (as for instance by the London underground) can be linked to decisions at the production level (the decision to build a personal stereo), but also to "representations", as for instance the way Walkman users were represented in left-wing discourse as tokens of Thatcherism's individualised, atomised consumers. In sum, the five "moments" are characterised by complex interconnections, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes disrupting each other.

The circuit of culture is a significant departure from the encoding/decoding model. First of all, it clearly is more apt for analysing general cultural processes, rather than the limited applications of the encoding/decoding model that was specifically geared towards ideological reproduction through mass communication processes. Secondly, it introduces some new terms while also shifting the focus of analysis for some terms. For instance, identity and regulation make their first appearance into the model. Although these terms did surface in much of the cultural studies work based upon the encoding/decoding model (e.g. Morley's insistence on differentiating textual subject positions and social identities, or early cultural studies work on moral panics surrounding youth culture – cf. Hall et al. 1978) they became much more prominent in subsequent work. The circuit model of culture thus integrates these emerging theoretical concerns that came to occupy the research agenda throughout the early 1990s. In general terms, then, the model is less focussed on the transmission of meaning (cf. also below), shifting its attention towards these newer concerns.

But perhaps the most dramatic shift has to do with the way the model spatially complexifies culture (and communication, I would like to add). The unilinearity of the encoding/decoding model has been replaced by a notion of circuit, that is, the idea that all these different meanings and practices are interconnected in complex ways. In the case of the Walkman, for instance, production design takes place in Japan, production in Taiwan, the advertising campaigns are designed in New York, consumers are situated in the United States or Europe, and the London Underground develops a new code of conduct in its London headquarters. The circuit model of culture is not drawn from a specific spatial perspective, but because it complexifies culture beyond an encoding/decoding problematic it suggests a network-like spatial metaphor underlying the circuit, with many different places shaping the cultural object. Unlike the encoding/decoding model it does not envision culture as a two-stage process (roughly production/consumption); rather it conceives of culture as a circulating entity, interconnecting different people, places and artefacts in complex ways. Furthermore, it is not unilinear, that is, the single arrow pointing from encoding to decoding has been replaced by a reciprocal relationship: the five processes reciprocally influence each other. Hall needed to invoke the hegemonic field of

discursivity to make the encoding and decoding stage fold back onto each other, but in a circuit the moments *reciprocally* influence each other, in concrete contexts rather than a social totality. This is what Grossberg (1997: 347) means when he writes “[a]rticulation transforms cultural studies from a model of communication (production – text – consumption; encoding – decoding) to a theory of contexts”⁵. In sum, what we see in the circuit model is a complexification of cultural processes, one that doesn’t fit into the neat comforting divisions of production and consumption in a social totality, relying instead on a more contextual, network-like approach to culture.

On the other hand one doesn’t need to exaggerate the rupture. Some of the central themes of the structuralist-Gramscian framework persist. For instance, du Gay et al. (1997) still rely heavily on *meaning* as central concept in their analysis. In fact, their argument throughout the book is that the *meaning* of the Walkman must be seen as the articulated result of the five different processes. Thus they argue, for instance, that the Walkman was encoded with certain meanings during its production phase, but that this production/encoding act in itself is not sufficient; it is equally important to investigate how it was subsequently represented in advertisements and how consumers took up the object “Walkman” in their daily lives and practices⁶ (including the attempts to regulate its behaviour). The circuit model of culture thus breaks with a transmission model of meaning (the idea that a text is produced in one place and subsequently is transmitted into the homes of the people), but that doesn’t mean that the term “meaning” vanishes from the analysis. Rather, the model represents an attempt to grasp how meaning is produced across different times and places, interacting in complex and sometimes surprising ways. In this sense it can be said to be a genuine improvement of the rather simple encoding/decoding model, because it points towards the complex interactions/articulations that shape a cultural artefact. But at the same time it remains dedicated to that central pillar of the structuralist-Gramscian framework, namely the idea that we cannot grasp cultural processes without considering the pivotal role of representation and meaning. However, as I have argued in the first chapter, the foregrounding of meaning has pushed cultural studies into a particular direction, neglecting important questions of/in culture (as for example culture’s governmental aspects). In the notion of network as it has been developed in ANT I find an approach that comes close to the spatial complexity of the circuit model of culture, a model that, as I have argued throughout this chapter, sees culture as a circulating entity. But unlike the circuit

⁵ The circuit model is thus better adapted for integrating the second generation of audience studies (the move to ethnography): “consumption” is more than the mere interpretive freedom that the encoding/decoding model credited the audience for. By placing consumption in a circuit rather than a communicative transmission model it surpasses the narrow interpretive concerns of the encoding/decoding paradigm.

⁶ Perhaps the most famous example of a technology’s “inappropriate” use (that is, consumers using a technology not in the way the industry had designed it) can be found in Roland’s TB-303, a bass synthesizer. Roland’s intention was to make a small and cheap machine that could emulate or replace a bass player in a band. Because the TB-303 was relatively unsuccessful in doing so (it didn’t even come near the sound of an actual bass guitar) the unit was quickly discontinued. The dance scene, however, loved the instrument because of its acidic sound. They didn’t use the TB-303 for emulating an electric bass, but reappropriated it into an acid machine. Examples like these show that producers’ “encodings” of products do not necessarily overlap with consumers’ meanings and uses.

model of culture the notion of network attaches less importance to signification processes, and it is therefore better suited for analysing culture's governmental aspects.

3. Network

The notion of network as we find it in ANT has influenced many of the ideas in this PhD profoundly. ANT is a specific approach to the study of science, technology and society (STS). Although recently a number of cultural studies-inspired studies have drawn on ANT in their analyses (e.g. Couldry 2000a, Kendall & Wickham 2001) the ANT paradigm remains largely unknown (or at least unquoted) within cultural and media studies. Therefore I will start this section by situating ANT within the disciplinary debates that shaped it. I will argue that it is a paradigm that forms part of a wider movement within the social sciences and humanities, one that I have described elsewhere as neomaterialism (Teurlings, 2004). I will also argue that ANT, although originating from the sociological study of science and technology studies, offers an interesting view on the social – a social ontology – that can be extended to other fields of inquiry. After these situating comments we will then move to some of the central concepts that have been advanced from within ANT, and what these concepts can offer media and cultural studies. I will also contend that the ANT-approach resembles and complements the governmental approach to culture. More specifically, ANT and governmental approaches share a common understanding of power, one that ultimately derives from Foucault. The remainder of this chapter is then used for showing – through its application on *Blind Date* – how the communication process can be seen as a network that meshes together humans and nonhumans into an assemblage, containing both signifying and a-signifying elements.

3.1 Context: neomaterialism

ANT might best be described as a neomaterialist approach to science and technology. I use the term neomaterialist in similar fashion as Manuel De Landa, who sees the current intellectual tide as moving towards “a new, revived form of materialism, liberated from the dogmas of the past” (De Landa, 2000: 12-13). Although De Landa doesn't mention ANT as belonging to this revival of materialist thinking (Braudel and Deleuze figure prominently, though) there are without doubt some close affinities. But what exactly is this neomaterialism, then?

The best way to describe neomaterialism is by telling what it is reacting against: the branch of thought most commonly referred to as social constructionism. Social constructionism is of course an umbrella-term, designating a number of – often incommensurable – theoretical influences as diverse as symbolic interactionism, pragmatism and poststructuralism. Although there are important differences, most social constructionist approaches see themselves as a critique of realism, or the idea that our categories of thought unproblematically reflect the world “out there”. Social constructionist approaches argue that “facts” do not lie in the objects they refer to but that the observer (i.e. the human mind) plays an active role in constructing them as an object of knowledge. Thus the typical social constructionist move consists of arguing that things needn't be how we usually

define them, and that those aspects of our thought we take to be the most factual are in fact historical constructions – there are good reasons why we defined them so, but it could have been otherwise. Social constructionism installs, so to speak, contingency *en lieu* of necessity, and it activates the historical by doing so.

So far the neomaterialist would not disagree with the social constructionist position. The problem, however, is that this general principle (historical contingency of realist categories) has been interpreted in a particular way. Especially since the advent of poststructuralism has social constructionism to a large extent been equated with a discursive/textualist approach. Many social constructionists have turned to Lacan, Derrida, Althusser or Foucault⁷ for making the point that reality is discursively constructed: even the most tangible, most material aspects of the world are the effect of specific discursive conditions of possibility. Social constructionism's trajectory within feminism is a helpful example to illustrate this increasing emphasis upon language, texts and discourse. The 1970s version of social constructionism was built around the sex/gender system. The argument was that whereas sex was biological (that is, "natural" or precultural) a person's gendered behaviour – the whole of male or female roles associated with a sex – was a result of socialisation. The argument was intended to disrupt the dominant idea that "biology is destiny": by showing that most of our gendered behaviour was a result of culturalisation rather than biological necessity social constructionism attacked the idea that male and female behaviour was innate. In fact, this version of social constructionism redrew the "topology of gender" by migrating (most of) our gendered behaviour from the realm of biological necessity to the realm of historical/cultural contingency. The existence of hormones, genes or whatever biologist explanation would be *en vogue* was acknowledged, but it was argued that cultural factors (e.g. the fact that aggression is glorified as a masculine trait) were far more important than these biologist explanations – indeed, it was often argued that biology (e.g. a higher average level of testosterone amongst males) was a *consequence* of socio-cultural influences (as for example in the case where men's testosterone-levels rise by doing body-building). As a result, social constructionism was at the same time highly critical of but also complicit with biologist explanations: it attacked the latter for being reductionist through a reversal of the causal explanations (favouring socio-cultural explanations) but at the same time it shared and endorsed the explanatory framework it drew on (namely, the idea that human beings can be explained in terms of a biological nature upon which cultural traits are grafted).

Whereas the political implications of 1970s social constructionism are still cherished by many feminist writers today, the sex/gender conceptual framework it drew on has come under attack. Poststructuralism was a particularly strong influence in critiquing the modernist assumptions that underpinned 1970s social constructionism. The binary opposition between biology and culture indeed stems from the 19th century, spawning disciplines like anthropology, sociology or criminology, and is therefore closely related to the universalistic pretensions of the era. Feminist writers influenced by poststructuralism started to criticise the sex-

⁷ As I have argued in the first chapter: to label Foucault as a theoretician of discourse does not do justice to the subsequent shifts his thought underwent. Nevertheless Foucault is often used for making "textualist" social constructionist arguments.

gender system upon which 1970s social constructionism was built. Judith Butler (1990, 1993), for instance, has problematised the notion of a natural, pre-social sex upon which gendered behaviour is supposed to be grafted. She argues that feminism is politically in danger if it uncritically accepts that sex – the sexed body – is an unconstructed, naturally given category standing outside of cultural signification. In her own words:

“Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex [...]; gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive”, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (Butler 1990: 7)

Butler reverses the social constructionist argument that gender is grafted upon a natural, sexed body. She argues that sex itself (the division of human beings as either male, either female) is *also* a historical and cultural specific construction, created amongst others throughout the medical apparatus. Moreover, she argues that gender’s role is more primordial than the mere *a posteriori* signification of a supposedly natural body: it is gender that performs a “natural” sex. In a sense, then, Butler propagates a “hyper-constructionism”, a constructionism in which everything, even the body, is the effect of discourse. Sex, in her account, is a question of how bodies become invested with a norm, it is a regulatory ideal that is forcibly materialised over time (Butler, 1993).

Butler’s deconstruction of the materiality of the body is not unique and represents a more general move within feminism to problematise the notion of a precultural body (e.g. Grosz 1994, Kirby 1997, Gatens 1990). But Butler’s account is also symptomatic for the textualist/discursive poststructuralist argument that seems to have become the dominant model within social constructionism. The - rightful - emphasis upon the ways in which materiality-as-the-inescapable is produced within specific discursive conditions of possibility, however, leads to an abolishment of the body’s materiality altogether. In Butler’s writing there is no engagement with questions like how bodies resist signification because they are incapable to do so⁸, or

⁸ This is not entirely correct. In *Bodies That Matter* Butler writes: “This does not mean that any action is possible on the basis of a discursive effect. On the contrary, certain reiterative chains of discursive production are barely legible as reiterations, for the effects they have materialized are those without which no bearing in discourse can be taken. The power of discourse to materialize its effect is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility” (Butler 1993: 188). Citations like these show that Butler is wary of some of the voluntarist readings of *Gender Trouble* – “if sex has been gender all along, let’s just choose sex” – but she does so by making discourse an autonomous and coercive sphere (“to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility”). Similarly, if she attaches importance to the ways in which bodies fail to conform to the norm this is described in psychoanalytic terms (as the excluded that comes to haunt the norm), but this is not entirely the same as engaging with the body *qua* materiality. In Lacanian terms “the real” is not “the world out there” but rather that which resists symbolisation, which can also refer to structural inconsistencies within the symbolic itself (Evans, 1996: 159-161). This is why Kirby (1997: 108) argues that “[o]ur sense of the materiality of matter, its palpability and its physical insistence, is rendered unspeakable and unthinkable in Butler’s account, for the only thing that can be known about it is that it exceeds representation. Beyond cultural intelligibility, the existence of this external stuff ensures that our

what bodies can or cannot do, or are capable of. Elizabeth Grosz (1994), for example, is equally wary of the sex/gender system, and equally dedicated to a monist understanding of the body as a material thing caught up in a web of signification. But her deconstruction of the body does not stop with the (negative) claim that the body's materiality is produced in discourse. Drawing on Deleuze she describes the (female) body in terms of intensities and flows, of potentialities that are actualised – or curtailed. It is such an "active" conception of the body (a body that is productive, capable of doing things, be it in a social and cultural context) that I feel the Butlerian account (and most of the textualist - poststructuralist accounts that she inspired) is lacking.

This short and schematic history of social constructionism within feminism is a useful framework for understanding what neomaterialist approaches are arguing against. With poststructuralism – of which they can be considered to be an offspring – they share a reluctance of dualist thinking (mind/body, sex/gender, infrastructure/superstructure, structure/agency) but they are at the same time critical of poststructuralism's privileging of meaning and discourse. The emphasis upon processes of signification, and the accompanied vocabulary of texts, signifiers, discourse and intertextuality has lead textualist poststructuralism to neglect and redraw from the material world "out there", a move that is ultimately politically debilitating. Donna Haraway, writing from a feminist perspective on science studies, eloquently describes her discontent with what she calls "radical social constructionism", which is worth quoting at length:

"I, and others, started out wanting a strong tool for deconstructing the truth claims of hostile science by showing the radical historical specificity, and so contestability, of every layer of the onion of scientific and technological constructions, and we end up with a kind of epistemological electro-shock therapy, which far from ushering us into the high stakes tables of the game of contesting public truths, lays us out on the table with self-induced multiple personality disorder. We wanted a way to go beyond showing bias in science (that proved too easy anyhow), and beyond separating the good scientific sheep from the bad goats of bias and misuse. It seemed promising to do this by the strongest possible constructionist argument that left no cracks for reducing the issues to bias versus objectivity, use versus misuse, science versus pseudo-science. We unmasked the doctrines of objectivity because they threatened our budding sense of collective historical subjectivity and agency and our 'embodied' accounts of the truth, and we ended up with one more excuse for not learning any post-Newtonian physics and one more reason to drop the old feminist self-help practices of repairing our own cars. They're just texts anyway, so let the boys have them back" (Haraway, 1991: 186)

Haraway's quote clearly spells out neomaterialism's relationship to poststructuralism. Neomaterialism is critical of the modernist grand narratives of Truth, Objectivity and Progress and their related dichotomous categories like mind/matter, body/soul, structure/agency... and in this sense it is decidedly poststructuralist. However, the primacy of texts and discourse that characterises most poststructuralist approaches has led to an exclusive focus on an epistemological problematic at the expense of questions of ontology. Since nothing exists outside of discourse the social scientist must not ask questions about the ontological status of the material – to deconstruct the truth claims of science, *that* is the social critic's task. As Haraway notes, however, this came with a political price to pay: the neglect

understanding of an outside, inasmuch as it is discourse dependent, can only be the dissimulation of an outside that *appears* as matter" (*emphasis in original*)

of ontological questions left the social sciences with no arguments against the truth claims of science (unless the argument that “they’re just texts anyway”). Textualist poststructuralism is simply not capable of engaging with what the world is like because it has discredited such questions from the start as being naively empiricist, with the result that it cannot contest science’s truth claims on the terrain it does best: the ability to make predictions about the world.

Although neomaterialism is not a coherent paradigm its practitioners share this commitment to engage with the material or “the world out there”, while at the same time staying true to their poststructuralist scepticism about science’s universalist truth claims. In De Landa’s writing, for example, this takes the form of looking at the way matter (either in a “natural” or in a human-created environment), when reaching a threshold of complexity, is subject to processes of self-organisation (De Landa 1991, 2000); ANT engages with the material world by conceiving of it as nonhuman actors in a network (see below); and in Haraway’s writing this takes the form of an engagement with the world in terms that are not phallogocentric, militaristic or objectifying (see for instance Haraway 1992, or her *Cyborg Manifesto* reprinted in Haraway 1991). In this sense neomaterialism is post-constructionist: it sees the world as human-made (and thus “constructed”) but isn’t satisfied with the human-centred orientation of most constructionisms which limit themselves to stating that a certain object of inquiry is human-made. Neomaterialism takes this constructionist adagio as evident but takes it only as a starting point, preferring to engage with what matter *does* once it is mobilised in a human environment.

3.2 Core concepts in ANT

The description of the neomaterialist project above sets the stage well for some of the central concerns in ANT. ANT started out as a particular approach within science and technology studies (STS), aimed at a critical study of science and its world-building capabilities. In doing so it developed a rather original ontology which proved inspiring for other fields as well, and the initial narrow focus on science and technology has been broadened to include almost any other field of the social. ANT has inspired people working in cultural studies (Kendall & Wickham 2001), and organisation studies (Law 1994, Czarniawska 2000); it has been used to study economic markets (Callon 1999) or electronic cash technologies (Stalder 2002); even the way music fans and drug users prepare the ideal conditions for their activities has been approached from an ANT-perspective (Gommart & Hennion 1999). In sum, the actor-network approach has evolved since its spectacular lift-off during the 1980s from a specific STS approach to a broad paradigm - Latour himself prefers to call it a method (Latour 1999: 20) - that has been applied to almost any other field one can imagine.

At the heart of the ANT paradigm is the desire to undo what Bruno Latour (1993a) calls *The Modern Constitution*. The former refers to the particular modern conception that the social and the natural world behave according to their own internal logic, and therefore they should be studied and kept separately at all times. Objects – or nonhumans as ANT calls them – are supposed to consist of inert matter whose laws can be discovered in controlled settings (the laboratory), whereas humans have their own will and agency and therefore their behaviour is unpredictable. *The Modern Constitution* has produced the all-too familiar academic

distinction between “hard” and “soft” sciences: whereas the former studies the natural world and the things that inhabit it the latter study humans, their behaviour and their politics. Moreover, the Modern Constitution wants to separate carefully both worlds (what Latour calls the “works of purification”): the exact scientist should exclude all social influences from her observations on nonhumans (the neutral – that is, impartial – and objective – that is, reproducible – ethos that inspires the exact sciences). The social sciences and humanities on the other hand should limit themselves to the study of humans and their social processes (neglecting the material world they inhabit). The laboratory is therefore the place where objects “speak for themselves”, and where truth is established independent of political influences.

But – as Latour’s title warns us – the truth is that We Have Never Been Modern. The works of purification (which is the hard sciences’ “official discourse”) have blinded us for the extent to which the practices of the scientists have blended humans and nonhumans together. Exactly *because* they objectify the natural world and are thus able to mobilise nonhumans, scientists have increasingly created hybrid networks of humans and nonhumans. Global climate changes, for example, take place in such hybrid networks of social and natural elements, up to the point that they become inseparable. In the ozone gap we find the deforestation of the Amazon forest linking up with social and economic policies, chemical reactions and political pressure groups. And, rather than falling back on the Modern Constitution and its Great Divide (as for example when affirming that the social and the ecological are two different problems that have to be solved separately) we should realise that the social and the natural are *one*. We live in one immanent world, and the transcendent categories upon which we have built the modern project should be undone.

ANT’s answer to the Modern Constitution is to conceive of both humans and nonhumans as actors in a network. ANT does not assume from the start that both are different in kind. This means that nonhumans, just like their human counterparts, are conceived to be “doing stuff” in the actor-network. One way of putting this is to ask the question “who is driving the car?”. Is it the driver, the gasoline, the steering wheel, the tyres or the road? The ANT answer is that all actors are needed for the car to drive, and that all actors are “doing something” in the actor-network “car”: take any of the elements (tyres, road, driver, gasoline or steering wheel) out of the network and it would be impossible to get the car moving. Or more precisely: if the car drives it is because a successful actor-network has been created that is able to maintain itself over a certain period of time. ANT thus effects a “heuristic flattening” (Leigh Star 1991: 43), placing human and nonhumans at an equal footing, not privileging the one nor the other.

From this simple example follows one very important ANT-principle: the principle of symmetry. Simply stated this principle says we must approach everything we analyse in equal terms, at least in principle. For example, rather than assuming that human and nonhuman actors are fundamentally different in kind the symmetrical approach states that we should approach both on the same terms. The principle of symmetry is not only limited to the difference between human and nonhuman actors; it applies to many of the categories that we are accustomed to in social analyses. John Law for example applies it to the difference between micro and macro:

"[I]t is a good idea not to take for granted that there is a macrosocial system on the one hand, and bits and pieces of derivative microsocial detail on the other. If we do this we close off most of the interesting questions about the origins of power and organisation. Instead, we should start with a clean state. For instance, we might start with interaction and assume that interaction is all there is. Then we might ask how some kinds of interactions more or less succeed in stabilizing and reproducing themselves: how it is that they overcome resistance and seem to become "macrosocial"; how it is that they seem to generate the effects such as power, fame, size, scope, or organisation with which we are all familiar. This, then, is one of the core assumptions of actor-network theory: that Napoleons are no different in kind to small-time hustlers, and IBMs to wheel-stalls. And if they are larger, then we should be studying *how* this comes about – how, in other words, size, power, or organisation are generated" (Law, 1992: 380, *italics in original*)

The principle of symmetry is important because, as John Law argues, it enables us to ask questions that are usually presupposed in social analyses. If we indeed assume from beforehand that, for example, humans are different from nonhumans because they are the only actors capable of agency⁹ we become blind for the many ways in which nonhumans indeed "act". Of course ANT does not claim that human and nonhumans are entirely the same (as for example the statement that the driver and gasoline perform the same function within the actor-network), nor does it mean to say that all nonhuman actors are all the same amongst themselves (as for example when arguing that the steering wheel performs the same function as the gasoline). Within ANT there is considerable attention for the specificity of every actor in a network, and how this specificity influences the actor-network in its entirety. The principle of symmetry merely states that if we find differences in functioning, we should explain where these come from, and how they are generated and maintained.

The insistence on nonhuman actors as being capable of agency is not unique to ANT. As mentioned before, it is that which binds the neomaterialists in their critique of social constructionism. What is unique to ANT, however, is what critics have called the Machiavellian undercurrent of the approach. In order to understand this we need to introduce two other central terms: *translation* and *alignment*. Whereas the former refers to the process through which an actor tries to inscribe

⁹ The problem with the word agency is that it, within social theory in general, has two slightly different meanings. The "strong" version defines agency as the wilful act of change, as opposed to structures which determine individual behaviour. Here agency is associated with consciousness and intentionality. There is however a weaker version of agency, which refers to the capacity to act. The classic example of this weak version would be a chess game: the rules of the game are determined exteriorly, that is, the individual has to obey the rules if s/he wants to play chess and s/he is not capable of changing these rules. It are, however, the very same rules that endow a player with the *capacity* to act within the rules set-up by the game. Obviously nonhuman actors are not capable of "agency" in the strong version of the word, since this would anthropomorphise nonhuman actors. However if we define agency as the capacity to act, it is clear that nonhuman actors indeed play an active role in an actor-network. Haraway makes this point succinctly: "[T]he things [...] do not pre-exist as ever-elusive, but fully pre-packaged, referents for the names. Other [nonhuman] actors are more like tricksters than that. Boundaries take provisional, never-finished shape in articulatory practices. [...] Perhaps we can [...] "articulate" with humans and unhumans in a social relationship, which for us is always language-mediated (among other semiotic, i.e. "meaningful," mediations). But, for our unlike partners, well, the action is "different" [...] but *crucial to the generativity of the collective*" (Haraway, 1992: 313, *emphasis added*)

other actors into its project (by positing itself as the spokesperson for the other actors), the term alignment refers to the extent to which a translation is successful. Put simply, translation is an attempt to mobilise other actors, and alignment is the result of a successful translation attempt. In *The Pasteurization of France* (1988), for example, Latour sketches how Louis Pasteur was able to build an actor-network, comprising heterogeneous elements like germs, the hygienist movement and French nationalism after the 1870 defeat against Germany. Pasteur was attempting to translate these heterogeneous actors into an actor-network, but its success was not given in advance. Pasteur had to convince the world about the existence of germs (which, of course, cannot be seen with the eye and thus could be fictitious), and he was able to do so by mobilising the different actors involved. First of all he was able to win over the hygienist movement because the existence of germs fitted well with their own project - in fact it was a far better justification for the entire hygienist movement than any of the other theories they had relied upon before; French nationalism was a second important actor that was mobilised by Pasteur - in fact, he craftily positioned himself as the scientist who would make France better and stronger so as to be able to defeat the German threat; and lastly the germs, whom he was able to keep aligned by "miraculously" curing for example rabies patients. All these different actors had to be kept aligned if Pasteur wanted to maintain the actor-network in which he occupied a comfortable, central position: if the germs would not behave like Pasteur predicted (for example by making rabies patients ill) their existence would be doubted. If the hygienists would feel threatened by Pasteur's micro-biological claims it would have been much harder for him to gather support for his laboratory experiments; and if France would not have felt threatened by the emerging German nation Pasteur would have found it much harder to get (state) funding for his research.

The underlying idea of this stress on translation and alignment is that actor-networks are *precarious achievements*, that is, they are momentary accomplishments that are easily disrupted. ANT's ontology comes close to an entropic viewpoint, in that it sees the world as being composed of bits and pieces that can be mobilised but they also have the tendency to drift off, dissent or form part of alternative actor-networks. The only thing that prevents them from going their own way is the sustained commitment of some actors. For example, the actor-network "university" comprises students, professors, cleaning personnel, and administrative personnel, in sum all the human actors one might expect. But it also comprises buildings, computers, classrooms, projection equipment... The list of nonhuman actors can be extended almost endlessly. Both human and nonhuman actors have to be kept in line because they have the tendency to drift off: professors prefer to do research rather than getting bogged down in bureaucratic reforms that endlessly go on, the buildings have to be maintained, projectors need to get their light bulb replaced, computers have the tendency to crash and students prefer not to study the boring courses... In fact, the actor-network "university" can be seen as a loose collection of actors, each trying to translate the others - which does not mean that all translation attempts are as successful: students, for instance, have less chance of making their translations ("that course is boring and/or too hard to study, I would like to skip it") reality than the professors. Networks are, in other words, places where *power relationships* abound.

3.3 A mechanics of power

ANT's approach to power, however, is very particular, and has been subjected to powerful critiques, some of which are crucial to this PhD. In the next section we will focus on these critiques and how actor-network theorists have reacted to this. In this section, however, I will limit myself to a description of the ANT approach to power. Also, I will argue that ANT and Foucault's analytics of power (as described in chapter 1) share a common core, something that is important in the final conclusion of this chapter.

John Law has called ANT a "mechanics of power" (Law, 1992: 380), which is in my opinion a very accurate description of the ANT approach. The reason for this is that the paradigm favours "how-questions" at the expense of "why-questions". This is a consequence of the principle of symmetry: if you want to avoid starting your analysis from the dualist categories that have plagued social theory for so long you cannot start from the assumption that there are determining macro structures on the one hand and individual interactions at the micro-level on the other hand. In other words, you-the-analyst can't presuppose this difference in advance. What is left for the analyst is the meticulous description of what actors *do* in the network: the attempts at enrolment of other actors within the network (Callon 1986a) and how this interacts with actors' self-image (Latour 1991), the programs and anti-programs¹⁰ that emerge from these translation attempts (ibid.), and the question of how this meshwork of practices creates networks that remain stable over time so that they appear to be structures, have to be described in detail¹¹. As a result ANT tends towards "how-questions": it describes *how* actors move through networks rather than asking the question *why* (causal relationships) this is so.

In its more extreme formulations this eye for detail becomes the ultimate horizon of the analysis, with the result that "actually-described-networks" are the *only* reality that remains. Latour, for example, has argued that:

"There is no need to go searching for mysterious or global causes outside networks. If something is missing it is because the description is not complete. Period. Conversely, if one is capable of explaining effects of causes, it is because a stabilized network is already in place" (Latour 1991: 130).

This is a pretty radical claim, and might need some explanation. The basic point is that within ANT, everything is a network effect. Even those categories that we habitually use for judging our world – terms like truth, size, profitability, power and so on – are for actor-network theorists the result of more or less stabilized networks. Scientific truth is a good case to illustrate this point. Scientists who are engaged in a

¹⁰ Sometimes the ANT terminology interferes with the thematic of this PhD in annoying ways: its talk about actors and programs, for example, becomes slightly confusing when talking about the media, where we also find "actors" and "programmes". In order to eliminate confusions like these as much as possible I use the US spelling "program" for the ANT concept, and the UK spelling for (television) programme. If I use the term actor I will make clear to which concept it refers.

¹¹ Within ANT this detached descriptivism is usually called the "follow the actor"-principle (described first, but not articulated literally in Latour (1987)): we should pay attention to the minor details of actors "as they are in the making", that is, we should follow their movements throughout the network and pay attention to the minor details of their interactions.

controversy try to mobilize different actors in order to prove their point. These actors are, of course, materially heterogeneous and might comprise for example findings by other researchers, reputations, textbooks, bacteria, measure instruments and so on, in sum, all the bits and pieces that inhabit the socio-scientific world. As long as the controversy is going on, our scientist has difficulties in proving the validity of her truth claims: "challengers" will try to argue that the measuring instrument is not apt for the task at hand, they will argue that the results do not allow such or such a conclusion and so on. However, from the moment the controversy is decided in our scientist's advantage (meaning that she is able to mobilise so many allies that her version of the phenomenon under discussion is accepted) the result is the production of "truth". Thus Latour reverses the modernist dictum that things are true when they hold, arguing instead that "when things hold they start becoming true" (1987: 12). Thus "truth" is or was not given in the course of things (it could have been otherwise) but is an effect of the network our scientist has spun. And this truth claim will remain "true" until some challenger is able to mobilise different allies, in other words, if a different network is put in place with new and different truth-effects.

Returning to power: ANT holds a similar attitude to power as to truth. Power is not something that an actor holds, it is a network effect. The common view that actors hold a power position is based upon the perception that powerful people have the ability to "get their will obeyed", that is, they are capable of defeating the inertia/resistance of other people and/or nonhuman actors. The manager is powerful because she is able to get things moving, and the professor is more powerful than the student because he can make the student study long hours in the library, hours that would preferably be spent on more joyful activities. The problem with this view, according to Latour (1986), is that it is based upon a model borrowed from physics – what he calls the diffusion model – containing an initial force uttering the order (the initiator), an initial energy (given to the order by the initiator) and a medium through which this order circulates. Instead of this model Latour argues for a translation model, in which the initiator's order is only realised through time and space when it is taken up by the other actors. Furthermore, the other actors have a multitude of options at their disposal, many more than the diffusion model which limits "obedient" actors' role to either resisting or yielding: in the translation model the other actors can drop the order, modify it, deflect it, betray it, add to it or appropriate it (Latour 1986: 267). Above all, this means that the order gets transformed as it travels through the network, and the other actors shape it according to their different projects. If an order seems successful it is because it is able to mobilise – but only momentarily – the interests of other actors, but this success is prone to corruption:

"'Power' is always the illusion people get when they are obeyed; thinking in terms of the diffusion model, they imagine that others behave because of the master's clout without ever suspecting the many different reasons others have for obeying and doing something else; more exactly, people who are 'obeyed' discover what their power is really made of when they start to lose it. They realise, but too late, that it was 'made of' the wills of all the others" (Latour 1986: 269)

From this it is but a small step to the assertion that "power", or more exactly, the impression that some actors occupy a power position, is nothing but a network effect. As soon as the network fails or disintegrates the actor that once seemed powerful is no longer able to maintain its allies – allies that were never *really* faithful

anyway. This is where ANT's already mentioned Machiavellistic trait turn paranoid: things hold together but only momentarily so, and treason is always lingering in the background, ready to make a strike.

Thus, within ANT power is a network-effect. But what exactly does John Law mean with "a mechanics" of power? The point is that ANT, starting from the assumption that power is a network-effect, has developed a vocabulary that is particularly rich for analysing power relations in a formalist way. Just like mechanics describes the way physical forces act upon each other through the use of terms like vectors, impact point, inertia etc... without being able to say what forces actually are, ANT *describes* how actors move through the networks of the social. We will focus on three terms that have emerged from ANT-inspired work: the *translator-spokesperson*, *obligatory passage points* and *immutable mobiles*.

The *translator-spokesperson* is an actor who tries to define and enrol other actors within an actor-network. S/he does so by problematising something and creating a more or less coherent program around it, ascribing roles to the different actors in the network. Policy decisions, for example, are full of such translation attempts and translator-spokesperson. When the Blair government talked about "liberating the people of Iraq" it turned itself into such a translator-spokesperson, claiming to talk for the oppressed people of Iraq. Furthermore, this translation attempt ascribed certain roles to several actors on the international stage. Saddam Hussain was portrayed as a vicious dictator who needed to be driven from power by force, weapons of mass destruction were defined as threats to "international security" that could end up in the hands of Muslim-fundamentalist terrorist groups, the UK and the US became liberating forces, and the UN security council was supposed to provide the coalition with a resolution that allowed them to invade Iraq. It's important to stress that the translator-spokesperson at first *attempts* to create a coherent program: it is a fiction that may or may not be realised in time, depending upon the success of her/his mobilisation attempts. Or, as Callon puts it, "[t]ranslation is at first an endeavour. Later, it may be achieved" (Callon, 1986b: 25). For example, in the Iraq-crisis, the UN refused to play the role that the UK-US coalition had ascribed to it, because of stubborn German, French and – to a lesser extent – Russian and Chinese resistance. In sum, the British translation attempt failed because one of the actors (the UN security council) refused the role allocated to them. This example shows that it is not given in the course of things that translations will succeed, since other actors in the network might oppose the role they are given by the translator-spokesperson. Also, it is possible that actors first go along with a certain programme but eventually resist the role they are supposed to play – Russia, that first kept aside in the debates but eventually criticised the UK-US coalition, is a good case in point. This is why Haraway prefers to speak of a "ventriloquist" (1992: 311) rather than a translator-spokesperson: to "speak for" others (that is, to represent them) also means to mute them. There is a certain violence in making oneself a translator-spokesperson, because it mutes the actors that one supposedly "gives a voice" (as indeed it proved to be the case for many Iraqis). And, as Haraway argues, it is "a representational practice that *forever* authorizes the ventriloquist. Tutelage will be eternal" (ibid.: 312, *emphasis in original*).

From the translator-spokesperson's point of view, however, translation is a difficult and uncertain process whose outcome is not guaranteed. Therefore translator-spokespersons will develop a number of strategies to reduce the uncertainty and get their program realised. The construction of *obligatory passage points* (Callon 1986a, 1986b) is one such strategy. This refers to the processes through which certain actors make themselves indispensable in the network. Put simply, an actor will try to structure the network so that the other actors have to pass by it. The UN Security Council, for example, is such an obligatory passage point. If it wanted a UN-sanctioned invasion the US-lead "coalition of the willing" had to find enough support in the Security Council. As we all know this was not the case, and the UK-US coalition had to construct their own network ("the coalition of the willing") in order to invade Iraq, a new network in which the Security Council lost its status as an obligatory passage point¹².

Another strategy that an actor can follow in order to maintain or set up a network is the use of what Latour (1987) calls *immutable mobiles*. These are essentially devices or techniques that enable an actor to conquer time and space in its attempts to keep the different actors aligned. Immutable mobiles thus allow an actor to act at a distance. Indeed, larger networks are often confronted with the spatial segregation of the different allies, so that it becomes impossible to directly control them. The use of immutable mobiles then helps "centres of calculation" to monitor what is happening throughout the network. During the Third Gulf War the Allied Headquarters in Qatar was such an important centre of calculation. Its aim was to monitor the state of the network well beyond its immediate environments. In order to do so the Allied Headquarters used a number of immutable mobiles: reports from reconnaissance flights, satellite images, operational reports, media analysis.... the list can go on endlessly. What is important about immutable mobiles is that they are a. mobile, meaning that they can travel time and space easily; b. that they are immutable, meaning that they are standardised so that they give the calculation centre data that can be dealt with in a uniform way; and c. that the data thus gathered can be combined. If these three conditions are met a calculation centre is able to monitor the state of the network across time and space.

Immutable mobiles are essentially knowledge technologies: maps, statistical data, pictures and so on – especially when they are combined – allow those that have issued them to see a reality which was ungraspable before the advent of these knowledge technologies. Immutable mobiles work by "representing [the world] in its absence" (Latour 1987: 247). But, as Latour warns us, this fact in itself cannot explain sufficiently how immutable mobiles keep the network together. Representing the outside or periphery is but one step, the reverse movement is also needed: how immutable mobiles enable a calculation centre to conquer the periphery. Latour explains this with the example of the first American manned space

¹² In fact, the Third Gulf War and its diplomatic preface can be seen as the attempt of one network (US) to destabilize another one and its obligatory passage point (UN). The debate within the US government between "hawks" and "doves" was exactly about the question whether the UN-route should be followed or abandoned, or, put in ANT terms, whether the UN security council constituted a valid obligatory passage point or not. Eventually the US-UK coalition abandoned the UN-route and thus created a precedent in post-Cold War international politics. Furthermore it is noticeable that the US was reluctant to give the UN control over post-war Iraq, since this would threaten its own status as an obligatory passage point.

flight. It is tempting to see this as a radical new event, a giant leap forward, as the rhetoric that surrounds these events often propagates ("a small step for a man, but..."). What actually happens, however, is that the network is extended *gradually*, one step at a time. The last step represents only a marginal difference, but it is represented as "a giant leap". Latour on Alan Shepard's "first time":

"He had done every possible gesture hundreds of times before on the simulator, a scale model of another sort. What was his main impression when he finally got outside the simulator and inside the rocket? It was either 'just the way it sounded in the centrifuge' or 'it was different from the simulator, it was easier' or 'Man, that wasn't like the centrifuge, it was more sudden'. During his short flight he kept comparing the similarities and slight differences between the *n*th rehearsal on the flight simulator, and the (*n*+1)*th* actual flight" (Latour, 1987: 247-248, *emphasis in original*)

And he concludes:

"[T]he point is that he was not really going into the unknown, as Magellan did crossing the strait that bears his name. He had been *there* already hundreds of times, and monkeys before him hundreds of other times. What is admirable is not how one can get into space, but how the complete space flights can be simulated in advance, and then slowly extended to unmanned flights, then to monkeys, then to one man, then to many, by incorporating *inside* the Space Centre more and more *outside* features brought back to the centre by each trial. The slow and progressive extension of a network from Cape Canaveral to the orbit of the earth is more of an achievement than the 'application' of calculations done inside the Space Centre to the outside world" (ibid.: 248, *emphasis in original*)

We now understand better where ANT's methodological descriptivism comes from. For ANT, it is impossible to step outside the concrete networks of the social. Shepard didn't step into the unknown: he merely repeated what he had done before, extending and incrementing the network with a marginal step. Nor did he conquer *terra incognita*, since 99% of his network stayed more or less the same, performing the same routines he had exercised a thousand times before. Shepard didn't "go boldly where no one had gone before": he went "routinely where thousands had prepared the way", only enlarging his network with a marginal extension. The language of barriers, breaks and frontiers is misleading because it overplays the new and underplays the familiar. But above all it installs transcendental ruptures (before and after, earth and space) where there are only gradual network extensions. We have come full circle now: ANT is dedicated to the "accurate" and "meticulous" descriptions of networks and their actors in order to escape transcendent categories; and what appear to be transcendental categories are actually the result of gradual network extensions. Nothing exceeds the networks of the social and "the social" is nothing but the circulation within localised, particular networks.

Time to recapitulate. Throughout this section I have argued that ANT can be described as a mechanics of power, meaning that it favours the meticulous description of the mechanisms through which actors try to keep a network together. Many of the terms that are used in ANT-analyses (alignment, obligatory passage points, immutable mobiles, translator-spokesperson and so on) refer exactly to such mechanisms. But – and this is important for what follows – "power" is *not* that which makes these mechanisms possible. Latour, for example, has argued consistently throughout his work against the view that power is something that an actor "holds". Unequal power positions are network *effects*, meaning that they are the result, not the cause, of a particular configuration. This is a pretty radical claim that leads to

some unforeseen, perhaps unwanted consequences, and many commentators have expressed their concern on this topic. Therefore we will now turn our attention to the criticism that has been voiced against ANT.

3.4 Criticism

One of the first criticisms that emerged after ANT's rapid rise in academia centred on its already mentioned Machiavellistic world view. Put simply, networks are ruthless goal-oriented assemblages characterised by strategic alliances that are only precariously held together, and the danger of betrayal is ever present. As such this need not be a problem: many sections of life (especially our life in organisations) are *indeed* goal-oriented and can be characterised by strategic alliances. The problem was, however, that it was a particular version of strategic thinking that was performed. 1980s ANT was very much concerned with *centred* networks, networks that were structured according to the "will" or vision of one actor. This tendency was aggravated by a concern about how large-scale networks are able to maintain themselves so that they appear to be solid, durable structures (e.g. Latour 1991, Callon 1991). Hence in the ANT analyses of the 1980s there wasn't much attention for multiplicity, for what symbolic interactionists call multiple definitions of the situation. Although Callon or Latour would agree in principle with the fact that actors tend to drift off there was always the suggestion that the guardians of the network were univocal and unambivalent. In sum, networks, though materially homogenous were actually a *singular* thing (namely, as defined by a powerful actor).

Recent work within ANT has tried to counter this critique, and more attention is given to multiplicity. Annemarie Mol (2002), for example, investigates how in a hospital slightly different versions of atherosclerosis are performed. For example, the diagnosis of atherosclerosis is different in the outpatient clinic than the one being done in the department pathology. Whereas the former is based upon talks with patients and external examinations, the latter can only be diagnosed *after* the leg has been amputated, through the use of a microscope. Both practices are incommensurable: either a leg is connected to a body, and then we can ask questions to the person (when does it hurt? How often does it hurt? etc...) in order to diagnose; or the leg is dissected, the artery is cross-sectioned and we can "see" (through the microscope) that the leg indeed *had* atherosclerosis – but it is useless to ask whether it still hurts. Thus in Mol's account there's no centred network; rather there are different views, or as she calls it "enactments" of atherosclerosis, each using their own technologies of viewing.

This is what John Law (2002) would call "the fractional coherence" of atherosclerosis: within the hospital there are many definitions of atherosclerosis. They all pretend to speak about the same object (the disease called atherosclerosis), which is supposed to be a singular object. But in practice it is multiple, as the outpatient clinic and pathology department show. Many times the outpatient clinic and pathology agree, that is, in those cases where doctors decide to amputate a leg based upon external observations and then afterwards the pathology department proves them "right". But there are also cases when patients do not complain about pain in the legs and when they suddenly die pathology diagnoses a severe case of atherosclerosis. Or, conversely, patients can complain about pain in their leg and yet there's nothing wrong with the arteries once they are put under a

microscope – although I wouldn't want to be in this patient's place. So yes, atherosclerosis is more or less coherently performed by the two departments, but not always so. It is inherently multiple, or fractional¹³.

Terms like fractional coherence, gradients or multiplicity are ANT's answer against the critique that ANT paid no attention to multiple definitions of the situation that exist in a network. But to what extent does it answer these criticisms? Is fractional coherence capable of silencing the reproach? I will argue that this is not entirely the case because ANT remains largely epistemologically conservative. In order to specify this claim we will have to make a short detour through what came to be known as "the epistemological chicken" debate.

The epistemological chicken debate gets its name from Collins & Yearly's (1992) article in which they contend that ANT is philosophically radical but epistemologically conservative. Writing from a perspective which they describe as Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK) they argue that ANT's heuristic levelling of humans and nonhumans is a step backward for STS. To resume, their argument is that ANT, by integrating into the analysis nonhumans as full-blown actors, is making a crucial mistake because of two reasons. First, Callon and Latour neglect the extent to which their account of the nonhumans (i.e. the scallops of St Brieuc Bay¹⁴) is always mediated through human actors. In fact, they argue, while Callon and Latour think they have access to the scallops they are relying on the scientists' account of them. An SSK account, to the contrary, would always start with the human actors as the privileged starting point of analysis:

"The informing assumption would be that whether there were more or fewer scallops anchoring early and late in the study did not affect the extent to which the scallops were seen to be anchoring early and late. No SSK study would rely on the complicity of the scallops; at best it could rely on human-centred accounts of the complicity of the scallops" (Collins and Yearley 1992: 314-315).

Collins and Yearly thus represent what I have called throughout this chapter the social constructionist position. Put simply, this means that for them "the scallops" – the actual animals out there – are not a valid object of investigation for the sociologist. STS should focus exclusively on "talk" about the scallops, because the talk is the only thing that is graspable for sociologists (even those of science). Any reference to what the scallops *do* (do they attach, don't they attach, do they procreate, etc...?) is something which the sociologist should bracket because these accounts are produced by the scientists. For Collins and Yearley, Callon and Latour just don't have any means to talk about the scallops, except through the discourses of the scientists. This is why they consider ANT to be "epistemologically conservative": Callon and Latour can only talk about the scallops by accepting the knowledge that has been produced by the scientists, thus enhancing and reinforcing the

¹³ Law borrows the term fractal from mathematics, where it refers to a line that occupies more than one dimension but less than two.

¹⁴ Callon (1986a), in an often-quoted paper, describes the problems French scientists had in their research on scallops. For example, one of the problems they encountered was that the scallops didn't attach themselves to the receptors the scientists had built. Callon describes this in typical ANT-fashion as a process by which the scientists tried to translate the scallops – and ultimately failed.

authoritative voice of science. And this is unacceptable for a discipline that has set itself the aim of debunking science's myths.

Collins and Yearly's critique is a powerful one, but I think we carefully need to separate two issues. First there is the question of whether the social scientists can talk about nonhumans (scallops, atoms, genes or what have you) at all. A good case in point is the atom bomb. A social constructionist position would argue that the sociologist cannot talk about atoms, protons and neutrons because the sociologist cannot see them – it is the scientist who tells him that there are atoms. But to retreat from the material in such a radical way neglects the extent to which scientific knowledge is effective in creating guaranteed effects. Even though the sociologist cannot see the atoms, she *has* seen the effects an atom bomb can do on a city. So we better take the nonhuman seriously and integrate them into our analyses, because the nonhumans out there, and the way they are translated into the networks of the scientists, *do* matter.

On the other hand I think that Collins and Yearly are right when they argue that ANT is epistemologically conservative. ANT's "deconstruction"¹⁵ of scientific knowledge (that is, the insistence on the necessary situatedness of scientific knowledge within localized networks, rather than the abstract and universal "truth" science claims to produce) is at the same time reinforcing the scientific knowledge it is critical of. This is because ANT does not attempt to formulate a "positive" or even "alternative" knowledge of what for example scallops do but prefers to follow them through the networks that the scientists have spun around them, with the result that the scientists' knowledge is *a posteriori* accepted, validated and "made official". This need not necessarily be so: it would be perfectly possible to formulate a "positive" non-modern account of how humans and nonhumans mingle, one that doesn't rely solely on the scientists' accounts of the scallops. I've already mentioned before the work of Elizabeth Grosz, who draws on Deleuze in her "positive" account of the body. Work like this, which tries to tell something *new* about bodies, could serve as a model for non-modern theories. But such an approach would mean that ANT would have to give up the detached descriptivism that some of its practitioners are so fond of, which probably is one step too far for most of the actor-network theorists.

Within feminism similar critiques of ANT have been produced. Leigh Star, for example, has argued in a much-quoted article that ANT is "biased towards the point of view of the victors (or the management)" (Leigh Star 1991: 33). Drawing on symbolic interactionism (and the incompatibility of her allergy to onions with a visit to McDonald's) she contends that ANT, despite all its talk about heterogeneity and multiplicity, is actually describing the world from the viewpoint of power, with the result that those actors that do not "fit" within the network (and indeed often suffer from their exclusion) are symbolically annihilated:

"Networks which encompass both standards and multiple selves are difficult to see or understand except in terms of deviance or 'other' as long as they are seen in terms of the executive mode of power relations. Then we will have doors that let in some people, and

¹⁵ The word deconstruction might be badly chosen here, because it is exactly against deconstruction (in its textualised form) that ANT directs some of its more biting criticism (see for instance Latour 1993a: 5-8). Here I use the word as a synonym for "revealing how something is constructed".

not others, and our analysis of the 'not others' can't be very important, certainly not central. The torture elicited by technology, especially, because it is distributed over time and space, because it is often very small in scope [...], or because it is out of sight, is difficult to see as world making. Instead it is the executive functions, having enrolled others, which are said to raise the world" (ibid.: 48)

Leigh Star's critique shares with the epistemological chicken debate the assertion that ANT privileges the "official" viewpoint, namely, that of the powerful actors within the network (be it the scientists or, as in Leigh Star's case, the McDonald's management). But unlike Collins & Yearly she is not interested in how "correct" ANT is (because this seems to be the implicit message of their article); her interests lie in the extent to which such a partial perspective a) represents itself as a neutral, disembodied viewpoint (Haraway's god-eye trick)¹⁶, and b) how such an operation mutes and discredits those that don't fit in. In other words, Leigh Star is arguing that ANT is politically debilitating.

If we now return to the move towards multiplicity within ANT we understand better why terms like fractional coherence don't fully counter the criticism. Yes, ANT does pay more attention to incoherence within the official discourse, and yes, it points towards the way different official discourses can overlap or work against each other. But the focus still lies on *official* viewpoints. In Mol's account patients *do* surface, but only as the passive objects of doctor's practices, as "cases" that illustrate a condition, not as people that suffer or want to be heard (see Saldanha 2003). Her "technology of looking" enacts the same objectification of patients as the medical practices she examines.

Although in this thesis I draw considerably on ANT I am aware of the problem and I have tried to tackle it as much as possible – I leave it to the reader to judge the success. In section 4 I will specify how ANT has informed and influenced this project. At this point it suffices to say that I have taken a "moderate" ANT approach, meaning that I think that ANT provides an excellent vocabulary for talking about institutional power relationships and the strategies that are followed in such highly structured organisations. But, and this needs to be stressed here, I have also tried to avoid endorsing the institutional viewpoint retroactively (as most ANT work seems to do) by paying attention to what the official viewpoint excludes. In the case of the dating shows under scrutiny this means that I have paid attention to the institutional regime and modus operandi of production teams. But I have also placed the viewpoint of "their subjects", the participants, on an equal footing, meaning that their experiences are *not* approached from the production team's vision on the

¹⁶ There's an uncanny similarity between the doctrine of scientific objectivity (observations are true if they repeat themselves independently of the observers) and ANT's detached descriptivism that focuses on the more mundane details of scientific work. Both claim to investigate "facts" (that is, observations that cannot be refuted) and both neglect the extent to which all observers are implicated through "technologies of looking" in the objects they pretend to describe neutrally. ANT is social theory's equivalent of Albert Camus' *L'Etranger* (1957), a book that is notorious for its factual, emotionless and almost banal descriptions by Meursault, the main character. But Meursault's distance from the world is a lethal one, as "the Arab" who is killed by him on the beach discovers. It is an observational distance that denies that it acts upon the world, with real effects for those that inhabit it. This is why Elam argues that "Latour sees himself as detached from, and not seriously embroiled in, the different worlds he charts" (Elam, 1999: 3).

matters. Also, I have been attentive towards those production practices that are *exclusionary*, practices that the production team and the institutional context in which it operates prefers to delete from sight, for obvious reasons.

Another criticism of ANT that is of crucial importance in this thesis is more specific and less commented upon in the literature. We have seen that for Latour differential power positions within a network are an effect of that network. Put simply this means that power can never be the *cause* of anything: if something is “causing” the execution of an order or a will it is *the network constellation* that does so. But if this claim is combined with the descriptivism referred to earlier (all your explanations must be in the description of the network) this means that structural power differences are non-existent. I’ve quoted this before, but it might need a more careful reading:

“There is no need to go searching for mysterious or global causes outside networks. If something is missing it is because the description is not complete. Period. Conversely, if one is capable of explaining effects of causes, it is because a stabilized network is already in place” (Latour 1991: 130).

In the first part of the quote Latour argues that causes external to a network (like size, structure, truth) cannot be used as explanations, since this is the asymmetrical gesture *par excellence*. *All functioning of your network must be explained in the mundane terms of the network itself*. Taken to its logical limits this means that if you want to tackle racism on the shop floor you only have to analyse the shop floor, and nothing but the shop floor; if you want to tackle family violence you only have to analyse the family constellation, and nothing but the family constellation; if you want to analyse coffee trade, it suffices to analyse the specific market place and neglect the larger economic context created by the IMF and the neoliberal policies it advocates. Any reference to larger structural inequalities (respectively racism, women’s oppression and neoliberal capitalism) is *by definition* excluded.

But then, as if taken aback by the radicalism of his own statement, Latour argues in the second part that if there seems to be a cause external to the network, it must be that there is a “larger” network in place. But isn’t such a larger, stabilised network exactly what “a structure”, that hideous asymmetric word, is all about? Isn’t a stabilised network that is capable of producing effects in many different situations – that in other words is so all-encompassing that its function is so to speak guaranteed – exactly what is referred to as “a system of domination”? It seems to me that Latour is reinventing the wheel here: first he argues that structural inequalities don’t exist because unequal positions are the result of a specific network constellation. But if there are consistencies across different networks, well, then there is a larger, stabilised network in place – we won’t call it a structure because that’s a faulty concept but in fact it has all the properties of a structure.

Things get even more inconsistent if we connect this to the John Law’s “mechanics of power”. Take for instance the construction of obligatory passage points. This, as we have seen, is one of the strategies that an actor can follow for making itself indispensable in the network. But it is obvious that not every actor will be as successful in her attempts. The professor is “somehow” more successful than the student in making herself an obligatory passage point; the US “somehow” was

able to put aside the UN security council; and both the student and the UN security council would probably love to be an obligatory passage point but are (were) incapable to be so. Now, the only way to explain the success of the professor and the US is by drawing on that what Latour has excluded in advance from the analysis: structural power differences. The US doesn't really *need* the UN Security Council because of its enormous military, political and economic might. The professor doesn't really *need* the individual student because of her structural position within the university.

The point is that it is necessary to insist on structural power differences, power differences that are so all-encompassing, so consistent across different networks, that they truly become structures. Maybe ANT is right in arguing that such differences are reversible, that they are "based upon the will of the others", as Latour would put it. And indeed, once and a while we are confronted with the dissolution of what appeared to be huge, solid structures, and then we wonder how it comes we never saw how fragile they actually were – the implosion of the Soviet empire is one of those instances (taken from Law 1992). But for the most part the insistence on reversibility and actually-described networks obscures the fact that individual (human) actors don't have any choice but to obey the structure. Moreover, some structures are enormously durable and solid, as the examples of racism and sexism show. To take an example closer to this PhD: the differential power positions of members of the production team and participants are in principle reversible, and we can indeed discern strategies by which the production team tries to keep the network "theirs" – for example by creating themselves as an obligatory passage point. But the individual participant who wants to appear on *Blind Date* or *Streetmate* will find it very difficult to make any changes to the format, let alone construct him- or herself as an obligatory passage point. To argue that this is because of the material network constellation *alone* will not get us very far: there is no reason whatsoever why the individual participant would comply with the strict rules the production team sets out, unless we bring into the analysis the idea that to appear on television is something special, an exciting moment in one's life. And this exclusiveness of the media world, the thrill of television, is something that is carefully crafted and managed by "the media system" *as a whole* (Couldry 2000a). In sum, there will always be elements that escape the meticulous description of one particular network. And to argue, like Latour does, that this means that there is just a larger, more stabilised network in place just doesn't do the trick.

In this PhD I therefore adopt a moderate ANT approach, meaning that I make use of some of its concepts without going "all the way". Concretely this means that I think that ANT has provided some excellent concepts for analysing institutional power relationships. Terms like obligatory passage points, immutable mobiles, material constellations and the likes will surface once and a while, because they are useful, "mechanical" concepts to answer "how questions". But once and a while "why questions" will be asked as well, and I will draw unscrupulously on ANT – unlike terms as structural inequalities, the media system, gender hegemony and so on. Perhaps this is a sign of theoretical impurity, a failure to pursue one's philosophical principles, but I felt it was necessary. Moreover, as we will see shortly, the concept of *assemblage* instead of network allows us to escape some of these criticism while retaining the valuable elements of ANT's neomaterialist

institutionalism. Before we get to this issue, however, we will explore the links between Foucault's analytics of power and ANT's views on power.

3.5 Power and networks: Foucault versus Latour

"I like *Discipline and Punish*. It is a fascinating field study of the dissemination of power, and I also like his idea of the regime of statements and how they are spread. Such an idea can be used very effectively as a network argument, but I still think there is a misunderstanding about his radicalness. [...] I have used Foucault and read him a lot, so he might be absorbed in my thinking probably much more than I recognize, but I still think he is a much more traditional thinker than he at first appears" (Latour 1993b: 251-252, *italics in original*).

In the interview from which the above quote is taken Latour argues that Foucault comes closer to a traditional epistemological thinker instead of the radical critic the Anglo-Saxon academic community has made of him. In Latour's views Foucault is an asymmetrical thinker since he focussed only on the human sciences. Foucault's linking of power and knowledge is interesting but he has only done half of his homework according to Latour. The true test for Foucault's analytical apparatus would be to apply it to chemistry, to physics, or mathematics, something he never did and which – still according to Latour – would not stand the test. This is in Latour's view endemic for the deep respect French intellectuals foster for the "hard" sciences: "they are always taking a critical stand wherever they are, except on science, and I think Foucault is very much a part of that tradition" (ibid.: 252).

Despite Latour's rather critical comments, and without wanting to downplay the differences between both, I would like to insist that there are many similarities between Foucault and Latour (and ANT in general), notably in the way they conceive of power. The attentive reader will indeed have noticed multiple Foucaultian echo's in ANT's vocabulary on networks and power, and this section aims at mapping them. The main point that I want to make, then, is that Foucaultian analytics of power, when combined with an ANT approach, forms a powerful tandem for analysing institutional power relations.

What are the resemblances? First, it is clear that both ANT and Foucault share a reluctance to think power relationships in terms of a system or a structure. Foucault's microphysics of power insists on the necessary local and situated character of all power relations; for ANT, systems or structures are invalid explanatory concepts because they are network-effects rather than causes. The difference between both approaches, though, is that Foucault does not deny the existence of structural power relationships: they do exist, but they have to be reproduced in countless local contexts. ANT has, as we have seen, the tendency to downplay such structural power relationships. But in general terms both share the idea that power relationships are relational, that is, they need local, situated interaction in order to be effective.

Because both approaches see power relationships as situated in local practices they share the idea that the concrete material context is of fundamental importance in the creation and maintenance of subjectivities. In fact, it is at this level that Foucault and ANT come eerily close to each other. Foucault's often-referred-to discussion of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* (1991) is an example of such a concrete material context. The panopticon is *the* epitome of

surveillance technology: it is a building in which prisoners sit in individual cells that can be monitored from a central place by just one guard. The prisoners can't see each other and have no clue as to when they are observed or not by the central guard, who is invisible to them. Foucault sees the panopticon as exemplary for modern power, because in it a number of modern themes are combined: the combination of individualisation and massification that is characteristic for modern, pastoral power; the fact of not knowing whether one is observed at a certain moment installs a self-governing mechanism within the prisoner, even when nobody is watching (because the possibility is always there that the guard might watch); the aim of this spatial constellation, finally, being to create new subjectivities, or the "docile bodies" that inhabit Foucault's pessimist account of modern disciplinary power. In sum, the panopticon is a device, a technology that *creates* the subjectivity of the prisoner.

Within ANT there is less concern for overarching statements about modern power, but the emphasis on the materials of (non-)human organisation has led to a similar attention for the material conditions of subjectivity. Michel Callon (1998), for example, has recently argued that in order to understand economic reasoning we have to study the market *place*, the material constellation in which buying and selling takes place. He quotes a study by Garcia (1986) on the construction of a strawberry market in the Sologne region in France. The market place was literally constructed on the basis of economic theory. In order to disentangle the economic transactions from interpersonal relationships, buyers and sellers needed to be physically separated, so that buyers didn't see whose goods were being sold (and vice versa). The strawberries were categorised upon arriving, thus defining the strawberries' quality in an "objective" way (that is, defining qualities in quantitative categories). Moreover, the selling process itself was done through an electronic board, on which the price dropped until someone of the sellers felt the price was right and decided to buy the lot. All these spatial distributions and measurement devices were very important in the creation of the impersonal relationship that is so characteristic for economic relationships. Garcia's study shows that the *homo economicus*, the kind of rational calculating subjectivity capitalism needs, is not a fiction, but that it has precise material conditions of possibility that were elicited, enacted and enhanced by the material constellation of the market place itself. And this is a very Foucaultian point indeed.

A third common characteristic between Foucault and ANT is that they connect power relationships to *strategies*. For Foucault, any power relationship in which one tries to direct the behaviour of others is necessarily a power relationship, and this "directing" is being done through the use of strategies, which is why he describes power as "the name one gives that one attributes to a complex strategical situation" (Foucault, 1990a: 93). In similar fashion ANT also attaches huge importance to the strategical component of/in power relations. Put simply, an actor will try to keep her network aligned through the use of a number of strategies, including translation attempts, the construction of obligatory passage points and the creation of immutable mobiles. And since both Foucault and ANT attach enormous importance to the strategic component of power relationships they prefer "how-questions": the mechanical description of how actors try to have an effect (respectively upon other's conduit or upon the network).

Fourth, and lastly: ANT and Foucault share the idea that power relationships can be thought of as taking place in *networks*. In fact, Foucault himself occasionally made use of the network metaphor to illustrate the local and material character of power relationships (e.g. Foucault 1980: 98). The metaphor of network is an important one, because it pulls our attention towards the micro-level and the manifold connections power relationships can make. But the visual economy of the metaphor is also remarkable. Just like a map creates a view of the landscape from above – which is a situated perspective that pretends to see from nowhere – the metaphor of network invokes the same kind of disembodied view “that sees everything from nowhere” (Haraway 1991: 189). If Foucault is the cartographer of power (Deleuze 1986: 31–51), then ANT provides the topography of this map.

Because of the above reasons I will consider throughout these pages Foucault and ANT as two instances of one materialist approach to power. Again, I do not intend to state that both the Foucaultian and the actor-network approach are identical. Both have different aims and stem from different disciplinary backgrounds. But, as I hope this section has made clear, there are considerable similarities in the way power relationships are conceived and the crucial role attached to material arrangements in their functioning. Moreover, as I have consistently argued, both “paradigms” offer an excellent conceptual apparatus for analysing *institutional* power relationships, that is, those relationships that take place in highly organised settings. For these reasons I will sometimes refer to “the materialist approach to power”, by which I mean those aspects that ANT and Foucault share.

4. The communication process as a network

Having introduced ANT and its notion of network we can now return to the communication process. In this section I want to apply the ANT perspective on the communication process. This is not an unproblematic enterprise, because ANT came out of a discipline that is not interested in mass communication or popular culture per se. Nevertheless I think that ANT’s ontology is sufficiently stimulating, perhaps even provocative, to make us think the communication process in different terms, terms that are also more apt for the subject of this PhD. This does not mean that I propose a general “network model” for communication, a model that would be applicable to all kinds of genres and/or communication instances. Rather, my engagement with ANT has grown out of a desire to understand two *particular* shows, *Blind Date* and *Streetmate*, and the description that follows is arguably only valid for these two shows alone.

The basic claim in this section is that the mass media communication process in capitalist societies can be seen as the establishment of a network comprising different actors, human and nonhuman alike. In order to make this claim I will first start with a description of one such “actual” network, namely the Flemish *Blind Date*. Starting from this description I will then outline in what ways it differs from, and displaces some of the central terms of, the encoding/decoding model and the circuit-approach to culture. In a way, then, this section is concerned with rethinking the cultural studies project in ANT-influenced terms. Although I do not think that ANT can provide a full-scale alternative for cultural studies’ vocabulary I do believe that it can offer an alternative view on mass media

communication processes that is at least refreshing. Potentially it might even force us to rethink what we have come to accept as common wisdom, thus bringing new problematics into the field. I would like to insist that it is not a question of a fresher ANT “superseding” old-fashioned cultural studies (as academic convention would have it), nor is it the case that both paradigms can be happily joined together. There are fundamentally different viewpoints in both paradigms, and it is not my intention to hide these tensions from sight. I rather prefer to think of these tensions as productive, meaning that one paradigm can be used to explore and provoke the other’s weaknesses and underlying assumptions.

4.1 Blind Date as a network

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the network approach to communication is by opposing it to a functionalist approach. This functionalist approach to institutionalised mass media communication is very influential in the sense that it is how the industry tends to think about itself. It is, in other words, the industry’s *common sense*, a doxa that has been highly influential in shaping the industry’s functioning.

The Flemish Blind Date is based upon a format owned by Columbia Tri-Star. This means that it is shot in Belgium, with Belgian participants, a Belgian production team and a Belgian host. The company that produces the show is Ghent-based Capiau Projects. The broadcasting company that emits the show is Flanders’ biggest commercial broadcaster¹⁷, the Vlaamse Televisie Maatschappij (VTM). Like all commercial broadcasting systems the functioning of Blind Date can be represented in the following flowchart:

¹⁷ In Belgium legislators have opted for a mixed system of private and public broadcasters. For the northern part of the country, Flanders, this means that three broadcasting corporations are active. The public service (Vlaamse Radio en Televisie – VRT) own two television chains TV1 and Canvas, reaching respectively 27,4% and 9,7%. The biggest commercial competitor is de Vlaamse Media Maatschappij, owning VTM (mainstream commercial television, averaging 24,4% market share), Ka2 (aimed at a younger audience, averaging 5,4% market share) and Jin-TV (music channel aimed at youngsters – no market share available). VT4 is owned by Sweden-based SBS and averages a market share of 6,5%. Although the latter is only a small television company its arrival in 1995 hurt VMM considerably, because it was the first time that their commercial monopoly on advertising revenues was challenged (source: <http://www.audimetrie.be/audiences/N-MSOEVER.htm> - figures are for the first 5 months of 2003).

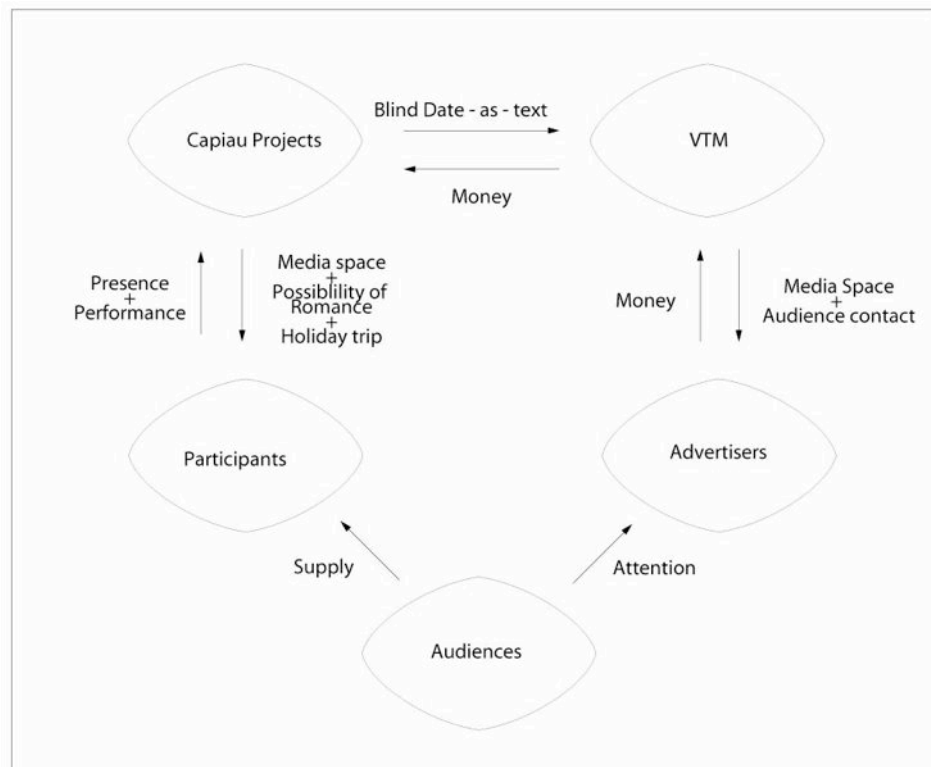


Figure 3: "functionalist" flowchart of Blind Date production context

Essentially the flowchart maps the different actors involved and allocates them a "role" or a "function" in the whole. In the case of Blind Date there are five groups of actors. First there is Capiou Projects, the company that makes the show. They are paid by VTM – the second actor in the whole – for making what I have called Blind-Date-as-a-text (the program as it is transmitted on television). VTM in turn gets paid by advertisers because the latter are interested in reaching a fourth actor: the audience at home. Since Blind Date is a rather popular program with a market share that hovers roundabout 30% advertisers are keen on advertising before, while and after Blind Date, since in that way they know they reach a rather large segment of the Flemish market (that hopefully buys the products that are advertised for). The fifth and last actor in the whole are the participants, who appear on the show in return for the possibility of romance, the free holiday trip offered to them, or their fifteen minutes of fame.

The functionalist view on commercial mass mediated communication does more than the mere mapping of actors and allocating them a role: it also performs these relationships in a certain way. First of all, it is clear that it is focussed on functionalities: every actor *does* something in the network: audiences watch, advertisers buy media time, Capiou Projects produces Blind Date, VTM broadcasts the programme and so on... As such this would be consistent with a network approach to communication, with its emphasis upon what actors do in the network. But functionalism is also renowned for its neglect of conflict. In the flowchart, actors gleefully work together to make the system work. There is no attention for conflicts amongst actors, since they all cooperate in function of the system as a whole. In this sense, the flowchart represents the manager's dream of omnipotence. It offers an institutional and managerial point of view, focussing on how departments *should* function, rather than how they actually function. Secondly, the identities of the

different actors are unproblematic: every actor has a precise, delimited identity that is ultimately derived from his/her function in the whole: broadcasters do nothing but broadcasting, advertisers advertise, participants appear on the show, and all of these functional identities are clear-cut and unambiguous. Thirdly, the flowchart embodies the organisational point of view. It focuses upon departments, not on the minor details of the actual interactions as they take place: there is no attention, for example, for the way the production team of *Blind Date* cooperates with VTM when doing the shootings (cf. below). Fourth and lastly, the flowchart is also a human-centred approach. All relevant actors are humans (or departments governed and driven by humans), and there is scant attention for nonhumans in the organisation.

Because of these reasons the flowchart must be discarded from an ANT-influenced perspective. Although the relationship between ANT and functionalism is more complex than some of its practitioners claim¹⁸, it is clear that these four characteristics are highly incompatible with an ANT approach. Instead of the flowchart we will therefore introduce Figure 4, which represents *Blind Date* as a network:

¹⁸ For instance, in *Organizing Modernity* (1994) John Law repeatedly distinguishes ANT from the functionalism as found in organisational sociology. Of course there are numerous differences between both paradigms: whereas functionalism starts from notions like system or structure ANT starts from actually-described networks; whereas functionalism is essentially a doctrine of social order ANT asks *how* social order is established and maintained; functionalism deletes conflict from sight whereas ANT is more attentive to it. But there are also resemblances between functionalism and ANT: both propagate an institutional point of view, and both paradigms are concerned with “functions” (in ANT-terms “what an actor *does* in a network”). In this sense ANT can be said to be a form of *neofunctionalism*, a critical functionalism that has been rid of the notion of system and put more in line with a poststructuralist suspicion of modernist categories.

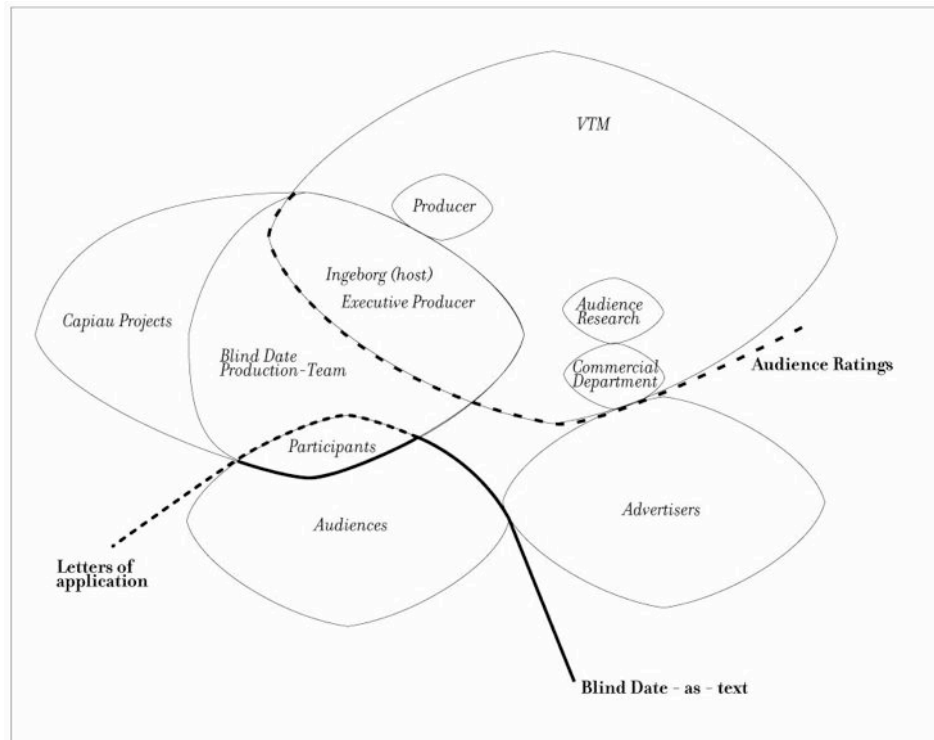


Figure 4: Blind Date as a network

Unlike the flowchart, which focuses on functional departments, Figure 4 works with “interaction spheres”. In an interaction sphere the different actors materially interact with each other, meaning that they necessarily come into physical contact with each other at one point or another. The map can be divided in four quadrants, giving us four large interaction spheres. The top left interaction sphere is the production context. The different actors operating within it are: the Blind Date production team (who are employees of Capiou Projects), Ingeborg (the host of the show), the Executive Producer (working for Capiou Projects), and the participants. It is important to stress that the borders of an interaction sphere are not rigid: there are no fixed physical boundaries of an interaction sphere. In fact, for some of the actors it is rather difficult to tell which “department” they actually belong to. The Executive Producer’s position, for example, is difficult to pinpoint. He is an employee of Capiou Projects in Ghent (they pay his salary), but during the production process he spends at least as much time in the VTM offices, located near Brussels: he collaborates closely with VTM’s producer, who is responsible for managing Blind Date, and the both of them meet at least weekly while shooting the show. Similarly, Ingeborg’s position – the host of the show – is also ambivalent, in the sense that she works closely together with the production team but she is paid by VTM. The third quadrant (below left) is the interaction sphere of the audience. Here we also witness the same gradient quality that we have witnessed in the first and second quadrant: the participants, for example, are always-already members of the audience (no participant appears on the show without having seen Blind Date beforehand). In fact, participants occupy a highly ambivalent position, since they are on the one hand non-media people (and they appear on the show for this reason alone) while also being part of the concrete, material production process. We will get back to this important point repeatedly in the empirical part; suffice it now to state that participants are situated at the point where the audience interaction sphere and

the production sphere intersect. The fourth and last interaction sphere is that of the advertisers. They have very few actual interactions with the other actors; only VTM's commercial department interacts physically with them (and even then it is usually done through negotiations with a media buying company). There is, however, another way in which advertisers interact with other actors (most importantly the audience), and that is through what I have called "Blind Date-as-text". Indeed, from a commercial point of view this contact between the audience and the advertisers through Blind Date-as-text is Blind Date's *raison d'être*: the advertisers are the ones who pay for the costly production process for the sole reason that the programme enables them to reach the audiences at home.

This brings us to a second major difference between the functionalist flowchart and Figure 4: the emphasis upon the role of representations in the network. There are three representations that play a crucial role in keeping the network intact: the first is the already mentioned *Blind Date-as-text*. Put simply, this is the show as it is being broadcast by VTM. Blind Date-as-text is not only important because it generates the necessary funds for paying for the production process; it is also an important motivator for participants to appear on the show. If people wouldn't watch Blind Date there simply wouldn't be any participants to appear on it (or it would be much more difficult for the production team to find the necessary participants). The second representation that is crucial in establishing and/or maintaining the network is the infamous *audience ratings*. These provide the advertisers with information on who watches Blind Date, usually in the form of socio-demographic composition of the audience. But they are also important in providing the production team feedback on how the show is doing – like in any media company, the Blind Date production team carefully monitors the audience ratings. The third representation that plays a role in the network is the *letters of application*, written by the would-be participants when taking their chance for appearing on the show. In the chapter 4 we will get back to how exactly these representations "function" in the network. For the moment, it suffices to say that our ANT approach differs from the functionalist flowchart because it attaches importance to several representations that weren't even mentioned in the latter. Furthermore, these representations are conceived as having an *active* role in the maintenance of the network.

What are the consequences of focussing on the actual interactions, rather than on functional departments? Is it a question of mere "mapping", with an eye for detail that functionalism lacks, or are there other consequences? The answer to this possible criticism is not literally "in the map" but comes from the notion of network as it is used in ANT. First of all, I take from ANT the idea that a network is a *precarious achievement*, that is, Blind Date-as-network needs maintenance and continuous "work" in order to keep on existing. There are many things that could go wrong: the audience might not like the show anymore; people might lose interest in appearing on the show and the production team would be confronted with an acute lack of possible participants; Capiou Projects might think that VTM is not paying the right price and decide to renegotiate its contract; the host could lose interest in Blind Date after eight seasons of a highly standardised production, preferring to go for more challenging programmes; advertisers could conclude that there are better, more popular shows, or shows with a more suitable socio-demographic profile; VTM could decide that the show doesn't fit with their new profile and target audience. In

sum, it doesn't take much imagination to see Blind Date-as-network collapse. Indeed, the history of television is scattered with programmes that were not able to maintain themselves over time. The reason for this is that all the different actors in the communication network have the tendency to drift off and go their own way. This point needs to be stressed here: Blind Date-as-network is only able to maintain itself over time as long as it is capable of keeping the different actors aligned. The difference with functionalist flowchart, then, is that in Figure 4 social order – or stability of networks over time – is problematised, rather than presupposed.

Why does the danger of "betrayal" loom large? The reason is that most of the actors in the network have their own reasons for entering the Blind Date network: advertisers want to reach an audience; VTM wants the advertisers to pay for the cost of making television (and thus they need large audiences); the production team wants the participants to be "good television"; and participants want the possibility of romance, a free holiday trip or the thrill of appearing on television. As long as these different agendas are more or less aligned Blind Date-as-network will remain more or less intact. This has two consequences. Firstly, all these different agendas give rise to "a complex strategical situation", the Foucaultian definition of a power relationship. In other words, all the relationships between the different actors can be considered to be *power* relationships, in which actors try to influence each other's behaviour. Secondly, because actors try to influence each other's behaviour momentary conflicts and frictions are bound to happen – and they *do* happen, as I hope will become clear in the empirical analyses. Thus Figure 4 – the network approach to communication – differs from the flowchart in that power and conflict are an integral part of it.

4.2 Cultural studies and networks

Thus far I have, for the sake of the argument, contrasted the description of Blind Date-as-network with functionalism, and I have argued that making Blind Date can be seen as the establishment of a network between different actors, and that such a network can be seen as a field in which actors try to influence each other – in short, the field is criss-crossed by power relations. The question that arises now is how such a network approach differs from other approaches within cultural studies. In other words, what is the relationship of the network approach to the dominant models of analysis in cultural studies? Is it a question of adding some interactions and materiality in the process, or is the relationship more tenuous? What concepts fit easily into the cultural studies project and which ones don't? In what ways differs Figure 4 from encoding/decoding and the circuit of communication?

Let us focus on the similarities first. The comparison with functionalism is handy because it shows us clearly that the network approach, encoding/decoding and the circuit model of culture belong to the critical sociologies. Contrary to functionalism "conflict" is an integral part of our three models – it is in a way that what inspires them. In the encoding/decoding model conflict is mainly defined in structuralist-marxist terms, namely as the power to define reality, and the conflicting interpretations that thus circulate in a hegemonic formation. In the circuit model of culture, on the other hand, conflict arises out of tensions between the five different processes – as for example when the Walkman needs to be regulated. In the network approach to communication, conflict arises out of the

“complex strategical situation”, when actors with different agenda’s try to influence each other’s behaviour. In sum, conflict is an essential aspect in these three models. Furthermore, all three models attribute quite a crucial role to representations within the communicative process. In encoding/decoding televisual representations are texts that carry meanings (which doesn’t amount to saying that their decodings are guaranteed), in the circuit model “representation” is one of the five processes that contribute to the articulation of a cultural artefact, and in the network approach representations are actors that keep the other actors aligned.

But as soon as we get to this point the differences between the three models start to become clear, differences that have to do with the neomaterialist principles underlying the network approach to communication. In general terms: cultural studies are too much oriented towards the meaning-side of things (the discursive interpretation of poststructuralism it draws so prominently on) to be convincing for a neomaterialist. What are the frictions between both approaches?

First of all, it is clear that the role ascribed to representations is entirely different in both approaches. For cultural studies representations are essentially “carriers of meaning”. They are, so to speak, the vehicles that transmit meaning from one place to another (and are thus capable of maintaining or disrupting a hegemony – all of this of course within a context of polysemic texts and interpretive audiences). For the network approach to communication this interpretation is not excluded in advance from the analysis, but the focus lies on how representations are able to mobilise other actors in the network. In this scenario representations still “carry” meaning but the focus is on how these meanings *affect* the other actors in the network. Take for instance the role of the audience ratings in Figure 4. It is clear that they carry meaning: they represent how many people watch Blind Date, combined with other data like gender, income and the likes. This is their meaning. But from an institutional point of view audience ratings are first and foremost “tools” for selling the advertisement space before, between and after Blind Date. If the audience ratings are “convincing enough” advertisers will be prepared to pay VTM – they will, in ANT-terms, become *allies*. So the network approach to communication differs from the cultural studies approach in that “meaning” is only of secondary importance, focussing instead on what representations do in the network – how they function. In this sense it is useless to try to “deconstruct” audience ratings (to reveal how they are constructed, see for instance Miller 1992). What matters most about audience ratings is not whether they are exact or approximate the truth “out there”, but how they *function* within the network. As long as there are enough actors willing to believe the audience ratings they are a useful tool for mobilising actors.

This brings us to a second difference between the network approach and cultural studies: the institutional perspective. The network model provides a tool for analysing *institutional interactions*. The encoding/decoding model and the circuit model on the contrary are essentially cultural process-oriented. The encoding/decoding model, for example, got its name from the two communicative processes it considers central. In the circuit model, there are five such cultural processes: representation, production, consumption, regulation and identity. Of course the focus on cultural processes does not exclude an institutional perspective. Recent cultural studies work on production, for example, has studied media production in its institutional context (see for instance Du Gay 1997a, Nixon 1996).

But both encoding/decoding and the circuit model don't offer a conceptual apparatus for analysing institutional interactions like the network approach to communication does.

But perhaps the most important difference concerns the way the communication network is spatially represented. In section 2 of this chapter I have argued that the encoding/decoding model essentially remained a transmission approach to communication. I have also argued that this resulted in a reification of the two central communicative moments: production and consumption. The encoding/decoding model installed an a priori separation between production and consumption, and the only way Hall was able to reconnect them was by invoking a quasi-transcendent field of discursivity. Put simply: production and consumption take place in different places and the only way they are connected (form a totality) is through the field of discursivity. We are now in a better position to see why from a neomaterialist viewpoint this is a flawed conception, at least in the case of *Blind Date*. If we look at Figure 4 the rigid separation of production and consumption stops making sense. Take for instance the position of the participants. On the one hand they are part of the audience: every participant has seen *Blind Date* before deciding to apply for the show. In this sense, they are to be located at the consumption-side of things. But once they are selected they participate in the production process – in sum, they operate at the production-side of things. Hence the rigid separation of production and consumption is permeable, to say the least. Similarly, as I will argue in later chapters, when audiences are watching *Blind Date* they are also watching a production process: although television does its best to conceal the concrete material production context from sight media audiences are, after forty years of television culture, to a large extent media savvy¹⁹. As Abercrombie and Longhurst argue:

“audience members have become much more skilled in their use of the media, and this in itself gives greater capacities to the audience in relation to the text and makes audience responses more diverse and unpredictable” (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998: 32)

Whereas Abercrombie and Longhurst are interested in the media savviness of contemporary media audiences because for them this means that audiences have entered a new relationship with the media my claims are more moderate and down-to-earth. The point I am getting at is that “television making”, especially in the era of reality television, is no longer the mysterious and glamorous activity it was 40 years

¹⁹ A small but growing body of work within media studies is concerned with the question of how media audiences are to a large extent savvy about the media's functioning. John Fiske's work (1987) on how fan communities create “tertiary texts” (as opposed to the primary texts – the programme itself – and secondary texts – texts about programmes produced by the industry itself, like *Soap Opera Digest*) has been hugely influential in pushing this line-of-thought. Fiske argued that these tertiary texts bridge the division between production and consumption, since “consumers” start to produce their own discourse about their beloved television programmes, often trying to influence production decisions by means of lobbying activities. Similarly, Harrington & Bielby (1995) argue that soap fans are very knowledgeable about the genre's conventions and production process, which adds an extra layer of audience pleasures in the show. More recently Nick Couldry (2000a, 2000b) has argued that when people come into contact with how television is being made (for instance by comparing the actual protest demonstration and its coverage in a current affairs programme) their view on television's functioning changes dramatically.

ago. People know more or less how a television show is being made, if not by own experience than at least by second-hand knowledge – and this knowledge shapes their “readings” of television (see chapter 5). As a result the separation of production and consumption, where cultural studies relied so strongly on, is a problematic category that needs careful reconsideration.

In fact, since Figure 4 focuses on the actual interactions rather than the process-oriented encoding/decoding model (and the circuit model), it offers us a way to reconsider the relation between production and consumption in concrete, material terms: it literally “maps” the different interactions in the network. Moreover, it does so in true ANT-style, by *not* presupposing for example that actors can be divided in those who produce and those who consume media products. The network approach to communication thus offers an inherently different spatial model of communication, one that pays attention to the manifold ways in which audiences interact with media, grounded in concrete, material settings rather than cultural “processes”.

5. The assemblage

Having described Blind Date as a network, and how such an approach differs from the way mass mediated communication is usually studied within cultural studies, we are now also in the position to better understand some of the critiques that have been levelled against ANT. This section explores some of these critiques and how they have influenced the analyses that follow. To recapitulate quickly, the two most important critiques of ANT were that it refuses to talk about structural power relationships that exceed the narrow description of the network, and that in its analyses it reproduces the viewpoint of the management – in other words, the feminist critique.

If we start with ANT’s rejection of structural power relationships we see that the preliminary analysis thus far has performed a heuristic levelling of all the actors involved – participants, viewers, advertisers, broadcasters, all have in good symmetric fashion the capacity to resist or drift off. However, it is important not to neglect the actual power differences that exist between the different actors, power differences that can only be thought in structural terms. Put simply, it is not because in principle we should approach all actors in the same terms that we should be blind for how certain actors have far more influence in the network than other ones. The individual viewer, for example, has the capability to act upon the network, but his or her actions are limited to either tuning into the show or zapping away from it²⁰. The same goes for the participants who want to appear on Blind Date: although I wouldn’t

²⁰ This does not mean that the experience of watching Blind Date can be reduced to either watching or not watching – although this is indeed the way the industry has defined television viewing (see Ang 1991). Broadcasters like VTM basically sell viewers to advertisers (Smythe 1977), and as long as the audience keeps watching the show (for whatever reason) the “experience of watching Blind Date” is of no concern to them. The point I am getting at is that while it is true that the industry’s approach to the audience is reductionist (and that my analysis in a way reinforces this viewpoint – see below), one cannot ignore the fact that actors like VTM are far more powerful in shaping the network than the audience at home.

want to make them into dupes of the production team it is also naïve to suppose that participants are even remotely capable of influencing the show's format or functioning – a capacity the production team *does* have.

The emphasis upon structural power differences is what makes the analyses that will follow differ from ANT. Actually, a difference can be made in Figure 4 between actors that are solidly anchored within capitalism – the institutional actors like Capiou Projects, VTM, advertisers – and non-institutional actors (participants and members of the audiences). Although *in principle* all actors are needed to make the network work it is clear that the individual non-institutional actor has far less space to manoeuvre than the institutional actors. To paraphrase *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (1998): all actors are equal but some are more equal than others. A “purist” ANT-analysis would explain this power difference by drawing on “the mechanics of power”, by arguing for instance that the production team makes itself indispensable by constructing itself as an *obligatory passage point*: if you want to appear on Blind Date you will have to pass by a selection committee, who will judge quite literally how well you perform. Or, they would argue that the production team makes use of *immutable mobiles*, like the reports that members of the production team write when they accompany participants on their holiday trip. But mechanical descriptions like these, though offering valuable insights in itself (and insights I will draw upon in a later stage), are not adequate in explaining the consistency and durability of these differential power positions. It is simply impossible to explain, for instance, why participants so readily accept the production team's definition of the situation (for example, that participants are “guests” who are “invited” on the set) if we don't draw on concepts like ownership, the media system, or professionalism – concepts that indeed surpass the narrow descriptions of the network. In sum, although one has to take care not to portray some actors as “strong” and others as “weak” – one has to attribute agency to all actors – this should not get in the way of seeing the structural power differences between actors. In this context, the difference between capitalist organisations and non-institutional actors is crucial in this concern.

We also better understand the criticism that ANT is epistemologically conservative because it reproduces the viewpoint of the management. Take for instance the claim that Blind Date-as-network is only able to maintain itself over time as long as it is capable of preventing the different actors to “drift off”. An example of such an act of drifting off would be a participant refusing to confess publicly that she slept with dating partner during the holiday trip. But the mere choice of words, the choosing for the word “drifting off” shows that ANT implicitly takes over the viewpoint of the production team, because the production team wants “their” participants to confess. If we take the perspective of the participant, to the contrary, it is a perfectly understandable and justifiable act to maintain her privacy in difficult conditions, and thus it is not an act of “drifting off” but rather *maintaining* her network. In other words: although the description appears to be putting all the actors (the big-scale and longstanding companies like VTM or Capiou Projects as well as the “ordinary” participant) at the same ontological level the network perspective actually takes over the definition of network as it is advanced by the institutionalised actors, thus privileging the viewpoint of those who “own” the network (or at least try to do so).

Although in this PhD I have placed a heavy emphasis upon the institutional context of television making I have tried not to reproduce the official viewpoint retroactively: I have not only interviewed members of the production team or employees of VTM but I have also interviewed participants and members of the audience. This in itself is not sufficient, of course, because it is perfectly possible to interview participants while still interpreting their answers from the official viewpoint. In this sense it is possible to “listen to” subordinate actors but “reading” them in official terms (as failures, rebels, or what have you). The interviews with the participants were in this sense a good antidote against the production point of view because it offered me an alternative “epistemology”. The concerns of the participants are often different than those of the production team, and the former’s experiences and occupations have often been a great help in abolishing the official viewpoint.

In order to distinguish my interpretation of network from its “purist” ANT use I will often use the term *assemblage* rather than network (though admittedly I haven’t been entirely consistent in using the terms and at times use them interchangeably). An assemblage shares with a network its artefactuality: it is something that has to be put together. Moreover, an assemblage combines just like a network humans and nonhumans in a *localised* meshwork. It also has a machinic quality to it, in the sense that it works in institutions and therefore is structured according to a certain logic or governmentality. But unlike a network an assemblage is not narrated from a – supposedly neutral – viewpoint “from above”: it looks at the network from different, *embodied* viewpoints. Moreover, since it does not privilege the viewpoint of the management of the network it is attentive towards the unintended effects of rational, intentional behaviour. Indeed, from the viewpoint of the management the network is often “inefficient” or “overproductive”, because it produces more than that what it was intended for. In the case of Blind Date the assemblage would look something like this: it is a machinery that combines different actors (production team, broadcasters, advertisers, audiences, participants – actors that are not all of them equal and occupy different structural positions) in a localised meshwork, and moreover this machinery is productive: it generates and circulates money, administrative routines, managerial practices, hierarchies and professional roles, but also feelings, aspirations, love, holidays, resistance, letters, irritation, even unexpected job losses²¹. In sum, an assemblage differs from a network in that it its generative effects are not approached from the viewpoint of the management *alone*.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have proposed an alternative approach to communication, one based upon the metaphors of network and assemblage as it comes from ANT. Basically, the network approach to communication argues that mass mediated communication involves the establishment of relations between different actors so that they form an assemblage of humans and nonhumans. Furthermore the network approach suggests that we should at least in principle approach these different actors

²¹ In chapters 4, 5 and 6 we will see in detail to what these terms refer. The job loss refers to one of the participants who was fired at her job after appearing on Blind Date.

in the same terms. For instance, it might be a good idea that we don't start our analysis from the assumption that there are people who make media content and that there are people who watch media content, because if we inspect the Blind Date network carefully, and focus on the actual interactions, it becomes clear that the neat, clear-cut division between production and consumption is quite leaky. Moreover, many of the actors involved in making Blind Date have quite flexible identities, operating sometimes on the consumption-side of things, then switching to the production-side (and vice versa). Hence it is not fruitful to think about communication in terms that draw strong demarcations between production and consumption. This does not mean, however, that the terms "consumption" and "production" are irrelevant for a network approach to communication, nor that we should redefine, replace or abandon them altogether. Rather, it means that we should use "production" and "consumption" *with care*, and that we should be attentive towards those moments where the boundaries are transgressed – and what the theoretical (and political) consequences of this "transgression" are. A last characteristic of the network approach to communication, finally, is that a network or assemblage must be seen as a field criss-crossed by power relations, because in such a network actors try to influence each other's behaviour, giving rise to a complex strategical situation – the Foucaultian definition of a power relationship.

If we combine this chapter with the first one, the contours of the materialist approach to communication that I promised in the first chapter should become clearer. As I have argued in section 3.5 there is a connection between Foucaultian models of culture (or, the governmental approach to culture as I called it there) and the ANT approach that we have explored in this chapter. These similarities can be summarised in the following points:

- An description of power relationships as to be situated and functioning in tangible, material contexts rather than at the level of ideology or meaning.
- A description of power relationships in terms of strategies and "technologies", rather than in "persuasive" terms.
- An interest in the institutional contexts in which these power relationships take place, rather than a "social totality" or a "field of discursivity". This is combined with a preference for interactions as the basic unit of analysis.
- A preference for analytical tools that don't rely on terms like system, structure, production, superstructure and all other terms that are used in classical sociology (that is, those sociologies that date from before the advent of poststructuralism)

It is obvious that such a materialist approach to communication and culture sits rather uneasily with the cultural studies project as it was laid down in for example the encoding/decoding model. In other words, both "paradigms" are to a large extent incompatible. Although they occasionally draw on the same theoretical resources (poststructuralism, for example) and use the same terms (power, representation...) the concepts perform different functions in both paradigms. As I argued in the first chapter I have been rather pragmatic in my choices. When analysing a given problem I have chosen for the paradigm that seemed the better tool

for that particular problem; if the paradigm failed I turned to the other. In the process of writing I have never intended to hide this uneasy tension, and I will repeatedly get back to it in the empirical part. Basically, I believe both paradigms have something useful to say about the relationship between communication and power: both are necessary *and* necessarily incomplete.

In general terms, I think the materialist approach to communication is very apt for analysing *interactions* within an *institutional* context. Concretely this means that it has been particularly fruitful in analysing the *production process* of *Streetmate* and *Blind Date*. The approach is materialist because it looks at cultural production as “the result of what particular people have done at particular times and places, and under particular constraints and limitations” (Couldry 2000c: 11). Hence the materialist approach that I have advocated here is concerned with *particularity*: both the Foucaultian analytics of power and ANT have a preference for the more mundane (and thus highly specific) aspects of social life, the nitty-gritty details of our life in organised settings. But there is also the tendency to downplay the more structural aspects of such organised settings. ANT is the clearest example of this. In his refusal of transcendental categories Latour rejects all descriptions that are not “complete”, thus rejecting structural causes or effects (see 3.4). Foucault is much more nuanced when it comes to this problem. He doesn’t exclude structural power relationships in advance but argues that even structural power relationships have to be grounded in tangible, material settings. Nevertheless his work contains little or no attention for such structural power relationships, let alone classic sociological categories like gender, class or ethnicity.

This neglect of the structural aspects of power relationships is complemented with a rejection of questions of signification and interpretation. While I do think that the strength and attraction of the materialist approach can partially be explained by the way it dislodges the structuralist-Gramscian framework I also find it difficult to think culture and communication without *any* reference to signification. Watching television, for example, hardly makes sense to me without some reference to something like “meaning”: when people watch television they are to some extent caught up in processes of interpretation. This does not mean that “meaning” should be the endpoint of all analysis (what the structuralist-Gramscian framework made it to be) but neither should it be abandoned. In sum, what I am arguing for is a decentring of signification, not a rejection.

For these reasons I think the structuralist-Gramscian framework has valuable insights to offer, and this thesis draws repeatedly on some of its central terms, especially in chapters 6 and 7. As I mentioned in the introduction, I believe in the productivity of the encounter, and the empirical chapters that follow will play out these tensions against each other. First, however, we will turn our attention to the research set-up and the methodological choices that came along with it.

Chapter 3: Research setup and methodology

"[Blind Date] is every media student's dream for two reasons. First, because it's so great to analyse. Have you spotted the way which Cilla patronizes the females but doesn't to the males? Have you noticed how Cilla makes huge points about how good people look, when ironically the contestants can't actually see each other? Ah, hurrah for feminist theory, dominant ideologies and the Frankfurt School! Second, because it's the easiest way of getting onto television in prime time [...]"¹

The two previous chapters were concerned with high theoretical debates within cultural studies and other disciplines. In them, I argued that cultural studies was in need of a more materialist approach as can be found in Foucaultian *analytics of power* or ANT. Up until now this argument has limited itself to the theoretical level, and references to dating shows were scarce and limited in scope. This chapter is intended to make the link between the theoretical stakes of the previous chapters and the actual objects under scrutiny, namely two Flemish dating shows.

The conventions of academic writing require us to present an argument in its "finished" form, hiding the inconsistencies and doubts from sight and forcing us to present a coherent and convincing argument. The practice of research, however, is often far more messy and confusing than the eventual end product suggests. The advantage of the conventional academic style is that the reader is confronted with a set of arguments that is already crystallised, clearer and thus (hopefully) more convincing. The disadvantage is that arguments are separated from the muddy context from which they were forged, which comes with a price to pay: arguments are separated from the concrete issues which gave rise to them, thus acquiring a self-evident status. As a result, academic writing, like all styles of writing characterised by a high level of abstraction, often seems to play at the level of words, concepts and paradigms rather than the empirical world it is supposed to be writing about. That theoretical academic writing in the "outside world" is often perceived to be obscure, hermetic and generally far removed from "the real world" is one of the regrettable consequences of "the academic genre".

For this reason I have chosen to present the theoretical and methodological issues at stake in the form of a genealogy. A genealogy, in Foucaultian terms, is a history that does not unite what was once dispersed, nor is it a teleology that explains the present in terms of underlying causes or roots which have always been there. Rather, a genealogy maps past events in their multiplicity, in the ways they evolved as well as in the ways they *could* have evolved (which does not mean that there are no good reasons why things evolved the way they did – to explain the present through

¹ This quote is taken from the UK Game Show Page, a website dedicated to all game shows being broadcasted on British television (to be found at http://www.ukgameshows.com/atoz/programmes/b/blind_date/index.htm).

the past is one thing; to argue that the present was always “present” in the past and that thus the present could not have been otherwise is quite another). By writing such a genealogy of my research project I hope I will ground the theoretical debates of the previous chapters in the concrete, tangible issues and problems that gave rise to them, thus lending them at once more concrete and more convincing. To put it simply: I do not particularly like criticising cultural studies for its own sake. Rather, my arguing for a more materialist approach within cultural studies comes from the particular trajectory this research project has taken. In sum, this research has a history, and it is that history that this genealogy will sketch.

1. Genealogy

Contrary to what the opening quote of this chapter suggests dating shows have received relatively little academic attention. According to my knowledge at the time of this writing there are some conference papers written on the topic (Hagen 1998, Teurlings 2002b) and a few articles have been published (White 1989, Syvertsen 2000, Scannell 1999, Teurlings 2001) but there are, for example, no book-length studies. This is rather surprising given the fact that the dating show is a relatively “old” television genre. Moreover, in recent years we have witnessed a veritable explosion of the genre, varying from “the mother of all dating shows” (Blind Date) to all kinds of new formats which one way or another try to bring people together. But the lack of scholarly attention is remarkable for yet another reason: dating shows contain in them all the elements which make a good combination with “traditional” cultural studies themes: they are hugely popular and frowned upon by cultural critics and other propagators of the dominant ideology thesis; because they are about romantic love and the dating process they resonate well with feminist concerns about romance, gender roles, gender discourses, the politics of appearance and so forth; finally - and related to the previous remark - dating shows often play with notions of class and gender in a moralistic and/or ridiculing fashion and can therefore be seen to invoke the “formations of class and gender” that Beverly Skeggs (1997) so probingly described. The lack of scholarly attention from media and cultural studies scholars for dating shows is even more surprising given the huge amount of (mostly sociological and US-based) literature on romance and dating culture (e.g. Rothman 1984, Bailey 1989, Lystra 1989, Breines 1992, Illouz 1997, Bailey 2002, to name just a few).

The initial idea was to do a “classic” cultural studies meets discourse analysis of dating shows in the line of the above remarks. Simplifying somewhat the original research design, the aim was to conduct a discourse analysis of dating shows focussing mainly on the construction of romance and the politics of gender in them, and this through a textual analysis and a reception analysis. Blind Date, for example, can be seen as a site in which gender discourses are produced and gender identities performed. When a male participant talks about his date and says that she is “too extravert” for him, he is at the same time producing a discourse on women (how they should behave in order to be attractive or datable) while performing at the same time a masculine identity (men like women who are obedient). In this initial stage the research questions would be: a. what kind of gender discourses and identities are produced in these shows, and b. how do audiences at home engage with the thus produced gender discourses? The research in this form would thus be an

investigation of how certain hegemonic forms of (heterosexual) masculinity and femininity are reproduced and/or challenged through a popular media text.

The problem with this approach, however, was that it bracketed the production context and thus relied on a rather naïve perception of dating shows. Put simply, it presupposed that participants who appear on *Blind Date* and *Streetmate* were “authentically” or “naturally” performing these identities. The research setup supposed – albeit implicitly – that the gender identities produced in dating shows were not very different from other gender identities performed throughout society, thus neglecting the specific material conditions from which they emerged. This is problematic because it neglects the extent to which dating shows are *shows*, that is, television programmes that are made with the explicit aim of entertaining the audience at home. As a result, the gender identities performed in dating shows bare the mark of these entertainment purposes.

In sum, what was lacking in the original research design was an account of the production phase of dating shows, because it was clear that this phase was to a large degree responsible for the specificity of the gender discourses being performed. Hence I decided to make a study of production, text and reception of two Flemish dating shows, from the viewpoint of reproduction of/challenge to hegemonic versions of masculinity and femininity. To include the production context in the research setup had the added advantage that it would lead me into relatively uncharted cultural studies territory. As I described in the first two chapters a peculiar division of academic labour had been established between political economy and cultural studies, so that the former would be the privileged method for studying media *production* (and then preferably in its structural form), and the latter would then counter these deterministic analyses with *reception* studies that showed that audiences reactions were far more complex, ambivalent and negotiated than the political economy approach suggested. In this way “production” became the privileged field of analysis for political economists, and cultural studies scholars focussed themselves exclusively textual analyses and reception analyses. Although writers from both fields acknowledged the importance of seeing the communication process in its totality (cf Hall’s social totality referred to in chapter 2, Mosco’s (1996: 29) insistence on political economy as rooted in the wider social totality), in (research) practice the communication process was cut into three different moments, and very few studies tried to reconnect them (probably due to the cost in time and money of combining production, textual and reception analyses). As a result the ongoing disputes between political economy and cultural studies often fell on deaf ears. Somewhat schematically: whereas political economy would argue that economic ownership and the likes determine the media’s functioning, cultural studies could always argue that this didn’t necessarily mean that people “bought into it”. And when cultural studies scholars would investigate some popular culture phenomenon political economists could always argue that it was produced by the capitalist system.

The incorporation of a production analysis enabled me to counter this intellectual cul-de-sac, by taking the privileged object of political economy – media production – while approaching it in terms which are derived from the cultural studies vocabulary. By doing this, so I hoped, it could be shown that there was more to say about media production than that it is an economic process, inspired and

determined by profit-making motives. For instance, that television's production context had an influence on the gender identities being performed on shows.

My initial take on the production analysis was that dating shows, as a production context, could be seen as a "device" intended to produce gender discourses. It is important to stress that at that time I situated "production context" mostly at the level of format, meaning that it was my intention to analyse the different parts of the shows and see how they "forced" or "suggested" the participants to interact. Take for instance *Blind Date*. The programme is divided into two parts. The first part mimics the getting-to-know each other phase of the dating process. A Hunter² has to choose out of three Preys that are hidden behind a wall with whom s/he would prefer to go on a holiday trip. In order to make this choice, the Hunter asks questions to the Preys. When the Hunter makes his/her preferred partner known the newly-baked couple leave on a holiday trip. The second part of the show is taped after the trip, and both participants explain in a movie and in the studio how the holiday trip went. It is clear that in both parts two different levels of gender performance are at play. In the first round the emphasis is on getting-to-know each other – be it in a highly ritualised form – and consequently participants' self-presentation is guided by what they perceive to be an idealised version of their selves, hence the quick and funny answers and the abundance of romantic stereotypes. The second part of the show is more personal in tone, and the emphasis is on character (in)compatibility. Both parts therefore provoke entirely different gender performances: the first based upon romantic clichés, and the second based upon the idea that love and romance are about the meeting of two kindred spirits that "fit"; whereas the former is essentially based upon pleasing and consensus, the latter is based upon juxtaposition and is therefore more prone to provoke conflict (see also chapter 7). In short, at that stage of my doctoral odyssey, "production context" referred to how the different parts of the dating shows incited certain gender discourses/identities while blocking others.

As soon as I started interviewing participants and members of the production team, however, some cracks in the nice setup started to appear. Probably the most important thing was my "discovery" that love, romance and gender were far less important for the people involved than a textual analysis would reveal. For the production team, the aim is first and foremost to make "good television", that is, a professionally looking show that will appeal to the audience at home. In this sense matchmaking the participants was only a second-order by-product of making a dating show: far more important was the task of making the participants behave in a "broadcastable" fashion, according to the rules of television. The participants, on the other hand, also seemed less preoccupied with finding the perfect partner than one would expect. At least as important was the thrill of being on television, the free holiday trip, or "the challenge" (this was in fact the word that surfaced most in the interviews and letters-of-application, and testifies the extent to which neoliberal rhetoric has permeated everyday language). And, as I will later on argue more

² Participants are divided into Hunters and Preys. The former are the participants who ask the questions and have to choose, the latter are the participants who respond to the questions and "get chosen". Generally the role of Hunter is preferred, since this means that you have a more active role, it is considered to be less humiliating *and* you are guaranteed to win the free holiday trip.

extensively, for the audience at home dating shows are not only about the (im)possibilities of love but also about “ordinary people” and how they behave on television. In sum, it seemed that the only person who was reading gender into the show was me, which is a fairly uncomfortable position to start from.

The point which gradually became clear to me was that gender wasn’t the only power relationship that was relevant in the case of dating shows: at least as important were the “televisual” power relationships. With televisual power relationship I refer to the fact that dating shows make use of “ordinary people”, meaning that participants are not “celebrities” in the broadest sense of the word. Contrary to the amalgam of politicians, TV hosts, singers, musicians, actors and society people who populate our television screen, participants do not have the habit of appearing on television and thus they do not belong to what Couldry (2000a) calls “the media world”. In the northern part of Belgium there is an expression which describes this difference perfectly: the BV, short for *Bekende Vlaming*, which can be translated as Famous Flemish (FF). An FF is basically any person who features regularly on television and/or in the popular press, and s/he thus becomes part of the collective cultural consciousness. Once an FF enters the media world it is hardly important how s/he got there in the first place: in the self-referencing world of the media world it is far more important to appear regularly on talk shows and to give interviews to the popular press than the pursuit of a fixed career built upon a specific competence (see Juhl-Diaz & Teurlings, 2004). Many FF’s therefore switch occupations in their (often) short lifespan: singers become TV hosts, ex Big Brother participants inevitably launch a singing career, and sometimes it even suffices to have dated another FF to get your own television show. In sum, being an FF means that you are part of “high society”, that you intermingle with the glamorous “in-crowd” and that you are a media celebrity who is recognized while shopping.

Participants in dating shows are definitely *not* FF’s. In fact, it is a necessary prerequisite of the genre that you are “ordinary”, because this adds to the authentic feeling of dating shows (see below). The “ordinariness” of participants, however, has a profound influence on how to approach the production phase. Because participants are non-media people, a peculiar dynamic between production team and participants comes into being. Both parties enter into a relationship which is best described by the word “managerial”. The production team is mostly interested in making what they call “good television”, that is, a professionally looking show that is interesting to watch – or so they hope. But the “problem” of using ordinary people as your raw material is that they don’t know “the laws of television”, for example how to behave in front of a camera. Moreover, because dating shows are generally not scripted it is not given in the course of things that participants will provide – even *be* – “interesting material”: the production team is to a large extent dependent upon participants’ interaction in order to be able to distil “an interesting story” out of it. In order to counter this generalised unpredictability the production team will therefore manage “their” participants – they will try to make them behave so that participants become interesting television subjects. But this means that the relationship between production team and participants is a power relationship in the Foucaultian sense of the word: the conduct of conduct, or the changing of behaviour through the use of institutional regimes.

It is at this point that the theoretical discussions of the first chapter become clearer. Once I moved onto the terrain of media production and asked the question why participants behave the way they do in dating shows, the categories of "ideology" and "discourse" started to become inadequate for the task at hand. When I interviewed former participants of *Blind Date* and *Streetmate* I was surprised by the extent to which they were critical about dating shows in general, including the way they were treated during production process. These people certainly weren't the cultural dupes that cultural critics would like to make of them. While it is true that in general they had quite a positive view on the show (more than the average member of the audience I would guess), it is not that they believed in dating shows to the extent that they were interpellated into "the ideology of romance", or "the ideology of dating shows". And yet on the screen they behaved in the typical *Blind Date* or *Streetmate* manner that is so often ridiculed in everyday conversations, press reviews and academic writing.

The point I am getting at – and which gradually became clear to me while conducting the research – is that participants behave in the typical "dating show" manner not so much because they believe in it, but because of the concrete material context in which they are put. With "concrete material context" I mean the production context in its tangibility, namely the recording studio or the mobile recording set. This production context must be seen as being managed by the production team with the aim of provoking "broadcastable" identities. This is the lesson to be learnt from Foucault's work on discipline, and the members of the governmental school that build upon and extend this work: that instead of relying on the categories of ideology and discourse we better pay attention to the nitty-gritty details of how social life is organised, managed and regulated, because it is at this "lower", almost banal level that power works. Large parts of this PhD are concerned with mapping the "concrete material context" of *Blind Date* and *Streetmate*, the managerial strategies that play in them and how this affects the performance of participants' identities. In short, this PhD will in large part be an analysis of the "institutional regime" and its *modus operandi* of two Flemish dating shows. In order to do so, I will draw extensively on the governmental model of culture, with its emphasis upon the regulatory and normative routines intended to direct behaviour. ANT (see chapter 2) has also been influential because it provides a vocabulary and a spatial model for mapping these managerial relationship between production team and participants.

But whereto does this genealogy lead us? Admittedly it reads as a story of constant redefinition and changing focus, with no apparent direction or synthesis (in fact, that is what a genealogy is all about). What started out as an analysis of gender discourses through textual and reception analysis eventually became a "monster" encompassing a productional analysis, a textual analysis and a reception analysis. Moreover, the original focus on gender power relationships seems to have been gradually degraded into an emphasis upon televisual power relationships. Does this mean that gender is an irrelevant category in dating shows, and if this isn't the case, how do both types of power relationships relate to each other? In sum, what is the eventual end result of this doctoral odyssey?

2. Research setup and description

I have told the genealogy in quite a detailed fashion because it explains how and why the research project took its current form. Put in the most general terms: this PhD is about the relationship between identity and power in two Flemish dating shows, and hence it can be seen as part of those research traditions that have investigated the often intimate links between power, identity and the broader cultural context. I will do this in a “holistic” fashion, namely by focussing on the three “moments” of communication that media scholars in one of those rare moments of collegial fraternity seem to agree upon: the production phase (the “making of” the shows), the text that is the result of these productional efforts, and the reception of these shows (the moment when the audience comes into contact with the text). The integration and juxtaposition of these three levels is something which is generally acknowledged to be “the right thing to do” but in practice this is rarely done (see the previous chapter).

The focus is on two kinds of power relationships: televisual and gender power relationships. It is important to stress that these follow from the genre itself: on the one hand they are dating *shows*, meaning that they are television programmes whose main *raison d'être* is to entertain audiences. The specificity of dating shows, however, is that they make use of “ordinary people” as their raw material. As a result the making of dating shows is characterised by a power relationship between production team and participants, a condition which I have summarised under the term “televisual” power relationships. On the other hand dating shows are also *dating* shows, that is, cultural artefacts “about” love and romantic relationships. But love and romance are not neutral categories: as decades of feminist research have shown us they are intimately linked to questions of gender and sexuality (e.g. Millet 1969, Kahn Blumstein 1977, Amsberg & Steenhuis 1982, Ang 1982, Modleski 1988, Radway 1987, Gayle Backus 1999). Hence dating shows are also “about” gender: about which men and women are available for romance, what they like or don't like about each other, and how they live the dating process. It's this dual nature of dating shows – television programme and dating agency of some sorts – that provides the basic structure of the empirical chapters which are about to follow and which the reader can see in Figure 1. In the next three chapter we will focus on televisual power relationships, and chapter 7 is concerned with gender power relationships in dating shows.

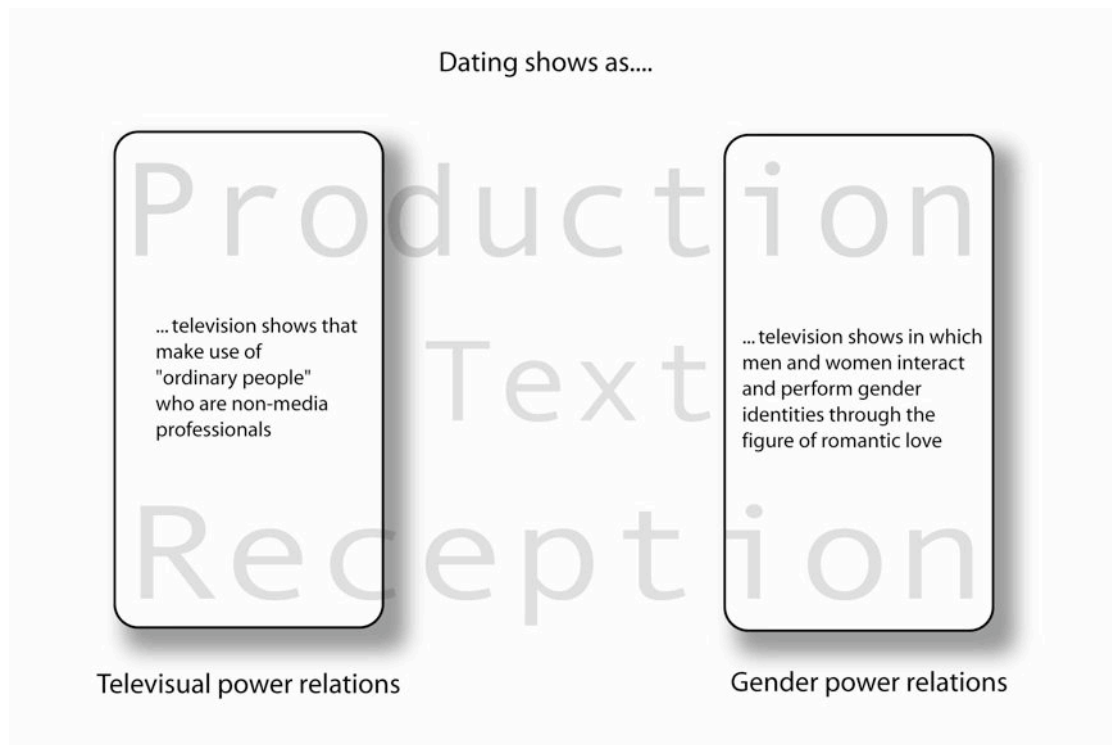


Figure 1: schematical overview of research setup

The starting point from, and the fundamental research question of, the chapters on televisual power relationships is the following question: what happens when people, who are television novices, enter into a context which is to a large extent controlled and managed by a team of media professionals, and how does this material setting affects the behaviour and performance of the participants? This means that I will make a detailed analysis of the production team's modus operandi, of the institutional routines they use in order to manage "their" programme and how such an institutional regime regulates and directs participants' behaviour. In short, the emphasis is upon how production as an institutionalised practice provokes certain identities and performances while discarding others – a classic Foucaultian analyses in the line of his 1970s work on discipline. In chapter 5 we will next focus on the "materials and spaces of televisual power", and draw on ANT in order to further analyse the televisual power relationship. It is important to stress that televisual power relationships are not limited to the production side of things, but that they also play at the reception-side of the communication network: because dating shows make use of "ordinary people" the audience at home looks differently at participants than at your average FF. Their readings of the participants (how audience members look at participants) are important because they allow us to contrast a set of managerial practices intended to create "identity" with how these identities are read or interpreted by the audience: Are the managerial practices "effective" in their identity creating attempts? Does the audience see the managerial relationship or is it deleted from sight? These questions will be addressed in chapter 6.

The chapter on gender power relationships (chapter 7) also crosses the bridges between production and reception but changes the focus of questions of "ordinariness" and "authenticity" towards the questions of gender power relationships. Here the main research question is how dating shows provoke men and women to interact in certain ways while blocking others, thus inciting certain

hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity through the figure of romantic love. This chapter will, like the ones preceding it, encompass a production analysis, a textual analysis and a reception analysis, by asking the following questions: which aspects of the format and the production context can be said to incite certain gender performances and what is the textual result of this? How does the figure of “romantic love” that structures dating shows act as a generator of hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity, or conversely, are they more likely to generate anti-hegemonic gender performances? Finally, how does the audience engage – in gendered terms – with the men and women that appear on dating shows?

Although I have taken a “holistic approach” (in the sense that the research design covers production, text and reception) honesty compels me to admit that I have placed heavy emphasis upon the production analysis. The reasons for this choice are diverse. First of all there was the already mentioned conviction that the cultural studies paradigm, with the appropriate theoretical tools, would be able to produce analyses of media production that the economic reductionist approach wasn’t able to provide, or deemed of lesser importance. But since “production” was relatively uncharted territory within cultural studies, I felt it was the field in which the most valuable contributions were to be made; hence the heavy emphasis in this PhD upon the production analysis. Secondly, it is quasi impossible for a single researcher to work out in detail an analysis at all three levels. Due to the nature of the research setup qualitative research methods were more appropriate (cf. below). Qualitative research methods are well known for being relatively cheap in economic terms (no costly surveys) but they are quite time-intensive. The majority of cultural studies reception analyses, for example, will work with a sample varying from 20 to 80 respondents, and an average of 30-40 respondents is more likely. Since doing the production analysis in itself meant that I had to interview 30 respondents it was quasi-impossible to implement a “full-blown” reception analysis, due to time limitations.

One might ask then, as at one time one of my co-supervisors remarked, if it wouldn’t have been a more rational choice to limit myself to a production analysis. In such a scenario this research project would have taken the form of an analysis of how “ordinary” and gender identities are produced in and through the institutional routines of media companies. Whereas I do agree that such a research setup would have been more “elegant” I also think that it was necessary to include an at least a rudimentary reception analysis, because by doing so I could contrast my own analyses with audience interpretations of the shows and their participants. Actually, the interviews with people that watched the show proved to be highly interesting because they complexified the production analysis to a large degree. For instance, I was rather surprised by the extent to which the production context formed an integral part of the experience of watching dating shows: viewers were constantly referring to the production context in order to make sense of participants’ behaviour (more on this later). In other words, these interviews showed that “ordinariness” and “authenticity” are problematic categories for viewers as well, and limiting the research setup to a production analysis would not reveal this complexity. The same goes for the focus on gender identities: it is not really hard to show that dating shows, through their design, have the inclination to provoke certain gender identities. But the real question, the question that politically matters, is to what extent these gender identities cooperate in the creation of a gender hegemony, and this is something we

can not deduce from a production analysis alone. In short, by interviewing audience members and how they engage with the programme I was able to trace some of the complexities that surround dating shows, though admittedly this came with a price (namely the fact that the reception analysis is not as thorough as I would have liked it to be).

Time pressure was also a factor in another methodological choice I had to make, namely what programme – Blind Date or Streetmate – I had to choose for doing the reception analysis. Whereas the production analysis is well-balanced (I interviewed roughly the same amount of participants and members of the respective production teams) it was impossible to do this for the reception analysis. The reasons for this have to do with differences in target audiences for both programmes. For starters, Streetmate and Blind Date are broadcast on different channels with quite a different market share and target audience. Blind Date is broadcast on VTM, the largest and oldest commercial broadcaster³, which aims at a mainstream audience (describing itself as the “family channel”). Streetmate, on the other hand, is broadcast by VT4, a “minority broadcaster” aimed at a younger audience and not aspiring mainstream status. As a result of these institutional differences both dating shows have a rather different audience, Blind Date scoring well in all age groups whereas Streetmate was limited to a younger audience. Furthermore, the sheer fact that Blind Date is one of the longest-running⁴ programmes on VTM combined with the company’s larger audience base made it far easier to find respondents for Blind Date than for Streetmate. Because of these reasons I have limited the reception interviews to Blind Date only, although in an ideal scenario I would have included Streetmate viewers as well.

³ Until 1989 television broadcasting in the northern part of Belgium resorted under the monopoly of the public service broadcaster, the BRTN (whose name was later changed into VRT). In 1989 the television market was deregulated or “opened up” (as the neoliberal rhetoric prefers to call it) but contradictorily legislators only allowed one commercial broadcaster, VTM, to enter the market (who, on top of that, was largely owned by financial groups from the press sector, making Belgium probably the only country where a commercial broadcaster was given a *de jure* duopoly and where cross-ownership – or, in less flattering words, media concentration – was made compulsory (Perceval 1994). Due to this rather absurd legislative framework VTM almost instantly conquered an impressive market share in a relatively short time, establishing itself as *the* mainstream broadcaster in Flanders – an era often referred to as The Golden Age in VTM-circles. In 1995, however, SBS-backed up VT4 broke VTM’s monopoly on television commercials through a complicated legal structure and entered the commercial market. The by then well-established position of VTM, however, made it very difficult for VT4 to conquer a substantial market share (at times even dropping below 5%), and it was forced to rethink its strategy, abolishing mainstream aspirations and targeting a younger audience. Although it took VT4 a long time to establish itself as a small but nevertheless important player in recent years it has become quite successful as a “minority broadcaster”, thanks to programmes like *Temptation Island* or *Expedition Robinson*.

⁴ Streetmate had a rather short life span. After the season that I followed intensively (the 1998-1999 season) there was a second season called Beachmate, which was basically the same format except that it was set at the Belgian coast during the summer holidays. Disappointing audience ratings of both Streetmate and Beachmate made that the programme was discontinued.

3. Research details

Now that the general research setup has been sketched we can get into the more mundane aspects of the research methodology. The final section of this chapter will be used for discussion of some theoretical and methodological issues, but this section is primarily concerned with a detailed description of the methodologies used in this PhD. Before doing this, however, a short description of both programmes is needed, because many of the methodological options and choices relate to the difference between both programmes.

3.1 Streetmate and Blind Date: some similarities and differences

Streetmate and Blind Date are both “foreign” formats, meaning that the format is owned by an international company (respectively Tiger Aspects and Columbia Tri-Star) but that both shows are shot in Flanders, with a Flemish host and crew and with Flemish participants. This means that D&D Productions, the company that produces Streetmate for VT4, and Capiau Projects, the company that produces Blind Date for VTM, pay an annual fee which allows them to make use of the name and the format. Format obligations are, however, rather strict – albeit there are differences between licensing companies. Columbia Tri-Star is particularly well-known for watching vigorously its format. Even minor changes to the format have to be approved of, and it often happens that Columbia Tri-Star refuses a certain change because it violates the format⁵. Streetmate is less rigorously watched by Tiger Aspects, and the Flemish production team was rather free in how they adapted the programme to the local context.

But of course Streetmate and Blind Date have more in common than the fact that they are Flemish productions based upon foreign formats: they are both dating shows that aim to bring two people together; both programmes play heavily with the conventions of romantic love; and both programmes make use of non-media professionals as their prime visual material. These similarities should not blind us to the fact that they are also quite different beasts, especially when seen from a productional point of view. These differences ultimately boil down to differences in format, and therefore a short description of both programmes’ format is needed.

Blind Date is probably the best-known dating show (and the oldest of the genre), so it is a handy benchmark to compare Streetmate. Blind Date basically exists of two parts: a “before” and an “after”. During the first part, which is shot in a studio, one woman has to choose out of three men with whom she would like to leave on a holiday date. She is separated from the three men by a screen, and she has to make her choice based upon the answers the men give to her questions (this is why she is called “the Hunter”, and the three men are called “Prey”). After several rounds of questions (see the next chapter for details) the *moment suprême* has arrived and she has to publicly announce with whom she would like to leave on the holiday trip. Both “rejected” participants are revealed to our female Hunter (including hardly suppressed faces of disillusion – “why didn’t I choose *him*?”), and then the moment

⁵ This was confirmed to me by Blind Date’s executive producer, Steven Vlasseroot. Perhaps the clearest example is the British version of Blind Date. After Cilla Black had left the programme she had been presenting for 18 years ITV wanted to make changes to the format but this was refused by Columbia Tri-Star (<http://www.yabedo.com/news/id/10713>).

of revelation has arrived, which is symbolised by the ceremoniously lifting of the screen – the moment when both potential romantic partners “finally” get to see each other. After having drawn a holiday trip the newly-backed couple leaves on the holiday trip, and the show is set for the next “phase”: the returns. During the returns we, the audience-at-home, get to know the whereabouts of the holiday couple. This is first introduced by a short movie of their holiday trip with no voice-over (with the added warning that these are “amateur images”, supposedly shot by the participants when they were on the holiday), which is generally vague enough to leave unanswered the question of whether they became romantically involved. This holiday movie is then followed by a confessional movie, which was taped immediately after the holiday trip, and in which both returning participants comment separately upon each other’s behaviour and desirability. This confessional movie – or bish-bash as the production team calls it – is then used as an introduction for further discussion in the studio, where both participants in the mean time have taken place and talk about their experiences and their different interpretations of the holiday trip together with the host (a well-known female presenter called Ingeborg). This before/after structure is then repeated with a male Hunter and female Preys.

Blind Date, in other words, plays with the common idea that “true love is blind”, that appearances don’t matter because love is the meeting of two kindred spirits, rather than based upon looks. In Streetmate we don’t find this idea that love is blind, on the contrary: attraction based upon physical appearance is the starting point of the programme. The format is quite simple: Streetmate’s host – a female TV presenter called Joyce De Troch – dwells the streets of one of Flanders’ cities, asking mostly young people more or less randomly whether he or she is single. If so, and if the participant accepts the invitation, she goes out with the participant to find someone with whom the participant would like to spend a romantic dinner, paid by the production company. All the participant has to do is point out whom s/he finds attractive, and then Joyce De Troch does “the dirty job” (as she calls it herself). If someone accepts the invitation, both go out a few days later for a romantic dinner-by-candlelight, which is of course fully taped, recorded, and commented upon by both participants before and afterwards. Thus the show uses and explores the idea that the world is full of possible romantic encounters, but social restrictions and the “guts” to go up to someone and ask her or him out for a date are limiting factors. Hence enter Joyce, the “goddess of love” (again her own words) to make love happen.

From this description follow a number of similarities and differences between both programmes. First it is clear that Blind Date is a mixture of a game shows and a talk show, whereas Streetmate is closer to the *observational documentary* (Nichols 1991: 38-41). In Blind Date we, the viewers, are largely dependent upon the participants’ *talk* about the dating process but we don’t get to see the actual date. In Streetmate this is exactly what the viewer gets, namely an unashamed, almost voyeuristic look into a dating event as it unfolds, with no voice-over or no non-diegetic sound (though this footage was intercut with interview fragments). This means that the Blind Date production team stands for an entirely different managerial problematic than their Streetmate colleagues: whereas the main problem of the former is how to make participants “confess” about what really happened during the holiday trip the latter is confronted with the problem that the mere presence of the camera disrupts the dating process it supposedly merely registers. In other words, Streetmate’s production team is confronted with an

“interactional” problematic (how to make participants’ date romantic while an entire crew is surrounding them?), whereas Blind Date’s production team is confronted with a “confessional” problematic (how to make participants tell the truth about what happened?).

This brings us to the second difference: whereas Blind Date is mainly a studio-based programme Streetmate is shot “on the go”. This has important consequences for the managerial power relationships between production team and participants. We will get back to this extensively in chapter 5, at this moment suffices it to say that the television studio is a setting which is characterised by a high degree of controllability, whereas shootings at location are from a managerial point of view far more unpredictable and more likely to be in need of improvisational sensibilities. The third difference is also related to questions of controllability, namely the fact that Blind Date’s participants have to pass through quite an intensive selection round. This means that the production team knows in advance which participants will be on the show. The Streetmate production team operates in far less predictable circumstances, because they does not know in advance a. whether they will find suitable participants, b. whether these suitable participants are willing to appear on the show, c. whether they will find a suitable dating partner for the participant.

In sum, although both programmes are dating shows *pure sang* they are quite different in terms of production practices. The main differences between both programmes lie in the *material setting* in which they take place (namely the studio versus shootings on location) and the different *managerial problematics* the production teams are confronted with. Since it is the explicit aim of this PhD to investigate the relationship between management and the material setting in which it takes place (the Foucaultian – ANT line of investigation as described in chapters one and two) Blind Date and Streetmate are sufficiently similar and different at the same time for yielding interesting insights into the interrelationship.

3.2 Production analysis

Since the aim of the production analysis is to analyse how the institutional setting and the production team’s *modus operandi* provokes the performance of certain identities it was clear from the start that qualitative research methods were more suitable for the task at hand. Given the fact that the prime object of interest was the production team’s production practices I needed an as complete as possible image of how the concrete production process “worked”. The main methodological tool for accomplishing this was the use of qualitative semi-structured interviews with all the relevant social actors, meaning all people who played a role in the making of these dating shows (cf. below for a full list). In research-technical terms this means that the interviews were “informant interviews”, focussing less on opinions or interpretations (exemplified best by the “classic” cultural studies reception analysis) and more oriented towards a detailed understanding of how a social setting works. The production interviews therefore have a very “factual”⁶ nature (see appendices),

⁶ The difference between respondent and informant interviews is in a way a very modernist concept, since it heavily relies on the difference between “facts” and “opinions”.

focussing on television's institutional *regime* and the operational procedures that govern it.

Doing informant interviews on television production, however, is not an unproblematic endeavour. The first problem is that not all social actors agree on how media production works. I encountered for instance many inconsistencies in respondents' accounts, sometimes due to sheer forgetfulness but sometimes less innocent factors were playing. For instance, on the issue of how respectful the production teams are towards the participants accounts differed substantially. Whereas most members of the production teams would put considerable efforts in trying to reassure me that they treated participants respectfully ("allowing" participants do to retakes, "granting" them the right to see the episode before it is broadcast) many former participants claimed that this had not always been the case. In the cases where such discrepancies between accounts have arisen I will point towards them and draw upon other resources to evaluate the conflicting claims.

These other resources are mainly participant observatory accounts. Basically this means that during the 2000-2002 period I have witnessed several days of shootings, both for *Blind Date* and *Streetmate* (or, *Beachmate*, as the latter was called at the moment when I witnessed the shootings). Although I consider these observations too ephemeral and haphazard to call them an ethnography they were nevertheless very helpful in getting a feel for how television production actually works, and it was enormously helpful in grasping the often subtle ways in which televisual power relationships work. Furthermore I will also draw on some of the observations in other academic works (mostly works on talk shows and/or ordinary people in media settings). Since television productions are rather similarly organised in different countries (and since the buying of a format also means that a production process, or a *production know-how* is bought) many of these observations can be transposed to the Flemish context.

An unexpected rich source of information were *Blind Date* participants' letters-of-application (*Streetmate*, of course, doesn't work with letters-of-application since format entails that the production team has to go "hunting" for participants). On one of my visits to the Capiou headquarters in Gent *Blind Date*'s production team offered me the possibility to copy an entire season of these letters, a huge pile of documents which proved to be an invaluable source of information on how future participants try to get on the show and how the selection procedure works. The pile was so huge because of the sheer amount of participants that are needed for an entire *Blind Date* season. Since every episode consists of two times four participants (one "Hunter" and three "Preys") an entire season of 13 episodes is in need of 104 participants, and this is without counting the refused candidates⁷. Moreover, each file was rather lengthy due to the way the selection procedures are organised. In a first stage the *Blind Date* production team uses all of its resources to announce to the general public that a new season of *Blind Date* is in the making. This

Perhaps a better way to cast the difference is to say that the production interviews focus on "how questions" rather than "why questions" (see chapter 2).

⁷ Since the "archive" was rather disorderly organised I only disposed of 98 of the 104 letters-of-application of people that made it on the show. The people that were rejected or those that quit the application procedure formed with 138 the largest part of the letters-of-application. Of course I also copied these "rejected" files.

is done through the use of VTM's website, advertisements in newspapers, interviews with the host in the popular press. Possible participants or their peers are invited to write a letter to the Blind Date production team. From the moment the production team receives a letter-of-application they send a form to the would-be participant (at this point in time no selection is being made, that is, everybody who writes a letter receives an invitation) with some personal data (name, address, job), the name of the person they would like to represent them during The Reference, a juridical disclaimer and some questions in true Blind Date-style (more on these different sections in the next chapter). The possible participant has to bring this form to the actual selection procedure (usually in the lobby of a hotel near Brussels), where he or she fills in yet another form, intended for "getting to know" the candidates – which basically means that they are tested quite literally on how well they perform on typical Blind Date questions. As a result of this selection procedure every file of a successful candidate comprises three different documents: the letter-of-application written before entering the selection, the form that has to be brought along to the selection procedure (hereafter "home form"), and the form that is filled in "on the spot". The files of the candidates that didn't make it on the show (either because they were rejected, either because they didn't show up or had second thoughts) were less voluminous, because they often lacked the first or the second form). All in all the archive amounted to a considerate pile of paperwork, approximating 900 pages, or five lever arch files.

These application files were a genuine goldmine because of several reasons. Firstly, they offered a complete view on who applied for the show during the 2000 season. Because the first form contained the candidate's age, job, gender, address and the likes it was a handy source for seeing which cross-section of society applies for the show. Therefore the first thing I did upon receiving the archive was to classify them in a spreadsheet, containing the following information: a tracking number, the name of the participant, gender, age, profession, whether this profession was mentioned in the letter or only on the first form, who had written the first letter (the participant him- or herself, friends, or family), and some other remarks. These quantitative data were then quantitatively analysed to get a general view on who applies for Blind Date. Occasionally I will refer to these quantitative data in the chapters that are about to come.

This quantitative analysis was then supplemented with a qualitative analysis of the letters-of-application, since these archives yielded far more information than an answer to the question "who applies for Blind Date?". A number of observations could be deduced from the letters-of-application. First of all they revealed which argumentative strategies applicants use in order to get selected. The tone of the letters varied widely, ranging from very elaborated, decorated and fluently written letters to short, handwritten notes containing only a name and a contact address. Also, the arguments that were invoked differed substantially, with some candidates (or their peers) stressing their televisual talents ("X or Y is very funny and witty and will make a splendid guest") while others went on about their past love life and why it hadn't worked until now. In other words, the letters-of-application reveal in what ways candidates manage what Goffman (1959) calls "the presentation of self" in a media production context. Secondly, because the selection procedure is spread across time the three forms of the application – at least for those who were successful candidates – reveal what happens once participants get "sucked into" the Blind Date

production process. Or, put in terms of chapter 2, the application files reveal what happens when actors (i.e. the future participant) become increasingly translated into a network – in this case the Blind Date production process. Note that this does *not* mean that applicants first stood apart from the network and that they gradually became part of it. From the start these participants were part of the Blind Date production network, if only because they had seen the show and therefore they more or less knew what the show entailed. What changes in time, however, is the *modality* of involvement with the show: whereas at first Blind Date was mostly a show broadcast on television *with other people* it now became a material reality in which *they* were going to play a part, and this change in translation (roughly: from viewer to participant) brought with it an entirely new set of expectations, identifications and behaviours. The application files made this difference in network involvement very clear, and I will repeatedly get back to this important point.

The letters-of-application, finally, also offered insight into the selection procedure *as such*, and which routines the production team uses for managing the programme. The forms not only revealed what kind of performances the production team expected from the participants; the production team also used the same letters-of-application and forms for writing production notes on them. This could range from factual information (for example: “not available from June to July”, or “does not own a car”) to classifications like WN- (“Wil niet”, or *doesn’t want to participate*) or “NIET” (meaning that the participant was not considered suitable for the show). In short, these archives offered a lot of inadvertent information on the selection procedure and which criteria are used, information that otherwise wouldn’t have been accessible or would have remained implicit.

However, as I mentioned before, the main body of the production analysis consists of interviews with participants, members of the production teams and other people who are involved in the making of Streetmate and Blind Date. This means that I conducted semi-structured interviews with all of the major actors in the field, in a total time-span of 2,5 years (roughly from January 2000 till August 2002). Concretely this meant that I interviewed:

A. FOR STREETMATE:

- 3 participants who had appeared on the show
- a production-assistant responsible for organising the practicalities of the shootings
- an editor responsible for participant coaching
- a director (in small, non-fictional crews, the main function of the director is to supervise the shootings first and afterwards s/he decides on the cutting)
- a sound recordist
- an executive producer (Streetmate’s producer at D&D, the production company making the show)
- an associate producer (Streetmate’s producer at VT4, the broadcasting company)

B. FOR BLIND DATE:

- 3 participants who had appeared on the show
- an editor, responsible for organising the preselections and the shootings
- a participant coach, responsible for the coaching of participants during the studio shootings
- a “final editor”, responsible for small changes in the format and general structure of the show
- an executive producer at VTM, the broadcaster of Blind Date
- an associate producer at Capiou Projects (the head of the production team)
- a member of the audience rating department of VTM
- the host of Blind Date, Ingeborg

The aim of the interviews was to get as much information as possible on how the production process was organised. As a result the production interviews focus on the minor details of the production processes, often acquiring a very factual tone verging on the banal. When interviewing members of the production team I wanted to get an as complete as possible view on what the job entails, the difficulties that come along with it, and how one tries to solve the problems as they occur. When interviewing former participants I stuck to the chronology of the events, asking them what happened and how they felt. Most interviews were rather lengthy, with a minimum of 50 minutes and a staggering 3 hours and a half as a maximum. To my own surprise the members of both production teams were very helpful and open, often suggesting to me who to interview next. The fact that both production teams allowed me to witness the shootings unconditionally, and the copying of an entire archive of Blind Date application letters were testimony of this general sphere of openness. Even when I touched upon data or issues that were “sensitive” this didn’t provoke reactions of censorship, but I was asked – gently but decidedly – not to make it publicly (see section 4 in this chapter). The only time I was denied access to data was when I asked to copy Blind Date’s holiday reports. When Blind Date participants leave on the holiday trip they are accompanied by a member of the production team who organises the practicalities of the stay abroad. But of course this member of the production team also witnesses the interaction between “the couple” during the trip, and in true Foucaultian fashion s/he “registers”, meaning that s/he writes a report of the trip. This report is later on used by the other members of the production team for preparing the shootings (which questions will be asked, and so on). When I asked to see these holiday reports the executive producer refused so because they were, in his words, written in an ironic style – read that these reports were rather disrespectful towards participants. But apart from this singular event both production teams surprised me because of their willingness to open up the production process to me.

Some remarks have to be made on the choice of members of the production team. Originally I started with interviewing the people that I deemed more important at the “content”-level, namely those members of the production team that are involved in the creative decisions – notably producers and editors⁸. When I started

⁸ In Dutch the production team is divided in three groups: “de redactie” (people thinking out the concepts and making the creative decisions, which can be translated into “editorial office”), “de productie” (those people that organise and implement the ideas of the

taking the interviews, however, I quickly realised that this was based upon erroneous presuppositions. Whereas the distinction between “content functions” and “production functions” (see footnote 8) works very well for, say, a soap opera, in dating shows this distinction becomes irrelevant. In a soap opera the “content functions” are clearly distinguishable from the productional functions: a screenplay writer thinks out new story-lines but is not involved at all with the organisational practicalities of the shootings, up to the point that most of them even never attend studio shootings, or meet the actors in person. In dating shows (as well as other formats, for example talk shows) this is not the case: the people that do the conceptual thinking (which participants to choose, who to put together, which changes to make to the format) are also the persons involved in the organisation of the production process. In sum, dating shows are, more than soap operas, collective productions where all of the different functions participate in creative decisions as well as in practical, organisational ones.

The clearest example of this is *Streetmate*. *Streetmate* is in television terms a low budget programme: an average day of “hunting” only needs five persons: the host, one camera man, one sound recordist, a director and an editor. This means that many of the creative decisions that have to be taken on the spot, for example where to shoot the short clips of the participants are collectively taken. Although in this particular example it is the director’s task to take this decision, I have witnessed several times that the camera and sound people objected to a certain choice, and not only because of technical reasons (as for example lots of background noise, which is difficult for the sound recordist to filter out) – also “content” arguments were used by them.

It is for this reason that I interviewed as many different functions as possible, ranging from the sound recordist up to the associate producers at the broadcasting company. In fact, it were often the more “technical” functions, like the sound recordists or the directors, that provided me with the most interesting pieces of information, and this because of several reasons. Perhaps the most important reason is that they are – unlike the editors or producers – self-employed freelancers, meaning that they are employed for short-term contracts by the production company. These short and fragmented periods of employment makes them less loyal to the production company, especially when they have stopped working for the production company in question. As a result, they are more likely to tell how things actually worked rather than presenting an idealised version of it (as I found was often the case with “higher level” functions). Secondly it was also noteworthy, probably for the reason outlined above, that they identified less with the programme. Their attitude was rather technical, more “let’s get the job done” than “I want to make a nice television programme”, making them more inclined to display a critical stance towards the production practices⁹. This attitude of critical detachment, combined

editorial office) and “de techniek” (the technical staff, mostly camera crew and studio technicians).

⁹ This does not mean, however, that they identify with the participants. As I will argue in the next chapters *all* members of the production team display in varying degrees some level of disdain towards participants. The technical crew is no exception to this. The big difference with editors and producers is that they don’t have any investments in the programme and its content, whereas the latter do.

with the fact that they witness the shootings in person, made these interviews the most interesting ones.

3.3 Textual analysis

Whereas the production analysis is the most important part of this PhD I also conducted a rudimentary textual analysis of both *Blind Date* and *Streetmate*. For this aim an entire season of both *Streetmate* and *Blind Date* were taped and transcribed. For *Blind Date* this season started on September 1st 1999 and ended on November 24 of that same year, making a total of 13 episodes (this was the sixth season of *Blind Date*, which continues to be broadcast up until the time of this writing). The *Streetmate* season which was taped was the first one, starting on November 2 1999 and ending on January 25 2000 (after this one another season – called *Beachmate*, because it was set at the Belgian coast – saw the daylight the year afterwards, but since audience ratings were rather disappointing VT4 pulled the plug). I did not transcribe the *Streetmate* season since I excluded the latter from the reception analysis.

The textual analysis is rudimentary because it is rather different from the majority of textual analyses that are being conducted under the cultural studies umbrella. Although cultural studies is often equated with audience studies (with or without the adjective “new”) the structuralist-Gramscian paradigm posited a model of cultural analysis in which “texts” played a fundamental role¹⁰. But texts took up a very particular function within this paradigm. As we have seen in the first two chapters: texts were conceived as signifying structures that are polysemic, to be sure, yet crucial in the formation and maintenance of a hegemonic project. To take a well-known example: the first part of the Nationwide research project (Brundson & Morley 1978) investigates what the preferred meanings are of the show, and how these preferred meanings are textually established. Similarly, in a lesser known study, Lewis (1991) examines how different uses of the hermeneutic code in television news items explain why some items are able to mobilise viewers’ interest and attention while others don’t. The common denominator in studies like these – and many more examples are possible, for example Modleski (1988), Brown (1994), Fiske (1994) – is the idea that texts are “carriers of meaning”, or signifying structures that are to a certain extent open-ended. In such a framework the aim of textual analyses is to investigate how texts structure and delimit their possible meanings vis-à-vis their readers (since ultimately a hegemony survives through conquering the “hearts and minds” of the people). In short, texts are approached from the viewpoint of “how they signify towards audiences” (within a context of

¹⁰ The association of cultural studies with reception analysis can of course be explained historically, namely in the way cultural studies scholars positioned themselves against Screen Theory and the concept of subjects-positions-in-texts, by arguing that “the subject” is actually a social subject, formed in prior relationships that precede the encounter with the text (see chapter 1). The polemic made that cultural studies became associated with those modes of thinking that rejected “strong texts” in favour of socially constituted subjects, everyday life and reception analyses (here we see most clearly the legacy of culturalism at work). Nevertheless “texts” remained crucial to the structuralist-Gramscian framework, since they are the “carriers of meaning” through which hegemonic formations are forged. Though few cultural studies scholar would take pride in being called a “textualist” there also is a large consensus that “texts” are a very important component of cultural analysis.

hegemony), which is why I call it a *structural-phenomenological* approach to meaning.

Although I will occasionally draw upon signification as an explanatory tool (cf. below) this is not the main aim of the textual analysis as I conducted it. Rather than taking the audience as the implicit starting point I take production as the explicit point of departure. Put simply, I treated the “texts” – the episodes of *Streetmate* and *Blind Date* as they were broadcasted – as documents that provided information on the production process. This reading works at two levels. On the one hand I looked at participant’s performances and statements as the result of the managerial practices during the production phase. The texts offered me as it were the material imprint, the end result of the different strategies during the production process. In a way, then, this is a naïve way of looking at *Blind Date* and *Streetmate*, because it brackets issues like cutting and narrative construction and takes the episodes of accurate reports of “how things actually happened” – be it through the lens of management. The second level of treating the texts at my disposal does not neglect the cutting and the construction of narrative but treats them as managerial practices¹¹ in their own right, namely as signifying *practices* aimed at producing narrative tension and the concordant identities that follow from such a narrative construction (e.g. when in *Blind Date* the cutting of the confessional movies makes it clear from the start that one participant is in love and the other is not: narrative “montages” like these immediately create an identity for the participants, an identity that will set the tone for the consequent studio-based discussion).

Thus “the text” is used in a double way in this PhD: firstly in a naïve mode, namely as tools that reveal the results or effects of the managerial practices during the production phase; and secondly in a much more critical mode, namely as tools that reveal how the production team uses television’s editing techniques as signifying practices that create identities for the participants. At first sight both approaches seem incommensurable because they tend to phase each other out: either one takes television shows to be representing reality accurately (meaning that they are a neutral “window upon the world”), or one takes them to be signifying structures, which immediately problematises the whole idea of a reality which exists independent of the representational practice that puts it into being. Another way of putting the dilemma is the following: how can we use the edited footage as a source of information on the production process if we know at the same time that it is edited, or assembled with a particular narrative in mind? The answer to this seemingly uncuttable Gordian knot is triangulation.

Data triangulation means that one compares information from various sources in order to strengthen confidence in the results. In the case of *Streetmate* and *Blind Date* this meant that my knowledge of the production process, of the *modus operandi* of the production team, enabled me to see the production process “through” the edited version. To put it like this, however, sounds too positivist, as if

¹¹ Note that in this case the “object” of the strategies (those actors whose behaviour the strategy is intended to change or direct) is not the participants but “that other actor” in the network: the audience at home. In the next chapter we will get back to this important remark when we focus upon the complex triangular relationship between production team, participants and the audience.

triangulation was a magical potent allowing me to rigidly separate editing techniques and "reality". In actual research practice it was not always clear whether, for example, the behaviour of a Blind Date participant was exaggerated during the editing phase. The only moments when this was very clear was when I interviewed that participant. For instance, John Ray, a Blind Date participant I interviewed, complained about the fact that during the second studio shootings (the "afters") they cut out large parts of his talk so that in the broadcast version he came across as being rude and unmannered. Examples like these show that one has to be very careful when "seeing production through the text", as I attempted to do. In an ideal situation, one would have to interview every single participant of an entire season because this would allow us to compare participants' version with the broadcasted version. Unfortunately this presented an insurmountable problem in terms of work load; hence I will occasionally make claims that I cannot back-up with hard data, but I will point to them explicitly and will not hide these more or less speculative assertions from sight.

These reservations notwithstanding, I think that the combination of production interviews, observations and textual analysis offers quite a full and more or less accurate description of the production process. In this context it is important to stress again that the focus point of this PhD is on "production": even when doing a textual or reception analysis it is from the viewpoint of what happens when ordinary people enter into a context which is managed by a production team. In other words, it is production which is the guiding principle of this PhD, even though this is done through for example a textual analysis.

This last remark also illuminates the remark earlier in this section, namely that "signification" takes on a slightly different meaning in this PhD than it does in the bulk of cultural studies work. As the description above suggests signification is an important concept, but I don't approach it in a structural-phenomenological way but rather as a *production practice*. Or, put in different terms, my interest in signification does not so much start from the question of how texts signify so that they create or sustain a hegemonic project; rather I take "texts" to be the result of a signifying practice which belongs to the domain of production, and that this is a managerial practice in its own right. Another way of putting this difference is that my prime interest lies in the participants of dating shows, how they are managed and made into "an identity" – materially as well as through signifying practices like editing techniques – whereas the bulk of cultural studies ultimately is interested in "the audience" because it is in their heads that a hegemony resides. In sum, my approach uses many of the terms of cultural studies but displaces them and attributes to them a different function, particular to this research project.

Note also that my approach in this PhD does not exclude hegemonic effects – overall effects of all these localised, specific production practices that despite originating in many different contexts have similar effects "in the heads of the audiences" and thus become structural-hegemonic. I do believe in such hegemonic effects, and I will point to them when we encounter them in our analysis. But the *leitmotiv* of my analysis is the participants in the production context, and how this production context shapes their performances and identities, rather than the hegemonic effects they have (see chapter 6 and 7)

3.4 Reception analysis

The same logic has shaped the way I have approached the reception analysis, namely by putting the participants' identities at the centre of concern. For the reception analysis this means that my main interest lay in how viewers at home look at participants, how they "read" their actions, why they think participants behave the way they do and, more generally, how they judge the programme. I was also interested in the question to what extent viewers would invoke the production context in their talk about the participants.

In total I interviewed nine self-proclaimed viewers of *Blind Date*, of whom seven individually and two together¹². I recruited participants through the snow-balling method, asking different people around me whom they knew watched *Blind Date* and whether they were willing to do an interview. The problem with this approach is that social networks tend to be rather homogeneous in terms of class and the likes, but to my own surprise I ended up with quite variable professional backgrounds. In chronological order I interviewed a hairdresser, a kindergarten teacher, a pensioned high school teacher, a pensioned cleaning lady, an educator in an institution, a political collaborator of the Flemish Socialist Party, a translator working for an export firm, a salesperson in an IKEA department store and a PhD candidate in medicine. Ages ranged from people thirty-something to sixty-something. Whereas the nature of my research questions and the small sample of respondents made "representativeness" not my primordial concern (cf. below) I still deemed it important to get as much internal variety as possible, and I think I was pretty successful at that. The only sociological variable which was difficult to vary was gender: I only found one man willing to participate in the interviews. Of course this does not mean that men don't look at *Blind Date*. The audience ratings which were provided to me by VTM's audiometric department showed that *Blind Date* has a slightly unbalanced audience in gender terms: 55% women versus 45% men. Hence one would expect it to be easy to find men who watch the show (in absolute terms we are speaking here about 350.000 Flemish men watching *Blind Date*). But watching and admitting that you are watching are two different things, and being a *Blind Date* viewer is definitely not one of those things that one is likely to be shouting of the rooftops. First of all there is a general disdain about the programme, because it is considered to be cheap, voyeuristic and not uplifting at all. But for men there is an extra burden to carry, due to *Blind Date*'s association with romance and talk about relationships and emotions, which make it into a feminine genre. Hence, although I *know* that many men are avid *Blind Date* viewers it was difficult to find men who were willing to do an interview about it. Whereas most of the women I interviewed said they watched it together with their partner (that is, if they were in a relationship of course) the usual scenario would be that when I entered the house the male

¹² That I ended up doing one group interview happened purely by accident. One day I was ready to do an interview with a woman and a friend of her happened to visit her. The friend was thrilled by the subject (actually, they watched it together frequently) and the interview turned out to be a very interesting and long one. As soon as I got home, however, I discovered that my minidisk player had failed to record the conversation (proving - in a rather painful fashion - ANT's point that nonhumans are full-blown actors that *do* things in the networks of the social). Since the interview had been so interesting I decided to take the interview again but with a time lag of one year in order to make the memory of the first interview fade.

partner would leave me and the female respondent alone, since it wasn't "their" show.

The lack of men in the sample is unfortunate but on the other hand it is not dramatic, due to the nature of the research set-up and the choice for qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is often attacked for being unrepresentative and hence problematic. Admittedly in recent years the debate seems to have been toned down, but that does not mean that the controversy has been settled; rather, the methodology war has turned into an entrenched war, with both positions staying firmly in their own camp and an occasional outburst of hostilities. I would like to use a few paragraphs to present my own take on the matter by using my empirical material and my methodological approach as an illustration, because I think that many of the debates are due to a profound misunderstanding of each other's position.

First of all: quantitative and qualitative research methods have fundamentally different aims. Quantitative research methods, exemplified best by the classic survey, are essentially interested in *distributions*, like for example 20% of the voters are in favour of X, 50% are undecided and 30% are against. Of course things get more complicated than this when one looks for correlations – like for example when one wants to know the gender composition of the undecided – but essentially this is again a distribution, only that this time the population whose distribution one wants to measure is limited to a sub-population of the entire population, namely the those who are undecided. The important point, however, is that distributions require *categories* in order to be measurable. In the above example the question "are you in favour of X?" the categories could be "yes", "no" and "I am undecided". These categories are not given, however: it was the researcher who decided that these are the possible answers to that question. Many of the methodological disputes within the quantitative research paradigm are exactly about this choice. For example, a more contentious researcher might argue that "I am undecided" is not exactly the same as "I am not interested in the matter" or "I have no opinion about it". Hence our second researcher might propose a different category system in which there are five categories: "yes", "no", "I am undecided but will make a decision in due time", "I am not interested" and "I have no opinion". But even our second quantitative researcher changes his or her categories only because s/he is interested in countable distributions.

Qualitative research methods are not interested in distributions per se. To put it frankly, s/he or he couldn't care less about *how many* respondents say yes or no or undecided or what have you. What they are interested in is what a certain individual, with his or her personal history has to say about a particular topic in his or her terms. Suppose that the X in question is the issue of immigrant voting rights. Qualitative researchers could also ask the question "are you in favour of immigrant voting rights?" but they would rather have their respondents answer outside of the yes-no grid that the quantitative researcher has spun. In order to do so they would slightly twist the question and ask "what do you think of immigrant voting rights?", because by putting it this way it is more likely that respondents will talk about the subject. Moreover, by asking the question this way one will learn many things about the respondents' "attitude" to it. For example, a respondent might reject it by relying on an explicitly racist discourse, whereas another might use the discourse of

citizenship in his or her rejection (most likely the actual talk will contain elements of both).

The big difference between quantitative and qualitative research, then, is the *aim* of the methodology. In quantitative research the aim is to measure distributions, and categories are the *means* for doing so. In qualitative research on the other hand the aim of the research is *category construction* in itself. But is a far more flexible way of constructing your categories: they are not pre-constructed “grids” in which the respondents have to be fit; rather, the categories emerge from the data, in a constant interaction between theory and the empirical data. Moreover, because qualitative researchers prefer to have respondents talk about a topic in their own terms it is more likely to offer an understanding of respondents’ reactions based upon their personal history and life path. In other words, the aim of qualitative interviews is to *understand* respondents-as-individuals (a case-per-case logic), rather than aggregating their (pre-categorised) reactions at the level of society (a logic of totality).

But if qualitative research is strong in making categories, and quantitative research strong in counting distributions (by making use of categories), one might argue, where then is the opposition between both? The perfect all-encompassing research project would then start with qualitative interviews, construct the categories on the basis of the empirical data in an “unforced” way, and then a quantitative research methodology could use these categories for conducting a survey, thus combining “the best of both worlds”. The problem with this line-of-reasoning is that it underestimates the importance of the “measuring instrument”, namely the questionnaire versus the semi-structured interview¹³. Take for instance the above example of immigrant voting rights. Qualitative research might indeed reveal that there are a number of different arguments that people use when being in favour or against immigrant voting rights – a racist discourse, a discourse of citizenship, or the discourse of multiculturalism, for instance. But this example immediately makes clear that integrating these categories into a survey is far more difficult than we might expect. For instance, one cannot ask the respondents straightforwardly whether they are racist: even in times when far right extremism is worryingly popular amongst large sections of the European population very few would be ready to openly declare themselves racist. In other words, a racist discourse is something which cannot be asked straightforwardly but has to be deduced – often in implicit subtleties – from respondents’ “talk”. Of course the quantitative researcher might resort to other tactics, like for example confronting the respondents with a number of statements that probe the respondents’ racial attitudes (the familiar “to what extent do you agree with the following statements?”). The problem is that this type of questions are often too straightforward to grasp the complexities and inconsistencies involved. The semi-structured interview, with its flexible and more interactive question-reply structure, is more likely to reveal for instance racist attitudes.

¹³ Another problem with this approach has, perhaps ironically, been pointed out by Jensen (1987). He argues that the conventional way of representing qualitative and quantitative research as respectively exploratory and confirmatory effectively privileges quantitative research because it establishes a framework in which information is only valid if we can count it. It is ironic because Jensen uses this criticism in order to advocate an integrative approach, something which I am rather critical of (cf. below)

The point I am getting at is that not only have quantitative and qualitative methodologies different aims (respectively counting distributions versus creating categories); they also make use of different "measuring devices" that will yield different results. Because for quantitative research methodologies categories are a means rather than an end in itself, they need categories that are unambivalent, (often) mutually excluding and discrete: counting, after all, is only possible when we have discrete categories at our disposal. Hence its "measurement device", the questionnaire, will typically present respondents with a number of discrete options, forcing as it were the respondents into a pre-constructed grid. Moreover, the questionnaire presupposes that knowledge is always discursive, that is, that knowledge can always be articulated, *and* on top of that, that all words have the same meaning for all respondents. Consequently, quantitative research methodologies like the survey create their own data that are well suited for particular questions (for instance when one needs countable and discrete categories) but perform badly in other areas (for instance, flexibility of the interviewing method or letting respondents explain issues in their own terms).

Qualitative research methodologies are no different, in the sense that their "measurement devices" also create their own data. The semi-structured interview, for instance, leaves respondents far more space to address an issue in their own terms, but is for the exact same reason pretty bad at producing data that can be processed quantitatively: if you "let" respondents talk in their own terms about a topic it is more likely that they will drift off, refuse the terms in which you define something or twist the perspective. Of course you can later on recode their answers into a category system (which is actually what most of the qualitative researchers do, except that they wouldn't use the term "recoding" for it) and then use these categorised data in a quantifiable manner, but the sheer duration of semi-structured interviews would make this a hopelessly time-consuming effort.

To resume my argument thus far: quantitative and qualitative research methodologies differ not only in fundamental aims (counting versus category constructing), their measurement devices are also fundamentally different in that they yield - by definition - different kinds of results. Because of these reasons I am rather sceptical about those pleas that call for an integration of quantitative and qualitative research methods (e.g. Jensen 1987) because I think that integration is not the way to go. Rather, I think that we should see both methodological orientations as fundamentally different yet at the same time complementary; put simply, for certain types of research questions quantitative methodologies are appropriate, for others qualitative methodologies will be better suited. Complementariness, here, does not refer to a synthesis-like integration, where the two methods are intimately combined so that the advantages of the one cancel out the faults of the other and vice versa, as in the above example where one would first conduct semi-structured interviews in order to formulate adequate categories which then would be used in a more "representative" survey. Rather, it means literally what it says: that both methods have fundamentally different aims and data-creating-technologies, and one should choose the appropriate method according to the specific problem one tries to address. Both methodologies can then, each in their own terms, contribute to a study by "triangulating" the object under scrutiny.

This also means that one shouldn't assess one methodology in terms of the other. The often-voiced criticism, for instance, that qualitative research is "unrepresentative" is a moot point, because it assesses qualitative research in terms which belong to the quantitative paradigm: since quantitative research's main interests lie in distributions-within-totalities ("% of the population") it is important that the sample is thus chosen that a limited number of respondents yield results which can be generalised to the population *in its entirety*. In other words, the individual respondent is in this paradigm a *tool* for making claims about a larger entity, because the ultimate aim of quantitative research is precisely to produce knowledge about "the larger entity". Hence the importance attached to "representativity" within quantitative research: it is, so to speak, the guarantee that the results we obtain from a limited sample of respondents are valid for a larger entity. Qualitative research, on the other hand, does not have such a "utilitarian" logic to the individual respondent (the individual as a means to access the totality). Here the aim is (often) the individual respondent in his or her individuality: to understand, for example, the complex articulations between social experience, class background and racist discourses¹⁴. Consequently the individual respondent performs a fundamentally different function in qualitative research: s/he is not so much a detour for finding knowledge about a larger entity but a goal in itself: to understand him/her in his or her particularity (located, of course, within wider social structures). This also means that *generalisations* in qualitative research are of a fundamentally different nature: they necessarily are more concerned with individual, diachronic social processes rather than with (synchronic) extendability to entire populations.

Does this mean that numbers are irrelevant in qualitative research? In a rather compelling account, Justin Lewis (1997) argues that numbers are qualitative researches dirty little secret that everybody does and knows about but nevertheless wouldn't want to get caught out in the open doing it:

"Qualitative audience research [...] is full of inferences about the wider applicability of particular cases. It suggests how certain people read certain texts. Not always or absolutely or to the nearest percentage point, but in the general run of things. [...] We may not be able to enumerate it, but in describing its presence we assume that it is, in some form, quantifiable. We assume that it counts" (Lewis 1997: 87)

Lewis drives the point home succinctly. He even calls – and I think the example is strategically well-chosen – *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978) a work with "an implicitly quantitative approach, searching for repetition and coherence of an ideological formation that paved the way for Thatcherism" (ibid.: 93). It are observations like these which make him conclude that cultural studies should take the red pill and abandon its principal aversion of questionnaires and the concomitant dedication to "number crunching" and instead look at them as a useful tool that can, provided that we rid them of their overtly modernist assumptions, offer us insights into the processes that we are interested in:

¹⁴ This is why qualitative research is often associated with interpretive traditions, more related to the Weberian "verstehen" rather than the Durkheimian "social fact". See Jankowski & Wester 1991 or Frissen & Wester for two excellent overviews of which theoretical influences have shaped qualitative research traditions.

"Using a questionnaire to ask people what they think about something, whether it be feminism or war or immigration or cultural identity, tells us very little about ideology. We are merely plucking ideas from a social vacuum, without knowing where they came from, why they are there or what they even really mean. If, on the other hand, we ask people what they know about something, we may be offered a glimpse of an ideological process. We no longer have a series of empty articulations, we have a sketch of the place from which these articulations are made" (ibid.: 94)

Although Lewis' main preoccupation lies in the (in)compatibility of attitude research and surveys, and more ideologically inspired research (often qualitatively inclined) I think there are some valuable lessons to be learned from his account. In fact, Lewis' account is very close to my pragmatist approach when I argue that both quantitative and qualitative approaches have something valuable to offer for any research problematic. Although I am more inclined to stress the different aims and "measurement devices" of both methodological orientations it is nevertheless important not to forget that every method can be useful, depending upon the types of questions one asks.

To leave the argument less abstract and more applied: it is because I believe in the usefulness of quantitative *and* qualitative research methods that I conducted a *quantitative* analysis of Blind Date's letters-of-application. Just like Justin Lewis sees surveys and attitude research as imperfect yet significant indicators of ideology I take these letters-of-application as yielding important data in their own right. A quantitative analysis of the social composition of Blind Date's participant pool would in itself not be very revealing. However, if we combine this with more "qualitative" questions, like to what extent is Blind Date's production context geared towards embodied middle class competences like oral fluency, verbal proficiency and general adaptiveness (cf. Skeggs 1997: 82-94) this becomes less a question of "number crunching" but a political question in it's own right, because this means that the majority (and the term is deliberately quantitatively chosen) of the candidates will be "out of place" – or at least they will feel that way *and* they will be judged according to those standards. Examples like this show that quantitative and qualitative research methods cannot be *integrated* but that they are *complementary* (each of them offer insights into a certain problematic) as outlined above.

All of this to argue that in principle I hold nothing against quantitative analyses as such. For the reception analysis, however, I opted for a qualitative analysis, since the main research question for the reception phase was "how do viewers see the participants and do they relate their "readings" to the production context?". For this type of question I needed qualitative research methodologies, as they were more "process-oriented" – I was looking for "ways of looking at Blind Date" that hadn't been specified or even investigated up until that moment. Since this research question addressed uncharted territory I needed a method which explored possible readings of Blind Date and hence was necessarily more open-ended than a quantitative analysis would allow. The cost of this methodological choice is, of course, that my findings are not "representative" as the quantitative researcher might insist.

How did I look for "possible interpretations of participants"? As mentioned before, the interviews were semi-structured (and thus quite flexible), but roughly the structure of each interview consisted of the following sections (see appendices for the full questionnaires). A first series of questions asked very general questions

about respondents' relationship to Blind Date: do they watch it regularly, how often, with whom, and so on. I also asked what aspects they liked and which not, a question which would prove to be very revealing (see chapter 6). The aim of these general questions was first to get the conversation started and secondly to get an idea of how avid the respondents watched the show. The second set of questions came closer to the actual research question and focussed on how respondents "saw" Blind Date's participants, by asking questions like "what kind of people participate in Blind Date? Have you ever considered participating? Is participating in Blind Date a good way of trying to meet people? Do you think that some participants lie on stage? Do you think participants make fools of themselves in the show? Is watching Blind Date sometimes a painful experience? Do you think men behave better or worse in general than women?". Two things need to be stressed here: first of all, these questions focussed on participants alone and didn't relate them to the production context. Consequently, when respondents activated in the production context in their explanations why participants behave "the way they do" it was not because the questions directed them towards it (see next chapter). Secondly, although the questions might seem biased in that they ask rather negative things about participants I should stress that those terms often surfaced spontaneously during the first part of the interview. As we will see in the next chapter, respondents generally didn't hold Blind Date participants in very high esteem, although there were also substantial differences between respondents. In other words, although the questions might seem biased they are also the terms which respondents used spontaneously for describing participants.

The third section of the interview moved away from the participants towards the role of the host of the show, Ingeborg. Although this was not directly related to the core questions that I wanted to address in the reception analysis it nevertheless proved to be quite revealing. For example, a question like "do you think Ingeborg is too understanding towards participants or does she incite conflicts between them?" showed to what extent respondents saw participants to be behaving spontaneously, or alternatively, as a result of the production context¹⁵. The fourth conversation topic, finally, focused on images of love and romance, and how respondents evaluated Blind Date in terms of this. Of course this last section was very naïve, because I asked questions like "do you think Blind Date gives an exact image of love and relationships?", a question to which respondents often reacted scornfully. But again questions like these proved their usefulness through a detour, offering glances of what "*real romance*", and "*real love*" meant to them. Also there was a series of questions on the "exceptional" Blind Date episodes, like the ones featuring "older" people (people in their fifties, to be exact), and the gay episode, but I will get back to them extensively in the last chapter.

These questions talked about participants in general terms. The advantage of this is that you get quite a good idea of what respondents think about participants in *general*. However, it was also the very same generality which posed problems. For example, in order to investigate gendered interpretations of Blind Date participants – how the politics of gender played at the reception level – I initially asked questions like "do you think men are harsher on their holiday partner than women?", or "do

¹⁵ This was actually the only question which hinted to the production context, and even this was rather indirectly.

you think men fall easier in love than women?”. The problem with this type of questions, however, is that they put respondents before an essentialist choice: either *all* men fall easy in love, either *all* women. The immediate reaction was consequently in almost every case “no, I wouldn’t want to put it that strongly”, or “it’s not a general rule, of course”. After taking the first interviews I realised that I had to find another way of looking for gendered interpretations, because the questions up until then had produced rather meagre results.

The solution for this problem was not to have respondents talk about participants in general but about *specific* ones. In order to do so I chose two fragments from the Blind Date season I had transcribed and showed them to the respondents. Doing so enabled me to look for interpretations of participants that did not remain at the general level: they explored, through particular examples, audience interpretations of participants. The two fragments that I used in the interviews were the Nancy-John Ray story, and the Gerry-Muriel story. Although both stories are “failures” (no relationship came out of it) the gendered dynamics of their “romantic” interactions are in many ways each other opposite. For a detailed account I refer the reader to chapter 7. At this moment suffice it to say that the John Ray and Nancy story is an example of an interaction that follows the patterns of patriarchal heterosexuality, whereas Gerry and Muriel deviate from it. Starting from concrete participants was a more productive interview strategy because as long as we were talking about John Ray, Nancy, Gerry and Muriel viewers talked about them in very gendered terms. As soon as I switched to general questions, however, and asked whether such or so is typical for men or women, the question’s essentialist presupposition withheld respondents from articulating “the love game” in gendered terms.

Time to recapitulate. The reception analysis basically consisted of two parts. First, I asked a series of general questions about Blind Date and the people that participate in it; and secondly, I showed the respondents two fragments with the aim of investigating interpretations of specific participants/narratives (John Ray, Nancy, Muriel and Gerry – see the appendices for a Quicktime version of both fragments). Because I decided to add the Muriel and Gerry part after I had taken three test interviews this means that not all interviews are equal: the three first interviews do not contain any reference to Gerry and Muriel. In an ideal scenario a follow-up would take care of this, but time constraints made it impossible to do so. In defence of this deficiency I can only say that the reception analysis in general is not as thoroughly done as I would like it to be, but I nevertheless considered it crucial to include, even if this implied doing a rudimentary and in some aspects “lacking” analysis. The best way to look at it is as an explorative research which tries to uncover some general outlines of the reception of Blind Date but which is also, unfortunately, incomplete.

4. The politics and ethics of doing research

Throughout these pages we have already encountered most of the methodological choices and issues relevant to this thesis. I would like to use this

final section for bringing together those issues that only have been touched upon asymptotically. Also, the ethical aspects of the research set-up are shortly discussed.

The relationship between the Foucaultian analytics of power and the production analysis is a first issue which needs fleshing out. As we have seen in the first chapter Foucault offers a framework for analysing institutional power relationships, that is, those organised, intentional and tangible arrangements that are intended to produce, incite or suggest certain modalities of being (be it at the level of behaviour or at the level of subjectivity). It is this approach to power relationships which has led me to look at Streetmate's and Blind Date's production context as an institutional regime intended to provoke and create identities. But Foucault's analytics of power does not go unchallenged. Two criticisms are particularly pertinent in this context. First there is the problematic equation of institutional measures with the effects they are intended to have. The typical Foucaultian strategy is to provide the reader with historical snapshots of particular institutions and the measurements that govern its "functioning". Foucault's source material consists therefore mainly of house rules, legal documents, manuals, scientific treaties, instruction courses and so on, in short all documents that install a regulatory ideal and make propositions how it could be reached. The problem, however, is that Foucault conflates these measures with the effects they intend to have: Foucault, quite naively, believes that the "actions upon actions" he investigates are very effective in producing the "docile bodies" he sees everywhere. In short, Foucault deduces "subjectivities" or behaviour from the measures that are intended to shape it, thus conflating the regulatory ideal with the effect it intends to create. But ethnographic research of institutions with a high Foucaultian level, like for prisons or schools, shows that the regulatory ideal only exists in the discourses of penology, and that the actual practices in prisons differ substantially, even bluntly contradicting the principles set out in the policy documents (see for example Alford 2000). In other words, if Foucault had investigated "actually-working" prisons he would have found quite another world than the one he depicts in *Discipline and Punish* (1991). Of course this would pose insurmountable methodological problems: Foucault's preference for historical juxtapositions make it impossible to do, say, an ethnography of the 17th century prison. Nevertheless the problem remains that actual institutional practices often differ from how they are supposed to be, and this tension between ideality and actuality is not sufficiently addressed in Foucault's work.

My analysis of Streetmate's and Blind Date's production context is, in view of this criticism, decidedly unFoucaultian. I am not so much interested in the regulatory ideal of television production (if there could be said to exist such a thing) but in the actual practices of the production team. Of course the actual practices also contain some kind of regulatory ideal - and thus the opposition between actuality and ideality is not as absolute as one might think - but the focus on actually-implemented measures allowed me to address some issues that Foucault himself was unable to address. For instance, the fact that I could interview the participants offered me a possibility that Foucault in his analyses never could take into account (or had to presuppose), namely the effects and effectivity of the institutional regime, and how "its" subjects live it, including different modalities of conformity and/or circumvention. As a consequence, this PhD is more about the actual institutional practices of television production than about the regulatory ideals that underpin it.

The price to pay for this that the analysis turned out to be a lot “messier” than Foucault’s: since he limited himself to the study of how institutions are supposed to work he did not have to take into account the more mundane aspects of institutions, like employees refusing to implement a certain programme, rivalry between departments, or simply plain nonchalance. Moreover, because my analysis was not concerned with a diachronic historical comparison but took instead a synchronic approach of two specific institutional settings (the production context of *Streetmate* and *Blind Date*) the analysis turned out to be a lot more concerned with very practical things, like for example time constraints, or budgetary restrictions that hamper organisations in their ideal functioning. In short, my approach can be seen as an attempt to “translate” the Foucaultian analytics of power to the field of media production while simultaneously attempting to incorporate the above mentioned criticism (that Foucault, because he focuses on regulatory ideals does not pay sufficient attention to how institutions actually work).

A second critique of Foucaultian analytics of power that could also be applied to the production analysis as I have conducted it is far more stringent. In chapter (section 5) we have encountered Nancy Hartsock’s critique that Foucault’s theory is that of “a colonizer who resists”, meaning that he is too embroiled in the power relations he criticises to be able to be genuinely critical. To paraphrase her argument: although Foucault seems to be criticising power relationships he is also, retroactively, endorsing the viewpoints of the ruling groups – exactly because his focus is on institutional arrangements, on how they function and what aspects of behaviour they intent to change, he is reproducing these “official knowledges” and fails to provide an alternative account that reflects and validates the experiences of the oppressed. (Note that this criticism runs parallel to Leigh-Star’s critique of ANT (1991), namely that ANT sees the world from the viewpoint of the “management” or the “victor” and is therefore destined to define subjectivities that don’t fit the official programme as marginal or even aberrant. The similarity of both critiques is not surprising, since I argued in the second chapter that Foucaultian analytics of power and ANT can be seen as two different sides of one (neo)materialist approach to power).

How does my analysis stand in relation to this important and rather fundamental critique? There is no doubt that I have placed heavy emphasis on institutional routines and their effects, which brings my analysis closer to the “official knowledges” – side of things. Although it is critical of the production team’s modus operandi and its effects it also does not provide an “alternative epistemology” like Hartsock seems to expect from critical theory, for the simple reason that my main interest lies in how television production “functions” and how this affects participants’ “performances”. So in a way the production analysis is at least partially guilty to the charge of being “‘with’, rather than ‘against’ power” (Hartsock: 1990: 167) by being overly concerned with institutional functioning. On the other hand I have also taken care not to retroactively endorse the official point of view. Because I have interviewed the participants, and because I possessed the letters-of-application I was able to include the voices of those people that are subjected to the institutional regime, namely the participants. This also helped me to challenge the “definition of the situation” that the production team holds, thus “softening” the tendency of the materialist approach to power (Foucault + ANT) to view subjects as

they are defined by the institutions that govern them. An example on the class dynamics in *Blind Date* might leave this argument less abstract.

When interviewing those members of the production team that do *Blind Date*'s selection procedure, for example, it became pretty clear to me that they didn't hold the candidates in high esteem. Take for example the following extract, taken from an interview with the executive producer, on how the letters-of-application are used:

Producer: "The selection criterion we use is that the letter can't be too thick, or when we feel that it's over the top, if that's the case we don't invite the candidates. [...]"

Me: "What do you mean with 'over the top'? Pathetic?"

Producer: "No, mainly that we think... like, people that are really morons. Some of them can barely write, so we feel we can't do it [to put them on television]".

In the beginning the harshness of these words shocked me, but when I received the letters-of-application I had to admit that the average level of spelling was quite low, the majority of the letters containing at least one spelling mistake, the more extreme cases even stretching the limits of readability. So in a way the quote from the producer is "correct", even irrefutable. Although I would use less harsh words, it is true that some of the candidates can barely write. But this line-of-reasoning as I have just described it shows the dangers of focusing on official knowledges, namely that you accept the definition of the situation as it is set by the executive functions (i.e. the producer in question): the "accurateness" of the producer's statement deletes from sight the normalising effects of the institutional regime which is set by the institution itself, namely that people who want to appear on television should at least be able to write "properly". The eye of power is always right since it has set the standards of what it means to be right, proper or appropriate. That these requirements are very much oriented towards middle and upper class competences (and thus exclude large sections of the population¹⁶) is something which only became gradually clear to me, and it shows the dangers that loom large when engaging with official knowledges.

The point I am getting at is that Hartsock's criticism has forced me, one way or another, to "take sides". The detached descriptivism that characterises Foucault's and ANT's approach (see chapters 1 and 2), the eye for detail which characterises this line-of-thought, re-enacts in an almost perverse way positivism's disembodied viewpoint, the eye that sees everything from nowhere. And by doing so both materialist approaches are in a bizarre way complicit with the institutional regimes

¹⁶ Although within the "developed countries" (most of Europe, Canada and United States) illiteracy is almost non-existent so-called "functional illiteracy" is surprisingly high. This term refers to those people who can technically read and write but not sufficient enough in order to be able to function in society. In 2000 the OECD published a research rapport on functional illiteracy which stated that in 14 out of the 20 countries under examination "at least 15 per cent of all adults have literacy skills at only the most rudimentary level" (OECD 2000: xiii), Belgium scoring an intermediate level of 18%. Sweden scored best with "only" 8% and Portugal scored worst with 48%. Note that it is exactly this "functional illiteracy" that the producer of *Blind Date* was referring to: people who *can* write their name but who are, for example, unable to write a full letter.

they are critical off, because they accept the definition of the situation as offered by the institutions. I share with them the eye for detail and the emphasis upon material settings; however, my analysis is also explicitly partisan, and I make no secret of the fact that my sympathies lie more with the participants than with the production team. I believe that the television studio should not be the exclusive domain of middle class people (and by extension the young and beautiful). Moreover there is a fundamental injustice in the way television production works, especially those formats that make use of ordinary people: on the one hand the production teams needs ordinary people (because they are the raw material on which they thrive), but they only allow participants in as long as they behave according to the norms which are set by them – the televisual equivalent of “*tais-toi et sois belle*”¹⁷.

It is this fundamental asymmetry of televisual power relationships which has fuelled my production analysis. In this sense it departs from the detached descriptivism of both the Foucaultian and ANT-approach and takes up a clear political position. What it does share with the materialist approach is the emphasis upon material settings and institutional routines, but it does so from a clear political position which identifies more with some actors than with others.

Apart from these theoretical issues there are also ethical issues involved. The first such issue has already been touched upon earlier, namely the problem of sensitive data. During the time I spend with the production teams of *Streetmate* and *Blind Date* I occasionally stumbled upon production practices which can be called – and I think I am being pretty careful – “dubious”. For example, I discovered that *Streetmate* wasn’t always “honest” in the way they found participants: one those days that they had difficulties finding participant they kept some “volunteers” at hand – usually friends or acquaintances of the production team – who then “accidentally” would pup at the right moment. As understandable as this practice may be, it is a form of cheating: the programme claims to go out on the streets and look haphazardly for participants, not contacting them beforehand and telling them where to be.

Findings like these pose some serious ethical problems for the researcher, because they touch upon the heart of what academic research is supposed to do. On the one hand we are expected to provide truthful accounts of the worlds we depict, on the other hand we often feel sympathetic towards the people we interview because they provide us with all the information we need for making our analyses, write reports and articles, and perhaps even build a career on. The problem is, in other words, about loyalty: will you use information that, although interesting, might damage the people you have gotten it from? Because things like this were told hush-hush so that the other members of the production team did not hear them say it.

In this PhD I have searched for a middle way between truthfulness and loyalty, on the basis of two principles: relevance and anonymity. The first refers to the fact that the information had to be relevant for the point I was trying to make. If information, although spectacular, was not relevant in the argument I did not include it. For instance, the fact that *Streetmate* kept some “fake” participants at

¹⁷ Literally “shut up and be beautiful”, the French adagio men use when women voice their opinion.

hand is relevant because it is one of the strategies the production team used for countering unpredictability, one of the more important themes throughout this thesis. It wasn't really needed to make the argument, but it does provide insights into how the production team copes with economic pressure: although Streetmate is definitely one of the cheaper programmes to make, an average day of outside shootings still costs an average of 80.000 BEF (€2000), and hence time pressure was considerable. The second criterion was anonymity. When I decided to use a certain piece of information which could be damaging to a certain member of the production team I will not reveal who did the "confessing", because I think it would be unfair to these persons. occasionally I will quote people without adding who they are, and this is to "protect my sources". Also, I would like to stress that all in all the amount of "sensitive information" I had to keep secret is limited, and I have the feeling that by and large production teams play the game correctly. When I criticise televisual power relationships in this PhD it is not the ones hidden from sight, on the contrary: the most out in the open, the most obvious and self-evident production practices are the object of my critique.

A second and final ethical problem that has to be mentioned here is about naming the people I interviewed. It is common practice within the social sciences to change the names of respondents, or only use the first name, mainly because privacy reasons: often the (qualitative) researcher touches upon quite personal issues, and even though academic publications have a rather limited reach it nevertheless would be a sign of disrespect of the researcher to describe respondents so that they are identifiable. Hence for the audience members I interviewed the situation was clear-cut, and I only used their first names in this PhD. But when one researches television participants this clear-cut ethical dictum becomes somewhat muddled. Television is, after all, a public medium, and the participants that have appeared on, say, *Blind Date*, after all chose to appear in public. Moreover, in *Blind Date* the participants are announced with their full name and the place where they live, which makes it even easier to identify and locate them (actually, I had to resort to this strategy to locate one of the participants, because the mobile number the production team had given me had become invalid). Nevertheless I only mention the participants by their first names, since some of the interviews contain some information which is more private. The members of the production team, finally, are usually referred to with their function, because it is their role in the organisation which matters mostly. Since they are also easily identifiable (through the credits of the show) and because they speak from an official position there is no reason to change their names, and the reader can find their names in the appendices.

With this we have come to the end of the methodological chapter. In the next three chapters we will investigate the televisual power relationships, in chapter 7 we will focus on the gender power relationships.

Chapter 4: Televisual power relationships and strategies

"But the self, I think, has to be considered, not as a reality which can be hidden. I think that the self has to be considered as the correlate of technologies, built and developed through our history. The problem then, is not to liberate, to free the self, but to consider how it could be possible to elaborate new types, new kinds of relationships towards ourselves"

One of the recurrent themes within media studies is the question whether the media tend to reproduce the status quo or, conversely, whether they offer a space to marginalized voices and thus are a threat to the status quo. It is a theme which is not only limited to cultural studies but can be seen at work in approaches as diverse as political economy, Screen Theory, cultivation theory or system theoretical approaches to the media. It is this general and widespread concern for the ideological effects of media that has framed the question "what happens when ordinary people appear on television?".

The most elaborate body of work that has implicitly addressed this question is a small but quite consistent series of studies on talk shows. Although the individual talk show guest never was the explicit point of attention these studies can be read as an attempt to address the above mentioned question in the context of talk shows. Without wanting to simplify too much there are roughly two opposing camps. On the one hand there are those who argue that talk shows offer a public forum for people that otherwise rarely would get a chance to voice their opinion on TV, and that they thus can be seen as contributing to a progressive and more democratic form of television (e.g. Livingstone & Lunt 1994, Shattuc 1997). Other scholars are more prudent in their claims. For instance, Gamson (1998), in a particularly balanced and well-thought study, claims that studies like these rest upon two problematic assumptions. First, "giving voice" is equated with "authenticity", neglecting the ways in which the medium and the genre structure the voices that come out. Second, there is the question whether talk shows constitute "a forum":

"It is certainly true that talk shows come closer than anywhere else on American television to providing a means for a wide range of people, credentialed but especially not so credentialed, to converse about all sort of things. But is daytime really a forum, a set of conversations? How do the production and programming strategies shape the capacity for discussion, and the content of conversation? If, as Wayne Munson has put it, talk shows are simultaneously spectacle and conversation, what is the relationship here between the circus and the symposium, and what is the political significance of their combination?" (Gamson, 1998: 17)

¹ Michel Foucault in a lecture called "The culture of the self" given at Berkeley on April 12, 1983. Can be downloaded at <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Speech/VideoTest/audiofiles.html> in real audio format.

Gamson's remarks have far reaching consequences for the "public forum" interpretation of talk shows. His study, though empathic towards the ideals of "giving a voice to the voiceless" pulls our attention to the media as institutions, to their institutional logic and functioning, and the image he sketches of talk shows' production practices is not a pretty one. For example, in a section on whether daytime talk shows are real or fake he tells a story of one of the recordings he witnessed and how a participant effortlessly repeated a teary scene because the first one failed due to technical reasons. He concludes:

"The point here is not just that guests are sometimes faking it or that producers are often manipulating and deceiving, although those are both the case. The point is that performance and dishonesty are built into the *production arrangements* of television talk; they result from its logic, not from its corruption. Producers and bookers mislead and manipulate, if that gets them the booking; guests exaggerate and role play, sometimes because they are told to do so, sometimes because they know it works" (ibid.: 89)

The emphasis Gamson puts on the production arrangements is a crucial one, because it locates precisely from where to start answering the question "what happens when ordinary people appear on television?". If we look at the production arrangements - how talk shows are actually made - the idea that they offer "a forum" to the "marginalised voiceless" becomes quite problematic. What we see instead is a number of practices - an institutional regime, in Foucaultian terms - that have their own institutional logic and thus shape to a large extent the interaction in the studio. The talk show studio only vaguely resembles the Greek *agora*: both are, indeed, places where people "meet and talk", but this superficial resemblance should not blind us from seeing how they have different aims and consequently, what different functions talk performs in both paradigms. For instance, talking on the Greek *agora* is not as strictly regulated as the talk show conversation, with its tight time schedule and strict role allocation ("the expert", the "experience expert", the "ordinary citizen") is. In short, it's not because the talk show studio and the *agora* share some characteristics that they are similar, nor that "talk" performs the same function in both places.

Dating shows differ from talk shows in numerous ways, but *mutatis mutandis* we can take Gamson's emphasis upon the production arrangements as the point of departure. In this chapter and the next one we will make an analysis of the production process of *Blind Date* and *Streetmate* from the viewpoint of televisual power relationships. In order to do so, however, we have to start looking through "the eye of power", by looking at the production practices from the viewpoint of the production team. I will argue that the production teams of dating shows are confronted with what is essentially a managerialist problematic ("in order to reach goal X we need to arrange things so and so"). This will lead then to a number of strategies on their behalf, and this chapter is essentially an inventory of all the different strategies at play during the production process. We will conclude that these strategies to a large extent shape the performances of and interaction between the participants. Chapter 5 is essentially concerned with the same strategies, but focuses on the material arrangements and spatial constellations in which the televisual power relationships take place. I will argue that a key element in successful management is the extent to which one is able to mobilise the nonhuman actors of the television set. The talk about power relationships, however, is also misleading because it suggests the image of an almighty production team that dominates weak

and docile participants. We will therefore look at the numerous instants of failed management, how this can be explained, and what this means for the power relationship between production team and participants. In a final section of chapter 5 we will return to the production arrangements, and ask ourselves how we should think the performed identities. Drawing on the work of Deleuze I will argue that the production arrangements effectuate “actualised but sticky identities”. In the conclusion of chapter 5 we will then return to televisual power relationships from the viewpoint of accountability and responsibility. In short, this chapter and the next one should be read as one whole, with slightly different perspectives.

1. Management

Desperately Seeking the Audience, Ien Ang’s (1991) excellent study of the procedures and assumptions through which the television industry has defined “audiencehood” in order to secure its own reproduction, starts with an observation by Christian Metz. Although he is referring to the cinema industry his remarks can be transposed to the television industry:

“In a social system in which the spectator is not forced physically to go to the cinema but in which it is still important that he should go so that the money he pays for his admission makes it possible to shoot other films and thus ensures the auto-reproduction of the institution - and it is the specific characteristic of every true institution that it takes charge of the mechanisms of its own perpetuation - there is no other solution than to set up arrangements whose aim and effect is to give the spectator the ‘spontaneous’ desire to visit the cinema and pay for his ticket” (Metz 1975: 19, quoted in Ang 1991).

Metz is referring here to a fundamental characteristic of the movie industry, namely that its audience cannot be forced to watch the movies it produces. Contrary to other institutionalised activities like going to school or enjoying unemployment benefits, going to the movies is a *voluntary* activity, one that moreover involves making an effort – leaving the house and taking the car or public transport to physically get to the movie theatre, for example. Hence the movie industry is perpetually – time and time again – confronted with the problem of getting the audience sufficiently enthusiastic so that they make the effort to go out and, more importantly, shell out the necessary money for seeing movie X or Y. In other words, there is a fundamental element of uncertainty involved in making movies, and the movie industry in its entirety has developed a number of strategies for reducing it, thus securing its own reproduction as an institution.

Of course going to the cinema is not the same as watching television. For starters, the television viewer does not have to leave her house to enjoy a television programme: the television set is – often – situated in the living room and thus watching television can be easier integrated into the flow of everyday life. Also, watching television is not as attention-absorbing as watching a movie: television sets often play on the background, allowing the viewer to do other activities while “watching” television. Nevertheless from an institutional point of view the problem remains that watching television is by and large a voluntary activity, one that has to compete with a range of other leisure activities like chatting with friends, going to the local pub, reading a book, sleeping and so forth. Nothing forces the audience to

watch television, and the television industry has developed a number of strategies for securing what could be dubbed "medium loyalty". These strategies are well-known in the industry, and they vary from vertical and horizontal programming, the use of trailers for announcing new programs, hammocking (putting a less popular programme in between two popular ones), counter programming (countering a competitor's stronghold with one of its own), double pumping (presenting the same programme twice in one night or twice per week), and so forth.

Ang's focus is on the role of audience ratings. Her main argument is that audience ratings present television producers with a specific form of knowledge that makes the audience transparent so that it becomes a knowledgeable and hence "workable" entity. But, as she contends, this is a discursive operation which produces the audience as "the wild savage which the [television industries] want to tame and colonize" (1991: 24). In the discursive practices of the audiometric business "the audience" is that strange and cunning entity, never perfectly knowledgeable, always ready to do the unexpected. Ang's concern is that this kind of institutionalised knowledge forms a technology of social control, and she seems eager to "free" knowledge from this instrumental use. She argues for a new type of knowledge on audiences, one that is not aimed at governing and has different political aims. Given the direction her subsequent work took (Ang 1996) this new kind of knowledge on audiences tries to get rid of its institutional-administrative origins and takes the everyday experience of the audience, as well as the position of the researcher as the starting point.

This is not the time and place to discuss Ang's work in detail. What I would like to do instead is take her general observation ("the television industry is confronted with some degree of uncertainty and thus it has developed a number of strategies for countering and managing this insecurity") as the starting point for the production analysis. It provides us with an excellent perspective for starting to unpack what I will call the *double managerial problematic* that the production teams of *Streetmate* and *Blind Date* have to confront. In other words, Ang provides us with a *general* account of the managerial problematic of the television industry, one that we can put to good work in our analysis of two *specific* programmes.

1.1 The production teams' double managerial problematic

The production teams of *Streetmate* and *Blind Date* are subject to the fundamental uncertainty and unpredictability Ang is writing about. Put simply: it is not written in the stars that the audience will tune into the show they produce, week after week. There is nothing that forces viewers to watch *Blind Date* or *Streetmate*, and thus the fundamental problem of the production team can be described as "how do we get the audience to tune into our show while they are not obliged to do so?". This is the *first managerial problematic* the production team is confronted with, one that they share with many other television production teams. But for dating shows the problem is even more difficult to tackle due to their narrative characteristics. Every episode is as it were a self-contained story, and thus there is little or no room for playing with the hermeneutic code, which makes it difficult to build up viewer involvement across episodes. In comparison to, for example, soap operas, with their long-running narratives, complex relationships between characters, and narrative techniques like the cliffhanger, dating shows have relatively little on offer for

stimulating viewer engagement. Streetmate is the most extreme example: each episode is literally self-contained, following the dating story of two particular couples from the beginning to the end, meaning that there is no continuity between different episodes, no stories to “follow up”, which might make us tune into the show the next week. Blind Date on the other hand has a slight advantage because a couple is followed across two episodes: in the first episode we see them meet and then we have a whole week to wonder how the holiday trip went, thus creating a narrative tension which is only resolved the next week. And yet this suspense element comes nowhere near soap opera’s narrative build-up across time. As a consequence, the production team can do nothing but making an “as good as possible” episode every week, and hope that the viewers enjoy the programme sufficiently so that they tune into the show next week.

This brings us immediately to the second and intimately related managerial problematic. Since dating shows are rather rigid – if not to say formulaic – programmes there are fairly few creative decisions to take. Each episode is so rigidly structured that it could, as it were, be produced on automatic pilot, requiring little or no creative decisions. There are again some noteworthy differences between Blind Date and Streetmate: whereas the former is very rigid the latter is more open to change. On several occasions there were Streetmate episodes that played with the usual programme format. For example, one episode the production team decided to do “the Hunt” not in one of Flanders’ shopping streets (as the format dictated) but instead opted for attending a soccer match. Joyce De Troch, the host of the show, then publicly announced seconds before the toss up (when maximum attention was guaranteed) that they were shooting an episode of Streetmate and that all available bachelors should come to the entrance of the stadium during the interval. Another example of Streetmate’s creative interpretation of the format can be found in one episode in which a girl, who had been chosen by a Hunter, did not show up for the date. The footage of the production team standing in front of a closed door was included in the broadcasted episode, and next we see Joyce De Troch announcing to the surprised Hunter that his first choice had not showed up but that instead she had brought a friend of hers who was willing to replace the original girl, upon which the episode continues its usual course of affairs. Examples like these show that Streetmate often had to rely on instant decisions, or as the producer put it: “It was very much a thing of improvisation” – which means that the production team had some creative autonomy – although it was more often a case of practical necessity than artistic choice. Blind Date on the other hand is very rigid, Columbia Tri-Star having to approve of even minor changes in the format. As a result all of the episodes are practically interchangeable, although there are occasionally “special interest” episodes (more on this later).

But in the end these mutual differences are relatively minor and both dating shows are of a fundamentally formulaic nature. Perhaps the Streetmate production team has more creative input, but it is largely limited to choosing a different setting, or playing a bit with the format. The rest of the programme’s structure remains exactly the same: participants are “hunted”, they go looking for an “appropriate” date; both participants are interviewed and then go on a dinner date, and so forth. In short, even in those episodes that require creative decisions the majority of the events follow a strict and predictable scheme. So how can the production team influence the “content” of the show in order to get the audience to watch Streetmate

or Blind Date? What exactly do they *do* during the production phase, as to make it an enjoyable programme to watch?

The answer to this question is rather simple. The “thing” the production team can influence most is not so much the format, because this is given in advance and sets “the rules of engagement”. They *can* influence, however, the performances of the participants, the way they interact, how they behave, what they say and so forth... Contrary to the general structure of the programme, which is out of their immediate control, they do have an influence on the participants – staying, of course, within the structural limits of the format. Here we encounter the production team’s second managerial problematic, which is directly linked to the first managerial problematic: the main means for achieving the first goal (how to make the audience watch “their” show) is *participant management*: how to make the participants interact so that they become interesting “material” to watch? Because interesting participants make a fascinating “view”; a view that will make audiences endlessly return to the programme like moths around a flame. Just like the flame’s fascination resides in its structural constant while changing endlessly, dating shows feed us “more of the same” while being highly particular in each and every instance.

This is what I mean with the production teams’ *double and interrelated managerial problematic*. The first one is a general one, common to all television productions, namely “how to make audiences tune into our show week after week?”. The second managerial problematic is more particular for dating shows (and other formats that make use of “ordinary people” as their raw material: how to find and manage the participants so that they become “interesting to watch”. This means that the answer to the second problematic is the solution for the first; hence the two managerial problematics eventually boil down to one single question: how to make participants behave so that they become interesting “material” to watch? Figure 1 summarises the two managerial problematics schematically:

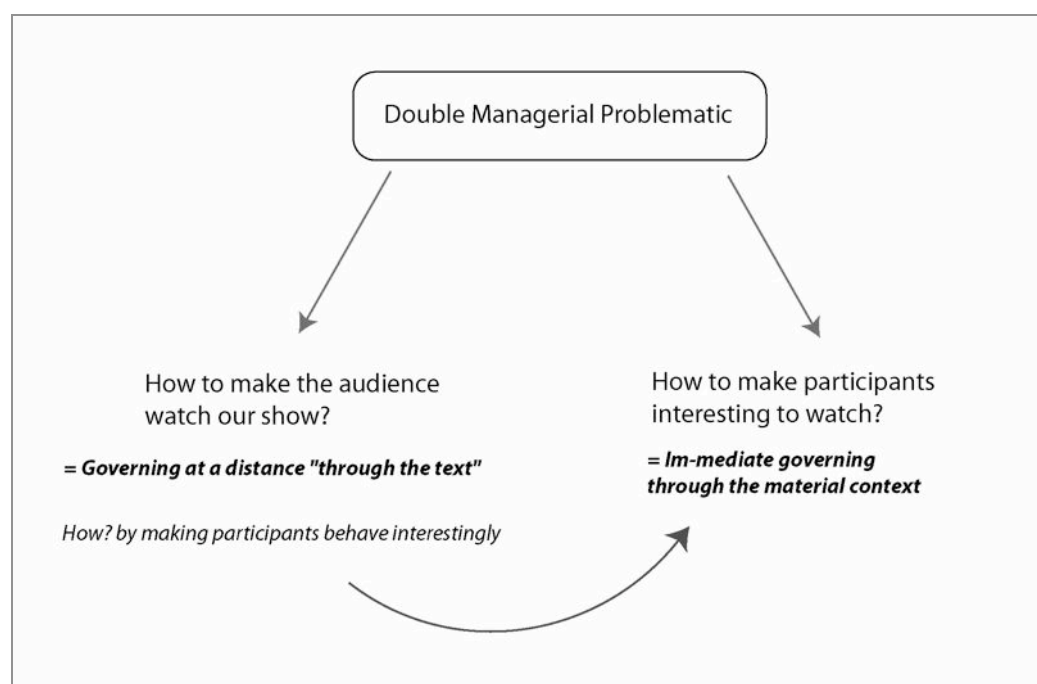


Figure 3: The production teams’ double and interrelated managerial problematic

If we look closely at Figure 1 we see that the two managerial problematics involve two different means of governing. The first one (how to make the audience watch our show?) involves the governance of an actor which is "absent". Audiences are not in the "im-mediate" (literally not-mediated) control of the production team for the simple reason that they are dispersed across space. The only means available to the production team for making the audience watch the programme is making an as good as possible show (or what they define as such). This means that they have to govern the audience "at a distance" by using the only means available to them: the "text". The Foucaultian language is no accident: "governing at a distance" is the term he uses for those types of government which, unlike for example the prison, install types of subjectivity that require no immediate, material control upon bodies but instead rely on self-governing modes of being that are perceived to be voluntary rather than coercive. Being a Blind Date *aficionado* (and more generally, an avid consumer of television) is exactly about the self-governing, "spontaneous" desire to sit down in front of the television, week after week. It is a voluntary act which is inscribed in, and shaped by, strategies of power, i.e. the strategy of the media industry to obtain audience maximisation so that they can "sell" these viewers to the advertisers (see also Figure 4 in chapter 2).

The second managerial problematic involves a different type of government. Here the production team is not confronted with a distant actor which hopefully is sufficiently disciplined so as to tune into the show. Contrary to audience members participants are not distant but *physically present* actors that are under the production team's "im-mediate" control. Hence this type of government relies less on distant governing, and more upon immediate control upon "bodies" through the use of material arrangements. If we were to compare both types of governing the second comes closer to the disciplinary regime of closed institutions like the prison, the school or the army garrison, the type of institutions that Foucault described in *Discipline and Punish* (1991). Although both types of government have the same objective (the conduct of conduct) the *means* for reaching these goals, the spatial constellations they involve and the types of subjectivity needed in order to be able to function "properly" are fundamentally different. Both are power strategies, but they are pursued by different means and they function according to their own, particular logic.

The comparison with the prison, however, cannot be made unqualified. There are indeed similarities between the prison and the television set: for instance, both are closed environments, and both intend to shape and direct behaviour; but it would also be premature to lump them together into one heap of "disciplining institutions". To start with, unlike prisons television sets are desirable places, and many people are willing to go at lengths for starring in a television programme (which can hardly be said about inmates). Hence the "subjects" of both institutions differ dramatically in the enthusiasm with which they engage with the institutional regime in question. Second, the category of "shaping behaviour" is too broad for what are essentially very different institutional aims. In the prison the aim is to transform the prisoner as to make her "a better person", which is a long-term project aimed at transforming behaviour more or less permanently – or so it is hoped. In dating shows, on the contrary, the aim is to make participants behave for a short time-span broadcast-friendly, so that they become interesting "characters" to watch. In short, the objectives and corresponding institutional measures differ

substantially, and what is needed is a *specific* account of the governmental logic of participant management.

1.2 Participant management: aims and objectives

What are the aims of participant management, and how can we best describe its governmental logic? In figure 1 I have summarised this aim under the umbrella term “to make participants behave so that they become ‘interesting’ to watch”, but this is quite a vague and dubious description. In fact it is very hard to pinpoint what exactly makes a participant “interesting” to watch. When I asked the members of the production teams what the ideal participant looked like I got a diverse range of answers, and nobody seemed to be able to come up with a clear-cut definition. When I gave specific examples, however, the interviewees were often quite univocal and they all seemed to agree. In short, there seems to be a consensus within the television world about what makes participants “interesting”, but it is basically a non-articulated consensus: they all recognise one when they see one but wouldn’t be able to define it.

Despite the impossibility of definition I will nevertheless give it a try. After having talked with both production teams I think that the best definition is the following: participants are “interesting” when they perform “*strong identities*”. With this term I refer to identities that stick out, that are extraordinary (literally: out of the ordinary) or spectacular to watch, identities that will make the show the talk of town (“did you see Blind Date yesterday?”). In this sense the performance of the girl in the episode of 19 September 2003 which we encountered in the introduction is the perfect Blind Date performance: it only took some minutes for the first posts on the bulletin board to appear, and the thread lasted for several weeks. But things are not always as radical as this example. The production teams are in general quite happy if “their” participants stay out of “the grey zone” and do something that sticks out. For example, when I asked both teams what was best for the programme – whether the couple got involved romantically or the opposite, whether they had lots of conflicts or even fights – most of the members of the production teams agreed that you needed both. The worst that can happen is the all too common “we’re just friends”. As Blind Date’s final editor puts it:

Final editor: That’s a new evolution – no, actually it’s not new, it was in there from the beginning – that the participants prearrange not to criticise each other, that they promise to spare each other. Like “even if we hate or can’t stand each other we’ll stay polite”. And if that happens that’s bad for the programme, because if they remain very diplomatic it’s really boring. These are the least interesting episodes.

In similar vein Streetmate’s editor compares her programme to Blind Date, and she argues that Streetmate’s format does not allow for conflicts to emerge, because the dinner date is too short-spanned with the result that participants keep everything very formal and polite:

Editor: In Blind Date they are four days together on a holiday, and there is always something happening... For example, the pressure of the plane being too late, or bad weather, or the hotel being disappointing, whatever. There are so many things that can get on your nerves, and that’s also good television, when they start killing off each other. That’s what’s lacking in Streetmate. Most participants said things like “yes, he looks like

a nice guy”, or “she’s not my type”, but that’s it... I am still waiting for the first participant to walk away from the dinner date, like “sod off!”.

Jan: It would be better television.

Editor: Exactly! But no, they don’t do things like that, they are too polite... Because they also think like “ok, we’re already at the first dish, if I hang on a little longer, there’s only a main dish and a dessert left and then I can go home”

Quotes like these show what the production team understands by strong identities: identities that escape the safe havens of the middle ground. This can mean basically any performance that tends towards the extreme and the clear-cut. In the world of dating shows ambivalence is not a valued quality: one needs clear-cut identities and frank statements, high passions and painful details, not boring nuances or talks free of engagement. In terms of the interaction between participants this means that the production team has three basic scenario’s in mind: the couple becomes romantically involved, or one participant is in love while the other isn’t, or they really dislike each other up to the point that they have a heavy discussion. This is the basic structure that all dating shows set up for “their” participants, a structure which ultimately plays with varying degrees of *conflict*: either there is the absolute lack of any conflict (the romantic union of two kindred spirits), or there is lots of it. And all of this has to happen in public, of course, because *if it ain’t televised it didn’t really happen*:

Final editor Blind Date: Recently it happened that the recalls – that’s how we call the participants that return from the holiday – we had them up here [in the make-up room, before the second studio shootings] and they were having a huge fight. I mean a *real* fight. Quite noteworthy: they were 50-55 years old. And they almost started attacking each other physically. But by the time we were ready to start shooting they had already calmed down. For us, that’s very unfortunate, but that’s the way it goes [...] I mean, they were sitting here to get the make-up done but in the mean time they are sitting together. By the time we were going to record they had lost that extra oomph... I mean, it was still quite stingy but it could have had much more punch.

In other words, from a productional point of view participant management is not only about inciting the right emotions (respectively love and/or anger) but also about getting it on camera. Hence the second objective of participant management: the aim is not only to make participants perform strong identities, it also has to happen *in public*. Two participants who are foolishly in love are not very useful if they do not display this love publicly. In short, strong identities need to be performed publicly in order to be useful for the production team. Take for instance the following quote from Streetmate’s editor, who thinks back upon a couple who had appeared on the show:

Editor Streetmate: Bruno and Begga were a good couple, because Bruno really played it quite openly. I mean, he was very open, even said things like “somehow I never manage to get romantically involved with somebody”. And then there was Begga who really likes to listen... The moment he says out of the blue “you have such beautiful eyes”, that was a very touching moment. He was less conscious of the camera, or better, he was aware of the camera but it didn’t inhibit him, he remained spontaneous. He really was himself in front of the camera, most people are not capable of doing that.

This is, in a nutshell, the aim of the participant management: to make them *publicly perform strong identities*. This is the thread running through this chapter, and in what follows it is important to keep this “golden rule of television making” in

mind. Bruno and Begga were such a “good couple” (read: good participants) because unlike the average participant Bruno was not restricted, displaying in public those aspects of one’s personality that one usually keeps for oneself, or reserves for more intimate moments. Moreover, his performance lacked the usual ambiguity or shallowness, performing a *strong* identity that every dating show desperately needs: the man (or woman) who is in love. His performance was clear-cut and extreme enough for the editor to think back about them, almost nostalgically, as “a good couple”.

How does one go about making participants publicly perform strong identities? It is obvious that it is not given in the course of things that participants will behave according to the “golden rule”. The reasons are diverse, and we will get back to them repeatedly in chapter 5. For the moment, suffice it to say that sometimes participants resist performing strong identities, that they sometimes are simply not capable of performing them, and that in some instances it is the material constellation of the dating show itself which gets in the way of the public performance of strong identities. In sum, strong identities are not given in advance, and therefore the production teams use a number of strategies for obtaining this aim. That is also the reason why I call the managerial relationship between production team and participants a televisual *power* relationship: it is a relationship in which one actor aims to transform or shape the behaviour of another, the “conduct of conduct” – and this is exactly the Foucaultian definition of power. Or, in actor-network terms, the production teams try to keep “their” networks intact by keeping the different actors aligned, and aligned participants, in the case of dating shows, publicly perform strong identities.

2.Strategies

So what are the strategies the production teams use for securing the public display of strong identities? How does the production team try to mould the performances and interactions of the participants so that they perform strong identities in public, and thus become “good television”? The answers to these questions are complex, because making dating shows is a process which consists of many different stages, each requiring their own specific strategies and corresponding “technologies” (in the Foucaultian sense of the word). For instance, in *Blind Date* there is quite a dramatic shift in terms of managerial problematic between the first part of the show (the ritualised “getting to know each other” process, or “befores”) and the second part (the “afters”), when the couple returns from the holiday trip. During the *befores* the most important task of the production team is to make sure that participants know the different parts of the show and when to enter the stage; that they behave in a camera friendly fashion; and that the Preys give short and witty answers to the questions asked. In other words, during these first shootings the production team will mainly be confronted with the problem of making them behave in a “broadcast-friendly” way, so that the funny and high-paced rhythm of the show is guaranteed. During the *afters*, however, the managerial problematic changes, and is less concerned with questions of televisual form². The

² It would be wrong, however, to conclude from this that management during the *befores* limits itself to questions of form (the “how” of the performances), while during the second part

problematic changes quite drastically: participants should talk openly and without unease about their experiences, hopes and disillusionments, and the likes. As Scannell (1999: 288-289) argues, this second part is potentially far more dangerous for the participants: "In *Blind Date*, the risk lies mainly in the second part of the game. The programme's sting lies in the subsequent feedback as the couple sit beside each other and talk it through with Cilla, for it often turns out that the date was a rocky experience, one way or another, for both concerned". In short, the second part is a dangerous part because one's personality is being under public scrutiny. As a result, the participants often agree amongst each other not to get (too) personal, or not to reveal compromising things. During the *afters*, then, the managerial problem is concerned with "cracking" the coalition between participants in order to make them "confess" publicly what *really* happened between them. In short, during the course of the production process the managerial problematic shift, and hence each moment requires a different strategy or a combination thereof.

In general we can distinguish the following strategies, corresponding more or less with the temporal development of the production process:

- **selection strategies:** how to find suitable candidates? In this group we find those productional routines aimed at a. finding enough possible candidates, and b. selecting the right candidates. We will see that - due to differences in format - the selection procedures of *Streetmate* and *Blind Date* differ substantially, bringing along quite a different managerial problematic.
- **strategies of televisual form:** how to make participants behave "broadcast-friendly?". Since participants are mostly television novices that never before have been in front of a television camera they don't know much about the "laws of television", or the practicalities of television recording. Therefore the production team manages the behaviour of the participants in order to secure that it remains or becomes "broadcastable".
- **strategies of self-presentation:** how to influence the self-presentation of the participants? Since dating shows are about the dating process they invariably contain a part during which participants present themselves (with the added advantage that the audience at home also "gets to know" the participants). But this self-presentation needs to be moulded according to the "strong identity"-need of the shows, and the production teams have consequently developed several strategies for managing this self-presentation.
- **interactional strategies:** this category contains the strategies that are aimed at influencing the interactions *between* participants. Again it is the need for "strong identities" that explains why the production team tries to influence the participant interaction: if they are able to steer the

the effects are situated at the level of substance (the "what" of the performances). To the contrary: it could be argued that the production team moulds the performances of the participants most strongly during this first series of shootings (see below for details). The differences between *befores* and *afters* lie in the playfulness of it all. Whereas the identities performed during the *befores* are playful and non-committal (read: mostly stereotypes of romantic behaviour), the *afters* are more personal in tone; hence the changing managerial problematic.

interactions between participants (e.g. getting them involved romantically, or on the other side of the spectrum, getting them to fight amongst each other) they are more likely to obtain the strong identities.

- **confessional strategies:** these are the strategies the production teams use for making participants “crack” so that they publicly disclose information they would rather not share with the audience. This includes well-known interviewing techniques as well as less conventional ones.
- editing as an identity practice: this category refers to the editing process (the selection of which footage to broadcast) and how this is helpful in creating strong identities, both at the textual and production level.

This chapter, then, is in fact a detailed overview of the different strategies. It is, so to speak, an *inventory* of managerial strategies. Like all inventories it is not the most exciting piece of work, and the analysis often gets bogged down into minor details that might seem banal or even redundant, so bear with me. The advantage of the detailed overview is that it sets the scene for the sections that will follow, which will be less dry and more concise.

3. Selection strategies

Selection strategies are those aspects of the production team’s *modus operandi* that are concerned with finding and selecting suitable candidates to appear on the show. Actually this contains two different but related selection problems: first of all there is the problem of finding *enough* candidates. This is *selection-as-inclusion*, meaning that the production team should try to get a big “batch” of possible candidates to apply for the show. On the other hand, it is not sufficient that there are many possible candidates, they also have to be “right”, meaning that they should fit in the format of the show. This second move is therefore more concerned with eliminating the “misfits”. This second type is called *selection-as-exclusion*. One can compare selection strategies to a fishing net: in order to be efficient a fishing net needs to have a large enough spanning width so that large volumes of water are covered by it (= selection-as-inclusion), because more scanned water means more potential fish. But a fishing net also contains a filtering mechanism, namely the size of the meshes, which filter out the small fish that are of no use for the fishermen (= selection-as-exclusion).

Both production teams have established procedures that function as a fishing net, or in other words, that attempt to solve the interrelated problems of selection-as-inclusion and selection-as-exclusion. But this does not mean that Streetmate’s and Blind Date’s selection procedure are similar, on the contrary. The differences in format between Streetmate and Blind Date make that the former doesn’t even *have* a selection procedure in the proper sense of the word: Streetmate’s production team basically dwells the streets of a city on the off-chance, hoping that they will encounter suitable candidates who are willing to participate. Moreover, this “selection procedure” is not part of the preproduction process but is an integral part of the televised version: “the Hunt” is the first part of the broadcasted programme. In Blind Date, on the contrary, participants have to apply themselves *and* this is being done long before the actual shootings take place, making both selection

procedure of a fundamentally different kind. Because of these differences I have chosen to treat them under a separate heading.

3.1 Streetmate

In Streetmate the selection procedure is an integral part of the television programme as it is broadcasted. A typical Streetmate episode starts with “*The Hunt*” during which we see Joyce De Troch, the host of the show, walk around one of Flanders’ main streets or shopping centres, “hunting” for participants who are single *and* willing to collaborate. But for the production team this meant that *Hunt* was a risky enterprise, since they were never entirely sure that they would find people who were willing to collaborate. Moreover, it wasn’t just enough to find a first “victim”: once a first participant had been encountered s/he had to find a fellow Streetmater who was also willing to participate. In other words, there were more than enough things that could go wrong during a *Hunt*, and the production team developed and used a number of strategies for managing and constraining this unpredictability.

The first of such strategies concerns the *place* of *hunting*. Actually, this was the only aspect the production team genuinely controlled: it was more or less the only production decision that could be made and planned in advance³. In order to be sure that they would find enough possible participants the production team went “hunting” to main streets and shopping streets, or any other place where they expected to find lots of single, young people. The production team learned this the hard way. Since Streetmate was a first-time production (only to be followed up by one season of Beachmate) the pilot was a kind of test to see how easy it would be to find participants. This pilot was shot in the early summer of 1999, in the city of Antwerp. Much to their own surprise the production team had found in no time five “couples” who were willing to go on a dinner date with each other. This made them quite optimist about the future. However, they soon discovered that the Antwerp-pilot had gone exceptionally well:

Editor: My first shootings were in Diest, and that’s not really a big city, you know. We were lucky that the weather was brilliant, but there was nobody on the streets. Nobody! We had checked beforehand where the pubs with lots of youngsters were, we had checked what time schools finished, and so on... Eventually we managed to find somebody, but it was a very long Hunt... I think we finished roundabout 16h30⁴, I remember thinking “this is never going to work”.

³ This makes it sound as if preproduction entailed nothing more than having a meeting about where to go next week, which is a bit overstated. A lot of preproduction work went into getting the permissions to organise shootings in a certain city. In Belgium (as in many other countries), local authorities need to know in advance if a camera team will be operating within its borders. The official explanation is that local authorities need to secure public security, but for many cities it has become a way of generating extra income, taxing the permissions for shootings quite heavily. Bruges, for example (which is well-liked with camera crews because of its “authentic” and well-conserved historical city centre) is well-known for being very strict and expensive. Because Streetmate’s format dictated that every episode should be taped in a different city this meant a lot of work for getting the appropriate permissions from the local authorities.

⁴ An average “Hunt” started roundabout ten in the morning, and it was the intention to find and compose a couple before noon.

The above quote shows to what extent the place of “hunting” could be prepared in advance. Basically the production team explored the terrain in advance by looking for those places and times when they were likely to find young bachelors. But even this preliminary exploration did not guarantee success, due to a number of practical limitations. First of all there was the very tight schedule by which the Streetmate production team had to operate. The pilot in Antwerp was shot during the summer, but VT4 had postponed the purchase decision, which meant that the production team had not worked on the show during the whole of the summer. Suddenly, somewhere in October VT4 gave the green light for starting broadcasting *in November*. As a result the production team was under very high pressure to finish one episode every week. This institutional decision had two main consequences. First, whereas the pilot was shot during the summer the majority of the actual episodes were shot during the winter, under dark and rainy weather conditions. Hence, in comparison to the pilot there were far less people in the shopping streets, and shooting time was rather limited. Second, the practicalities of broadcasting implied that the Hunt had to be shot *during the week*⁵, eliminating those that went to school or had to work during the daytime.

All of this to say that at least in the beginning of the shootings the production team had many problems with finding enough potential participants. At a certain time the schedule was so tight that they had to resort to using one of the pilot episodes – a highly uncommon practice in the world of television. Pilots are in principle never broadcast since they only serve for try-out purposes (and of course also as a sales pitch towards broadcasting companies). Because the “central shopping street strategy” proved so unsuccessful the production team switched strategy, and opted instead for “special episodes” in spectacular settings that were more likely to yield better results. For example, one episode was shot in a club, another one during a football game (with Joyce De Troch doing the toss-up), another one on a university campus (which by accident happened to be on the one I work), and one was even shot on a commuter train during rush hour.

Another solution to the problem of selection-as-inclusion was the public announcement of the place of the next shootings on VT4’s website. Perhaps surprisingly one of the main problems of the early shooting were that people were unfamiliar with Streetmate’s format. Since the format was not known most passers-by were quite reluctant when Joyce De Troch walked up to them. This changed quite drastically from the moment the first episode was broadcast, and the production team found people to be more willing than before to participate in the programme. Sometimes people, or a group of friends, even walked up to the camera crew to say that they, or somebody else, was single and willing to participate. This made the production team realise that it was a good strategy to announce beforehand where they were going to shoot:

Executive producer: In the beginning we had to explain the people, like, “you choose somebody you like, you both go out eating, and that’s it”. I mean, most of the people understood the concept. But once we were on air it became easier because they knew the

⁵ VT4 broadcasted at the time from the United Kingdom, in order to circumvent the legal ruling that only one commercial broadcaster (VTM) could broadcast in Belgium. But this meant that the tapes had to be transported physically from Belgium to the UK, thus limiting even more the time Streetmate’s production team could spend on shootings and editing.

format. Moreover, after some time we put it on VT4's website, like "this day we'll be shooting there and there. This Monday we'll be in Aalst shopping's street. If you feel like coming..."

Jan: Did you? I once checked the website but it didn't work...

Executive producer: Weird... but I mean, I don't remember the exact details but we told VT4 to launch the programme. But I have to say that once we were on air it went much better.

Or, as the editor said: "after we went on air it was just a matter of choosing". A third and last selection-as-inclusion strategy was the use of spotters. These were simply members of the production team (mostly an editor and/or a production assistant) that would scout out the immediate surroundings and warn Joyce whenever a possible "catch" was coming⁶. These spotters used mobile phones or a headset to warn the camera crew-annex-Joyce that a possible catch was coming along.

Of course, selection-as-inclusion is not the only selection problematic. It is not sufficient to get enough potential participants. They also have to be the "right" participants, and thus we move into the terrain of *selection-as-exclusion*. There were five requirements a participant had to meet: they had to be single, heterosexual, good-looking, in the 18-30 age group, and "spontaneous". It is worth looking at them in detail.

First there is the requirement of being single. Contrary to what one might expect the production team was quite strict on this. In one case the production team even dropped an already taped Hunt and dinner because they found out that one of the participants was already romantically involved:

Editor: No, we didn't broadcast that one, we also had technical problems that time. But the problem was that the guy apparently also knew [that his date was already involved in another relationship], so the dinner date was horrible. I mean, what kind of conversation do you have at the dinner table? No hope, not even a suggestion of... or even some kind of eye contact with which you can do something...

The above quote is remarkable because it clearly indicates what kind of reasoning lies behind the production team's insistence that participant should by all means be single: true bachelors are simply better television material. There are no moral concerns in the above quotation (like for example "they have to be single because otherwise their partner will get hurt"). Rather the editor complains about the lack of romantic and/or narrative possibilities of such situations. Participants

⁶ The use of spotters was also important because each Streetmate episode started with "the question of the week". Usually this question hinted towards the romantic and/or the sexual, for example, "How long lasted your longest relationship?", or "Which is the weirdest place you have ever had sex?". This question was asked to all kind of passers-by, not just to potential Streetmatters (and often accompanied by some kind of "naughty" remark by Joyce). In the broadcasted version the question of the week comes before the actual Hunt. In recording practice, however, both parts were closely interwoven. In principle the question of the week was shot before, but of course the production team scanned the surroundings at the same time. Thus it could happen that Joyce would be interviewing a person for the question of the week, and the spotters would follow the possible catch, informing the camera crew with wireless connections or mobile phones where they would be going.

that cannot *really* play “the game of love” too often remain in the dreaded zone of “it was nice but we’re just friends”.

The second requirement was that participants had to be heterosexual. According to the production team it was VT4 who had insisted on this. The first season they would do a try-out and “play safe”, later on it would be possible to go “free-wheeling”. When I interviewed the producer early 2000 he said that this was just for the first season, but he didn’t exclude the possibility of making a Streetmate with elderly people, or with handicapped people (note the paradigmatic association). However, even during the Beachmate season we only got to see heterosexual couples.

The strict implementation of the heterosexual rule brought along its own set of problems. It’s difficult to judge whether a passer-by is heterosexual, and the production team often ended up having a “catch”, only to discover soon after that the person in question was not interested in going on a dinner date with somebody of the opposite sex. To be fair: the production team also used some of these “failed attempts” in the broadcasted version, as a quiet reminder to VT4 that not all relationships are heterosexual. In chapter 7 we will get back to the production team’s ambivalent relationship towards heterosexuality. For the moment suffice it to observe that the refusal of homosexual participants was a requirement of VT4, and the production team was not entirely happy with this.

Participants also had to be good-looking. Again this was a rather strict rule, albeit difficult to quantify. It was also VT4 who had insisted on this, but contrary to the heterosexual rule the production team did not challenge this “definition of the situation”: “good television” contains beautiful people. Take for example the following quote:

Editor: I understand VT4. If you have to watch for a quarter of an hour [an ugly person] ... I mean, I don’t think they have to be super models, if they are spontaneous that’s also very good. But you don’t know that in advance. So you might end up with an ugly person – if you allow me – who moreover is a bit of a disappointment.

The underlying logic is clear: ugly people can be ok, but only on the condition that they have this extra something which makes them perform “strong identities”. Beautiful people, on the contrary, already perform “strong identities” by the very nature of their physical appearance. It is a thoroughly hierarchic way of categorising people, making one group of people as the norm to which the others fail to conform. But of course this is not the fault of the production team. In a move that would not put Pontius Pilatus to shame there is always “the audience” which comes to rescue, allowing the production team to wash their hands in innocence:

Sound recordist: Whether we found somebody quickly depended upon how many eligible people were walking around. I am very sorry but a hunchback is not getting in, it’s very straightforward. People don’t like it when you say something like this, but that’s the way it is: people want to see beautiful people on the screen, that’s unavoidable.

“The audience” here functions as a discursive device for displacing responsibility. The production team is basically saying that it is not of their own choosing, that they have to do so because the audience wants them to do so. Whether this is true or just a question of rhetoric is difficult to judge, and is eventually of

lesser importance than Pierre Legendre's observation⁷ (1983: 95) that institutions tend to work by displacing blame and creating innocence. The institutional logic of television – the interplay between media producers, participants, audiences and advertisers – always allow one party to displace criticism to one of the other parties: audiences watch "because that's what's on" and media producers "give the audience what it wants". We will get back to the issue of responsibility in a later stage of this thesis.

Fourth there was the age group. Participants had to be in the 18-30 age group. The lower limit was due to legal reasons. The upper limit was less rigid but had to do with VT4's target audience – within the television world it is common knowledge that if you aim your programme at young people your "screen material" (the participants) also have to be young. This upper boundary was less rigid because it was mostly based upon appearance. As one of the editors said: "a guy could have been 35, but if he looks 25 that's alright". Actually, the production team preferred slightly older participants, because they found out quite quickly that the really young participants (roughly 18-22) had no experience with going on dinner dates, and were not able to keep a nice and interesting conversation going. Unfortunately for the production team Joyce De Troch, the host and "front woman" of the show, was far less liked with these "older" participants, and they often ended up with the younger strata of the 18-30 group. According to the producer this was one of the main reasons why the dinner dates – which in principle should be the "unique selling proposition" of the show because it offers viewers a direct look on the act of dating itself – turned out to be one of the weakest moments of the show.

Fifth and lastly, participants preferably had to be "spontaneous", or "unrestricted". Just like "strong identities" this is a very vague category which could mean almost anything. There are however, some elements within the interview material that hint at what the production team means with "spontaneous". When comparing the Flemish Streetmate with the British original the producer thought it was regrettable that the Flemish participants were so restricted in their drinking behaviour. With a pinch of envy in his voice he said that "When they do dates over there [in the UK], they get really drunk. I mean, they really get loaded". A bit later in the interview it goes "In England they drink an awful lot and that makes them throw away their inhibitions". "Spontaneity", in other words, means whatever makes participants behave "out of the ordinary", whatever makes them steer away from the non-committal "we're just friends" atmosphere. In short, whatever makes them perform "strong identities". And of course the summum of "spontaneous participants" is when they become romantically engaged (and are willing to admit it publicly).

Potential participants, then, had to conform to five rules to be eligible: single, straight, good-looking, 18-30 years old and spontaneous. But how did the production team go about securing this? Some of the desired characteristics, like for

⁷ French psychoanalyst who focuses in his work on the History of Law. Remarkable in his account is the way he combines some Foucaultian concerns (the functioning of truth in institutions, an emphasis upon normalising tendencies within modernity) with a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach. In a way he does a psychoanalysis of a Foucaultian problematic, a combination which is rarely found, due to Foucault's biting criticism of psychoanalysis as a normalising regime of truth in itself (especially in Foucault 1990a).

example beauty or age group, are visible from the outside, but others are not. It is very difficult to judge in a glimpse whether somebody is spontaneous, let alone straight. The truth of the matter is that the whole hunting procedure was very much a question of improvisation, of making split-second decisions based upon social instinct rather than rational action. Often the camera crew was just following the whims of Joyce De Troch, who acted more on her own gut-feeling or her instinctive assessment of a passer-by than on some kind of pre-decided procedure. The reason for this lies mainly in the format itself: because it is a programme which does its selection "on the go" the production team has relatively little control over things. In *Blind Date*, to the contrary, the selection procedure is part of the preproduction process (it does not happen onscreen), which brings an entirely different dynamic to the problems of selection-as-inclusion and selection-as-exclusion.

3.2 Blind Date

The biggest difference between *Streetmate*'s and *Blind Date*'s selection procedure lies in the fact that the selection procedure in the case of the latter happens off-screen. In other words, it is part of what media people call "the preproduction process". Moreover, in general *Blind Date* is far more structured: it depends less on chance, coincidence, social intuition or "inspiration of the moment". Another major difference is that *Blind Date* needs far more participants than *Streetmate*: whereas the latter needs four participants per episode, *Blind Date* is in need of eight participants per episode - making *Blind Date* a particularly "participant-hungry" show. Finally, *Blind Date* exists for already nine years, so that by now the production process has been sufficiently crystallised as to become a routine, not requiring lots of collaborators nor fine-tuning⁸. For all these reasons *Blind Date* is quite a different production than *Streetmate*, and these differences show already during the selection procedure.

Whatever the differences between the two dating programmes, both production teams are confronted with what is fundamentally the same problem: how to find enough participants (selection-as-inclusion), and how to make sure that they are the "right" participants (selection-as-exclusion). What does the "fishing net" of *Blind Date*'s production team look like?

The problem of *selection-as-inclusion* is essentially solved in a similar fashion as in *Streetmate*: the *Blind Date* production team makes public that a new season of *Blind Date* is in the making. In order to reach an as big audience as possible they make use of all the means that are available: they make trailers and

⁸ An average season of *Blind Date* starts roundabout April – May, when the "outside world" is notified that a new series of *Blind Date* is going to take place. After the selection procedure (which will be treated more in detail below) three studio shootings are organised. In a first session, the two "returns" of the last season are recorded, and a new batch of "leaves" is recorded. The second studio shooting is the largest, because it contains the first returns, as well as some new leaves. The final and third studio sessions tape the leaves from the second round, and they also send the final two couples off on a holiday trip. It took the production team quite some time and lots of tinkering in order to come up with this scheme, but by now it is quite a stable (and the most convenient) way of organising. The preproduction process only takes two-three full-time collaborators. Only on the day of the shootings (and the holidays themselves) more personnel is required.

contact VTM for broadcasting them; a permanent teletext-advertisement is put on the VTM-pages; they publish advertisements in newspapers and magazines; they put a notification on the VTM website; in interviews with the popular press Ingeborg (the host of the show) mentions the fact that they are still looking for participants and so on. All these activities have one simple aim, namely convincing people to apply for Blind Date.

At first sight the strategy looks quite successful. The application files I could get my hands on reveal that 237 people applied for the 2000 Blind Date, but these figures need to be taken with care. The focus of the archive was clearly on the *retained* candidates, but even those files were sometimes incomplete or even lost. Nevertheless they give us an idea of the applications' order of magnitude. Of these 237 applications 98 were accepted and 139 rejected⁹. At first sight this means that the production team gets to see more than the double amount of applicants than it actually needs. But the figure of 237 is also misleading, because it contains those people that never even showed up for the selection talk. During the 2000 season there were 54 such applicants, and 19 more sent a reply that they did not want to participate, leaving a total of 66 rejected participants. One can only guess why these people preferred not to show up. My guess is that there are two main reasons: either because they had become romantically involved in the mean time, or because their name was suggested by other people while they actually did not want to participate. Indeed, of the 54 candidates that eventually did not show up only 12 had written the letters-of-application themselves.

This brings us to the question of who takes the initiative for applying. In fact, the majority of the first letters-of-applications are written by somebody else than the applicant. The variety is enormous, ranging from friends, mothers, colleagues, sisters-in-law, fellow students, members of a hobby group. In the sample there was even a high school teacher whose pupils wrote a letter on her behalf. The following table summarises in absolute and relative terms the proportion between self, family or friends-initiated applications:

	Self	Family	Friends	Undetermined ¹⁰
Non-selected participants	48 35%	32 23%	52 37%	7 5%
Selected participants	33 34%	22 22%	33 34%	10 10%
Total	81 34%	54 23%	85 36%	17 7%

Table 1: Proportion of self, family and friend – initiated applications (2000)

The low level of self-initiated applications is quite surprising: only one third of all letters-of-application are written by the candidates themselves. Peculiar is that

⁹ Since a season of Blind Date is in need of 104 participants this means that of the accepted applications 6 were lost. For the rejected candidates it is harder to estimate how many letters-of-application were lost.

¹⁰ For some of the application files it was impossible to deduce who had written the initial letter, for example because they were written anonymously (the shortest one was an anonymous email that only contained a name and a mobile number) or because the original letter had gone lost.

many of the letters that are written by “others” balance between well-meant concern and a half-joking undertone:

“Hi Ingeborg,

The Blokker Team from Tienen is urgently looking for a suitable partner for its manager, Christine Belfort. We are desperate and distraught, and that’s why we make an appeal to you for finding a suitable guy for her, and we want to sign her up as a Hunter in Blind Date. Here is a short description of Christine. She is 30 years old, divorced, and lives with her parents again. She is 1m 58 tall, slender, has a nice clothing style and still acts like a teenager. Her hobbies are shopping, travelling, going to the restaurant, going out and having fun. Since the customers in our shop are mostly women it’s unlikely she hooks herself a suiter during working hours. Twice a week she goes fitnessing in order to meet beautiful men, but that doesn’t help much. That’s why we beg you: HELP US, PLEASE!

She does not really have a type. He has to be funny and good-looking. Blond, dark or black-haired doesn’t matter. Attached you also find some pictures of Christine, taken during a party for her 12,5 years of service with Blokker. [...] Greeting from her colleagues Cindy, Sandy, Nadia, Martine, Marleen (application file 1070, *capitals in original*).

John Ray, one of the candidates that eventually made it to the screen, explains how he was tricked into the selection procedure by some of his friends:

John Ray: I had had problems with my previous girl friend and a number of people sent in a letter to Blind Date. Actually they were friends of my parents, and because I was quite upset about the way my ex had cheated on me, and they thought it would do me good. So they wrote a letter, behind my back, and I didn’t know about it. And then... one day my brother told me “come, let’s go for a ride, we are going to a party”. So yeah, I go along with him. And in the car he was preparing me, like “don’t be afraid, just be yourself”. I didn’t really understand it until we arrived at the selections. But I only realised I was going to participate in Blind Date after having signed the contract. Up until then I didn’t even know which programme I was going to be in”.

Not all “other-initiated” applications are practical jokes or pranks, though. There are also numerous letters-of-applications which are written by friends or family out of what seems to be a sincere desire to help a candidate find “that special someone”, or sometimes even because a candidate is too shy to write a letter him- or herself:

“Dearest Ingeborg,

My name is Jane Bishop. I don’t write this letter for myself, but for my sister, Ellen Bishop. When I saw your call for new girls I immediately thought of my sister. I know that she very much likes to be in your show but she would never dare to ask it herself. That’s why I take this first step. I am sure she will be happy to the rest” (application file 9)

What do these figures and quotes tell us about the selection strategies? First of all it is clear that the cliché of the lonely single who, in an ultimate attempt to get romantically involved, after much deliberation applies all by his or herself for Blind Date (see chapter 6) doesn’t really apply to the majority of the applicants: approximately six out of ten do not even initiate the application procedure themselves but are “lured” into it by peers or family, often without them having any prior knowledge of it. A second observation is that the production team’s selection strategies are not so effective as the figure of 237 application files suggest. If we extract those candidates that don’t even do the effort of reacting to the first letter,

and those that refuse to come to the preselections, the production team ends up with a meagre 170 candidates, out of whom they have to choose 104 participants. The safety margin is thus rather small, and the production team cannot afford the luxury of being too picky on “their” participants. It does not come as a surprise, then, that the production team often talks in derogatory terms about the people that apply for the show (cf. below).

Nevertheless some candidates have to be “eliminated”. How does the production team assess them and what criteria make a candidate “passable”? Here we are in other words on the terrain of the practices of selection-as-exclusion. In comparison to *Streetmate* the *Blind Date* selection procedure is a very structured and organised event. In chapter 3 I have already roughly outlined how the selection procedure is organised. After the initial call for participants all registered participants (that is, those candidates that write a letter themselves or who are suggested by others, cf. above) receive an invitation to come and present themselves on one of the selection days, usually held in the lobby of a hotel near Brussels. By that time they have already received by mail a first letter containing some typical *Blind Date* questions (detailed below). When they arrive at the hotel the candidates fill in another form with some extra questions, and they also sign a contract in which they commit themselves to attend all of the studio shootings, to go on a holiday trip if selected, and to remain single between the first studio shootings and the holiday. Note that they have to sign this contract *before* they know whether they are selected. Next they are let into a room in groups of five to twelve, “confronting” a jury composed of members of the *Blind Date* production team. During this first group interview the candidates are asked to introduce themselves, and they are asked what one member of the production team calls “silly questions for breaking the ice”:

Production assistant: One such question is the condom question. It goes like this: “suppose you go on a holiday with *Blind Date*, and your partner brought a present for you. Already on the plane he or she gives you a family pack of condoms. What is your reaction? I mean, that is such a silly question...

Jan: To see how they react to it?

Production assistant: We hope for a nice answer... You have those that say “I blow them into balloons”, and you have those that remain dead serious, it all depends... [...] Sometimes they are serious, people that really come for the date, and they are very serious. But you also have the people who want to have fun, who want to come on television, for the holiday... and they usually want to have fun.

After this first group interview the production team collaborates and decides which candidates are selected. The participants that are rejected are notified and those that remain then proceed to a second interview, this time individually. Here the future participant is not so much tested on how well s/he will perform on *Blind Date*, but also when s/he is available to go on a holiday, which type of person s/he is, and whether the person is a “Hunter or Prey”. This, however, they don’t tell the participants at the moment itself: since all participants want to be Hunter rather than Prey¹¹ the amount of cancellations would be too high. The participants only get to know this several weeks later, when they receive the concrete dates of the first

¹¹ Almost all of the letters-of-application mention that they would prefer to be Hunter, rather than Prey. The reason for this is that Hunters are sure to go on a holiday trip. Moreover Hunters have a more active role within the game, whereas Preys essentially have a reactive role.

studio shootings. After this selection procedure the production team can then start to organise everything: compose the different panels and plan the studio shootings and holidays.

If we look at this selection procedure a little bit more in detail we see that the processes of selection-as-inclusion actually happen at three different moments: a. the moment when the first letters-of-application arrive, b. the moment of the first group interview, and c. the moment of the second, individual interview. Each of these three moments have a very precise function, creating as it were a multi-staged elimination process:

a. *When the production team receives the first letters of application* there is already a first elimination. As the executive producer explains:

Producer: First we eliminate based upon the letter. The criterion is that the letter can't be too thick. If the letter is not over the top than we invite people [...]

Jan: What do you mean with over the top? Do you mean letters that sound too pathetic?

Producer: No, mostly... letters that are almost borderline mental defective. Some people can barely write, and you can't do that [put them on television]

Jan: And the pictures... do you also select on appearance?

Producer: Not really. But if they are really ugly then it is useless that we invite them anyway, because you can't put them on television. We could do that, and VTM couldn't care less, but for the people themselves it would be a sour joke. If they are blatantly ugly... But in principle we don't take it into account. What we do take into account is age: we want to have at least in half of the episodes young people. That's just one of those laws of television: it's nicer to look at young, beautiful people than at others... after all it is and remains commercial television.

If we look at the quote in detail a number of things catch the eye. First of all, this first selection already eliminates those people that are functionally illiterate (see chapter 3). Although there is no necessary correspondence between being literate and oral proficiency these people are nevertheless *persona non grata*. Secondly, there also happens a selection according to age¹². A third selection criterion – not mentioned in the above quote – is that people who apply three times in a row are not invited¹³. Note that this first selection happens without candidates having the chance to present themselves, the judgement being based only upon one letter and a picture.

b. *The moment of the first group interviews* constitutes a second stage of elimination. It is worth looking into detail of what exactly happens during this moment. The executive producer again:

Producer: We let them in in groups of five. They present themselves, we ask why they participate on Blind Date and we ask some questions for testing their reaction and

¹² This can also be seen in the application files. The average age of refused candidates is 33,52, whereas the selected candidates averaged 29,77.

¹³ Within the production team there was some confusion about this. Some members of the production team claimed that they were not invited, others said they did. I am inclined to believe the latter, for the simple reason that the production team does not *have* a database with all applicants.

whether they are *ad rem*. Mostly, after this presentation, we already know enough. What do we pay attention to? Of course appearance. This doesn't mean that they have to be beautiful, but they have to be, let's say, presentable. Secondly we have to be able to understand them. That's actually a more important criterion than looks, you have to be able to understand them. Because you know, it's not too bad when you have a freak, it's actually quite good for the show.

Jan: Yes yes...

Producer: And lastly they can't be too nervous. If they already break down during the preselections you can be sure they also will on the show. So nerves, that's another criterion. And what they reply is also important: the more inventive their replies the more chance they stand. You know, most of them are "adventurous". I mean, they come in and they say [imitates very unexciting accent] "Hi, I am Jeffrey and I am adventurous". I mean, that's the reality we are talking about! They all like adventure, they are all very romantic, and they burn tons of candles. And of course the ones that break out of this pattern we select. And if they are fluent and react in a cool way, we make them into a Hunter.

The group interview, to resume the producer's quote, test people on a number of criteria like articulation, spontaneity, general presentation, nerves, originality. There is a large overlap with what the Streetmate production team deems important: the need for spontaneity, originality and "presentability", for instance. On the other hand the Blind Date production team attaches more importance to "stage qualities", like oral fluency or resistance to stage fright. The reason for this is that Blind Date, which is largely a studio-based programme shot in front of a live audience, needs participants that are able to perform well on stage, whereas Streetmate comes closer to the documentary side of things. In short, the second elimination moment is a refinement of the first, except that this time the decision is not based upon the letter but on their actual "live" performance.

c. The third selection moment is *the moment of the individual interview*. At this point the candidate already knows that s/he is selected. The aim of this second interview is therefore not elimination, but *role allocation*. It is basically at this stage that the role of Hunters and Preys are allocated. This decision is based upon originality or oral fluency. As the producer in the quote above says: "If they break out of this pattern [... a]nd if they are fluent and react in a cool way, we make them into a Hunter". Also the types of questions asked change slightly, and focus more on what type of person one is looking for, with the aim of composing the different panels. John Ray, a participant, explains: "These questions were probing what kind of women you like. This is where they checked "ah, he fancies such and such type of woman", and what age and stuff like that". The composition of panels (which does not happen at that moment but is done after the preselections and before the first studio shootings) is not only important for allocating Hunter and Prey roles. It is also a strategy for creating the "strong identities" the production teams so desperately seeks:

Jan: How do you compose the panels?

Final editor: We try to create a balance. We always make sure that there is one possible match with the Hunter, then someone with whom it absolutely wouldn't work at all, and then somebody in between.

It is obvious that the composition of panels is a technology for ensuring "strong identities", because it sets up an interaction scheme that tends towards

extremes: either they fit (“love”), or they are opposite (“hate”). Mathematically speaking the production team has a chance of two out of three that the interaction will go towards the performance of strong identities – assuming of course that their judgement of the participants is somewhat accurate.

Let us recapitulate. The selection procedure exists of three different “selection moments”, the first two essentially concerned with selection-as-exclusion, the third with role allocation. We also see that, in comparison to Streetmate, the selection procedure is far more structured and rather strictly organised and controlled by the production team, including even several forms to be filled in. Yet despite this strict control over whom they allow into the programme Blind Date’s production team does not feel more successful than Streetmate’s, to the contrary. One of the recurring threads in the interviews with Blind Date’s production teams is the numerous complaints about the “human material” available to them, and this starts already during the selection procedure. In one of the above quotes the executive producer complains about the abundance of romantic clichés: “You know, most of them are “adventurous”. I mean, they come in and they say [imitates very unexciting accent] ‘Hi, I am Jeffrey and I am adventurous’”, which is already enough to discard this type of participant because he is not original enough.

How fair is this reproach? It is true that the letters-of-application abundantly make use of romantic clichés. The application forms are literally crowded with terms like beaches, moonlight, candlelight, desire, romantic... But the reproach is also profoundly misleading because it smoothes over the production team’s own responsibility in the matters. There is a fundamental contradiction in the production team’s desire for “original” participants – participants that avoid the romantic clichés and/or sexual references – and the way the production process is organised, because the latter basically thrives upon and elicits platitudes. Take, for instance, the questions asked during the selection procedure. We have already seen the “condom question” as an example of one of the “silly questions” the participants are asked. But the application files yield far more insights into what kind of questions the production team ask. These are for instance some of the questions asked during the 2000 selection procedure:

AT THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL IN BLIND DATE IS A MAN OR WOMAN WHO CAN CHOOSE. HE OR SHE CAN ASK THESE QUESTIONS. WHAT WOULD YOU REPLY TO THEM? (the answers may be frivolous)

1. What is your idea of a dream holiday: where do you go, how do you spend your time and what does your ideal travel partner look like?
2. Give three qualities or deficiencies in a partner that for you are non-negotiable.
3. What is the top 3 of your dream lovers and tell us precisely why.
4. How do you know your partner is the right one?
5. What do you dream most about?

And in one of the later documents we find:

1. Suppose somebody asks you the following question, what do you reply?
 - a. For the ladies: If we would be together in an igloo, what would be your suggestion for indulging ourselves?
 - b. For the gents: I like brave men, what have you ever done which required lots of guts?

2. What is the most beautiful moment a couple can live?

The questions are remarkable because they mimic parts of the programme, notably the “own opinion” part of the show. In other words, the participants are literally tested on how well they might perform on certain parts. But the most striking thing about these questions is that they incite romantic clichés. This is what I will call the “What You Ask Is What You Get”-principle, or in its abbreviated form, WYAIWYG. The production team might very well complain about the predictability of participants, but they shouldn’t be surprised that almost all of the answers to “if we would be together in an igloo, what would be your suggestion for indulging ourselves?” make reference to “keeping ourselves warm”. In other words, the production team first creates the discursive conditions of the selection procedure but then complains about the results it yields. Muriel, a Blind Date participant, explains the WYAIWYG principle perfectly:

Muriel: The questions they asked were really stupid questions. I gave a serious answer. Next to me was a woman and I was really thinking by myself “please listen to yourself [what vulgar replies you are giving]. In fact I was ashamed, almost disgusted: sex, that’s what it’s all about.

Jan: Also the questions they ask?

Muriel: Yes yes!

Jan: But the funny thing is that the production team says that the participants always come up with sex-related questions.

Muriel: But they provoke you! *They* provoke you! And the questions are formulated in such a way that... The woman next to me, she was giving those vulgar answers... but that’s what they are looking for: people that are unrestricted on TV, people that call a spade a spade. And I answered in a dry tone, so I didn’t think they were going to choose me. But I definitely felt ridiculous with the type of questions they asked.

In a later section we will see how the WYAIWYG –principle is relevant during other moments of the show. At this point in the argument the important thing is that the selection procedure is not a neutral “measurement device” but that it creates its own “results”, meaning that the selection procedure, and more specifically the way it is organised, creates a discursive context that invites applicants to produce romantic clichés. Although the production team is not specifically happy with this it is to a large extent the result of the procedures *they themselves* have set up. In fact, this touches upon what is probably the most fundamental contradiction of the dating show as a genre: it needs “originality” (one of the components of “strong identities”) but it creates discursive and material conditions in which clichés flourish; it wants participants to be “spontaneous” while putting them into a highly artificial setting; it wants participants “that remain true to themselves” while asking them questions that are only remotely connected to their daily lives.

What does this section tell us about the strategies of selection? In this subsection I have argued that both the Blind Date and the Streetmate production team are confronted with a double problematic, namely how to find enough participants (selection-as-inclusion), and how to find suitable participants (selection-as-exclusion). Both programmes differ substantially in the way they try to

address these problematics: on the one extreme there is Streetmate, with its disorganised, almost chaotic recruitment procedures that have to happen “on the spot”, in split-second decisions that do not allow for studied choices. Blind Date is located at the other extreme: it is a highly “bureaucratic” selection procedure, consisting of several stages (each with their own function), and the decision-making process is far more thoughtful and deliberate than its counterpart. Moreover we see that candidates are judged according to slightly different standards: Streetmate attaches more importance to young and good-looking participants, whereas Blind Date is more open to older and less good-looking participants, but in return attaches more importance to stage-like qualities like resistance to stage-fright or oral fluency.

The differences between both selection procedures, though important, should not blind us from the fact that they nevertheless perform the same function, namely securing that participants will perform the “strong identities” they so desperately need. More precisely, selection strategies are the first step in the long and windy road towards strong identities: if you control tightly who gets in and test them on how well you think they will perform, the bigger the likelihood that the ones who eventually make it on the show will perform “better” (that is, according to the standards you have set). In this sense selection strategies are *gatekeeping* strategies, aimed at controlling who gets in and who doesn’t. But there is more to selection procedures than the mere decision who gets in: they are also devices, or technologies to use the Foucaultian term, that elicit certain behaviours while blocking others. The Blind Date selection procedure is the clearest example: the types of questions and the spatial arrangements (see chapter 5) do not offer a neutral space for observing that-what-was-already-there; rather, they incite and enhance certain types of behaviour, and therefore they *constitute* the behaviours and identities they supposedly merely “test”. This is what the WYAIWYG principle refers to: the constitutive role of the production environment in performing certain identities.

It is this last thread – the constitutive role of the production environment – which will become more prominent in the following subsections. Indeed, once a candidate has been selected (in other words when s/he has become a participant) the production team’s work of making them perform strong identities is not finished. On the contrary: it has only just started.

4. Strategies of televisual form

In the introduction of this section I have summarised the aim of participant management as “to make participants perform strong identities *in public*”. With this last specification I stressed that participants had to talk freely about whatever kept them occupied no matter how private or painful the matter. But public display on television differs from public display on, say, a marketplace or a bus, for the simple reason that it has to be caught on camera. A spicy quote or a dirty look is worth nothing if the camera crew didn’t catch it. Moreover, television requires a particular communicative form: what looks touching or convincing on a market place or a theatre stage does not necessarily “work” that way on television. Television professionals like actors, TV show hosts or politicians know this all too well, and they all have to learn how to act “naturally” while being aware of the camera. Expressions like “he knows how to play the camera”, or “the camera loves her” refer to this

specific ability to behave camera-friendly without it looking like a studied pose (what it actually is).

In chapter 3 we have seen that dating show work with “ordinary” people. As a consequence – and in contrast to television professionals – participants do not know these laws of television, or how to behave in a camera-friendly fashion: they speak when the camera is not aimed at them; talk with their back to the camera; speak at the same time; don’t articulate very well... The production team therefore has to extract camera-friendly behaviour from the participants, and I will call the set of measures that are aimed at this *strategies of televisual form*. Again there are important differences between Streetmate and Blind Date. Whereas the former is shot “on the go” the latter is mainly studio-based, and the different settings have a profound impact on what kind of performances they require and what strategies are used to obtain “broadcastable” performances. Blind Date, especially the first part, is very much a *show*, closer to the theatre than to the documentary, and the choreography is tightly controlled and regulated. Moreover it takes place in an environment which is *designed* for television production: television is a studio’s *raison d’être*. Streetmate’s “biotope” – the street, the shopping centre and the restaurant – is not such a “functional” environment, to the contrary. A camera crew is the last thing you would expect to bump into when shopping. Streetmate’s production team therefore has to work in conditions which are very different – less controllable – from the ones in which their Blind Date colleagues operate.

How did Streetmate’s production team secure camera-friendly behaviour in such less than favourable conditions? The role of the host, Joyce De Troch, in this cannot be underestimated. All members of the production team stressed that contrary to her public image of a “dumb blonde” she is a professional who is able to get the most out of a difficult situation. As the sound recordist explains:

Jan: What is very striking is that Joyce puts people on the right spot.

Sound recordist: But that’s the intention. And that’s why I’m very happy that Joyce did the show. You have other so-called celebrities who think they are geniuses. But the end result is horrible. Joyce pulls people into the right angle, she makes them say things you can use, I mean, she is a professional.

The sound recordist is stressing the fact that Joyce knows perfectly how television works. When she walks up to people and asks them something she is perfectly aware of the camera, putting herself aside or managing to subtly direct the participants so they face the camera rather than her. In everyday social interaction this is a rather bizarre move because a conversation between two people is supposed to happen face-to-face, but television needs people to speak towards the camera. In short, Joyce is very aware of the televisual aspects while at the same time interacting with the participants in a “spontaneous” manner. Honesty abides me to also mention that the visual style of Streetmate was very lo-fi and chaotic. This is due to technical reasons: the camera “crew” (what’s in a name?) only consisted of two technicians, one camera man and a sound recordist. The director also shot images on a consumer-level portable video camera. This means that there were only two sources of images, which is barely enough for making use of some of television’s cutting techniques like the very common shot-reverse shot. Especially when Joyce was running up and down a crowded shopping centre the camera crew often lagged

several meters behind her, arriving barely in time to catch the start of the conversation¹⁴. The production team used these restraints to its own advantage, however, opting for a hasty MTV style that didn't abide the norms of conventional camera work (as in classic "realist" cinema). The rough camera work with minimal means also added to the "authentic" feeling of the show, since it mimicked the home video style we have all gotten to know through programmes like *America's Funniest Home Video's* and the likes.

The deliberately rough visual style – one of the members of the production team called it "trash TV" – notwithstanding it is clear that a minimal set of televisual norms had to be respected, and the role of Joyce De Troch in ensuring "broadcastable" performances was considerable. Since the production team didn't know in advance under what conditions and with which participants they were going to have to work there was relatively little they could do in advance, and the full responsibility for managing participants' televisual behaviour lay in Joyce's hands. It was *her* ability to improvise on the spot that was crucial in obtaining broadcastable performances.

The need for obtaining broadcastable performances can conflict with that other important prerequisite of "good television", namely the need for *spontaneous* participants. The fact that Joyce was not walking around on her own but was accompanied by at least three other people sometimes make it very hard to obtain "spontaneous" performances: Streetmate's production team, though minimal, is nevertheless an obtrusive "crowd" that is hard to muffle away. Part of Joyce's job exists in making the technical crew disappear, so that participants forget that they are walking around with a camera crew. And apparently she is pretty good at that, as one of the participants recounts:

Jan: Did it take you long to get used to the camera?

Tom: It didn't bother me that much. Afterwards, when we went out for the dinner, I was more conscious of the camera. But at that moment you just walk around, you know. And I've got the impression that Joyce De Troch tries to make you forget the camera. She acts as if the camera is not there, and she tries to pull you into the conversation. She is talking to *you*, with the result that you focus on her instead of the camera. And she does that very well, I think. It's her nature to get attention, or rather to claim attention.

These are, in a nutshell, the two major strategies of televisual form: first, to make sure that broadcastable material is recorded, and secondly, that at the same time participants' attention is drawn away from the televisual context in which they are performing. The two strategies of form try to reconcile two mutually excluding extremes: either you make "television", meaning that you play according to the rules of realist television, including camera and editing techniques that require you to intervene into the events as they unfold. This ideal type comes at the detriment of other valued characteristics, like spontaneity – there is hardly anything spontaneous about having to repeat a quote five times because the camera angle wasn't right the

¹⁴ Actually the job of the camera man was quite dangerous. Since television images mostly have to be shot frontally the camera man has to walk backwardly, not seeing what is behind him. On one of the shootings I witnessed he complained that this programme had cost him lots of "bruises and headaches", because of tripping over physical obstacles while having to worry about the (very expensive) digital Betamax camera.

first time. At the other side of the spectre we find the desire to shoot “authentic” events – events “as they really happened”, with no intervention. In this ideal type you do not intervene into the events as they unfold, and hence you have to make invisible those aspects that intervene in it – the camera crew, the lighting, the microphone. Combining both strategies of form is therefore something of a juggling-act, where the results you obtain at one level happens at the expense of another. Put differently, the dilemma is the following: the drama of making “reality TV” (the genre *Streetmate* comes closest to) is that the reality one supposedly “registers” is altered *by the very act of registration itself*. When recording an event, the production team cannot help but intervening into the situation in quite a brutal way, often having effects that are damaging to the aim of the programme: people shy away from the camera, refuse to repeat a quote twice, and so on...

In *Blind Date* the strategies of televisual form take an entirely different form. The show-like nature of *Blind Date*, as opposed to *Streetmate*’s more documentary approach, as well as the fact that almost all of the parts are shot in a studio rather than in a shopping street or a mall, make that the management of televisual behaviour is far less improvised and hence more structured (and controlled) than in *Streetmate*’s case. Especially during the first part (the ritualised getting-to-know-each-other process before the holiday trip) the production team puts considerable amounts of efforts in obtaining broadcastable identities. In fact, most of the efforts of the production during the days of the shootings (usually three per season) go into managing and directing studio behaviour. Since *Blind Date* participants are no different from their *Streetmate* colleagues in that they have no or very few experience with television recording sets, they need to be taught how a television set works, what the rules of television are, of what the different parts of the show exist, and so on... It is the job of the *participant coach* to familiarise participants with this alien environment in which they are about to perform.

Before we can discern the different strategies of form it needs to be stressed that participant coaching is rather different for Hunters and Preys. Although the former generally have a more active role in the show most work goes into preparing the Preys. In fact, it is largely due to their reactive role in the whole production process that Preys have to be carefully prepared: whereas Hunters stand all the time next to Ingeborg during the first studio shootings (and thus she can guide them throughout it) Preys are physically separated (by the famous “wall”) and therefore they have to know perfectly what comes next. Moreover Preys do not have the luxury to rely on mnemonic devices like little filing cards but have to memorise their “act”, which takes a lot of time. Because of these reasons Preys arrive at the VTM studio’s roundabout nine in the morning, whereas Hunters have to be there by two in the afternoon. Both groups are carefully separated during the day, since *Blind Date*’s premise is that the choice for a holiday partner should be based upon the answers they give rather than appearance. The physical separation of Hunters and Preys is so strict that participants have to be accompanied by a member of the production team when going to the bathroom¹⁵. As a consequence, each recording session makes use of two participant coaches, one responsible for the Hunters, the other for the Preys.

¹⁵ I still don’t fully understand why the separation is so strict. Members of the production team call with each other through mobile in order to know where the other group is, so that it is virtually impossible that Hunters and Preys bump into each other. The producer gave

If we return now to our strategies of televisual form we see that most of the efforts go into creating what the production team calls "studio habituation". This basically means the following:

- Participants are explained *how a studio works*. They are explained that there are five camera's, and the one with the red light is the one which is recording. They are also explained that they have to look into the recording camera.
- Participants are explained how they will *come across on television*. For example, that it is very important to keep smiling, or that they should sit up straight because otherwise they will (in the words of the participant coach) "look like the hunchback of Notredame", even if the camera is not focussed on them. Special attention is also paid to dress-code ("squared shirts hurt on the eyes") and make-up.
- They are also taught *what the different parts of the show are*, what they are supposed to do, like for example where and how to enter and leave the stage, and so on.
- Participants are taught *how to behave on stage*, like for example when kissing goodbye that they have to turn the left cheek first.
- Participants also *rehearse* and *nauseam* the lines they are supposed to speak (more on this below).

These rehearsals take all day. The actual shootings only start at eight in the evening, and are in the can quite quickly. When I witnessed the shootings three entire episodes were shot in a bit more than three hours. But this also means that Preys have been rehearsing "the walks" and "the lines" *for an entire day*, up to the point that they can't distinguish A from B anymore. Hunters generally have a less taxing day of rehearsals, although some of them also complained that the day was too long and boring.

Two remarks have to be made. It is tempting to dismiss strategies of televisual form as "innocent" managerial strategies, strategies that are more concerned with questions of form rather than content. For example, one might argue that the advice to sit up straight does not affect *what* identity participants will perform. This is undoubtedly true, but it is difficult to pinpoint where exactly such merely formal advice moves starts to impact upon the content of the performance. Take for instance the rehearsal of the studio walks. Participants are told from which side they have to enter the stage, where to leave when they are not selected and so on. But they are also told to enter the stage running and waving enthusiastically. Or, my personal favourite, participants are told that when a couple is formed they have to walk up the stairs holding hands (while they have never met before) and in the middle of the stairway our newly-baked couple has to turn around ("remember, turn *towards* each other, not away!") and enthusiastically have to wave to the studio audience, and this twice. It are little highly artificial things like these that often make

two main reasons for it: first, they want the game to be played "fairly", and secondly it had happened in the past that both groups had seen each other in the hallway, and by accident one of the Preys knew one of the Hunters. The woman – who had bad experiences with the Hunter – had subsequently incited the group of Preys up to the point that they refused to play the game, and the Hunter in question had to be replaced at the last moment.

participants the laughing stock of the country (see chapter 6), but of course it is not a spontaneous act but a thoroughly rehearsed (and obliged¹⁶) televisual form-element, making it hard to separate formal elements from the contents of performances.

This is also – and here we get to the second remark – why the production team’s “humanist” rhetoric sounds rather unconvincing, even obscene. The official rhetoric is that the endless rehearsals and preparations are there for the participants, because it reduces stage fright, makes them feel comfortable about the shootings later that day and generally eases the nerves. If one takes the words of the production team at face value it is as if all efforts are being put into making the participants feel at ease so that they make the best out of their performance – sometimes it even sounds as if Blind Date is a social benefit institution, made *for* the participants! The reality is somewhat more ambivalent. Take for instance the shootings. It is true that the production team puts quite some efforts in putting the participants at ease. On the other hand it is also true that once the recordings have started the production team is not so merciful: if participants forget their line or start stammering the shootings simply continue, whereas every minor mistake of the host of the show is enough to interrupt the shootings. This double standard – participants have to perform everything right from the first moment whereas the host can permit herself some mistakes – of course makes participants even more nervous than they normally are. Later on, when we investigate how the production team secures ownership of the programme, we will get back to this important remark.

Strategies of televisual form, then, *do* have an impact upon how participants behave but they are, as the name implies, mostly aimed at influencing those aspects of participants’ behaviour that affect *televisual* values, like position towards the camera, or keeping up with the fast-paced rhythm of the show. In a way, then, they are *formal* interventions (more to do with the *how* than with the *what* of performing) that as such do not straightforwardly impact upon the content of the participants’ identities. However, as I have shown for Blind Date’s rehearsal of the walks, there is a thin line that separates the *how*’s from the *what*’s. When the production team tells the participants that they have to wave twice when walking up the stairways it surely is a formal intervention but it also affects the performance as such – put simply, participants only do it because they are told to do so, not out of some kind of spontaneous desire. In comparison to the other managerial strategies (like strategies of self-presentation or confessional strategies, cf. below) they are at once the most blunt and the most effective of them all. They are blunt because they take the form of the explicit *dictum*. There is nothing even remotely hidden or secret about them, nor are they subtle strategies that require any form of social engineering: “if you walk up the stairs do this or that”, or “look into the camera with the red light”. But they are also the most effective because every single participant complies with it, even those that do not like it because they feel it is ridiculous.

¹⁶ Interestingly enough one former participant, Nancy, claimed that she had not rehearsed this. However, the other participants and the members of the production team were univocal in that it is an obliged and rehearsed part. Also, when I witnessed the shootings the studio walks were indeed rehearsed.

The next three set of strategies (of self-presentation, interactional and confessional) are much more subtle and less explicit. In fact, they could be seen as a kind of social engineering that work at different levels. *Strategies of self-presentation* are strategies that aim to affect the way participants present themselves on the shows. They work so to speak on the intra-participant level, on how participants relate to themselves. *Interactional strategies* affect participants in their interactions amongst each other, and can thus be said to be operating at the inter-participant level. Finally, *confessional strategies* – those strategies aimed at making participants publicly disclose information – work on participants' relationship with the audience (the studio audience as well as the television audience).

5. Strategies of self-presentation

Narrowly defined, strategies of self-presentation are those strategies that are aimed at influencing the way participants present themselves on the show. Since dating shows are about trying to matchmake two or more people they always contain some kind of getting-to-know-each-other-process. In *Streetmate* this is the Hunt and the dinner date itself (that is, the viewers gets to see the *actual* moment of encounter). In *Blind Date* it takes the form of quiz-like game where Preys have to answer questions posed by a Hunter whom they cannot see; thus it is a kind of ritualised imitation of the getting-to-know-each-other process, whereas the real encounter takes place off-screen. Despite these differences all dating shows contain in some form or another a moment where participants introduce and present themselves. I also use the term, however, in a broader way, namely as strategies that aim to affect the general behaviour of participants, not just the behaviour during the introduction phase of the show.

Why does the production team want to influence the self-presentation of the participants? The answer to this is – of course – the need for strong identities. Put simply, from the production team's point of view making dating shows is not about offering "ordinary people" a platform. Rather, they should perform interesting identities ("strong identities") that are compelling to watch. This means that the production team is actually in the business of *identity extraction*. Take for instance the following quote, taken from an interview with *Streetmate*'s producer. He is talking about one of the parts of *Streetmate* in which participants are presented towards the audience, called the biotopes. These were short interviews with the participants, shot just before the dinner date, in which participants talked about their romantic experiences and preferences, hobbies and the likes:

Producer: We preferred to do the shootings of the biotopes at the homes of the participants. I mean, in their bedrooms, because you get to know them. It tells a lot about the people. But some of the people were afraid to have a camera inside of their most intimate biotope. That's why we did some of the shootings at bars, with friends. So the best scenario is to do it at their homes, so you can show by means of in-between-shots if that person has Maria Carey on the wall, or three sixes and an inverted crucifix.

The quote shows very clearly the process of identity extraction. First of all, note how the producer stresses the need for "identity". The ideal place to do the biotopes would be the bedroom, because like this "you get to know them". Secondly, the quote also shows the mechanism behind identity extraction. It is not a question

of inventing something which isn't there; the aim is rather to take out these elements of the participant's identity that set him or her apart. In this sense identity extraction is a process of purification, of filtering out those elements the production team deems "interesting to watch". In short, identity extraction is a way of streamlining "the raw material" that participants have on offer.

Streamlining is not a neutral process, in the sense that it takes the identity of the participants towards certain directions while blocking others. Put simply, not everything participants do or say is deemed "interesting". What directions does the production team take the participants (and their identities)? First of all streamlining is aimed towards emphasizing the *particularity* of the participant. Take for instance the following quote from Blind Date's participant coach. He talks about the way they shoot the Hunter movie. This is a short movie, shot in the house of the Hunter, during which we don't get to see the Hunter but in voice-over s/he talks about his or her life through the images we get to see.

Participant coach: Of course you try to get the most original out of people. I think that's pretty important, because most of the people do more or less the same things. So you try to make some kind of advertisement for them, you look for hobbies, pastimes, what's important in their life.

The participant coach, as he puts it, tries to "get the most original out of people". This practice performs identity as particularity, emphasizing those things that set participants apart from the rest of the world. In practice this means that the participant coach visits Hunters at their home and goes looking for whatever makes the participant stand out. This can be a hobby, members of the family, even an object like a painting or a picture. However, as the participant coach makes clear in the quote, it is sometimes difficult to find that extra something which makes participants stand out of the crowd, and often these identificatory marks come over as if they are dragged by the head and shoulders.

Secondly, because streamlining aims at bringing out the particular in participants they also tend towards *the extreme* or *the spectacular*. This can be observed on many occasions in Blind Date and in Streetmate, but it becomes particularly clear at the end of the selection game. Just before the Hunter announces her or his choice a voice-over gives a short summary of the three Preys. Invariably this summary singles out the most "spectacular" elements of the past performance – often those with a romantic or sexual undertone. For example:

Voice-over: Josepha, she is a young and restless mind, thinks she is still young, is also young and she is a woman who can hold her ground. Jessica, she wants once and a while, once and a while, er... always to be right. She likes travelling to far away destinations and she wants to be your help and stay. Carine likes things to go veeeeery fast. A healthy dose of jealousy is not a bad thing and even Richard Gere has to make way for you. Make your choice!

It is not surprising that participants often give surprised looks when they hear themselves and their performance being summarised in such a "reductionist" way. Thirdly, streamlining also tends to go towards the *clear-cut*: complex and/or long narratives are not valorised very much in the world of dating shows. Blind Date is the most extreme example of this: the high-paced rhythm of the first part simply

does not allow any excursions into some depths, one could argue that it even is an undesirable trait.

How does the production team achieve streamlining? In other words, what strategies of self-presentation does the production team use in order to streamline the self-presentation of the participants? Again there are important differences between *Streetmate* and *Blind Date*, due to differences in format. *Streetmate*'s production team, because of its documentary nature, and because it is shot on the go rather than in a studio, has far less ways of streamlining participants' self-presentation. Nevertheless there are some ways by which they can try to have an impact.

5.1 *Streetmate*

After having found a Hunter (*Streetmate* does not use this terminology, but the function is more or less the same) the main initiative for managing their self-presentation lies in the hands of the host, Joyce De Troch. She dwells the streets together with this new-found participant, and asks him or her about his or her romantic preferences. Usually these kind of questions are kept to-the-point, with Joyce using the events as they unfold as an entry-point. Here we encounter again the WYAIWYG-principle. The types of questions Joyce asks determine to a large extent how participants will talk about themselves. The typical questions she asks are "are you looking for blond or dark-haired?", "does s/he have to be older or younger?", "don't you like this person over there?", ... In short, Joyce constructs a kind of romantic wish-list. Obviously this discursive environment will affect participants' behaviour and talk. More exactly, it performs them as "desiring subjects", but it does so in a very precise way. First of all, desire is reduced to a like/don't like game. Secondly, it is framed – at least at this moment in the show – as a question of attraction based upon physical appearance¹⁷. In chapter 7 we will get back to the performance of romance and the gender identities that go along with it. At this moment suffice it to note that *Streetmate*'s discursive environment incites participants to talk about themselves in specific terms.

A second managerial strategy can be found in the choice where to shoot the "biotopes". We have already seen that *Streetmate*'s production team deemed it an important choice because by showing where participants live the viewers can deduce what kind of person they are. The producer:

Producer: Preferably we went to the people's house, into their most intimate environment, into their bedroom – and I don't mean this negatively. Because like this you get to know them. How's the room decorated? What kind of bedspread do they use? Things like these tell a lot about who they are.

¹⁷ *Streetmate*'s format in fact makes the exact opposite movement from *Blind Date*. In the latter participants make their choice without having seen the future holiday partner, based upon answers the Preys give, and then they get to see whom they chose. *Streetmate* starts from a choice based upon physical appearance and then goes "inwards", towards getting to know the dating partner. Both shows build up a narrative tension of revelation but start from the opposite direction.

If participants refused to be taped in their homes because they didn't allow the camera into their home, the production team insisted on recording the biotopes in a place related to a hobby. For instance, Tom, one of the participants I interviewed, played in a hardcore band and his biotope was shot in the band's rehearsal room. Another participant whose hobby was equestrianism was interviewed in riding stables. In short, by carefully choosing the place of the biotopes the production team intended to convey as much information as possible about the participant in question. Moreover participants were instructed to bring along friends or family, people that know the participant well and were able to talk about how they are in relationships (see also 2.5 on confessional strategies).

During the biotopes the production team delved a little deeper into the private life of participants than during the Hunt. Though it still remained very sketchy the emphasis came to lie more on the romantic biography: past experiences were recounted, and participants were asked about their romantic preferences in terms of personality traits. On average this part only took 2 minutes, and it consisted of short soundbites about the participant's expectations about the date mixed with some "vital statistics" on VI¹⁸: longest relationship, age, hobbies, personality traits s/he can't stand and favourite actor/actress. This biotopes, then, perform participants as romantic subjects with a biography, but the underlying image of romantic desire remains a question of liking / disliking.

Again we see that Streetmate's production team has rather limited means available to them for influencing the self-presentation of the participants. They basically have two tools available: the questions they ask, and the place of the biotopes. Apart from that Streetmate's production team is rather helpless, and they have to hope that participants will perform strong identities spontaneously. Blind Date is a much more managed and structured setting, and consequently the production team has far more means for affecting participants' self-presentation. Which are the means by which the production team can impact upon the participants' self-presentation?

5.2 Blind Date

In fact it is the format itself which is probably the most important factor in affecting participants' behaviour. At the time when I started taping Blind Date the first round existed out of the following parts¹⁹:

- Introduction of the Hunter and the Preys
- "Quickies": Preys have to choose out of two words which they prefer, like "nude beach or bikini?", "long hair or short

¹⁸ VI = visual indicators. TV speak for the use of typography and graphics projected on top of the television image.

¹⁹ Each season Blind Date changes its format slightly. For instance, in the beginning the first round only consisted in a series of open questions. The division in Quickies, Own Opinion, Dilemma and The Reference was in fact new in the 1999 season. After that season a number of different format changes were implemented as well. It is interesting to note that each change goes accompanied with an even tighter structure, leaving even less room for improvisation.

hair?", "restaurants or fast food?", "video or cinema?". Each Prey has 20 seconds to respond to these questions.

- "Own Opinion": the Hunter confronts the Preys with a question like "What is according to you the ideal woman?" or "Suppose our relationship starts to become boring after a while, what would you do to make it more exiting?"
- "Dilemma": The Hunter presents the Preys with a so-called dilemma, like for example "Next week we marry, but suddenly you are offered the opportunity to star in a movie with Richard Gere. What do you do?", or "I just bought a beautiful and romantic apartment, and I'm enormously attached to it. But you also have your own house, and we live 100 km away from each other. What would you do: give up your house and come with me or drive every day 100 km?"
- "The Reference": here a friend or relative of the Preys comes to try and "sell" the Prey. They have exactly 20 seconds to do this, and they often fail to do so within the time limits. The chime is without mercy and interrupts them in the middle of their sentence.
- "The moment of Truth"²⁰, when the Hunter announces his/her choice.

The format in itself is a prime influence on participants' stage behaviour. The tight structure of the show puts participants in a tight corset which does not allow much improvisation – hence the intensive rehearsals. In fact, there is no improvisation on behalf of the Preys (see below); Hunters are generally less strictly managed, and have some manoeuvre space. It is this tight and fast-paced schedule, and their different contents, that structure and determine participant's behaviour and how they will come across.

The best way to illustrate this is by examining in detail one of the format changes that were implemented in the 2002 season. During the 1999 season, the season upon which I based my analysis, "the Moment of Truth" was structured as follows. First the Hunter, suppose he is male, announces his choice. Then the elected Prey waits behind "The Wall", and Ingeborg shows him the two rejected Preys who, after the obligatory kiss, leave the stage (sometimes with regretful looks of the Hunter). Then Ingeborg announces the name of the winner, and with roll of drums The Wall goes up and Hunter and Prey finally get to see each other, accompanied by uplifting music and studio audience cheers. In 2000, however, the Moment of Truth was changed. Officially the change of format was implemented because the production team thought not enough couples came out of the holiday trip. Hence the introduction of "the Repêchage", which was intended "for letting participants make a more suitable choice". Now the Hunter first has to announce with whom he is sure he does *not* want to go on a holiday trip. This rejected Prey then comes across The Wall and leaves the stage, leaving two more Preys on the other side of The Wall. Then the Hunter has to announce his choice with whom he *does* want to leave on a holiday trip. Again we get the lifting-of-the-Wall routine and Hunter and Prey get to see each other. This is where the Repêchage comes in, however. The Hunter can now decide

²⁰ Contrary to the other terms this one is my invention.

whether he “keeps” the Prey he selected first, or he takes a gamble and goes for the second Prey who remains hidden behind The Wall. And indeed, it often happens that a Hunter rejects his first choice (who has to leave the stage instantly, often with a look of dismay), opting instead for the second one.

This example illustrates perfectly how the format *itself* incites certain performances and blocks others. What the introduction of the Repêchage does, in fact, is opening up the Blind Date format to a new *register* of identities. If the Hunter decides to reject his first choice, he is rude and ruthless, because he rejects the Prey literally in her face. And for the rejected Prey it is a painful event, because she goes from the joy of being elected to the humiliation of being rejected. “Rudeness” and “humiliation”, then, are “ways of being” (identity) that are incited by this change in format. Or, to use the terminology I have used thus far, the change of format performs participants in such a way that they (can) be rude or become humiliated. Until 1999 the Moment of Truth did not incite rudeness or humiliation. From 2000 onwards, it became a dangerous moment, allocating roles and inciting performances that were not there before²¹.

The thing I am getting at is that the format is a *productive* force, one that *incites* certain behaviours. Moreover it is clear that this particular change incites behaviour that is deemed “strong” by the audience: rude Hunters and humiliated Preys are indeed “strong identities”, quite extreme and definitely most spectacular (the audience’s “oohs” and “aahs” are testimony of this). It is important to stress that for these performances the production team does not have to intervene *actively*. They literally have to do *nothing* for a Hunter to reject his first choice: it is just because it’s “in the rules” that a Hunter can behave rudely. Of course the format and the rules are set up by the production team, but once the decision is taken the performance of “rudeness” and “humiliation” does not require their active intervention. It is something which “just happens”. Sometimes the Hunter decides to use the Repêchage, sometimes he doesn’t. Moreover this operation transfers responsibility: it is the Hunter who *chooses* to reject the Prey, it is *he* who is the rude one. The production team can’t possibly be blamed for this, because it is, after all, an act of his own free will, isn’t it? The format – the way it determines the rules of engagement in the game – is in fact a magical trick by which the production team deletes itself and the decision it takes from sight. It deposits all responsibility upon the shoulders of the participants.

Nevertheless the format in itself is not enough for securing the guaranteed performance of “strong identities”. It is good, but not enough, and sometimes the production team needs to intervene actively. One of the more important strategies of self-presentation lies in the thorough preparation of the first part, in the fact that everything is rehearsed. The rehearsals are not only there for making participants used to the studio space: they are also a technology for shaping what participants will say. The producer explains best how this coaching works:

²¹ Another example of how changes in format incite new identities is the introduction of a “performance” during the first studio shootings. Participants now have to do a short performance, and the audience’s enthusiast cheers are supposed to tell the Hunter something about the Prey. But of course participants are not professional performers, and their “act” often turns out quite ridiculous. For example, it was during this part that the breast-incident of the introduction occurred.

Producer: We don't tell them what to say by definition. But what they want to say...

Jan: ...you put it in plain [English]?

Producer: We shape it. [...] We ask "What is important in your life?" and then they tell us what they actually want to say. [...] Suppose participant X wants to say that his hobbies are driving his motorcycle and marine diving. And suppose he says "I like my bike and sometimes 'ave a plunge". Then we make that into a coherent statement. [...] But some of them really haven't got a clue what to say. And then we make suggestions: "You could say this" or based upon our image of them "You might say that". You see, you are not only their coach but also their psychologist.

The participant coach gives a more detailed account of how this works for Preys:

Participant coach: I usually give them their papers before lunch, so they know the questions. During lunch they then think about it. I also tell them to write them down, that's easier for me to understand what direction they want to go, and secondly it is easier for them, because that way they can reproduce it easier, of course. [...] Of course I prefer that they come spontaneously with their reply. Obviously you direct it a bit, in the sense that you explain them the elemental rules of television. So you explain them "Look, it's important you put the right intonation", or "Your text should contain a teaser, something erotic, or something funny, or something original". I mean, it's not enough to be able to say two sentences in a row, it also has to be a) well-phrased and b) understandable. I mean, they don't have to speak standard Dutch, but they have to try to articulate so that everybody understands it. [...] I also tell them that honesty is important, that they should remain true to themselves. Once and a while it happens that somebody really has a black-out, that they have no inspiration at all, and then we give them some tips, like "Think this direction", or "You might say this, this might be fun". But it's definitely not the case that we give them the answers in advance and that they have to learn them by heart. First, it's not fun for them, and second, if the replies are theirs chances are they will better remember it later on, when they are on stage.

The point the participant coach raises is important. The Preys' answers are indeed not scripted, as is often thought. The production team does not "give" participants their lines in advance. Nevertheless what the producer calls "shaping" is quite a radical intervention. I have quoted this before, but notice how the producer moulds the replies in the Blind Date format. The powers of suggestion are very effective:

Producer: They tell us "That is what I actually want to say". But some of them really haven't got a clue what to say. And then we make suggestions: "You could say this" or based upon our image of them "You might say that". You see, you are not only their coach but also their psychologist.

Basically the all-day rehearsal moulds the Preys' answers into the Blind Date format, often giving them a supposedly "poetic" or "romantic" twist. This makes it very difficult to decide where shaping becomes scripting. Take for instance the following quote from Nancy, a Prey:

Nancy: In my group one of the questions was as follows: "You have a car break-down and a handsome motor driver passes by who only wants to take you along, not your date. What do you do?". And this girl said "yes, I drive along with him and make sure that afterwards somebody else comes and pick you up". And that he [the participant coach] really didn't like, because you have to pretend you care about your date. Something like [with artificial accent] "I drive along with him and at the next stop I take his motorcycle and turn around to come and fetch you". But "I'll send a taxi", no, that answer he didn't like.

The anecdote Nancy recounts is telling, because it shows how thin the line is between “helping” to formulate and telling participants what to say. The best word to describe it is perhaps “directing”. Just like a movie director is dependent upon his actors to come up with good ideas on how to interpret a character the production team wants the participants to come up with good ideas. But the director of a movie can also not be happy with an interpretation and tell the actor to try out different things. In this last sense “directing” becomes a synonym of “guiding”, or giving direction. The relationship between production team and Preys is similar: the participant coach needs participants to come up with good ideas, but also has to twist or direct them into the right direction.

Before Preys can start answering questions, however, the Hunter has to ask them. To what extent are these questions spontaneous, that is, made up by the Hunters themselves? Within the interviews there is some confusion around this issue. Some members of the production team claim that all of the questions are of the Hunters’ own choosing, but they often contradict themselves. The interviews with the Hunters (and some “dissident” members of the production team) give a different impression, one which is probably closer to the truth. Since the participant coach already knows the Hunters before the day of the first shootings – s/he disposes of their application files and has also shot the short “Hunter movie” – he and the final editor prepare the questions beforehand. Concretely this means that the Quickies, Dilemma’s and Own Opinion are actually already written before the Hunter even enters the studio. The final editor and the participant coach do so based upon the psychological profile they have constructed *themselves* of the participant in question, putting themselves literally in place of the participant and preparing the questions from this imaginary space:

Jan: The Quickies, do Hunters make them up themselves?

Final editor: No. You know, an editor has already visited them and made a movie about their house, he has had a short talk with them. I did the selection interviews so I know already quite a lot about their hobbies, little anecdotic stuff about their lives, their relationships, stuff like that. And so we write the Quickies based upon this. If they want they can add or cut some. But yes, the Quickies are theirs...

Jan: Yes, yes.

Final editor: I am not going say that there’s never a question in there of which they will say “What the hell is this?”...

The quote is interesting because it shows the circular reasoning of the final editor. In the beginning he bluntly says that the Hunters don’t make up the questions themselves, that the production team writes them beforehand. But since the production team *knows* the Hunter they can actually speak in his/her name. Conclusion: even if the Hunter didn’t *really* write them “the Quickies are theirs”. But then, as if he realises that this is not entirely true, the final editor adds that Hunters probably don’t always recognise themselves in the Quickies which are supposed to express their most intimate concerns.

What the production team actually does, then, is to posit itself as what ANT scholars would call a *translator-spokesperson*: the production team literally puts itself in the place of the participants and claims to speak for them, effectively muting participants in the same operation which pretends to represent them. The

production team becomes a kind of ventriloquist that claims to speak for the participant, who in turn become puppets on a string that mechanically move to somebody else's words.

How do Hunters react to this? Are they just mechanic dolls that repeat the words of the ventriloquist? To what extent do they accept these ready-made questions, or do they resist the way they have been cast? This largely depends upon the personality of the Hunter in question. Take for example the following opposite reactions:

John Ray: The Quickies are prepared in advance by VTM. Those multiple-choice questions [The Quickies] are completely made up by VTM. They had prepared 20 of them for each Prey, and I had to make a selection out of them, the ones that I wanted to ask, and I had to rehearse them so I could do them in time. And the second one, the Dilemma, that was also made by VTM. And the Own Opinion was also made up by VTM. So basically I had nothing to say about it.

Muriel: The Dilemma was also made up by them, if I remember correctly. But I twisted it a bit, made it into my own version... You know, I have a kid, and I don't want him to see me saying stuff like that [the quotes the the production team had prepared for her] [...]

Jan: And did they also fix the order of the Quickies?

Muriel: Yes they did, but that I also changed.

Both participants are confronted with a situation where they are not happy with the questions the production team had prepared for them. John Ray did not challenge the position of the production team and executed the orders faithfully. Muriel on the other hand did not like the questions that were handed out to her and she simply changed them. In other words, the institutional regime I have been describing thus far is very flexible in that its power relationships are – at least in principle – reversible. The production team does not dominate the participants, nor are the latter forced to do things they don't want. The power relationships mostly take a "soft" form: , suggestions, good advice, "house rules"... It then depends upon the temperament and the personality of the participant how they will react to this.

A final strategy of self-presentation lies in the way participants have to reply to questions during the bish-bash, the interview clips that are shown during the second studio shootings. This bish-bash is taped immediately after the Holiday trip for reasons that are outlined below. The important thing here, however, is that the bish-bash is shot on the basis of a standard set of questions. Every Blind Date regular knows these questions by heart: "Did s/he give you a present on the first day", "If you would compare your holiday partner with an animal what would it be?", "How would you describe the dressing style of your partner?", "What personality traits did you like or dislike about your holiday partner?", "Was there a spur of romance during the holiday trip?", "Will you see each other after this holiday?" are some of the more recurrent ones. First of all it is clear that the WYAIWYG-principle is fully at work in these questions. The questions posed are of a particular type, and they set up a path that looks for either commonalities or exclusive differences. The like/dislike questions are a good example of this: they search for conflicts and force the participant to answer according to the grid the question has set up for them. Other

questions are more geared towards the “playful”, like for example the question to compare the holiday partner with an animal. Needless to say that playful, at least from the audience’s point of view often becomes ridiculous (see chapter 6). This is moreover aggravated by the way the bish-bashes are recorded and edited: when doing the interview participants are told to repeat the question in their answer (genre: “On the first day she gave me...”). The question by the interviewer, however, is cut from the montage, which makes it look as if the participants are spontaneously talking about their experiences, rather than replying to questions. The combination of the WYAIWYG-principle and this interviewing and editing techniques is a powerful technology that impacts upon how participants will come across.

6. Interactional strategies

Interactional strategies are those strategies that aim to influence the interaction between participants. Whereas strategies of self-presentation work upon the single participant and how s/he behaves, this set of strategies will try to impact upon the interaction between participants. Dating is, after all, a (very specific) kind of interaction between two people, one that could be called *romantic* interaction. Of course this does not mean that all interactions between participants are romantic; many interactions are exactly the opposite of what we commonly call “romantic”. Nevertheless interactions between participants are an integral and important part of the programme, and it is logical that the production team will want to steer these interactions as well, so that they become interesting to watch.

In terms of the interactional ideal it is obvious that the production team prefers its participants to become romantically involved. From clammy love songs to romantic novels over romantic movies, the history of the cultural industries has shown that love sells and makes audiences tune in. But the production team is equally happy with a discordant couple, because this also proves to be popular with the audience. For example, Blind Date’s production team members claim that people often approach them to talk about an episode which was recorded more than four years ago, an episode in which one of the holiday partners stepped out of the second studio conversation (upon which the host of the show – who is generally considered to be one of the more amiable FF’s – concluded she was a “hate smurf”). And indeed, some of the viewers I interviewed also came up with this “historic episode”. In short, if holiday partners become romantically involved this is good, but it is equally good for the show if emotions run high and fights break out, because that is just as popular, if not more. The worst thing to happen is that participants are “just good friends”, without any conflicts between them.

How does one manage interactions? First it should be stressed that perhaps the strongest influence on participants’ interaction is the format itself, not so much concrete interventions by the production team. Put simply, Blind Date and Streetmate contain in their format, in their different parts, elements that will structure and mould the interaction between participants. Take for instance Blind Date. The second part, when the holiday partners come back from the trip and comment upon each other’s desirability, contains a very clever system of social engineering: the bish-bashes, or confessional movies, are shown to the participants while they are sitting in the studio (and the audience at home gets to see these

confessional movies *as well as* their “live” reactions in the studio at the same time). This spatial constellation makes that participants are confronted with each other’s comments and that we also get to see their immediate reaction – and all of this in real time. It does not come as a surprise that often a vivid discussion between the holiday partner erupts, sometimes even while the bish-bashes are still running (“you promised not to tell this”).

The point is that Blind Date’s very *format* elicits this kind of extreme interaction. The production team does not have to lift a finger for this effect to occur, although there are small interventions that can enhance its effectiveness (see below). All dating shows (and most of reality TV shows, for that matters) have such in-built interaction-affecting mechanisms: in Streetmate this is the taped dinner date and the short interview clips shot immediately afterwards; in Temptation Island it is the showing of the partners’ “infidelity”; in Big Brother the weekly assignments are the mechanism by which the production team attempts to provoke conflict amongst participants.

6.1 Streetmate

Sometimes the format is not sufficiently effective, though, and the production team sometimes needs to intervene actively. How do they do this? Again, the differences between Streetmate and Blind Date are notable. The main reason is that in Blind Date the dating happens off-screen, whereas in Streetmate we get to see the date itself. But it is exactly this very characteristic that puts Streetmate’s production team before an inextricable problem. As we have seen, the mere act of registering intervenes into and alters the reality it is supposed to merely register. For the dinner date this means that the sheer presence of the camera affects the interaction between the participants – and this not necessarily in a good way: camera-conscious participants are unlikely to be very spontaneous.

Therefore the production team tried to literally shield the dating couple as much as possible from the camera (and the production team): editors screened restaurants in advance, looking for places with altitude differences, so that the daters could be taped from above (and the production team would be out of their range of vision). In places without altitude levels a kind of wind screen was used for shielding off the production team; a single camera was used in a pan shot and was integrated as much as possible with elements of the scenery, like plants or interior design elements. The production team also used very small (lavalier) microphones, because they could be integrated into the clothes of the participants... In short, the production team tried to make itself as invisible as possible in order to reduce the effects of their presence.

This strategy proved mildly successful. Two of the three “Streetmatters” I interviewed said that they weren’t reminded too much of the camera during the dinner dates:

Marijke: They had pinned those little microphones on our clothing, and the camera was muffled away so you didn’t have the feeling that a camera was focussing on you.

Jan: So you didn’t really had the feeling that...

Marijke: No. And the people were behind a screen and were following the conversation through head phones. So we didn't see them, really.

Els: What was very good about [the restaurant] is that there were two levels, and so we were sitting downstairs, and they were sitting up there, between some pot plants, so we couldn't see them. So all in all it was ok. I mean, of course you still knew they were there but you couldn't see them.

However, as Els' quote remind us, however, no matter how hard the production team tried to delete itself from sight participants were always aware that their conversation was being taped. Some of them even engaged the camera in the dating game itself. In episode three, for instance, Laïla and David went out on a date together, and David used the fact that the dinner was taped to communicate information: he wrote on a piece of paper 'She drinks too much' and showed it to the camera while talking to her. In short, the production context was never entirely out of participants' consciousness, which was a serious handicap in getting "spontaneous" or unrestricted conversations during the dinner date – although in Laïla and David's case the production team used this to their own advantage, incorporating this disruption of "diegetic reality" in the programme as it was broadcast.

Thus we see that Streetmate's first interactional strategy consists in deleting the camera as much as possible from sight. But sometimes this did not suffice, and the dinner date did not always yield many good interactions or "usable" quotes. A second strategy therefore consisted in intervening during the dinner date itself:

Editor: If the girl went for a moment to the toilet – because that's what usually happened – than I accompanied her. That way I could give her some tips. I mean, I didn't tell them what to say, but say for instance that she had said during the biotopes that she really hoped he didn't have a tattoo because she hates them and that she would walk out of the date. Doing so I could tell her to ask him whether he has a tattoo, because after all that's what she wanted to know! But apparently they don't dare to do so when there's a camera present, so you try to [animate] it. Unfortunately that doesn't always work, because some people are very aware of the camera.

Note that this type of intervention is not only an intervention into the date itself (without the editor the tattoo question wouldn't be asked) but that it also structures the date interaction in a binary logic, built upon the absence or presence of conflict – either the boy doesn't have a tattoo (which is a reassurance for the girl), or he does (which will then lead to a conflict situation).

These two interactional strategies are more or less Streetmate's only ways of impacting upon the interaction between the participants. Moreover, the first strategy does not *positively* affect the participants' interaction. Rather, it attempts to reduce the effects of the camera's presence – it is an attempt at "harm reduction", not a positive intervention into the interaction. Once the date had started the production team could not do much but hope that the date went well and maybe quickly intervene during a short break, but this is where active intervention reached its limits²². In Blind Date the possibilities for intervening in the interaction are

²² It is for this reason that the production team changed the format slightly in the next season. In Beachmate the participants went to do an activity before the dinner date itself, since by

much broader, and this is due to the format as well the practical organisation of the production process.

6.2 Blind Date

In Blind Date the viewers do not get to see the date itself but are dependent upon the holiday's partners report of it. At first sight this is a weakness for the Blind Date team, since this means that we, the viewers as well as the production team, are dependent upon second-hand reports rather than seeing the date as it "actually" unfolds. But very few viewers realise that a member of the production team accompanies the couple during their trip. Thus what seems to be at first sight a disadvantage for Blind Date becomes its strongest point, since this "travel companion" witnesses and accompanies the dating couple, and s/he can actively intervene without the camera being an inhibiting force (compare to Streetmate, where a member of the production team can only intervene on the moment one of the daters leaves the table). Moreover, the Blind Date team has the added advantage that their date (the holiday trip) was not a two-hour event but takes five to eight days, which leaves more space for romance (or the opposite - conflicts) to flourish. As a result of these characteristics the Blind Date production team has more ways to manage the participants' romantic interaction.

A first interactional strategy of the Blind Date production team is the fact that the travel companion tries to make participants do as much joint activities together. Every holiday movie contains at least some images from a jeep safari, or a visit to a historical centre; these activities are compulsory. The holiday companion in fact has to try to keep a delicate balance between giving the participants sufficient space while at the same time keeping things animated enough so that boredom doesn't strike. The final editor:

Final editor: As a travel companion you have to make sure that they do as much as possible together. I mean, he doesn't have to be present all the time but he has to give them the chance to do activities together, to talk with each other and so on.

Most members of the production team agreed, however, that it is impossible to make participants fall in love, and that it is often already clear after the flight whether they would become a couple or not. In fact, in general the production team is characterised by a "laissez faire, laissez passer" attitude: since love is no "hard sciences" (words of the final editor) there is not much they can do about it. They can try to create the right conditions, but "if it doesn't happen it ain't gonna happen". At its best it can lie in subtle hints or orchestration:

Editor: You can't really direct them. Of course you talk to them and check them out, like "and... what do you think?". And indeed – I am being very honest now – if I feel there is a possibility but they are afraid to take the initiative I might suggest something, like "Don't you think he likes you, don't you think he is interested in you?". That I do. But directing in the sense of pushing, no.

In the interviews I only found one instance of obvious attempt at steering. John Ray and Nancy went on a holiday trip together to Spain, and from the start it was

doing so they already got acquainted with each other before the dinner date (and the production team could also manage their interaction in the mean time).

clear that there was not going to be much romance between them. But during the shooting of the holiday movie they felt as if they were being pushed:

John Ray: The thing which bothered me most was that [the travel companion] was pushing: "Hold each other, put your arm around her, give her a kiss".

Nancy: In the beginning she was pushing a bit. And also when shooting footage, that was time and time again "Sit a bit closer to each other, put your arm around her shoulder, do this, do that...". Like "We need good images". [...] That really got on my nerves. I mean, that was the only thing upon which John Ray and I agreed. We told her "If it doesn't work between us, it doesn't work. We can politely talk to each other but it is clear that there is no romance between us, so you don't have to shoot this kind of images. Just show it the way it really is!". I mean, we did the excursions together as they told us to do, and I understand she wants footage, but not like when we're in a boat "And now put your arm around her, sit closer to her, look nice into the camera..."

I doubt however to what extent John Ray and Nancy's experience is a standard production practice, since their travel companion accompanied a holiday for the first time, and other members of the production team gave rather different accounts. All in all the "incitement of romance" is something left to its own device, the production team creating "the ideal circumstances" but not actively pursuing it. (The same is, by the way, valid for *Streetmate*: the production held the same attitude vis-à-vis romance: either it happens, or it doesn't, but you can't enforce it).

In this context it is remarkable to note that the travel companion often has a soothing function, calming things down when frictions amongst participants become too pronounced and emotions run high. This does not contradict my earlier observation that the production team also likes fights amongst participants because of its good televisual value. From a productional point of view a conflict is of no use as long as it is not recorded, to the contrary: if participants get to the point that they refuse to do activities together, for example, there is simply nothing to report about later on in the show. The travel companion therefore often has to play a pacifying role, which stands in stark contrast to what the show needs and provokes afterwards.

The holiday itself is of course not the only place where participants "interact", they also return to the studio and comment upon the trip and each other. We have already seen that this studio talk is introduced by the bish-bash, and that this bish-bash, through its spatial-temporal constellation, affects the interaction between participants, forcing them towards extreme interactions. But the devil is in the details. Two aspects in particular relevant: the timing of recording the bish-bash, and the way the fragments are edited. Both are organised or "assembled" with maximal effect in mind.

The bish-bash is recorded *immediately* after the holiday trip: sometimes participants have a few hours to go and refresh themselves, on other occasions they drive straight from the airport to the studio. The rationality behind this is explained by the final editor:

Final editor: [T]hose movies are shot immediately after they return, when the emotions still run high. Sometimes they come straight from the airport to here [the studio], and then they pour out their heart. Both positively and negatively. When they return to the studio some weeks have passed by. By that time it has faded a bit, they've put things into perspective because they have been to work again and have talked about it with friends.

The intentions are out in the open: the bish-bash has to be recorded as soon as possible since at that moment the emotions are still fresh, and fresh emotions tend towards the extreme. As a result, and also because of the questions asked (see also strategies of self-presentation), the quotes during the bish-bash are often quite spectacular, which only adds to the inciting and/or provocative effect when the bish-bash is showed during the studio talk.

The production team can maximise the effect of the bish-bash upon the studio talk in a second way, namely by the editing the bish-bash. To be more precisely, they edit the bish-bash in such a sequence that maximal effect upon the participants' interaction is guaranteed. I have already mentioned that the bish-bash is shot on the basis of a set of questions (in other words, that it is an interview), but that this interview situation is deleted from sight by the way the answers are edited. But there is more to it: the production team also edits these short bits in such a way that they will have a maximal set of effects later on in the studio. Consider for example the following quote from *Blind Date*'s producer, and how he connects the editing of the bish-bash with its outcome in the studio talk:

Producer: First we rehearse the bish-bash and then we record them. The best situation is of course where she likes him, or he likes her, but not the other way round. Those are the best TV moments. Because what do you get? Of course we will edit the bish-bash from a little bit positive to negative. And as the conversation develops you see them sitting in the studio and their initial smile gradually becomes more sour...

The producer makes no secret of the fact that, for him, the bish-bash is an interactional device, one that, if edited rightly, can have maximal effect in the studio. In this case it is a device that incites a sour, humiliated smile; at other times it can provoke angry shouts, dirty looks, heart-melting declarations of love, defensive reactions or funny remarks – in short, the stuff that “good television” is made of.

7. Confessional strategies

Confessional strategies are those measures that are aimed at making participants “confess” or tell the truth about things that they would prefer to keep private. Dating is very susceptible for this problematic because of several reasons. First of all there is the general idea that love and romance belong to the private sphere, and that it is not appropriate nor desirable to talk about it publicly. This becomes even more pronounced if sex is involved – love still has this aura of mysticism around it, but sex just for the sake of it is deemed inappropriate behaviour. Besides these general attitudes about love, romance and sex there is also the way dating shows structure dating as a game with winners and losers. The above quote of *Blind Date*'s producers spells this out lucidly: dating is a game where “she likes him [...] but not the other way round”. This is the precise narrative function of the talks afterwards, namely to allocate the different roles. Narratively speaking there are three scenarios, each with their according roles:

- both participants are in love and become romantically involved: here both are “winners” since thanks to the dating show they have encountered love;
- one of the participants is in love but the other isn't: this is where things become poignant because the person in love is a loser of the game;

- none of the participants is in love: nobody wins or loses but a plethora of new roles open up, e.g. fights between both participants, the active person versus the passive person and so on.

The important thing about the afters, then, is that the stakes are high because it is there that roles are allocated *in public*. The public character of the event will make participants want to shield certain events or feelings from the general public, and strategies of confession are aimed at tearing this protective wall down²³.

There are again important differences between the confessional strategies of Streetmate's and Blind Date's production team due to differences in format. Two differences are particularly relevant. First, in Streetmate the self-presentation during the first part is not as non-committal as the one in Blind Date. Whereas the latter's first round is quizzical and fun-oriented the former already requires display of more personal things. The way Streetmate stresses the romantic biography in the biotopes is an example of this. In Blind Date there is no such thing: after having seen the first round one knows almost nothing about the personal life of a participant, and hence there is no need for confessional strategies²⁴. The second difference concerns the degree of knowledge of the production team about what "really happened". In Blind Date a member of the production team accompanies both dating partners during the whole trip. In Streetmate the production team is only present during the dinner date itself; everything that happens afterwards is unknown to Streetmate's production team, and they have to rely on the participants' account of the events. Blind Date's production team, to the contrary, has far more inside knowledge about the holiday trip, giving them a strategic advantage over their colleagues, and advantage that will be used to the max in the confessional strategies.

7.1 Streetmate

First Streetmate, though. There are roughly two moments when confessional strategies are important: first, during the recording of the biotopes (when the romantic biography is touched upon), and secondly during the "afters" (the interviews taken two weeks later). The basic strategy at both moments is perhaps the most ancient of them all: divide and conquer. Concretely this means that the production team must control who is present at the time of the interview. The first strategy consists of physically separating people; the second one is the exact mirror image of this, namely extracting information by putting people together.

Interviewing participants separately is a technique which was mostly used during the afters, generally recorded two weeks after the dinner date. The advantage of interviewing participants separately is that they don't know what the other one has said, and this could be used to the production team's advantage. The host of the show

²³ Although the majority of confessional strategies focus on those things that happened during or after the date they are not limited to it. For instance, during the shooting of the biotopes in Streetmate, when the emphasis is upon the romantic biography, it can also happen that participants prefer not to disclose information. See the Stijn and Gini example below.

²⁴ The Hunter is usually introduced by a short talk with the host of the show, and some elements of the romantic biography are mentioned here, like previous marriages or children. One knows virtually nothing about the Preys, though.

would often use this given, saying half-jokingly, “she told us there was a kiss”, just to provoke reaction and perhaps get to “a moment of truth”. Moreover, a separate interview has the added advantage that a more personal sphere is created. Although there is not much private about talking with three people present – two of them carrying large and bizarre objects, and a heavy spotlight on your face – it nevertheless makes a difference in the likelihood of participants saying more private things. There is something inherently contradictory in this: although participants are perfectly aware that the other person (lest not forget the whole of Flanders) will get to see these “confessions” it nevertheless makes a crucial difference. As the sound recordist puts it:

Sound recordist: If you interview them separately they will dare to say more. Of course they know that the other person is going to see it, but they are more daring. They won’t start calling names, but if the date wasn’t nice they will say “we can be good friends but we’re not going to end up as a couple”. And I think that the audience also know what that means.

Thus we see that interviewing participants separately sometimes makes them more likely to confess that “extra something”. Even if the effect is minimal it will make the audience realise how things really happened. (In fact, as we will see in chapter 6, it is exactly this “hermeneutics of the participant” which is a crucial element in audience reactions to dating shows).

Sometimes the same effect can be reached by putting people physically together instead of separating them. This was especially relevant during the shooting of the biotopes, where the focus was on the romantic biographies. Since the production team did not know anything about the participants (unlike in *Blind Date*, where the production team knows quite a lot about the participants). Hence *Streetmate*’s production team was entirely dependent upon participants’ willingness to disclose their romantic biography. That is why it was sometimes better to interview participants with friends and family during the biotopes. *Streetmate*’s editor explains why:

Editor: It depends whether you want a personal conversation or not. Suppose I ask something about fidelity in relationships, and the friends that are present all start to laugh. Then [the interviewee] will be more defensive, will try to joke his way out of it. Whereas if you do this in a person-to-person interview, even though there are two camera’s present, they will be more likely to get personal. The advantage of having their friends present is that you can show their reactions. Even if it is only a minor detail, like a blink of the eye that shows something is not right, that says already quite a lot, you know.

What the editor is actually saying is that you can *strategically* use friends or family: because they know the participant better than the production team the latter can use their presence as a truth-telling technology. This strategy can also be seen at work in the broadcasted episodes. Stijn, for instance, was interviewed together with his parents and sister. Stijn is asked whether he deems the physical looks of a girl important, and first denies it vehemently. But his sister, who was until then in the background, intervenes and tells the camera that Stijn indeed falls for beautiful girls – after which Stijn reluctantly admits his sister is right.

Blind Date uses basically the same “divide and conquer”-strategy but it is far more complex and layered. We have already seen that a member of the production

team accompanies the dating couple during the holiday, and that this is a way for structuring interaction between participants. But, in true Foucaultian fashion, this travel companion also *registers*: s/he not only shoots the holiday movie, but also writes a holiday report which contains a concise account of everything that happened during the holiday, including the juicy details. This is why the Blind Date team describes the travel companion's function as "travel-guide, psychologist, baby-sitter *and spy*". It is the travel report which in the subsequent steps of the production process will play a crucial role.

7.2 Blind Date

In Blind Date there are roughly two moments when the production team can try to make participants "crack" so that they tell the truth: the first is when the bish-bashes are taped, the second is during the studio talk afterwards. The recording of the bish-bash is in fact the most important moment from a confessional point of view, or, to put it more precisely, it is the bish-bash that opens up the most possibilities for making participants crack and disclose information. It is in the nature of the bish-bash to do so: just like in Streetmate the participants are interviewed *separately*, giving the production team the before-mentioned advantages of this strategy (playing participants off against each other). But Blind Date makes far more use of this potential in the ways the bish-bashes are recorded, maximalising its effectivity:

First of all there is the moment when the bish-bashes are recorded. As we have seen, they are recorded immediately after the holiday trip, when emotions still run high and participants are more likely to let off steam, venting the "true" account of their holiday experiences in the process.

Second, the person taking the interview is different from the travel companion. Through experience the production team discovered that it was disadvantageous if the travel companion takes the interview, because his/her relationship with the holiday partners is too close in order to make full use of the situation. As the final editor puts it: "The travel companion is too closely involved. This year I accompanied a couple to Rhodos and [I didn't take the interview]. You know these people too well, so you can't use certain interviewing techniques. You are just too involved". Concretely this means that the holiday companion gives his holiday report to the interviewer and tells him/her all the details, especially the spicy ones. Because the interviewer does not have the same ties with the interviewees, s/he will be more likely to use certain "dirty" interviewing techniques that will make participants crack.

Third there are special interviewing techniques aimed at yielding "good" results. In this context two of such techniques deserve special mention. The first consists in throwing in an unrehearsed question. Before recording the bish-bash the interviewer does a quick rehearsal with the participant of the questions which are going to be asked during the interview. During this rehearsal the interviewer does *not* include some of the crucial or sensitive questions. However, when the camera is running s/he throws in those questions that are crucial for the development of the story, hoping that the participant will be sufficiently flabbergast by this unexpected turn that s/he will answer honestly. Less subtle but equally effective are what the

final editor calls “tricks to provoke quotes”. This basically means that in the midst of the taped interview you suddenly say “but five minutes ago you said that...” – even if this was not the case. By manifestly lying the production team hopes that participants drop their shields and tell the truth about what “really happened” during the holiday trip.

These different techniques only work because the production team *knows* what happened during the holiday and because the participants *don't know* what the other has said. In other words, divide and conquer leads to a situation of *institutionalised distrust*: all of the participants I spoke affirmed that they didn't feel at ease afterwards and that they called each other to check what the other had said. During the interviews the production team makes use of this sense of distrust – one could even call it paranoia – to make participants confess:

Jan: During the confessions, do you also use quotes against them, like “but she said that...”

Editor: To be entirely honest: yes, we do. Because in the end those are the most interesting things.

The recording of the bish-bash is the confessional *moment suprême*. The production team was quite unanimous: if it didn't work then, it was not likely that participants would suddenly confess during the studio talk afterwards. They also agreed that if participants were really determined not to say something that it was very difficult to make them crack.

Nonetheless, sometimes the second studio talk *does* lead to confessions, or, as the host prefers to call them, “revelations”. For Ingeborg, the most important thing during the second studio talk is the truth: what did really happen between both participants? It is a mixture of elements which make participants crack on occasions like these. First of all there is the bish-bash and the way it is edited. The production team juxtaposes the most contrasting quotes, because this provides discussion material for the studio talk. Moreover, contrasting quotes inevitably make Ingeborg ask “but how did it really go, then?”. In the discussion that subsequently develop it sometimes happen that one of the participants admits certain things that were not in the bish-bash. Moreover – but this strategy is used very sparingly – Ingeborg can use the information she has read in the travel report for making a participant confess: “But I've heard that...”, or “... A little birdie told me...”²⁵. The latter strategy is used seldomly, though, because the production team does not want to give away to the general public that a member of the production team accompanies the holiday couple.

²⁵ This is one of the major differences between the British and the Flemish *Blind Date*. In the British version the televisual power relationships are out in the open, and the production team does not do much effort to delete the production context from sight. The Flemish production team wants to preserve some of the illusions of *Blind Date*. For instance, participants are instructed not to mention the travel companion, or, if they mention them, to use the expression “some friends we've met over there”. Similarly, when I first interviewed the producer he was willing to give me the details but warned me that he preferred me not to make public that holiday couples are accompanied. It is because of this reason that the Flemish *Blind Date*, unlike their British colleagues, are reluctant to use the “a little birdie told me”-strategy.

From this description it is obvious that Blind Date's confessional strategies, because of the way they are implemented, are far more effective than those in Streetmate. In the former it is true kind of social engineering that works by dividing participants and cultivating a feeling of institutionalised distrust. Their key difference with Streetmate is the *knowledge* they have about the holiday events, and how this knowledge is used in specific spatio-temporal constellations. In chapter 5, when we get to "the spaces and materials of power", we will further elaborate on these spatio-temporal constellations and how they relate to televisual power relationships. Before doing so, however, we have to get to our last televisual strategy, namely the use of editing as an identity practice.

8. Editing as an identity practice

In the story thus far we have already encountered a few times that editing is a managerial practice in its own right. For instance, we have seen that in the bish-bash the production team tries to juxtapose contradicting statements, because this is likely to provoke a lively debate during the studio talk. Similarly, the bish-bash is often edited so that it performs participants in a certain way, for example by going from neutral comments to more negative ones. What we see in examples like these, then, is that editing is first and foremost a *device*, a technology that helps the production team in producing the strong identities they need. As a consequence, editing is an identity practice because it is a tool for impacting upon the participants' performance. It is, so to speak, a real-time force *within* the production process.

Once the images have been shot, however, editing becomes an identity practice in a different manner. The production team always shoots more material than they actually need, and hence they have to select which footage and quotes they will use in the broadcasted version. Of course the production team will choose those parts which are "most interesting" to watch. To put it in the terms of the beginning of this chapter: the production team will select those bits in which participants perform "strong identities". As a result, participants often see a televised version which they did not really expect. Take for instance the story of John Ray. He was very nervous during the days of the shootings, forgot his lines and stuttered quite a lot. At a certain time he even said "succex" instead of "success". He recounts the story:

John Ray: They stopped the shootings when Ingeborg made a mistake. But the moment I said "succex" they didn't stop, and they used it on television. That's very unfortunate because I was gesturing "Cut, stop", but they continued. Because if you look very carefully you can see me gesturing "cut". [...] And a lot of people made fun of me afterwards: succex.

The montage, in combination with the questions the production team had prepared for him, made John Ray feel he was portrayed as "a sex-obsessed guy". Moreover he felt that he came across as rude during the studio talk afterwards, because they cut out a part of his joke, making it as sound as if he was attacking his holiday partner:

John Ray: During the second part I was not as nervous as before, and I was being my joking self. The studio audience was even laughing with my jokes. But the outside world [the audience at home] did not get these jokes. For example, at a certain time Ingeborg tells me that if I ever need a good conversation I should go and see Nancy, and I answer "see you in 40 years". That came across as very rude. But I had just before made a joke,

and they cut it out. If they would have left the joke in there the people at home would have realised I was joking all the time, instead of thinking I was harsh. But those present in the studio knew I was joking.

Muriel has a similar story to tell. She had encountered a new boyfriend just after the preselections, but she still wanted to participate since she felt she had signed a contract – and didn't mind going on a free holiday. Although initially she had not told the production team she was in a new relationship she was from the start open about this to her travel partner. During the "afters" this came to the light, and she was attacked quite heavily by Ingeborg (and the audience). Although Muriel in general was not disappointed about her appearance on *Blind Date* she did complain about the fact that the broadcasted version did not contain all the elements:

Muriel: During the afters Ingeborg was really angry. Afterwards she said she was sorry, but at the moment itself she was quite harsh. Apparently there had been a number of participants in relationships and she really felt liketaking me down a peg or two. [...] So I was explaining myself, how everything had happened, how I met Eric (her new boyfriend) and such, and they almost cut it entirely. I mean, I understand that the viewers are not supposed to know that it all happens over several months, but I was the [dupe of the situation]....

Anecdotes like these show to what extent "strong identities" are created during the editing process. Or, more exactly, how during the editing process those events and quotes the production team deems "interesting" are taken out of their original context and reassembled. During the editing phase the participants stop being a person and becomes a "character" playing a part in a narrative which is not of his or her choosing. Editing deletes those events and quotes that do not "fit" with the character, or cuts up temporal sequences (sometimes just condensing, but often changing cause and effects).

Streetmate's director gives a perfect example of how this works. In one of the more notorious episodes Steve went on a dinner date with Katrien (who was not his first choice but a stand-in because the first girl had suddenly had to move abroad). This didn't stop Steve from being very charmed by Katrien, and *during the dinner date* (before the eyes of the entire country) they kissed. During the afterwards, however, it quickly became clear that Steve was not really interested in her, since he hadn't returned Katrien's calls, who was visibly in love with him. The director explains how he edited the dinner date, by combining quotes of the dinner itself with the comments taped immediately afterwards:

Director: During the date it was pretty obvious things went perfect. I mean, he was touching her hair, giving a little kiss here and there, and then suddenly you have THE KISS [snaps his fingers]. But I built up the story towards the kiss, and from that moment onward things go awry. Of course I know how everything went, but that's the way you build up the story towards the audience. I mean, before the kiss everything looked like magic, you build up this story, and at the moment the kiss arrives everybody thinks "yes! It has happened!". But immediately after that moment the roles switch. I mean, she really liked him, and he immediately started saying "I'm impulsive, this doesn't necessarily mean something" – he started to back off immediately. Maybe these are quotes that he said in the beginning of the interview, but I put them at the end, because that is a far more interesting story for the audience. If I give everything away in the beginning there is no suspense left. But in the end it is all truthful, I am not going to make participants say things that haven't been said. You just manipulate the sequence in order to keep the suspense...

The point the director raises is an important one: editing has its material limits, in the sense that the editor has to work with the raw material available to him (i.e. the footage of the entire dinner date including the interview afterwards). But by changing the sequence he is able to make a “stronger” story, in which Steve gets to play the part of the ruthless lady killer and Katrien the victim that steps into the trap with her eyes wide open. Editing, then, is a form of *streamlining* the events that happened, making a simplified and purified “story” out of disparate events that were never as coherent in the first place. And in the editing process roles – usually “strong identities” – are allocated.

In this context it is noteworthy that Streetmate’s production team claimed that participants had “the right” (note how the privilege is “granted”) to object to a certain piece of information being used. It had occurred, so they claimed, that a participant had said or done something which they afterwards regretted, and then the editor would tell the director not to use that part. An example of this would be if a participant would say during a dinner date that s/he is a moonlighter, or when s/he would smoke a cigarette and the parents didn’t know. Blind Date’s production team, to the contrary, does not take such participants’ wishes into consideration: once a quote or an image is on tape it literally becomes “theirs”. But even in Streetmate’s case the right to control your own image is subdued to the general quest for strong identities. The production team did not mind cutting out minor details *as long as* they are narratively not important. “The kiss”, for example, would under no circumstances be left out. As the director puts it: “I am not going to tone down my story because a guy might smash in my head”.

9. Conclusion

With this we have arrived at the end of this lengthy inventory of managerial strategies, and it is time to zoom out of the minor details and see the wider panorama. In this section we have basically made an analysis of all the individual measures by which the production team tries to obtain publicly performed “strong identities”: by deciding who gets in the show, by making participants behave according to “the rules of television”, by impacting upon their self-presentation, by impacting upon the interaction between them, by making them confess, and by editing the show. All of these individual measures, each operating on their own specific level and at their own specific moment, add up to what I have previously called television’s *institutional regime*. Although the institutional regime is not necessarily coherent (see next chapter) a general managerial ideal lies at its basis, namely to make “good television” by making participants perform “strong identities”.

As a result of this the production process of dating shows (and for that matter all television formats that make use of non-media people) can be seen as entailing a power relationship between production team and participants. It is a power relationship in the Foucaultian sense of the word: a complex strategical situation where the aim is to influence or direct behaviour. Although I did not quote him a lot his “analytics of power” has been a hugely important source of inspiration, as well as providing some of the central concepts of the analysis. At its most basic level the analysis thus far has traced several *governmental rationalities* and their

implementation in two concrete settings. At this point I would like to stress that I did not have to “uncover” the power relationships: the institutional measures and their rationalities are out in the open. I did not “interpret” the interviews, I did not look for hidden meanings in the words of the production team nor did I try to understand from which subject-positions they were “speaking” (as in Weberian *verstehen*). Instead I just asked how the production team did things, at every minute stage of the production process, and why this was so. This is what Foucault calls “the local cynicism of power” (1990a: 95) – the fact that the aims and rationality of power relationships are quite *explicit* – but applied to television production.

The institutional regime of both dating shows have as its explicit aim, then, to affect participants’ performances and identities. What directions does it take them? In other words, what are the “identity effects” of the institutional regime? In fact, there is not just one direction built into the institutional regime; rather, the strength of the genre seems to reside in the plethora of identities, emotions and discussions it “enables”. Nevertheless some general tendencies can be observed. First of all the institutional regime provokes and stimulates performances and interactions along *conflict-lines*. Participants are, quite simply, driven towards behaviour that evolves around a binary option: either they like each other, or they don’t. In both cases they will have to argue why. As a consequence, “the dating game” sometimes has more of a competition than a game, that is, the dating shows put the participants in a “winner-loser” scheme and associated roles like “the humiliated” or “the rude one”. Secondly, dating shows’ institutional regime tends towards the extreme and the spectacular. Thirdly, dating shows’ *identity effects* tend towards the clear-cut: ambivalence or nuance is not appreciated.

In terms of the managerial mechanisms behind these identity effects we can divide most of them into the following categories:

a. Identity effects that require active intervention by the production team versus those that are induced by the format. The latter category is the most abstract and difficult to fathom. The point is that some identity effects are a direct result of the format, of the way the format (and nothing but the format) directs the identities and performances of the participants. The clearest example of this are some of the changes in the Blind Date format, and how they incite and provoke “new” identities. We have seen how the introduction of the Repêchage, for instance, is responsible for producing “humiliation”, or “rudeness”. Other identity effects require active intervention by the production team. For example, some of the interviewing techniques fall into this category.

b. “Repressive” versus “productive” identity effects. Another way of distinguishing between strategies is by looking at how they function. “Repressive” strategies are those strategies that work by filtering out, by deleting from sight, or other mechanisms of deleting. Strategies of selection-as-exclusion come to mind, as well as the selection of appropriate scenes during the editing phase, or the way the self-presentation of participants is streamlined during the rehearsals. “Productive” strategies, to the contrary, work by provoking or creating. The “creative” function of the WYAIWYG-principle is a prime example of this: the discursive environment has a productivity effect, in the sense that without these questions participants would probably talk in different terms about their dating experiences. The format (the

different parts of the show) has a similar creative effect: *Blind Date*'s confessional part, for example, provokes certain behaviours because of the way it juxtaposes both accounts.

It is the combination of repressive and productive strategies that is so characteristic for television's institutional regime: it provokes and enhances certain identities and performances, but it also blocks the unwanted ones, or purifies and streamlines them. It is important to stress that this double movement of creating and repressing, of provoking and filtering, does not mean that the production team can make the participants do whatever they want. Participants bring to the dating show their past experiences and personality, and it is with these "raw data" that the production team starts to work. Participants' pre-televisual identity, then, is the raw material of the production process, and like all raw materials it can be worked upon but it cannot be made into whatever you want. In the next chapter, when we get to the failure of management, we will further elaborate this point. First, we will now turn our attention to the materials and spaces of televisual power.

Chapter 5: The materials and spaces of televisual power

The empirical analysis thus far has been a classic Foucaultian one, in the sense that it has traced managerial and governmental logics in two institutional settings. Chapter 4 focussed on institutionalised strategies – the *modus operandi* of the production team. In this chapter we will shift the focus slightly, namely on the *material setting* in which these strategies take place. The point in doing so is that it will reveal that the production context is not just a passive setting in which strategies take place: it is not the background scenery in which the “battle” between production team and participants rages. Rather I will argue that the production context, its materials and its spaces, are *active* forces in the management of participants. This chapter, then, is a continuation of the previous chapter but it foregrounds the role of the nonhuman actors and how they “act”.

1. Management and translations

Actor-network theory provides the most adequate analytical tools for the task at hand. In chapter 2 we have seen that the Foucaultian “analytics of power” and ANT can be seen as two instances of one materialist approach to power, with the difference that ANT focuses on nonhuman actors. In this chapter I will therefore perform the kind of heuristic levelling of human and nonhuman actors ANT is renowned for, placing humans, objects, knowledge and representations on the same ontological level, and see how they function or operate in the network.

In fact, the entire analysis thus far can be re-read in ANT terms. For example, figure 1 in the previous chapter – the production team’s double and interrelated managerial problematic – actually represents the attempts of one actor (the production team) to keep two other actors (respectively the audience and the participants) aligned. Indeed, the strategies by which the production team tries to make participants behave broadcast friendly are, in fact, *translation attempts*, attempts to write them into the “programme” (in both the ANT as well as the conventional meaning of the word). The reason for doing so is that, if the translation succeeds, the other actor in the network – the audience – will in its turn become enrolled in the network, namely as a faithful audience that will tune into the show week after week. Thus we see that there exists a triangular relationship between three actors: the production team, the participants, and the audience. An ANT version of figure 1 in the previous chapter would look something like this:

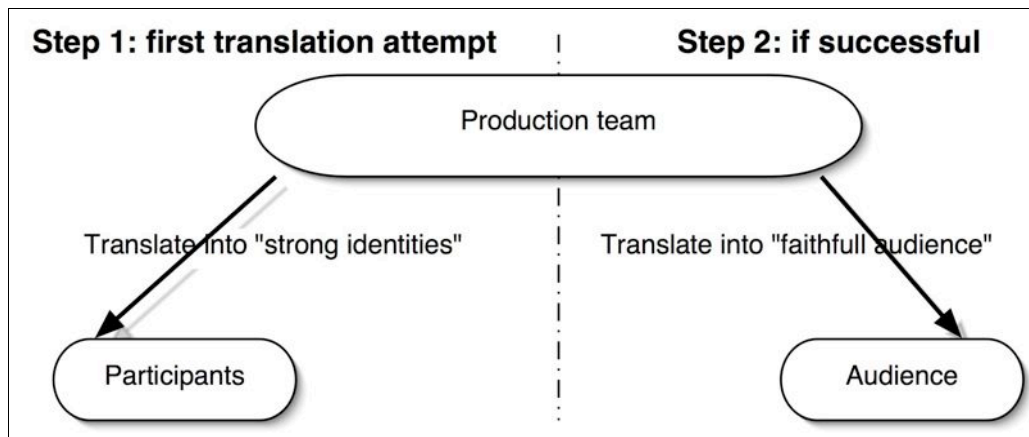


Figure 4: the production team's two translations

The advantage of representing the double managerial problematic this way is that it visually represents the actors involved, rather than merely reproducing the point of view of the production team. Moreover, ANT's underlying assumption, namely that all the actors in a network have the tendency to drift off, pulls our attention to the fact that a network is a "precarious achievement", that it requires a lot of work to keep all the actors in line with the program: participants do not always do as they are expected (for a variety of reasons), and audience behaviour is very hard to predict. Lastly, and this is something we will get back to in section 3, by visualising the actor "production team" and how it keeps "its" network intact we can see how the production team makes itself the nodal point in the network: both steps (first translating the participants, then translating the audience) are essentially strategies of the *production team*. *They* initiate the different steps, *they* keep control of the events, and *they* make themselves indispensable. In short, the production team posits itself as the spider at the centre of the web, the central point from which all movement is initiated, monitored and controlled. Or, to use the precise ANT term, the production team constructs itself as an obligatory passage-point.

The chapter will precede as follows. In section 2 we will investigate how the production team mobilises the nonhuman actors in the assemblage to their own advantage. This is in fact a re-reading of chapter 4 but from a different angle, one that focuses on nonhuman actors and how they "act", rather than strategies. After this, in section 3, we will turn our attention to the way the production team constructs itself as an obligatory passage-point, what this tells us about how televisual power relationships are kept intact and what this tells us about media institutions attitude towards the "outside world" in general. This will then set the stage for an (auto)critique of some of the concepts of ANT that will form the core of section 4. After trying to reassess what this means for how we should think the identities of the participants (section 5), we will conclude the production analysis with a reassessment of the televisual power relationship from the viewpoint of accountability.

2. Strategic use of nonhuman actors

During their managerial efforts both production teams mobilise nonhuman actors in the network. The list of nonhuman actors that can be mobilised is almost endless¹, but within the context of the production teams' managerial strategies three classes of nonhuman actors are particularly relevant: objects, information and time-space constellations.

2.1 Strategic use of the camera's agency

The strategic use of objects refers mostly to the strategic use of the camera, or better, the way the camera is an active force in the production process. Take for instance the following quote from *Blind Date*'s producer, and notice how he stresses that the camera affects the behaviour of participants:

Jan: How do participants relate to television? I mean, will they confess or do they rather think "I am not going to tell everything on television"?

Producer: It's an ambivalent thing. When the camera is not running they will say "I am not going to say that on television". But sometimes it happens that from the moment the camera is running they get into a certain drive. Or they say things that you and I wouldn't even think of because they want to show off. It's bizarre, but that's how it works. And sometimes you have those who say "such and such has happened but I am not going to say that on television"...

The point the producer raises is an important one, namely that the sheer presence of the camera has an effect on participants' behaviour: the camera makes that people will start to show off, or conversely, that they are intimidated. From the production team's point of view the latter effect is unwelcome whereas the former provides them the strong identities they so desperately need. Whatever direction the effect goes, however, is irrelevant for the fundamental issue at stake, namely that both "performances" are altered by the presence of the camera: without the presence of the camera both interviews would have gone differently.

The best way to understand why and how the camera "acts" is by drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical difference between on- and offstage. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) Goffman argues that the way we behave in public is fundamentally different from the way we behave in private, and that social actors carefully monitor and manipulate the image they give off in public. In fact, his book is an analysis of the different strategies social actors use in protecting and crafting the their public image, with the aim of enhancing their social status. It is exactly the border between public and private, between on- and offstage, that the camera

¹ This can be explained by the nature of an "actor". Within ANT an actor is "a patterned network of heterogeneous relations" (Law 1992: 384). In other words, a perfectly delineated actor does not exist because it is always constituted in relationships with other actor-networks. One can say that ANT focuses on the relationships that constitute actors, rather than the actor-in-itself. A computer, for example, is not a single object but consists of a hard drive, a processor and so on. Moreover this hard drive is constituted by and linked to other networks, like a production firm in Taiwan, for example, or global capitalism. Consequently, a network has the tendency to proliferate endlessly. Actor-networks that do appear to be one single, solid actor are called punctualised actors. These are, quite simply, actor-networks that have black-boxed the work that has gone into them.

crosses. The camera transforms a situation which is in principle private (during the interview there are only a few people present) into a public event, on scales that were unheard of 100 years ago. In sum, the camera is a sphere-crossing device that “magically” changes private events into public ones, and it is because of this capacity that it is an actor.

A second characteristic of the camera’s agency is that it creates *continuous time*. The best way to understand this is by opposing the montage versus the footage. In the montage the director can create a narrative or a sequence by cutting out irrelevant or contradictory parts. The montage can condense time or even change the sequence of events (up to the point that cause and effect get reversed). Footage, on the other hand, registers the events *as they unfold*. Or, more precisely, from the moment the camera is on it is a ruthless machine that registers every minor detail. There is no escape, no time-out or interruption possible – unless of course, the camera man stops shooting, or the “object” tries to get out of focus. It is to this characteristic that Nancy, a participant was referring when she said quite phlegmatically “if you say something they have got it – and you know they will use it. But if you don’t answer...”

From a managerial point of view, however, the capacity of the camera to act does not always take participants into the desired direction. We have already seen that Streetmate’s production team tried to hide the camera during the dinner date, hoping that it would not affect the interaction between participants. There were more “positive” camera uses, though, as for instance when the presence of the camera was used for making participants “confess”. The example of Stijn having to admit that he falls for physical looks could only work because the camera was present.

It is Blind Date, though, that uses the camera’s agency far more strategically. In fact, the kind of social engineering so typical for Blind Date depends to a large extent on the presence of the camera. Take for instance the function of the bish-bash, which is first recorded separately and later shown to the returning couple. I have already stressed that the showing of the bish-bash must be seen as an interactional technology: since the bish-bash is edited by juxtaposing the most contrasting comments it elicits explanations according to conflict-lines. This is moreover strengthened by the fact that the studio talk is “doubly public”: it is shot in front of a live audience, plus the camera records every single facial expression *while they are watching* the bish-bash. The audience at home gets to see, simultaneously in split-screen, both the bish-bash and their instant reaction to it.



Picture 1: The bish-bash and the agency of the camera

It is worth looking into detail how the camera's transformatory capacity is used in this example, because it is a very clever instance of social engineering, one that works on three levels and nicely patches the participants and the audience together. First of all there is the fact that the bish-bash is shown to the participants, which is already a reversal of the "normal course of affairs". Usually, when we talk about a third person not present, that third person is not supposed to hear the comments we have made. Although the participants know that their comments will be broadcast later on it is nevertheless a very artificial situation because participants "eavesdrop" on each other – and this thanks to the camera's capacity to transform private events into public ones. But the social engineering also takes place on a second level: because the camera also catches their instant reaction to it participants have no time to think through their answers or hide their disillusion from sight². Here the presence of the camera forces them to react instantly to what is sometimes quite insulting or even hurtful, and thus it forces participants towards the strong quotes and identities the production team needs. On a third level there is the split-vision image, in which we get to see both the confession and the instant studio reaction. This is the visual equivalent of the behaviourist laboratory: the viewer can instantly see what the effects are of a certain statement: if she says this, he reacts so. In this particular set-up, which is *artefactual* (it is constructed) and *artificial* (no other type of social interaction works similarly), the camera does three things at once: it affects the interaction between the participants; it forces them to react immediately; and it offers the audience at home a larger than life look into the depths of their soul.

² The format which uses this to the extreme is *Temptation Island*: during the "campfire nights" participants often get to see images of their partner's adultery, and the camera ruthlessly catches every single glimpse of emotion, often even replaying them.

What we see in this particular example is that the Blind Date production team, although confronted with the same “problem” of the camera (sometimes it enhances the performance of strong identities, sometimes it blocks it), “somehow” manages to use more to their own advantage. In order to understand why this is so, we have to consider the other nonhuman actors in the network – namely information and spatial-temporal constellations – and how they are mobilised by the two production teams.

2.2 Strategic use of information

“Information” is the knowledge that the production team has about what really happened during the date. It is especially at this level that Streetmate’s production team comes into trouble. After they have taped the dinner date they hold few trumps for getting to know what happened afterwards. An editor keeps contact with the participants in order to arrange the “two week afterwards” shootings but she also uses these opportunities to “check up” and see how things have evolved from a romantic point of view. But she remains by and large dependent upon what the participants want her to know. In Blind Date the holiday companion and the report s/he writes offer the production team an inside view on the date, and we have seen that this information is used in order to make participants crack. For example, during the taping of the bish-bash this knowledge is used for making participants confess things that happened during the holiday (detailed below).

How does information “act”? What is the specificity of information as an actor? In fact, the holiday report is what within ANT is called an “immutable mobile” (see chapter 2). The holiday report actually brings knowledge about a “distant event” (the holiday) into the “calculation centre” (the studio). The holiday report is a device that allows the production team to monitor what has happened “at a distance”. The combination of the holiday companion and the report s/he writes indeed extends the influence of the production team beyond its physical boundaries (i.e. the studio close to Brussels). Moreover the report extends the will of the production team in an *immutable* way: the holiday companion knows perfectly which events are important and which events are banal, whereas the holiday partners are not always aware of the spy-like qualities of the holiday companion. Consider for example the following excerpt from an interview with a participant:

Jan: When they were taping the bish-bash did you have the feeling they were looking for strong quotes?

John Ray: One of the oddest things was that they knew everything we had done during the holidays[...] So I guess they [the different members of the production team] had been talking to each other, in order to know which questions they had to ask to whom. I thought that was very odd.

The quote from John Ray shows to what extent participants are unaware of the spy-function of the holiday companion. Moreover, as John Ray hints at in the quote, “they knew which questions they had to ask” – and this is why the holiday report is an *immutable* mobile: it allows the production team member taping the bish-bash to ask “the right questions” (those questions that lead to “strong quotes” and “strong identities”) even though he or she not present³.

³ In this context it should be mentioned that the holiday reports were the only documents Blind Date’s production team refused to let me have a look at, because they were

We now understand better why Streetmate's production team's managerial capabilities are rather limited: they quite simply lack the immutable mobiles their Blind Date colleagues have at their disposition. As a result, the Blind Date production team has a competitive advantage during the confessional moments. But the most important difference, the one that explains why Blind Date is so much more efficient in managing the participants, is the strategic use of *time-space constellations*, the third nonhuman actor in the network.

2.3 Strategic use of time-space constellations

Time-space constellations have to do with the control of bodily movements in space: who does what where and at which moment? In the previous chapter we have already encountered moments during which this becomes important. For example, whether one interviews a participant separately or in group is an important choice to make, since it will affect the outcome of the interview (see "confessional strategies" in the previous chapter). The way the bish-bash is recorded is another example: by doing the interview *immediately* after the participants return from the holiday the production team hopes emotions still run high, giving a "better performance". Moreover, by physically separating the two interviewees they cultivate a situation of mutual distrust, because the one doesn't know what the other has said. In short, by using time and space consciously the production team can affect the performance of the participants.

It is possible to give many other examples of the strategic use of time-space constellations in Blind Date. In fact, the differences with Streetmate are striking: except for the decision how to take the interviews the Streetmate production team does not make strategic use of time-space constellations. Or, to be more precise, the problem of Streetmate's team is that its control of time-space is not tight enough. The reason for this difference lies in the spaces in which both programmes take place: the shopping street versus the studio.

The key element which gives Blind Date a strategic advantage over Streetmate lies exactly in difference between those two places. I have already mentioned that the studio is a place designed for making television, whereas the shopping street is not. But the studio is also a highly regulated, organised space, with strict allocations of space: the spatial distributions are fixed (audience, host and participants all have their place), the general structure of the recordings is determined in advance (in what the media industry calls a call-sheet), and in general the timing is tightly regulated. But Blind Date is particularly heavy-handed in its regulation of time and space. Hunters and Preys, for example, are carefully separated during the rehearsals and the shootings. The studio is compartmentalised by electrically controlled doors, and one needs a pin card for going to another part of the studio. This effectively limits the movements of the participants and enhances the control of the production team over "their" studio.

"rather ironic in style", as the producer puts it. It would be an interesting analysis, however, to see how these holiday reports focus on the "important events", thus containing already the focus on "strong identities" that will become later on so important.

The point I am getting at is that the Blind Date production “network”, once the shootings have started, is far more localised and hence controllable than Streetmate’s. Streetmate’s production team always had to work on uncharted territory, under constantly changing conditions which are hard to predict and even harder to control – there are some strategies and technologies which remain the same, but none of them even approximate the predictability of Blind Date’s studio. Time and time again Streetmate’s production team had to claim its own space in places which were not their own (restaurants, houses, bars), resulting in problematic control of space and participant management⁴. In Blind Date the opposite happens: participants are taken out of “their” environment and brought into a space owned by the production team (hence the endless rehearsals and strategies of televisual form). For the Blind Date production team the territory is well-known and the space is tightly controlled, and consequently everything becomes much more stable and predictable – even routine-like – and participants become “manageable bodies”.

Let me recapitulate the story thus far. If we focus on the nonhuman actors we see that the Blind Date network mobilises them to a higher degree than in Streetmate’s. Put simply: the Blind Date production team is far better at keeping nonhuman actors like the camera, information or spatio-temporal constellations aligned. Nonhuman actors are made to be allies, rather than obstacles or even opponents. There is one particular production practice which shows the extent to which Blind Date’s production team is able to mobilise these nonhuman actors in their managerial project. Blind Date’s producer told the following anecdote about the recording of a bish-bash:

Producer: This year we had a couple, and something happened between them on a jeep safari. But they refused to admit it. And of course, during the reactions, I mean, we first do a rehearsal, some general questions: “What do you think of him? What do you like about him? What don’t you like about him?”. So we rehearse this together with them. But what do we do downstairs, during the actual shootings? We take the same list and leave out the less interesting answers. [...] And then you take the report, and downstairs they are taping. And then the participants know the camera is rolling, and they answer smoothly, and then we throw in a number of questions that makes them startle. I mean, they *have* to react. We don’t do it because we want to bully them, but to get that extra something... And sometimes they crack, sometimes they don’t.

In this banal example the producer aligns (literally: bring into one line) the different nonhuman actors in the network, creating a coalition which is hard to break. First there is a time-space constellation: the interviewer is sitting upstairs and asks question through an intercom – different and more tricky questions than the ones previously rehearsed. Secondly there is information used as an *immutable mobile*: although the producer was not present during the holiday he *knows* from the holiday report that the couple became (sexually? romantically?) involved. Thirdly, the cameras capability to create continuous time is used to their strategic advantage:

⁴ During the Hunt Streetmate’s production team would use mobile technology for increasing their control over space: spotters were constantly screening the streets for possible participants, and would call the camera crew and the host where to go. Moreover, an editor could hear everything the host of the show said through wireless earphones, thus allowing her to monitor what was happening even if she was not present. Thus we see that the production team used modern communication technology in order to compensate for lack of control over space.

throwing in an unexpected or delicate questions while the camera is running is the televisual equivalent of "shock and awe". As the producer puts it: "I mean, they *have* to react".

We now understand better why the production context, as a *material* setting, is an active force that affects and sometimes even constitutes the performances of the participants: the nonhumans of which they are composed and which circulate in them are not just a passive "setting"; they are literally actors, allies, in the managerial power relationship between production team and participants. Sometimes they come to the help of the production team, sometimes the participants benefit from them – as for example when participants try to stick together and vehemently refuse to answer a question. In moments like these they use the agency of the camera to their own benefit: if a camera does not "catch" a quote it has, televisually speaking, not happened. As Nancy put it: "if you say something they have got it – and you know they will use it. But if you don't answer...".

A possible critique of the idea that nonhumans are full-blown actors in their own right might be that the camera, in order to be an actor, needs the production team. "All that the analysis has shown", the criticism might go, "is that the production team strategically manipulates the objects and spaces". While this is undoubtedly true the criticism is also in danger of reinstating the asymmetric Modern Constitution, with its clear-cut division of active, mobilising humans and passive, "dead" nonhumans. What I have aimed to do in this section is to look what happens when humans and nonhumans enter into a relationship, in a very specific setting, without privileging the one nor the other. Both types of actors "do" things in the hybrid network of which they form part. Without the nonhuman actor "camera" many (if not all) of the abovementioned strategies would not work or even be necessary: there would be no need for confessional strategies if a camera wouldn't transform the private into the public. In this sense the presence of the camera is the *cause* of managerial strategy, not a passive object used by the production team. To claim so, however, would be to reinstall a new asymmetric relationship, one that privileges nonhumans instead of humans (as can be found in for example environmental determinism). In short, a network should be seen as a piecemeal assemblage in which humans and nonhumans play their part, mutually reinforce each other or counteract. That is why in chapter 2 I called neomaterialism a *postconstructionist* approach: the aim is not to deny that *Blind Date* or *Streetmate* are human-made; rather, the task is to ask what role materials play in the networks of the social; networks that are inevitably *hybrid* in nature.

3. The production team as obligatory passage-point

Until now I have focussed on space as physical location, namely as a tangible and active force in shaping the interaction between participants. Space is also important, however, on a more metaphorical level. The control of space also refers to ownership, as in "my room is my private space", or "public spaces are accessible to everyone". In short, space and ownership are intimately related (Clark 1990, Young 1994), which means that if we look at the spatial dynamics of a certain network, and

the strategies that some actors use in order to maintain it, we can see how ownership of the network is secured.

The point I want to raise is that the production team posits itself as the centre of the network, as the obligatory passage-point where the participants have to pass through if they want to appear on television. For this purpose we will examine two instances which are particularly interesting: Blind Date's selection procedure, and the editing phase.

We have already seen that Blind Date's selection procedure is essentially a set of procedures for including as many as possible participants and excluding the ones that don't fit with the programme. If we look at the same procedures spatially, however, we see that the selection procedures in fact consist of a series of moments during which different human and nonhuman actors traverse space and come together. There are five such moments:

- The moment when the alliance between Capiou and VTM spreads the message across Flanders and members of the audience receive this message and in some way or another are incited to act. This happens through different means of communication (internet, ads on television, ads in popular press).
- This results in dispersed reactions across Flanders, where people start writing letters of application, (re)presenting themselves or another person.
- Consequently, the production team receives these letters of application, resulting in an invitation and a first form sent to the applicants.
- When the possible participants receive this form, they accept the invitation (or they don't), they fill in the received form and move their "bodies and selves" to the hotel near Brussels
- A fifth *moment* occurs when they physically meet the production team, and take the selection test.

This sequence of moments is trivial in itself, but under closer examination the spatial dynamic becomes clearer. First of all, these moments all imply a *movement* of people and representations across spaces. When the first initial message spreads across space, it evokes dispersed actions/representations that consequently are gathered in a central point, namely Ghent where Capiou Projects is situated. This leads again to a movement of representations across Flanders, inviting the people to gather in yet another central point: the hotel in Brussels. So we see a kind of oscillation, or rather a pulsation between dispersion and contraction as indicated by Figure 2.

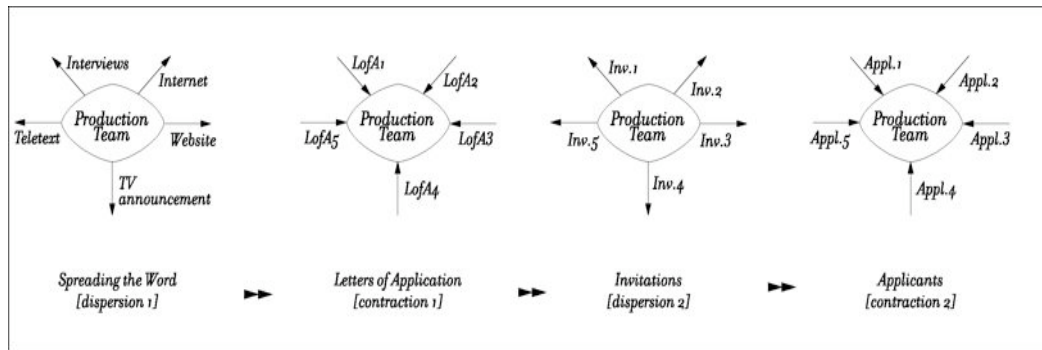


Figure 5: dispersion-contraction

Located at the centre of these dispersion-contraction movement is the production team. The production team is, so to speak, the spider located at the centre of the web. Although it needs the applicants (hence the dispersion moments) the production team nevertheless keeps tight control of the network by positing itself as the *obligatory passage-point* where the participants have to pass through if they want to participate in the programme. In Figure 3 there are two such centralising moments: "contraction 1" and "contraction 2"; both moments exclude the non-wanted participants (selection-as-exclusion). As a result of this, the production team makes the network "theirs": participants are "guests", who are "invited", not collaborators who stand on an equal footing or have a say in the production process.

This becomes even clearer when we look at what happens after the selection procedure, during the actual production of *Blind Date* and the editing phase afterwards. Figure 3 graphically represents the role of the production team during the actual production process. In a first step, the actual shootings, participants and their interactions are managed by the production team. Out of these managed interactions the performance of identities come forth. In a second step, the production team then starts to work with the footage of these performances and edits them so that they become edited strong identities. What is crucial in this chain of events is that the participants only have a role to play during the first stage: they provide the production team with their pretelevisional identity (their personality, hobbies, aspirations and capabilities), but their role is limited to that of supplier. Just like a supplier cannot make claims once he delivers the goods, participants have to supply their pretelevisional identity but they cannot make any claims later on. Their pretelevisional identity is processed in the *Blind Date* machinery, but they have little or no saying in this. The production team, to the contrary, occupies in each of the two steps a crucial position, as an intermediary but also as a gatekeeper. The production team, in other words, posits itself as the obligatory passage-point through which the whole machinery has to pass through, at several stages of the production process. By doing so, the production team makes the network "theirs": *Blind Date* is owned by the production team, *not* the participants.

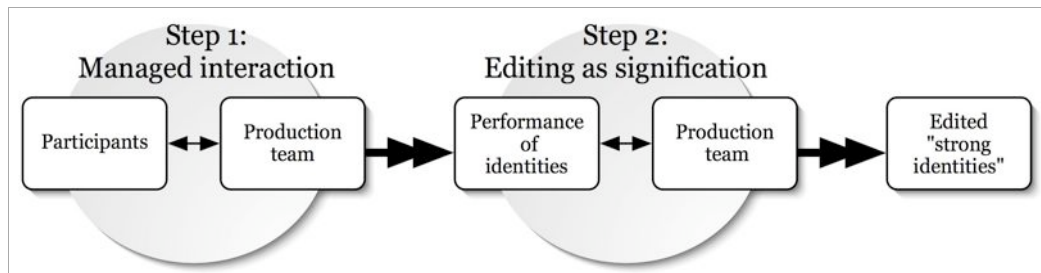


Figure 6: production team as obligatory passage-point during editing

In such a context, the participant is a collaborator or contributor who does not stand on equal footing with the production team: s/he does “identity work” and provides the production team with the raw material it is looking for, but does not get to decide how s/he is going to be portrayed; s/he contributes to the programme but is left out of the decision-making process on crucial phases. This makes the power relationship between production team and participants fundamentally *asymmetric*⁵. The often heard argument of television producers, especially those working in the field of reality TV, that “participants are old enough to know what’s good for them” obscures exactly this fundamental asymmetry. It presents itself as emancipatory, by critiquing a paternalist attitude – the attitude that participants are “so stupid” that they have to be protected from exposing themselves. As such I have no quarrel with this critique of paternalism. Participants indeed do not need protection from *themselves*; the biggest threat to them is the *asymmetry* of the televisual power relationship. The argument pretends that production team and participants stand on an equal footing. It makes the relationship between production team and participants into an equal, symmetric power relationship, and this does not correspond to the actual practices by which media people work. All media people, not just those working in dating shows, consider the programme they are working on “theirs”, and construct themselves in various ways as obligatory passage-points (see Carpentier 2001, Couldry 2000a). As a result, the media are often open systems but rarely democratic ones: they are open to and incorporate “the outside world” (non-media people) but *on the conditions of their own choosing*. All of our cultural studies talk about media and power has rarely investigated this aspect of media power, namely the ways by which the media are fundamentally asymmetric in their set-up and procedures.

4. Failure of and limits to management

In chapters 1 and 2, when I laid down the contours of the materialist approach to communication, we have encountered two substantial critiques. The first is particular to the Foucaultian approach to power, the second is valid for both Foucault and ANT. The criticism of Foucault stated that he focuses on the way

⁵ My use of the term asymmetric in this context should not be confused with the symmetric approach advocated by ANT. In this context, asymmetric refers to unequal power relationships. In principle these power relationships are of course reversible (it’s not hard to imagine a future where this would be the case), but it rarely – never – happens in reality. It is for this reason that I consider the relationship between production team and participants a structural unequal power relationship (see chapter 2 sections 3.4).

institutions are supposed to work (on their governmental logic), but fails to incorporate how the institutions actually work. If we look at the way institutions *actually* work, so the criticism goes, we see that the implementation of measures often differs substantially from how the reformers and theoreticians intended them in the first place. Moreover Foucault deduces subjectivities from the measures that are intended to produce them, neglecting in the process the many ways in which the subjects of an institutional regime “experience” or engage with the subject positions inscribed in them. The second criticism, aimed at Foucault as well as ANT, claims that both types of analysis look “from the viewpoint of power”, and by doing so they are retroactively reproducing the viewpoint of the victor. This is exactly what I have been doing up until now: I have focussed on how the production team organises things, on *their* views and preoccupations. If I have quoted participants it was mostly because I wanted to illustrate an aspect of the institutional regime, not so much for their view on the matter or their experiences. In this sense the analysis has indeed “muted” the participants, because it stayed on the side of official knowledge.

This section, then, is concerned with these questions. It will focus on two questions: a. how effective is the institutional regime, and b. how do the participants “live” it? The figure that allows us to explore both questions is the issue of “failed management”. This term refers to those instances when the institutional machinery hampers, when it is *not* capable of obtaining the results it aims at. The production team is not an almighty and monolithic organisation that dominates passive and docile participants that stand no chance against the behemoth that confronts them. Contrary to what the analysis thus far might suggest there are many instances in the interviews where members of the production team talk about the failure of management. Especially the Streetmate interviews read as a story of many missed opportunities, of being unable to get out of the participants what *could* be there. There are roughly four types of failure or limits to management that are of interest here: practical limitations, unpredictable participants, incapable participants and resisting participants. Although this section is still concerned with management it will be a less *centred* account, incorporating also the points-of-view of participants and their reactions to the institutional regime. This change of focus will then allow us to gradually move beyond the “eye of power” and to look at dating shows as “overproductive” assemblages, assemblages that perhaps have a rationality behind them but also lead to excesses.

4.1 Practical limitations

Time limitations are one of the most important limits to management. Put simply, the production team can often not afford to spend hours on making a participant confess, or getting to the truth of things. The reasons for this is slightly different for Streetmate than Blind Date. Streetmate is far cheaper to make than Blind Date, because it requires a minimal set of collaborators and hardly no production. In principle this should put less time pressure on Streetmate’s production team than on Blind Date’s, since the latter is a big budget production with many collaborators. Moreover it is a studio-based programme, which also makes it urgent to use time efficiently (13 episodes are recorded in 3 studio days). Despite this apparent cost (and thus time) advantage Streetmate was on a very tight schedule, due to the fact that VT4 had postponed the start of the project, leaving the production team with a margin of one week to tape one episode (see Chapter 4, 3.1

for the story behind this). Thus Blind Date and Streetmate, although for different reasons, were often limited in their participant management due to time reasons.

Technical failures and “environmental problems” are another of the practical limitations the production team encountered. This was mostly a problem in Streetmate. Since they shoot outdoors, they are operating in environments that are not “made for television” and they lacked the kind of environmental control that their Blind Date colleagues had over the studio. Getting the sound right was particularly problematic, especially during the special episodes in a discotheque and on a train. But even the regular dinner dates were often technically challenging due to inconsistent background noise⁶. Another problem for the Streetmate production team was the lighting. Since the majority of the episodes were shot during October – December they only had a few hours of daylight to go Hunting. Moreover everything had to be concentrated within the 10-14h time slot, because differences in light are very visible on television.

In theoretical terms observations like these show to what extent the studio space, by its very nature, is an ally of the production team – not only in their managerial efforts, but also in terms of televisual values like lighting or sound quality. The nonhuman actors in a non-television environment are indeed very untrustworthy, and if you combine this with participants that are not media professionals it becomes clear under which difficult conditions the Streetmate production team had to work. Blind Date, because it is shot in the studio, did not have to take these technical and environmental properties into consideration, to the contrary: they often used the studio space and its props in their managerial strategies (see section 2)

4.2 Unpredictable participants

A second major source of failure is the fact that participants can be quite unpredictable. From the production team’s point of view participants are unruly creatures that often come up with surprising things, sometimes desirable, sometimes less so. No matter how hard they tried to keep everything under control, something always seems to happen that unsettles the expectations. The list of anecdotes is almost endless: parents showing up with their daughter for a Streetmate dinner date and sitting next to the dating couple; a participant walking around with a gun in his home during the shooting of the biotope⁷; holiday partners falling in love

⁶ At the risk of getting too technical: a sound recordist has to choose between different types of microphones depending upon the situation. Condenser microphones are very sensitive and therefore give a very good sound; for this reason they are excellent for recording in situations with little or no background noise. Carbon microphones are less sensitive and therefore better suited for picking up one singular sound source in a space with much background noise (e.g. a stage). Moreover there are differences in pick-up patterns (bi-directional, omni-directional and shotgun microphones). Add to this the use of techniques like compression (“squashing” the sound) and gating (filtering out sound below a certain threshold) and we get an idea of the complexity of certain situations.

⁷ Streetmate’s sound recordist recalls the story: “This guy was a complete nuthead. He had a gun in his living room and was asking us to tape the gun as well, saying that a friend of him had recently died and that this gun was a symbol of death for him, stuff like that. And he was drinking champagne first, then Bacardi straight”. On top of that the production team’s car had

with the holiday companion instead of each other; a dinner date during which a participant ordered very expensive wine consuming half of the production budget, and so on. In short, the fact that the production team works with "ordinary" people they don't know brings along a whole range of unexpected behaviours that are hard to predict and often put the production team in funny, poignant or sometimes even dangerous situations.

One of the most dreaded and also most frequent "unpredictabilities" is the loss of celibate status at some stage of the production process. Especially *Blind Date* is particularly vulnerable to this, given the way its production process is spread over time. Preselections generally take place roundabout April-May, studio shootings start early June, and the last of the studio sessions is recorded somewhere in September. This leaves plenty of time for participants to encounter somebody else during the time. Moreover, the willingness to participate in *Blind Date* means that one in general is actively looking for somebody else. As one participant I interviewed, Muriel, said during the show: "I didn't walk around with my eyes in my pocket, you know".

In fact, the anecdotal evidence I have gathered shows that it happens much more than frequently one might expect. Of the three *Blind Date* participants I interviewed two of them had a boyfriend at some stages of the production process. Moreover, Nancy, one of the *Blind Date* participants told me that in her "pool" of Preys all three of them had a boyfriend, most of them in between the preselections and the first studio shootings. When asked why they hadn't quit the programme at that time a variety of reasons were given: because they had signed a contract, because they wanted to go on holiday anyway,... Whatever the reason, it is my feeling that many *Blind Date* participants are in a relationship at some point of the production.

In *Streetmate* this problem is less common, because Hunt, dinner date and afterwards follow quickly after each other, everything happening in the time span of a month. Nevertheless participants can also behave in unexpected manner, and not always in a desired direction. The story of Tom and Liesbet is a particular good example of how participants' unexpected behaviour can interfere with the plans and aspirations of the production team. Tom and Liesbet are two participants who appeared in *Streetmate* episode ten. By chance, this episode was recorded at my university's campus. The televised version tells a touching story of Tom meeting Liesbet through *Streetmate*, and going out for a dinner with her. This doesn't go particularly well, but when the cameras leave, the spark of love hit both of them. Two weeks later they are officially together (made official because made public by the broadcasting of *Streetmate*).

However, what happened in reality is that three days after the recording of the Hunt, Tom and Liesbet ran into each other at a university party, started to chat, and kissed later that night. So, Tom and Liesbet were confronted with a problem: they had to go on a date and had to act as if it were the first time they' saw each other. They decided not to tell the production team, and to fake the whole dinner. And it

broken down, so they were forced to wait there for several hours until a replacement car arrived. The moral of the story? One doesn't need to be a war correspondent to get into sticky situations.

worked: nobody of the production team noticed anything, and neither did the audience at home watching the show. As Tom says:

Tom: So we've been fooling the production team since halfway the programme. I mean, my friends as well, the friends they interviewed before the dinner. So I had to tell them the whole story, Liesbet told them the whole story. And these people [their friends] played along. It was brilliant!

Tom and Liesbet's story as well as the data on Blind Date show us that participants are no "dupes" of the production team, to the contrary: they can also pretend, fake things, even use the programme to their own advantage. Els' story is particularly relevant in the latter respect. She went on a dinner date with Joenait who was at the time participating in the Mr. Belgium contest. Both Els and the production team felt that Jonait was not really interested in the dinner date but was more into the whole game because of the extra and free publicity it generated⁸. Examples like these show that participants often have their own agenda, that they actively use the programme for their own purposes⁹. In short, it would be wrong to look at them as passive objects of the dictatorial production regime.

The point I am getting at is that participants are not powerless and passive "objects" under the control of a tyrant production regime. They are (social) actors in the true sense of the word. In other words, the problem with the materialist-institutional analysis of productional routines (the analysis we have conducted thus far) is that it is too one-sided (focussed on the point of view of the production team) and also that it is, in a way, too "serious" (it looks at the production team's governmental *rationalities*, without taking into account the playfulness of things, or the fact that participants can actually fake sometimes). In the next subsections (4.3 and 4.4) we will therefore focus more on the participants' version of things. This will then allow us to look at the production of dating shows from a less managerial point of view, stressing the overproductive aspects of dating shows (4.5).

4.3 "Incapable" participants

A third major source of failed management is that participants are simply not *capable* to do the things the production team expects from them, no matter how hard they try. For Streetmate this happened mostly during the dinner dates. One beforehand, the production team had hoped that these dinner dates were going to be the programme's *unique selling proposition*: the viewer would get a direct look on the act of dating itself, rather than having to rely on second-hand accounts of it. But the dinner dates ended up being rather disappointing due to the fact that the young age group (cf. Chapter 4) simply did not have lots of experience in doing dinner dates. So on top of the artificiality of the situation (the presence of the camera, etc...)

⁸ Els and the production team based their impression upon the fact that Joenait seemed completely disinterested during the dinner date. Moreover, a few months later Joenait participated in Mr. Gay Belgium, which raised even more suspicions about his reasons for participating.

⁹ It had also happened a few times that participants used Streetmate in order to date somebody they had "chased" for quite a while. Although this kind of "programme appropriation" is more in line with the expectations of the programme it shows that sometimes the production team can be used by participants in order to obtain their own, particular agenda.

the young daters also had to deal with a romantic practice they felt uncomfortable with, and many of the dinner date discussions literally went nowhere. The producer:

Producer: Some of these talks lasted for several hours, like two to three hours. But they didn't talk about anything, it was total emptiness. Like "nice vase, isn't it?" – [imitates working class accent] "yes, I also like it" – "yes, it's really nice to have a vase like this on the table". [...] After a while we realised that we had to keep the dinner very short unless it was an animated talk.

In *Blind Date* it is the first part, the ritualised getting-to-know each other process, which puts participants in problems. Amongst the members of the production team denigrating comments about the participants' stage qualities are quite frequent, and some of them are borderline harsh. Take for instance the following interview exchange:

Editor: One of my tasks is that I make up of their so-called answers, which I do together with them. In recent years there's an evolution that they have a much bigger say in it.

Jan: Really? More than before?

Editor: Yes, they have more of a say in than before. Although they still don't manage to get it as they should, but that has to do with excitement and stress.

Jan: What is really striking is that you all have a negative image of people.

Editor? Negative? You think so? I think it's just an observation. It's a realist image of people, that's what it is. But I think it's due to the circumstances: they are here the whole day, living towards that one moment, and then there are other stress factors, like the fact that they only have one shot, the audience being present, I mean, it's for real!

Scornful remarks about participants and their televisual qualities are quite common amongst members of the production team, and they seem to be an integral part of television's production culture. At first I was quite shocked by this, but it is true that many participants are not capable of retaining the few lines they have been rehearsing all day. It is tempting, therefore, to conclude from this that the production team is "right", and that participants are indeed incapable of remembering a few lines. This shows, however, the dangers of looking through "the eye of power": by adopting the managerial point of view one deletes from sight the unequal power relationships that gave birth to the managerial epistemology in the first place. Because if we look carefully at the words of *Blind Date*'s editor we get a hint of how things actually work.

The crucial element here is what the editor calls "the circumstances", or what I have called before the production context. Participants, being the non-media professionals they are, suddenly have to behave according to the rules of television. But this is difficult for somebody who has never before stand in front of a camera or in front of 400 people. Moreover they are not treated in equal fashion as the "other" professionals at the set. The rules are entirely different for the host of the show: whereas she can use mnemonic devices like little cards or an autocue Preys have to remember their text by heart. Moreover if, the host makes a mistake the shootings are stopped and she can start all over again. For the participants this is not so: when

participants stammer, forget their line or make a mistake the shootings are *not* interrupted, and it *will* always be used in the broadcasted version. If you combine this with the fact that the quotes are not “theirs” but have been shaped by the show’s romantic requirements, participants’ “incapabilities” come to be seen in a different daylight. In such conditions stage fright is not something that the production team combats but *cultivates*.

From the participants’ point of view, then, not remembering your lines is a logical consequence of the production context. Take for instance the following quote from John Ray:

John Ray: I was really nervous during the day of rehearsals. Really nervous. But that’s because they didn’t allow me to do my own thing. Put me in front of an audience and let me do my own thing and you’ll see that I am quite ok. But if they make me do stuff [like the rehearsed lines and the “obliged” questions] than I become nervous. Complete stage fright.

John Ray is quite explicit: if the show would have allowed him to do “his own thing” he would not have been this nervous (and John Ray indeed stammered his way through the first studio shootings). John Ray’s stammering (or his “failure” to perform), then, is not so much a property of John Ray, it is a property of John Ray-in-a-particular- context, one that did not allow him to act as he normally would.

The problem of stage fright is only part of a wider problematic of dating shows, namely that they oblige participants to interact in terms which are not necessary their own. In general, dating shows are oriented towards middle class values, like oral fluency, being able to speak in public, the ability to use standard Dutch ... While these capabilities are not limited to middle class only they nevertheless are concentrated in this social group. But if we look at the composition of the people that apply for Blind Date (and the letters-of-application offer a good view on this, since most of them contain the profession) it is clear that Blind Date recruits mostly people from working class and lower middle classes. It is hard to adequately quantify this since in the forms applicants described their profession in their own words, which are not always very precise. Based upon profession I deduced the level of education (going for the most “optimist” estimation), which gave the following results: of 237 applicants 12 had a (possible) university degree, 194 did not and 31 had a missing value. The clearest (less ambivalent) indication of education offer the students: of the 19 students 3 students were at the university. The most common professions are office clerks (26), manual labourers (24), nurses and other care workers (15), people working in hotels, restaurants and bars (9), bakers (4), in short mostly executive jobs. In comparison, in the whole sample we only find three managers (two of shops and one McDonald’s) and four self-employed.

Blind Date is in other words, not a cross-section of society: it recruits more in the “lower” sections of society, and their class habitus sits rather uneasily with some of the requirements of the show. John Ray is a case in point: he went to a technical school and now works as a cabinet-maker. Although he is very talkative he is not eloquent in the way Blind Date expects him to be. For instance, when he returned from the holiday and complained about Nancy being “too calm and too timid” Ingeborg asked him why he chose her then, while he knew making bobby lace was one of her hobbies. John Ray avoids the question but when Ingeborg keeps

pressing he suddenly asks “what is bobby lace?” – upon which the studio audience starts to laugh.

Anecdotes like these reveal that for many participants Blind Date’s production context is an alien one, far removed of their daily vocabulary and behaviour. In a way, the production team forces participant to perform identities which do not lie in their “natural” register, yet the resulting “failure” is presented as a failure *of participants*. A failure we can all have a good laugh at, as when a “stupid” participant does not know what making bobby lace is. For this reason I am not entirely sure to what extent floundering and stage fright is a failure of management or an intended effect. The production team’s official rhetoric is that the endless rehearsals are there for the participants, because it reduces stage fright, makes them feel comfortable and generally eases the nerves. But if participants’ well-being is of such importance for the production team they might as well interrupt the shootings if they stammer or forget their line, *quod non*. The “humanist” rhetoric is thus a form of doublespeak, it pretends to be benevolent whereas the actual production practices are rather dubious. To be fair: I do not think that the production actively looks for floundering and stage fright; rather it is an unintended but *systematic* effect and the production team also knows that this scores with the audience – something they will only admit off the record.

Whether intended or not, what is striking about this whole construction is that the production team is let “of the hook”. The televisual assemblage in which “failure” takes place is such that the participant is the stupid one, not the context in which s/he has to perform. It is the *participant* who is in the spotlight, who at in the centre of attention, whereas the production team stands safely by the side and deletes itself from sight. Through a magical disappearing act the production team becomes invisible, and the participant becomes the sole “actor” of the whole. To what extent this assemblage is effective in obscuring the power relations that produce “failure” we will explore in the next chapter 5.

4.4 Participants: resistance and compliance

If “incapable” participants are on source of failed management, resisting participants are another. The difference between both is that is that the former is an unintended cause of failure (participants do not intend it as a conscious act of resistance), whereas the latter refers to those intentional and conscious strategies and acts of participants that go against the institutional regime to which they are subjected. We have occasionally already encountered some of such strategies: in Blind Date, for instance, most participants promise not to get too hard on each other during the bish-bash. In this subsection we will focus on such explicit “acts of resistance” by participants against the managerial regime to which they are subjected.

The first of these strategies is the most extreme: to *redraw from the programme*. All of the participants I spoke to at one time or another had doubts about their engagement and wanted to get out of it. Especially Streetmate was very vulnerable at this level: since participants were often “converted” on the spot it often happened that participants, after some time, started to have doubts.

Marijke: Yes, I wanted to get out at a certain time. Not really just before the dinner date, more when we were hunting. Because we were looking around and I really couldn't find a date and such. At that time I really wanted to cancel the whole thing.

Els: I knew my father was not going to like it. Joyce De Troch, VT4, Mr. Belgium, that's not his cup of tea. I mean, I made the worse possible combination. And so when I came home [after the Hunt] with my sister, we were very enthusiast... But my dad was furious: "What are my clients going to say? Your name is not on there, is it?", stuff like that. So at that time I really felt "oh Els what did you get into this time again?". Also, all of my friends were making fun of me when I told them. But it was Anja [the editor] who convinced me to stay.

Tom, who was already together with his Streetmate at the moment of the dinner date had to be recorded, really wanted to quit just before: since he and Liesbet had to pretend they did not know each other the foresight of having to fake the first encounter was not very stimulating.

Tom: The dinner date was hell, disastrous. Because at that time we were already a week together, but we couldn't bring up subjects we had already talked about. So we had to ask questions to which we already knew the answer! So that was boring as hell. I think we both smoked a pack of cigarettes each! [...] Before we were thinking about when to tell the production team: do we say it before the dinner date, afterwards, never? But I think we did the right thing.

For varying reasons these three Streetmate participants at one time felt the urge to cancel their participation. In *Blind Date* this is rarer, because getting selected requires a continued effort, even some dedication. Nevertheless none of the *Blind Date* participants I spoke expressed a really urgent desire to get on *Blind Date*. Remember that only one third of the participants initiate the application procedure themselves: most of the initial letters-of-applications are written by friends or family. So even during the selection procedure some of the participants expressed their reluctance to the whole thing. Muriel, for example, was on the brink of leaving the selection procedure because they took so much time and because they weren't offered anything to drink or eat for several hours. John Ray also wanted to leave because he felt he was making a fool of himself. So even during the selection procedure we already see a considerable degree of reluctance amongst possible participants. The most "dangerous" moment is the moment between the preselections and the first studio shootings: there are those participants that are disappointed they are only Prey, others have second thoughts, and others have become romantically involved. Once the shootings have started, however, *Blind Date* does not suffer a lot from participant redrawal¹⁰ (probably because of the future reward: the free holiday trip).

Whatever reasons people have for redrawing from dating shows it is something that the production teams anticipate upon. Streetmate had to find this out the hard way: during one of the first episodes a "hunted" girl didn't show up for the

¹⁰ As far as I know it has only happened once that a participant left the stage. It is a notorious episode, often recounted to me by *Blind Date aficionados*: a woman walked out of the programme during the studio talk because she felt attacked, with Ingeborg saying "you are a hate smurf".

dinner date. Eventually the production team solved the problem by using a stand-in (a friend of the host of the show), but since that moment they made newly-found participants instantly sign a form in which they committed themselves to pay for the costs of a Hunt, approximately €2000. Blind Date uses the same technique. One of the first forms participants receive contains the following section:

"I hereby declare to agree to the following:

- i. I will make myself available for one day of studio shootings, to be determined by Capiou Projects NV. If I am selected I will go on a holiday trip with the partner in question for a period to be determined by Capiou Projects NV.
- ii. During this holiday I will honour the guidelines of the person representing Capiou Projects NV.
- iii. If between the studio shootings and the holiday departure it becomes clear that the participant is in a relationship all costs made by Capiou Projects NV concerning recordings and holiday trip will be recuperated.
- iv. If I do not show up on the day of the recordings without a 48 hour notice Capiou Projects NV will take the necessary measurements to recuperate all costs concerned, since I cause technical unemployment for the entire production team.
- v. I will also make myself available for two days after the holiday trip for further shootings, to be determined by the production team.

Although legally this contract is not binding (in fact, it is illegal to make participants sign such a contract) it often deters participants sufficiently so they do not cancel their participation. From a theoretical point of view it is also striking, because it is one of the only moments that the institutional regime becomes purely restrictive (see below).

A second type of act of resistance is *reinstating the public/private divide*. There is something contradictory in participants' attitude towards the way the show plays with the public-private divide. On the one hand they are perfectly aware that the programme's *raison d'être* is about going public with things which are generally considered to be private, and they accept this logic. On the other hand they don't want to be "too naked", or they don't want to be made ridiculous. As a result participants are constantly balancing what things to bring out in the open and what things to keep for themselves. Els, for example, a Streetmate participant, refused to let her biotope be recorded in her home because she didn't want to "let the whole of Flanders know how I live". This is a clear attempt to keep what she considers to be her private life out of public sight. Moreover, it goes against the production team's attempt to extract "identity", as we have seen in section 2.

A third and related act of resistance is the *refusal to perform strong and clear-cut identities*. Basically this strategy boils down to trying to avoid being pinned down on a strong identity. Even in the televised versions this strategy is visible. Streetmate's Stijn and Ginni are a case in point. In episode eight they went out on a

dinner date together, and kissed later during the night in the absence of the camera. They spoke to each other during the rest of the week and in two weeks later Joyce interrogates them about what happened. Both rather unwillingly admit what happened. From these responses Joyce assumes 'so you're together now?', to which Stijn reluctantly replies 'not really, it's too early, we'll see'. Joyce keeps pressing for a clear-cut answer until Stijn replies 'What do you want? You want us to kiss on television, I won't do that, you know!'. Examples like these clearly illustrate that participants try to avoid that they perform strong identities in public (in this case the performance of "the couple in love").

In *Blind Date* the refusal to perform strong identities mostly comes into play during the second part of the show, when the holiday partners return from the trip. After the holiday trip the stakes are higher: participants do not just perform parodies of themselves: they have gotten to know each other, comment upon each other's personality and in a way it is one's whole way of being which is being scrutinised – even judged – in public. All participants have seen the horror stories of returning couples criticising each other without mercy, and all of them want to avoid that situation. Consequently they promise, whatever their opinion about each other, to remain polite, and not get too hard on each other.

Nancy: Beforehand we had made a deal that we were going to keep it civilised. Because sometimes you see on *Blind Date* discussions that are just not normal anymore, that you feel ashamed in their place. And I think we did quite ok: I think we made clear that there were things bothering us but all in all we kept it quite civilised. I don't have the feeling I was too easy on him, but ... I mean, there were tensions, but it is not necessary to go and tell it on television.

John Ray: I agreed with Nancy that we were going to stay polite during the bish-bash. If you would see the original tape you would see that I just thought she was quiet and passive, nothing more. I can't lie and say "she's not my style" just because they want me to. I am not going to criticise her, it was a nice trip and I've had lots of fun. So I think I've behaved quite restricted.

The above quote from Nancy illustrates perfectly the difficult balancing act participants have to go through: she wanted to make it clear that indeed there were tensions between them, but on the other hand she didn't want to end up performing the "strong identity" all participants fear most: the fighting couple that come down hard on each other.

But here we also encounter the limits of participants' acts of resistance. It is true that if participants *really* stick together the production team cannot break their alliance. The problem, however, is that the strategies of the production team (for example, some of the confessional strategies and interviewing techniques used during the recording of the bish-bash) cultivate a feeling of betrayal and paranoia amongst participants that give the participants a hard time keeping their coalition together. John Ray and Nancy's story is illustrative: although they were both dedicated to "keep things civilised" there was enough tension between them to let doubt and suspicion do their destructive work. John Ray, for example, became quite agitated during the studio talk when Nancy talked in the bish-bash about his social background. Literally, in the bish-bash, Nancy says: "we come from a different

background. John Ray went to technical schools where you have to stand up for your rights". When I talked about this with John Ray he told me the following:

John Ray: When they showed the bish-bash to the audience I was nervous, really nervous. Because you have to watch it and at the same you hear for the first time what she has said about you. I mean, some of the things we talked about were private, whether you know that person well or only shallowly. And Nancy said some things I really didn't like, which made me angry. I mean, I tell her something confidentially, and she brought it up there while it was not necessary at all... Like for example, I used to be a problematic kid at school, and she brought it up there, whereas that wasn't necessary at all.

Jan: Did she say so?

John Ray: Yes, you know "John Ray went to problematic schools where he constantly had to stand up for himself.."

In itself this interview fragment is banal, but it reveals perfectly the mechanism behind the culture of suspicion. The coalition between John Ray and Nancy remained intact until Nancy said something which hinted at his background. Literally she didn't mention anything about him being a problematic child, she just mentioned the schools he went to, but it was enough for John Ray to take it as a personal attack that was needlessly made public. It was enough to get him agitated, and after the bish-bash their studio conversation became a little more high-pitched. Despite their good intentions the bish-bash did its identity work: it set them up against each other, and the tone of their conversation gained that little extra something which makes *Blind Date* such a fascinating view.

Acts of resistance like these show that participants are not dupes who just passively undergo the institutional regime. They are often aware of television's rationality and actively resist those aspects they don't really like. Sometimes, as we have seen in this section, they are even extremely aware of the tendency of dating shows to take them into the direction of "strong identities", and they actively resist the way the programme (and the production team) intends to cast them. But the institutional regime *anticipates* these acts of resistance: the format foresees these actions, takes them into consideration and proactively engages with them, hence the signing of the contract and the divide and conquer strategies. In a way, then, the production team is always one step ahead, as Nancy and John Ray found out. This does *not* make the production team an omnipotent actor – there are ways out of there for participants. But it gives the production team a strategic advantage that cannot be underestimated, and there are few participants who can resist the complex constellation of strategies and anticipated counterstrategies. This is partly because participants don't know "the rules of engagement": although they have an idea about what to expect next they don't know the exact details of how the shootings are organised, and how this will interfere with their well-intended and well-prepared plans. John Ray, for example, only discovered during the recording of the bish-bash that the holiday companion was in fact also a spy: "The weird thing is that they knew a lot about us... so I think the holiday companion had written a report about us and gave it to them". The moment John Ray discovered this, however, it was already too late, since he was sitting in the studio in front of a camera (he was, in other words,

"in" *continuous time*), baffled by the unexpected question¹¹ yet having to answer them.

If it is wrong to think that participants are institutional dupes, it would be equally wrong to deduce from this that they are institutional *guerilleros* who are in a constant but silent battle with the production team. Moments or acts of resistance are relatively rare, and in general frictions remain on a minimal level. In fact, it is very hard to describe the participants' attitude towards the institutional regime of dating shows. It is complex mixture of several attitudes, containing both quite critical as well as more complicit elements.

For example, most participants I talked to did not really "believe" in Blind Date or Streetmate. They did not take the programme very seriously, and most of them thought it was just "good fun" to participate in it (the most common expression being "the challenge"). In other words, their performances are not inspired by being interpellated into "the ideology of Blind Date", to the contrary: they keep a healthy distance from the show's official rhetoric. Tom calls it in his interview "you know, just acting silly", which illustrates this distancing-yet-positive attitude towards dating shows. Participants are also aware of what "good television" is and how the production team tries to obtain this, even before their first step in the studio:

Nancy: I really could predict the kind of questions they were asking during the bish-bash. From the moment I knew I was going to be in the show I had watched it a few times. You know in advance that they pick questions that look for conflict, or questions that fathom what do you think of him and what does he think of you. By the way, I really have the impression that in the bish-bash they try to make fun of you. That they try to make one person into "it wasn't entirely negative and it could have been possible" while the other says "no, I really don't like her", so that somebody is really negative and the other person mildly positive...

Nancy's quote shows that she was quite aware of the "strong identities" requirements of the show even before she had participated. Although her participation has probably increased her knowledge about how television is made she nevertheless understood that her identity was going to be moulded by the programme. All participants I interviewed at one moment or another expressed such critical reflections about how the show had affected their performance.

This critical distance notwithstanding it is undoubtedly true that their attitude towards the programme is best described as *compliance*. Or, to be more precise, even if there are specific aspects which vex participants their critical distance is softened by an accepting of that one fundamental law of television, namely that television is not "theirs". Participants quite simply accept that they are in a space which is not "theirs", that they are "guests" who are "invited" but do not have a saying in how things are run. Participants, and I think people in general, do not have the mental reflex to see the media as a public space where they too have rights: it is always somebody else's place, and a stranger never challenges the norms

¹¹ John Ray had a very short affair with a local girl, and during the bish-bash the production team interrogated him about this (that's how he discovered that the holiday companion had told them everything). Surprisingly enough this was not used in the broadcasted version: it was hinted at, but not made explicit (see also chapter 4)

of the house in which she is invited. Take for instance the following exchange, taken from an interview with Els who participated in Streetmate.

Jan: What do you think of the type of questions they asked?

Els: They were pretty regular questions I think. I kind of expected them. I mean, they were quite normal questions, no?

Jan: It's not about whether the questions were normal or not. The thing that bothers me is that they want to present an image of somebody and then they ask questions like "do you like one-night stands?". That's a bit shallow, I think. They could ask much more [interesting questions]...

Els: Yes of course, but don't forget it is a programme with Joyce De Troch...

The ease with which Els (and I could have quoted here any participant) accepts the fact that the questions were shallow hints at more than a mere issue of cultural capital ("you and I know that we shouldn't expect high brow television of a Joyce De Troch show"). It just didn't come up in Els' head that she could claim her own self-presentation, or better, that she could determine the terms in which she was going to be presented. The questions were "normal" because of the widespread and generally accepted idea that you, as a participant, have to behave according to the production team's rules. In return for a brief moment of media attention and some material rewards you give them what they want:

John Ray: I was really nervous during the day of rehearsals. Really nervous. But that's because they didn't allow me to do my own thing. Put me in front of an audience and let me do my own thing and you'll see that I am quite ok. But if they make me do stuff [like the rehearsed lines and the "obliged" questions] then I become nervous. Complete stage fright.

Jan: And why didn't you tell them to let you do your own thing?

John Ray: You know, I constantly kept in mind that I was going on a free holiday, so I let them have theirs so they were happy and I could go on a free trip.

It is for this reason that compliance is the best word to describe the general attitude of participants towards the dating show's institutional regime. They are not dupes, understand what it needs and how it works, and sometimes they even resist managerial strategies. But in general their counterstrategies are not very effective and moreover they fundamentally accept their non-ownership of the media. Yes, dating shows offer participants a public space, but not under the conditions of their own choosing.

4.5 Overproductivity

A final instance of failed management does not have so much to do with failure in the strict sense but rather with managerial *inefficiency*. Put simply, they are productive assemblages – assemblages that generate all kind of things (events, identities, movements, feelings, money, administrative routines, the list can go on endlessly) but not always in the way the centralised actor (i.e. the production team)

wants. They are, in other words, *overproductive*: they produce things which are not always useful or wanted, making them inefficient and sometimes even dissipating.

The overproductivity effect is the most obvious where dating shows fail most frequently: getting people romantically involved. It is relatively rare that dating shows end up with a couple in their televised version. Moreover, there is relatively little the production team undertakes, since they feel "you can't force love". Of course they stimulate romance and try to create the ideal conditions for it to emerge, but apart from that they feel there is relatively little they can do. Behind the scenes, however, love and romance are far more important than what the account thus far has suggested. In *Blind Date*, for example, romance indeed "flourishes" but not in the way the production team wants it to. During the day of rehearsals, for example, *Hunters and Preys* are carefully separated. But this also means that a group of bachelors is put together for a whole day, and it happens very regularly that *Preys*, for example, exchange phone numbers "in case the holiday trip does not work out"¹². In fact, *Blind Date*'s editor estimates that only a minority of all "*Blind Date* couples" has actually been together on the holiday; the majority were in the same day of shootings but did not go together on the holiday trip. A second example is the yearly production party, to whom all participants of all seasons are invited. These parties are genuine "matchmaking fairs", and it regularly happens that people leave the party with somebody else than they came with. In short, it is not because love does not happen in the televised version that is entirely absent from the phenomenon of dating shows: once the artificial setting and the cameras are gone we see that indeed love and romance are quite an important aspect of dating shows. But these romances are of course of no use for the production team, since they happen off-screen and thus televisually speaking did not happen.

Another example of overproductivity is more common in *Streetmate*, and has to do with the reputation of the host of the show. Joyce De Troch started her career as a singer in a girls band, *Opium*, and from the start she was positioned as the "sexy blonde" of the band. This, as well as some high-profile photo shoots in some men's magazines like *Playboy* and *P-Magazine*, has definitely made her into one of Flanders' sex symbols, adored by many – and equally devotedly hated by many others, making her an "essentially contested FF". In short, Joyce De Troch rarely leaves people unaffected, although it is not always predictable which direction the reaction will go. It is this reputation which often put the production team in unforeseen situations. For instance, at a certain moment the production team had to run from 30-40 drunk students who were having a party and started beleaguering Joyce; a father of one of the participants showed up at every shooting with the obvious aim of meeting Joyce, even inviting her for a dinner date; less extreme but equally annoying was the fact that wherever she would go people, even traffic would get to a standstill, which is fairly dangerous for the camera crew (since they were walking backwards most of the time). In short, Joyce's presence was enough to create

¹² Both John Ray and Muriel told that they got along quite well with their "sparring partner" and that they exchanged phone number. Muriel was even shortly "stalked" by her co-Hunter. When I witnessed some the shootings the two Hunters I followed for a while also said they would have preferred to go with each other on a holiday, rather than with one of the *Preys*. Based upon these fragmentary accounts it seems to me that it indeed is very common.

quite a stir, which sometimes had good side-effects but more often it was a nuisance for the production team because it wasn't "useful" for them.

These examples are quite extreme but help us to understand better what I mean with dating shows' overproductivity: they are productive but do not always generate things that the production team needs. From the production team's point of view, then, this is a kind of failure: participants that fall in love off-screen are of no use to them. At its best efforts are wasted; at its worse it is counterproductive (as when Streetmate's production team cannot get their work done because of the consternation surrounding Joyce De Troch). In this sense the production team is a kind of sorcerer-apprentice that does not always control the forces it unsettles. But it also shows – yet again – the weakness of looking at dating shows from the production team's point of view, as Leigh Star's critique of ANT (1991) reminds us. As long as we keep looking through the production team's lens we will always see such overproductive effects as "aberrations", "useless" efforts, "disturbances" and so forth, thus retroactively reinforcing the production team's point of view as the only valid one (both epistemologically and ontologically). It is inherent to the notion of network as it is advocated by ANT, and the prime reason why I prefer to call dating shows *assemblages*. The latter term describes the same ontology but does so from a less centred point of view: it does not retroactively privilege the managerial point of view but approaches the phenomena in a more symmetric fashion. Concretely, this means that there is nothing "wrong" with 30-40 students chasing Joyce De Troch: it is not a negative consequence of an otherwise perfectly fine production process but is an integral part of the realities of dating shows (and television and its relationship with the star system in general). There is also nothing "failed" about participants falling in love off-screen, because it is an integral part of dating shows as they actually *are* at the end of the past millennium, not how they are supposed to be for those who initiated it all. In our writing we should contest the media industry's claims to ownership of the public space they occupy, a claim they carefully create in discourse as well as in the minor details of their productional practices.

5. Actualised but sticky identities

Time to recapitulate. In this chapter and the previous one I have basically argued that the identities performed by participants are to a large extent shaped by the institutional regime of dating shows. The latter term refers to the conglomerate of strategies to affect performances (chapter 4) and the materials and spaces that make up the production setting (sections 2 and 3). However, I have also argued that this does not mean that the production team is the almighty actor in the assemblage, in the sense that it does not reach all of its goals. This is what the section on failed management (section 4) explored, namely the ways in which the managerial ideal remained just that, an ideal. From the production team's viewpoint there are many things which can go wrong, ranging from practical and material limitations to participants that actively resist the way the production team tries to shape their behaviours. However, we have also seen that the production team often maintains its strategic advantage, in that many of the productional routines already anticipate these "failures".

If we now return to the participants and their performances a few misreadings have to be cleared out of the way. In many of the talks I have had over the years – with academics as well as non-academics – my interlocutors often concluded that “the production context determines the participants”. Management, as I have used it here in this PhD, is not about the production context *determining* the participants, if we define determining as a causal relationship that can only have one, single effect. The disadvantage of mechanistic terms like “effect” is that it makes us think in physical terms. For instance when an object A hits object B it will cause object B to move, and if all conditions remain the same (*ceteris paribus*) object B will time and time end up in the same position. This is what Newtonian physics is all about, it is determination-as-causality-with-a-single-effect. If I use the term effect it means causality-without-determination. To give a simple example: John Ray’s nervous stage behaviour was an effect of the production context (without the production context he would behave differently), but on Muriel the exact same production context didn’t have the effect it had on John Ray, Muriel feeling like a fish in the water on stage. In other words, management has an effect on the performances but in a non-guaranteed way, it is a causal relationship that nevertheless can have many different outcomes. The reason for this is that the relationship between production context and participants is an *articulatory* relationship, one in which both terms are needed and each plays its role. This means that the concept of agency and structure – with the production context being the structure that determines the individual agency of the participants does not make sense, are inadequate for understanding how management works.

Another misreading of management is that what we get to see on screen is a “fake” identity, one that is manipulated by the production team. While it is true that participants sometimes fake things (as in Tom and Liesbeth’s case) this is not how management works most of the times. The emotions are mostly “genuine”, authentic, be it that they are induced by a specific context. John Ray *was* very nervous, just as well as he got *really* angry by Nancy’s remarks. The problem with this reading, then, is that it presupposes that outside of the televisual sphere participants have a true, authentic self which consequently gets brutalised in the televisual machinery. But this immediately brings up the weakness of the argument: how are we to decide that the televisual ones are more real than those outside? After all, both come “out of the participant”, only the circumstances changed. On other words, “authentic” or “manipulation” are also inadequate terms to describe what is going on while participants are being managed.

If management does not equal determination nor manipulation, what is it, then? The best way to describe it is by drawing on Deleuze’s distinction between the virtual and the actual (Deleuze 1994). The performed identities – the one we get to see on television – are actualised identities that draw from a pool of virtual identities (the – in principle endless – total of all performances a participant is capable of). This means that in another (equally specific) context like a bar or a sports club participants will probably perform a different identity. In this sense, the identity performed on television is not the only one, it is fact one of the many possible. Yet the actualised performance is “genuine”, “real” in the sense that it is actualised *by the participants*, that it comes from “within” – be it within the discursive, material and managerial context in which the actualisation takes place. This also explains why

the effect of management is not predictable: actualisations, in Deleuze's account, are always contingent, depending upon the specific assemblage in which it is effected.

The actualised identities are thus historically specific, temporary and situated performances. The specificity of broadcast television, however, is that it freezes time, crosses space and deletes the production context - the specific assemblage in which the identities actualise - from sight. Once an episode is recorded and broadcast the actualised identities they contain become reified and start to lead a life of their own. It is therefore important to stress that participant's actualised identities are also *sticky* ones, identities that remain with them long after the episodes have been broadcast. All of the participants I spoke told me little anecdotes that illustrate the durability of their dating show appearance: they were recognised on the streets, people they had never met walking up to them to have a talk with them. I was surprised by how long this lasted. When I interviewed Nancy and Els, for example, both told me that just a few months ago somebody had walked up to them saying they had seen them on *Blind Date* and *Streetmate*, respectively, and this was more than two years after the facts. In other words, what are essentially temporary identities obtain a certain stickiness or permanence by the mere fact of being broadcast.

Sticky identities not only remain longer with participants than one might expect, they also quite far-reaching effects. John Ray, for instance, met his current girlfriend 6 months after his appearance on *Blind Date*. At a party she had recognised him, and she and a friend walked up to him and started to chat. She also said she was surprised by him not being as "tough" as he had come across on television. But appearing on television does not only have positive consequences. Muriel, for example, lost her job because of it. At the time she was working in a catholic hospital, and she had just gotten out of a painful divorce procedure, which was already badly received by her superiors. After her holiday episode was broadcast, which contained the obligatory holiday movie (including the obligatory beach scenes) she was fired because she was "running around naked on television", and because she was "an unmarried mother going on a holiday with a man she didn't know". In short, appearing on television, as banal as it may seem, often has far-reaching consequences for the people involved, often moving participants' lives into very surprising territory.

6. Conclusions: televisual power relationships and accountability

It is the stickiness of the performed identities which is the fundamental problem with televisual power relationships as I have described them throughout this chapter: participants do not always realise to what extent their performance will remain with them. Even if their television performance doesn't have an immediate impact upon their daily lives there is a fundamental inequality in the power relationship between participants and production team, and this is the right place to bring them together.

First, although participants are not defenceless victims of an almighty production team it is clear that they do not enter the arena with the same “weapons”. The production team literally controls the materials and the spaces of television, which gives them a strategic advantage which cannot be underestimated. Moreover we have seen that many of the productional routines already anticipate participants’ “acts of resistance”, allowing the production team to be always one step ahead of participants. Finally, the production team’s absolute control over the editing process (which is one of the most important signifying practices in the whole process that can “make or break” a participant) makes that participants in the final instance have no control over how they are represented. Because of these reasons it is fair to say that the production team is “better prepared” than the participants: *they* set the rules of engagement, not the participants.

Secondly, the asymmetry also lies in the way the production team does not take *responsibility* for its own actions. I have mentioned a few times that both dating shows work by deleting the production process from sight. This deletion works at different levels. Sometimes it is the format itself that will actualise certain identities, as when the introduction of the Repêchage opened up a new register of performances centred around rudeness and humiliation. Sometimes active interventions by the production team are deleted from sight, as when interviewing techniques are left out of a montage so that it seems as if participants spontaneously come up with an answer rather than reacting to a question. Whatever the mechanism behind it, all these identity effects share the common characteristic that the actualised performance seems to originate in the participant *and the participant alone*, not the participant-in-a-specific-context. It is the participant who is in the spotlight, who seems to be doing things spontaneously and autonomously, whereas the production context magically disappears. As a result, it is the participants who take the full responsibility of things, not the production team: Muriel got fired, not the production team.

The point is that media people in general don’t think very much about the consequences of their managerial practices. They are interested in “good television” and “strong identities”, not in taking care of people’s public image. The glossy, informal, sometimes even chaotic but always friendly production culture does not easily reveal this cold rationality behind television making. The more cynical members of the production team are quite explicit about it, but they have already given up on it a long time ago. Take for instance the following quote of Streetmate’s associate producer, somebody who has been in the industry for more than two decades:

Associate producer: I think Streetmate has proven [...] that it lacked... how should I say, that the production team was too afraid to encroach upon things. [...] If you compare Big Brother Belgium with Big Brother in other countries it is clear that here in Belgium they steered things. As a production team you are behind the steering wheel, and you push those people [participants] into a certain direction, so that once they are there they have to do as you expect them to do. Actually, you try to write the story in advance. But if you leave the story to chance, like “this might happen then”, then it might *not* happen. But at that time you have spent lots of money on shootings already.

In statements like these the aims and mechanics of participant management are out in the open, even blatantly: you try to create the conditions in which

participants will do the things you want them to do. In the words of the associate producer we find not even a hunch of interest in how participants will feel about their portrayal, whether they will regret to have been on the show or not. The story he “tries to write in advance” is exactly that: a story. Its characters are indeed just characters, not people who have a social life, a job or a reputation. In times in which “identity theft” on the internet is increasingly recognised as a criminal offence, it is utterly bizarre there is no public outcry about the way television participants’ identities are treated by television.

The less cynical members of the production team tried to reassure me that not all was bad. There are roughly two defence mechanisms that constantly reappear in the interviews. The first is the “we’re not that bad in comparison to X”. There is always a format or a production practice which is even more radical. In my interviews it were mostly Big Brother and Jambers Magazine that were used as counterexamples, that had to prove that they were “ethical” and not at all as bad as they could be. But as I have repeatedly argued: many of the production practices are quite common to all television formats that make use of “ordinary” people as their raw material. Perhaps the specific modalities change from production to production, but I am convinced the general thrust of my analysis will stand the test for most reality TV.

A second defensive argument by which the production team tried to reassure me (and themselves?) is the denial of the power relationship *tout court*. In this line of reasoning there is no opposition between “what is good for the participants” and “what is good for the production team”. This became particularly clear in the interview with the participant coach. When I asked him why they rehearsed everything over and over again he answered the following:

Participant coach: I think that the demand also comes from [the participants]. *They* want to know how everything works, so let them walk down those stairs again. [...] I mean, it is not the intention to over-rehearse things. But for the people it is quite something, you know: they will be on television, their family is here, the friends are in the audience, for them it is quite an important event. Whether they are chosen or not, doesn’t matter. But the most important for them is the question “how will I come across?”

Jan: So you mean that’s something they worry about?

Participant coach: Yes, yes! [...] And that’s also why I think they appreciate all this [participant coaching], that we don’t throw them up for grabs, that they feel we are concerned and working with them. And we do this on the one hand for the [participants], on the other hand for the end result, of course.

In this framework the interests of the production team and those of the participants overlap: “we do this [...] for the participants, and [also] for the end result, of course”. In this account conflict of interest forms simply no part of the televisual universe, folding then together into one cosy unity. But it is also a thoroughly *patriarchal view*, because in the same discursive operation the production team becomes a benevolent father that helps his insecure children throughout difficult times, and the grateful children thankfully accept his wise advice.

Whether a member of the production team adopts the cynical stance or denies the power relationship does not matter in terms of the end result: both

relieve the production team of any responsibility for the participants' performances. In the first case, the member of the production team was "just doing his/her work" (and will get patted on the back for being a successful professional); in the latter case, the production team cannot be responsible since making television is, by definition, a conflict-ridden activity. Either way the production team cannot be made accountable, whereas participants take the full responsibility for their actions.

Chapters 4 and 5 focussed on televisual power relationships from the production side of things. We have talked about how the production team tries to shape the participants' identities, how the latter react to this institutional regime and what this tells us about televisual power relationships. Although we have occasionally encountered the audience it was again from the viewpoint of production, as when we looked at how the production team tries to convince the audience to tune into the show. The actual audience out there – the people that watch *Streetmate* or *Blind Date* – has been conspicuously absent, even silent. It is therefore time to change perspective and switch sides, and to ask ourselves how the audience watches dating shows.

Chapter 6: Watching the participants: views from the other side of the screen

Katelijne: What I like about it? Er... [silence – sighs] I really don't know. I especially like the comments upon each other, the afterwards movies. To see whether it worked out between them [laughs apologising]... Yes, to see how the trip went, and how they comment upon each other. And to hear how their stories sound, that's what I like most about the show.

Katelijne: What annoys me about the programme? Quite a lot actually. The host of the show, I find her patronising. Er... the fact that it is supposed to come across as spontaneous, and I think it is all rehearsed, that's also annoying. Er... sometimes I have a feeling of vicarious shame, when these people see each other for the first time, and that they judge the other based upon looks alone – you can really see on their faces that they think like "what the hell did they put here in front of me?". Also annoying is that many couples don't have any respect for each other at all: if you know you are going to participate in such a programme you can make the best out of it, in my opinion, even if it's not what you expected. Er... what else... I do think the formula has become a bit smoother in recent years. In the beginning it felt very stiff, and it was annoying that based upon three meaningless questions – that were on top of that always sexually oriented – that they had to make their choice based upon that. Nowadays the selection thingy is a bit longer, still not really in-depth, but still... they have a broader perspective. And indeed, it also irritates me that the questions always are sexually oriented, I think they make them say these things. Because I don't think that in normal circumstances participants wouldn't answer this way, not this artificial... Er... Yes, I think these are the most important things that annoy me.

1. Introduction

Until now we have focussed on how participants' performances are shaped, moulded and constituted by television's institutional regime. The key idea has been that their identities and performances are taken in the direction of "strong identities". The production team does so because they think it will make their show successful: participants that do extreme things are expected to attract large audiences. Moreover, as we have seen, this is being done in such a way that it deletes the production team and its actions from sight, placing the full responsibility for the performances on the shoulders of the participants.

We have, however, been conspicuously silent about the audience. To be sure, the audience has been implicitly there all the time but it was always from the perspective of the production team: when we talked about "good television" we were

actually talking about what the production team *thinks* the audience likes; when we talked about “strong identities” we were actually talking about what the production team *thinks* makes a performance interesting; when we talked about how the production team makes itself unaccountable for its own actions we were talking about how it structures the production process and thus *hopes* to conceal it from sight, not whether the audience buys into it. In short, we have not yet seen how the actual people “out there” relate to Blind Date.

As the opening quote of this chapter makes clear, the view from the other side of the screen is not always a positive one. For Katelijne it was harder to come up with things she liked about Blind Date than with things that irritated her. Whereas it is true that not being able to express what ones likes about a particular programme is not a direct indication of how pleasurable it is (pleasure is often situated at the precognitive or the non-discursive level, cf. O'Connor & Claus 2000: 379) the sheer difference in quantity of “dislike arguments”, and the heftiness of her reaction suggest that there is something more fundamental at work. In fact, it is *the* dominant theme throughout the interviews with viewers of Blind Date: irritation. In the beginning I was quiet flabbergasted by this. Instead of focussing on the pleasures of popular culture we should have put the irritations caused by popular culture at the centre of our concerns!¹ The active viewers seem mostly to grind his teeth, complain and grumble about “what’s on telly”.

What is so irritating about Blind Date? The terms that surfaced most in the list of irritations regarding Blind Date were vulgar, ridiculous, artificial, hyper, childish, rude, fake, overly rehearsed. There are many things that respondents singled out as annoying, and even when the same element was mentioned it was often from different political or discursive positions. In fact, every respondent can be said to have a highly idiosyncratic “irritation” profile that can only be attributed to vague terms like “outlook on life” or “life path”. Nevertheless some general observations can be made. If we look at Katelijne’s quote, for example, she mentions two sources of irritation: the way the production process is organised, and the behaviour of participants. In the first category was Katelijne’s irritation about the rehearsed and prompted answers as well as the meaningless rounds of the first round; in the second category we find the superficiality of participants – their focus on looks, their incapability to make the best of it and their disrespectful attitude in general. We will use the difference between criticising the production team or criticising the participant for structuring what follows: in section 2 we will treat the critique of the production process, followed by the critique of participants in section 3.

The fact that many elements in Blind Date are experienced as irritating does not mean, however, that watching Blind Date is a dreadful experience. After all there is nobody there to force them kicking and screaming in front of the television set. Rather, what seems to be happening is that there are many elements that are annoying to viewers, yet despite these irritations viewers *keep watching* Blind Date. The question that needs to be addressed, then is, how Blind Date still manages to fascinate viewers and captivate their attention despite these irritating elements. This

¹ To my knowledge, only Pauwels & Bauwens (2004) and Teurlings (2002b) have written on the irritations in popular culture.

is the thread running through this chapter, the enigma that will structure this chapter: why do viewers, despite these feelings of irritations, tune into and keep tuning into the show.

2. The production process

One of the first things that struck me when I was doing the interviews with audience members was the degree to which the production context is visible through the text. Although none of the questions I asked (see appendices) related explicitly to the organisation behind *Blind Date*, respondents kept making production-related remarks. In other words, *Blind Date* viewers are not only watching a diegetic world (the coherent world the text attempts to construct), they are also looking at the *production process* behind it. Although television in general does its best to delete from sight the context in which it is produced it is never entirely successful in doing so. No matter how hard they try, the “text” – the programme as it is broadcasted – will always yield *some* information on how the production process is organised. In ANT terms the text tries to black-box² the organisation behind it but it is never entirely successful in doing so: it is, then, a “leaky” black-box that constantly offers glimpses and hints of the work that went into creating it. In short, by watching *Blind Date* the audience at home also gathers knowledge on the production process behind it, and this process I call production-through-the-text.

2.1 Visible elements of the production process

The respondent interviews contain a staggering amount of information on the production process. Taken collectively, viewers know quite a lot about the way *Blind Date* is being made, although there are important internal differences. For example, and perhaps not surprisingly, the more avid viewers are more likely to come up with more detailed and also more knowledgeable accounts of the production process behind *Blind Date*. People that do not watch the show very regularly were less likely to make production-related remarks, so there is an uneven distribution amongst the people I interviewed, be it that the sheer amount of *Blind Date* episodes one watches is not the only determinant (see below). Whatever the internal

² Latour (1987: 2-3) takes the term black box from cybernetics, in which it is “a piece of machinery or a set of commands [that] is too complex”. The cybernetician does not need to know how it actually works, she only has to know what it does (“if I input A I get output B”). Just like a computer programmer does not need to know anything about how the CPU works on which her programmes run – she only has to know that a certain code input will lead to a certain output – I don’t have to know how my text editing software works: I know that if I press the space bar I will get a space between words, and it doesn’t matter what software code is behind it. Black boxes, then, are “finished” and reliable units that present themselves as punctualised actors (see footnote 1 chapter 5) that hide from sight the work that has went into constructing them. In this sense black-boxing is a crucial element of the risk society (Beck 1992), since they involve trust in work that has been done by others (in risk philosophy, this is called dependence upon expert systems). For ANT the easiest path to “deconstructing” black boxes is by examining those instances in which a black box fails to do its work, because in moments like these the constituent bits and parts that make up the black box (and that normally are concealed) become visible, and the material heterogeneity of the black box reveals itself.

differences, the production element that gets singled out most – in fact, all of the people I interviewed mentioned this to me – is without doubt the fact that the before-ones are thoroughly rehearsed:

Georgette: In the beginning [the first part] everything looks as if they have learned it by heart. The second part is less... er... rehearsed, isn't it?

Iris: It all looks very fake, they really rattle of their lines... It would be better if they would allow them to act more spontaneously. [...] When they ask questions, just let them give an answer. But now they just rattle off, and I don't like that at all.

Peter: I am irritated by the artificial, the rehearsed aspect. It's so obvious that the so-called spontaneous answer has been prepared for three days, like "if I ask such you reply so". I mean, it completely lacks spontaneity, because these participants try to talk a form of standard Dutch³ that sounds awful.

Christiane: I've often wondered whether they prepare the questions themselves, or whether they are suggested [by the production team]. Because they are so often drone-like. Either they have learned it by heart or do they read it from [the autocue], it's difficult to decide.

The fact that everything is rehearsed (that is, prepared in advance), is not only annoying because it is artificial and takes away the spontaneity of the performance. Viewers also suspect – and rather strongly at that – that the production team tells participants what they have to ask and what they have to reply:

Christiane: That's why I think that in the first part participants don't make up their own questions, that they are told what to say, isn't it? [...] Because I often said to my mother "they wouldn't be able to make me ask those kind of questions".

Iris: If they would let participants ask their own questions it would be better for them now. Sometimes they even make them say things which don't fit with the person at all! [...] And that's why so many participants make the wrong choice, I think.

Katelijne: And indeed, it also irritates me that the questions always are sexually oriented, I think they make them say these things. Because I don't think that in normal circumstances participants would answer like this, not this artificial...

Rita: The things they say are too much of a cliché. The questions they ask, I really wonder whether they prepared it in advance. Probably somebody corrected them.

Veerle: And they always ask the same questions, and you always get the same answers, a bit sex-related but not too hefty. And even if it is dictated [by the production team] I really don't understand that people give into it!

That the before-ones are thoroughly rehearsed and moulded according to the show's requirements is by far the most important aspect of the production process that gets singled out by the viewers, but it is not the only one. In fact, most of the different stages of the production process are more or less visible to the viewers I interviewed. The fact that there is a selection procedure also seeps through the broadcasted programme:

³ In Flanders people speak Dutch, but the vernacular is quite different from "official" standard Dutch. For instance, in vernacular Flemish Dutch the word for "you" is "gij", whereas in standard Dutch it is "jij". This is a perfect tool for separating what is rehearsed in advance and what is not: often participants will start off with "jij" but as soon as they have to improvise switch to "gij". This is what Peter refers to when he talks about the "awful Standard Dutch".

Katelijne: you often hear that they didn't write the application themselves, that someone else wrote the letter for them...

Rita: I am also very curious about [...] how they selected participants. I suppose there was a selection, so when I see those ten men and women [she means three] come on stage I really wonder ... I mean, how is it possible, I would never do that [appear on the show]

The rehearsals of the studio moves also gets noticed by some of them:

Christiane: What I also find ridiculous is when they walk up those stairs [imitates handwaving], and then three steps later the same. I mean, they have never seen each other and they have to hold hands and walk up those stairs, and at the top wave again. I can't believe they can't find another solution for that! [...] Of course they will be told to do so, but I think it is plain stupid. If I was responsible for making the show I would try something different.

Veerle: That's another ridiculous thing: the waving of hands! Three steps up, wave, three steps later, wave again! Extremely ridiculous.

The fact that somebody accompanies the partners during the holiday trip is also mentioned by some viewers, but here the tone became less convinced. Often this took the form of asking me – the purported "expert" – how things actually went. Take for example the following exchange:

Peter: These holiday movies are also so... [ridiculous?] ... What I don't understand, are they being filmed 24/7?

Jan: Probably it's not 24/7...

Peter: So that also must have been rehearsed and fake, it simply must be... But I also like to look beyond the obvious, you know. I can imagine people really like the show and suppose that everything those participants say and do is for real. And that they don't ask themselves the question "but who does the filming?"

Jan: Actually I think that all in all participants still remain quite polite. I think some of them were far more conflictual during the holiday trip than they pretend...

Iris: (interrupts) But does somebody go along during the holiday? For filming and stuff?

Jan: Yes...

Iris: Yes? So, if somebody else accompanies you all the time maybe you are just that little bit more inhibited...

Jan: Yes, perhaps...

Iris: Or perhaps it's somebody who pretends to be their best friend or so..

Jan: Yes, somebody of the production team. But it's bizarre, isn't it, that you don't really think about who takes the holiday images?

Iris: I look beyond the appearance. I have often thought about it. They can't film themselves, can they? So there must be somebody with them...

What is striking about the above interview fragments is the way the viewers bring up the topic, almost hesitantly – waiting for me to officially sanction their suspicions. Although I did not tell respondents before or during the interview that I

had interviewed participants and members of the production team (remaining deliberately quite vague, like “I do a PhD on Blind Date”) I was nevertheless considered to be a “Blind Date expert” by most of them. As a result, all those aspects of which they were not entirely sure were put in a more or less hesitant tone, as if waiting for my approval. Once I had given my blessing – reluctantly, as the above fragments show – they then further elaborated upon how they perceived things to be happening during the production process.

The latter is important because it shows us that the process of seeing production-through-the-text is more a question of suspicion and logical deduction than absolute certainty. It is very much a detective-like viewing activity, that deduces how things are organised from minimal traces. Some viewers go very far in deducing how the production process is organised. Katelijne, for instance, in a remarkably sharp assessment of the situation, deduces the timing of the shootings from the broadcasted programme:

Katelijne: I think they shoot the bish-bashes quite quickly after they come back from the holiday trip. I have the impression that they drive them straight from the airport and to the interview. And I really think they give then their first impression. Also because the majority of them are quite straightforward: they really tell how they have experienced it, even if it was negative. So I really think it's shot immediately after the holiday trip and that they give their first impressions.

I was quite surprised by the extent to which the production process seeps through the text. As these excerpts show almost every part of the production process is mentioned by viewers: the selection procedure, the rehearsed and moulded first part, the accompanied holiday trip and the recording of the bish-bash are all noticed. This is all the more striking since the interviews did not ask any questions about the production process at all, to the contrary: most of the interviews questions were about Blind Date in general, and about the interaction between the participants (see appendices). But statements about the production process kept popping up in the interviews, without me explicitly looking for it. The above quote from Katelijne, for example, was a reply to the question whether she thought participants sometimes lied during the bish-bashes, and Katelijne replies saying that she thinks participants are mostly honest because it is shot immediately shot after the holiday trip, thus invoking a “production argument” to explain participants’ behaviour.

2.2 Mechanism behind production-through-the-text

How exactly does the seeing of the production process through the text work? I have already mentioned that it is not an absolute or “official” knowledge. Rather, it is a kind of “fallible” laymen’s knowledge, more a question of suspicion rather than affirmative knowledge – hence the sometimes hesitant tone in the interviews. It is knowledge that has to be extracted by looking “beyond the text”, by carefully looking at those instances in which the diegetic world unwittingly gives off details about the circumstances under which it was produced. Sometimes this can be a short remark from a participant, as when a participant walked out of the programme saying “this

was not as we agreed⁴". For Iris, this was enough to create a suspicion that not everything was as spontaneous as it pretended to be:

Iris: So she yelled "this was not what we agreed you were going to say", something like that, I can't remember exactly. So there must have been a deal or something, and that's what bothers me about the programme: that it is all too orchestrated. I think it would be a far better show if everybody would be allowed to be how [they really are]. That way they would perhaps also make a better choice, wouldn't they?

When I showed Katelijne the fragment with Gerry and Muriel in which Muriel explains that she encountered a new boyfriend just before she left on the holiday with Gerry (see chapter 3 and 6 for a more detailed description) she also deduced some of the details of the production process:

Katelijne: I think it is wrong Muriel still decides participates in the programme [since she was in a relationship on the moment she left on holidays]. I don't know whether they obliged her to, but she [Muriel] said something about between the selections and the final shootings...

Both Iris and Katelijne pick up the small, unintentional hints given off by participants to deduce how the production process is organised. Not only short remarks by participants yield information on how the shootings are organised. Other viewers have picked up details about the production process through articles in the press:

Romy: [I have read somewhere that] many relationships start behind the scenes. Apparently they are sitting a whole day together behind the scenes, so they must be allowed to see each other.

For other viewers it is the concrete context of the studio space, which makes them think about the practicalities of the recordings:

Peter: I really would like to witness a live recording once, because I often wonder how it is organised. For instance, there is always a lot of people in the studio, and apparently you can also bring your own friends. But what I don't understand is that they don't shout number 1, number 2, you know, whom to choose. I don't understand why that doesn't happen all the time⁵.

Peter's quote shows the mechanism behind seeing production-through-the-text quite clearly: he literally occupies the participants' subject position and starts to think – very pragmatically – from there on, thinking that if he would be on the show he would take his friends and family with him and that they would probably give him

⁴ In all the years of *Blind Date* it has only happened once that a participant left the studio in full recordings. The participant in question felt she was being humiliated and left during the second studio talk. Together with the breast episode mentioned in the introduction this is one of the "historic" *Blind Date* episodes which got mentioned in the reception interviews time and time again.

⁵ Actually, as the producer told me, it *does* happen a lot that members of the audience give hints to the Hunter who to choose, sometimes by shouting, sometimes by giving visual clues. The production team tries to combat this but is not always very successful in doing so. John Ray told me a funny anecdote about this phenomenon. His friends and family were teasing him beforehand they would select the most ugly of the bunch, with the result that during the actual shootings John Ray didn't dare to trust on them, relying instead on his own judgement.

hints. It is exactly this "mental exercise", the televisual equivalent of daydreaming, that makes the production process more transparent to him. Or, to be more precisely, it is the ordinariness of participants (the fact that they are non-media professionals) that makes viewers interrogate the production process. In this sense all television formats that make use of ordinary people do more to opening up the televisual production apparatus than other, more traditional genres.

Take for instance the difference between dating shows and news. It is not hard to see that political news, for instance, also takes place in a machinic assemblage where power relationships are a crucial aspect (for instance those between journalists and politicians). Moreover, the practice of news gathering takes place, just like the dating show, in a highly organised and institutionalised context (be it that its institutions are idiosyncratic, like press agencies, wire services and scheduled press conferences). From the viewer's point of view, however, the machinic assemblage is a hermetically closed world that does not relate directly to their own mundane experiences, not only because the texts deletes the machinery behind the making of political news from sight (which is also true for dating shows) but also because it offers no space for identification: all of the social roles (MP's, journalists, ministers...) belong exclusively to what Couldry (2000a) calls "the media world" and therefore they do not offer many possibilities for identification. Dating shows, to the contrary, also belong to "the media world" but exactly because ordinary people "star" in it viewers pose themselves questions as to the organisation behind it. In short, the ordinariness of the participants is the lever that allows viewers to open up the black box of television production, making dating shows a hybrid genre that crosses the carefully maintained divide between the media world and the everyday world.

The contemporary explosion of reality TV formats probably plays an important role in opening up the black-box of television production. In a remarkable book on reality TV, Mark Andrejevic (2004) contends that fans of Big Brother in the US often made "savvy" remarks about the way the production team managed and manipulated the participants in the Big Brother house. Especially the 24 hour live stream on the website served as an "alternative" information source that invoked a media anthropological instinct amongst viewers. By comparing this live stream with the condensed and heavily (though quickly) edited daily broadcast fans picked up some of the strategies the production team uses for managing participants, foregrounding the production process rather than the "text". In other words, the current vogue of reality TV in all its forms and guises has to a large extent helped opening up the black-box of media production⁶, with the result that in recent years the general public has become quite television literate. The interviews I conducted contain a striking example of this increasing media savviness of the television audience. While I was taking the interviews, VTM, with a lack of viable alternatives during a slow summer season, decided to broadcast "The Best of Blind Date", a compilation of the most memorable episodes broadcasted over the years. Much to VTM's own surprise and despite occupying a late time slot the compilation slowly

⁶ This might be a too optimistic account of Andrejevic's book, since for him the savvy response to reality TV is ultimately as disempowering as the "naïve" way of looking at reality TV (namely, as an unmanaged and unmediated access to reality). See the conclusion of the thesis.

gained market share, going from 19,7% tot 27,6% (Herbots, 2002: 27). Veerle told me the following about being confronted with these “vintage” Blind Date episodes:

Veerle: I think nowadays I look to the show in a more, er... neutral way. Yes, neutral, that's the word. Because lastly I saw one of those episodes of Best of Blind Date, [...] and I was struck by how obviously rehearsed the part is when they ask the question and the boys and girls react to it. I mean, I don't think that when I started watching Blind Date [some years ago] I realised that it was all prompted. But apart from that it's as stupid as always.

Veerle is surprised about her former naivety: being confronted with the episodes that she took at face value only a few years ago, she is astonished by the blatant staged and rehearsed quality of the performances. But her quote also implies that she has left those naïve days behind her, and that her contemporary self is perfectly knowledgeable about how things really work. To what extent this feeling of current-days superiority (as opposed to her naivety of the past) is a topic we will get back to in at a later stage of this chapter.

2.3 The irritations of management

The people I interviewed were to a certain extent also savvy about participant management, and they were often annoyed by it. Especially the management techniques during the before's are seen and mentioned by all of the people I interviewed (see quotes in 2.1). But why is this irritating? The words most used were “artificial” and “fake”. The idea is that it is intended and supposed to come across as spontaneous, but it fails to come across as convincing. Moreover, answers are so clichéd and stereotypical that they possibly can't be genuine. In other words, the before's sin against the authenticity rule: since participants are ordinary people they are supposed to be “real” and behave “authentically” but the management spoils this.

But the feelings of irritation are also ambivalent. Whereas it is true that all respondents mentioned it as annoying it was also accompanied by a feeling of superiority. The feeling might be paraphrased as follows: “the production team wants these parts to come across as spontaneous, but they don't fool me”. Just like Veerle felt superior to her previous self (“how could I be so naïve a few years ago?”) the viewers derive a feeling of superiority of unmasking the managerial relationship, and not letting them to be fooled by appearances. Just like the detective has to wade through a mirror hall of appearances and false hints but eventually gets to the truth the viewer juxtaposes appearances and “sees through things”. The reward is a feeling of superiority, that can be directed towards either the production team (“you don't fool me”) or towards the other viewers who – so it is supposed – don't get it. I've quoted this before, but notice how unmasking provides some form of gratification:

Peter: So that also must have been rehearsed and fake, it simply must be... But I also like to look beyond the obvious, you know. I can imagine people really like the show and suppose that everything those participants say and do is for real. And that they don't ask themselves the question “but who does the filming?”

Iris: [about the holiday movie] I look beyond appearances. I have often thought about it. They can't film themselves, can they? So there must be somebody with them...

Iris prides herself on looking beyond the merely textual, whereas Peter thinks that most people that watch *Blind Date* take the show seriously and don't question how it is being made. In both cases the demystification goes together with a feeling of gratification, perhaps even superiority – especially

To what extent is the feeling of superiority justified? Here there are important differences between viewers. In general, the people that watch *Blind Date* very regularly are more knowledgeable about the production process and the impact this has on the performances of the participants than sporadic viewers. Respondents like Iris or Katelijne do know quite a lot about the way the production process is organised, whereas others are less knowledgeable. In a sense this is to be expected, since avid viewers have had more time and opportunities to deconstruct the black-box of television production. Sometimes their “educated guesses” were eerily accurate, as for example when Katelijne deduced the timing of the shootings of bish-bash from the broadcasted programmes. Another example of such a sharp assessment of how the production environment functions is the following quote by Veerle, when I asked her whether she thought participants sometimes made fools of themselves:

Veerle: Yes, sometimes they do, but that's logical, because they are asked such stupid questions. [...] I think it is just the way people are. If you only have 20 seconds to answer to a stupid question, it's logical that you're not going to get very philosophical, isn't it? So I think that the circumstances are a very important factor [why participants sometimes come across as foolish or ridiculous].

What Veerle describes is nothing more than the WYAIWYG-principle, namely that the answers of participants are a reaction to questions posed, and that they frame the answer you will get. Yet another example: viewers are aware that the format itself is an influence on participant behaviour, and that changes to the format are intended to make fools of people:

Georgette: Why I think people are ridiculous? Because they make you learn these lines by heart, and then they make you do a short act.

Inge: I don't think I would participate. Perhaps if another type of people would participate, or if there would be different questions, so that the whole becomes less ridiculing. Because forcing somebody do a little dance is de facto ridiculing somebody.

Quotes like these seem to suggest that the managerial relationship is perfectly transparent to the viewers. And indeed, there are moments in the interviews that this seems to be the case. But all in all such moments are relatively rare, and many of the forms of management go unnoticed. Even the respondents that at times seem to grasp best how the managerial relationship works, often underestimate the extent to which it moulds participants' performances. Especially the second part of the show is deemed by most viewers “genuine”, more “authentic”, and “not tampered with”. The only viewer who made a critique of management during the second part was Katelijne, when she deduced the timing of the shootings of the bish-bash.

The point I am getting at is that many forms of management *are* deleted from sight, and even the most savvy viewers do not always see the many forms of management. Drawing on the terminology of chapter 4 we see that the vast majority

of interactional and confessional technologies are deleted from sight, as well as the use of editing as an interactional and signifying tool. Take for instance the following fragment taken from the interview with Christiane:

Christiane: And what I also don't like is that they [the participants] are always criticising each other's clothing. I mean, is he then so well-dressed, or is she so well-dressed?

In the above quote Christiane criticises participants for commenting upon each other's clothes and deduces from this that participants are rude and have no respect for each other. In fact, she is referring to one of the recurrent questions of the bish-bash: "what do you think about your dress style?". However, because the question is edited out of the bish-bash, it looks as if participants spontaneously come up with these remarks. Christiane, who is one of the viewers who does not look regularly to *Blind Date*, does not know this and concludes from the – indeed sometimes critical – remarks about each others' dress style, that participants are disrespectful and focussed upon looks. The managerial strategy, in the case of Christiane, is successfully deleted from sight.

The clothing style example is but one example of the many ways in which managerial strategies are deleted from sight. And, as we will see in the next section, when the managerial strategies are deleted from sight viewers tend to "psychologise" participants behaviour: if participants behave disrespectfully it must be because they *are* disrespectfully, not because they are made to behave disrespectful. The most savvy viewers will be quicker to make production related remarks in order to explain participant behaviour, but even they repeatedly underestimate the influence of the managerial strategies. For instance, Katelijne and Iris, by far the most savvy viewers I interviewed, also did not understand why participants often are so hard on one another – reread Katelijne's opening quote and note how she calls participants disrespectful. In other words, though viewers can see through the production process their view is nevertheless incomplete and they often tend to underestimate its influence on the behaviour of the participants – they know it is there, but this knowledge gets suspended quite easily.

3. Participants

Participants are (as by now may have become clear) a second source of irritation. In general, viewers did not hold participants in high esteem. Terms that were used for describing participants were vulgar, selfish, ridiculous, rude, lacking respect, not of the thinking type, self-centred, desperately looking for love, and so on. Of course this does not mean that all participants are perceived in such a negative daylight. From the moment we left the general statements and started talking about particular participants, like John Ray and Nancy or Gerry and Muriel, the respondents were often far more nuanced in their accounts. Nevertheless there is a strong undercurrent of looking down upon participants.

The attitude towards participants is, however, far more complex and ambivalent than this might suggest, because the participants are also the main reason why viewers watch *Blind Date* in the first place. The most important pleasure that *Blind Date* offers its viewers is the pleasure in reading participants, a process

which I will call the hermeneutics of the participant. If *Blind Date* is successful in binding its viewers it is because the format stimulates viewer involvement through this hermeneutics of the participant.

3.1 Hermeneutics of the participant

The best way to describe the hermeneutics of the participant is that it is pleasurable to read the personality of the participants. In a way, it is an “identity game”: it is trying to figure out who this person is you are seeing on the television screen, trying to assess this person and how s/he will behave. Take for instance the following quote from Inge, who says she likes the way the *before*s have been restructured to include the Reference (an acquaintance of the Prey has 20 seconds to argue why the Hunter should take the Prey), and notice how she stresses it is an important way of getting to know more about the participant:

Inge: I like the part where the family is allowed to have a word, because like this you get a better image [of whom the Prey is]. Because the person that comes to speak is usually somebody close to the Prey – close enough to be willing to do so. I mean, usually it is not the one with a completely different character who is willing to testify, isn't it? So it is a good way to judge the Prey, whereas the *Quickies* don't tell you anything.

Whereas it is true that most forms of film and television involve some sort of hermeneutical activity, dating shows are particularly geared towards stimulating a hermeneutical sensibility: the genre is, after all, built upon putting people together and seeing whether they combine well, and this presupposes that we “read” their personality, try to make predictions and anticipate future romantic possibilities and tensions. In short, dating shows are very much about which identities “fit”, and this needs interpretation work by viewers.

From the interviews emerged two important hermeneutical moments: during the first part, the *before*s, the hermeneutical activity focuses on whom the Hunter is going to choose; the second hermeneutical moment takes place during the *after*s, when viewers try to read how things went between the dating couple. Both hermeneutical moments differ in the way the audience is positioned vis-à-vis the participants. If we look at *Blind Date*'s *before*s, we see that the Hunter is divided from the three holiday partners-to-be by a wall, and s/he has to make the choice based upon the answers they give to his/her questions. The viewers, to the contrary, *can* see the Hunter and the Preys and thus thus have all the time in the world to evaluate them and literally try to “read” what kind of personalities the four people on stage have. Part of the fun revolves around the question whether Hunter and Prey will “fit”, meaning whether their combination offers romantic possibilities:

Georgette: Especially when you're watching it together with friends or family you can speculate. Like “she's not going to take that one, because they really don't fit at all”. Because most of the time you can already judge it in advance.

Katelijne: I think you guess unconsciously, that's the way the game works. From the moment the choice is made you immediately start thinking “nope, this is not going to work”, or “this might evolve into something”. I mean, it's not a very conscious thing...

The pleasure derived from the *before*s is therefore a pleasure based upon foreknowledge. From the viewers' point of view, participants are dramatic diegetic

characters, groping around in the dark with very little or rudimentary information at hand, whereas the viewers are in a position of superior knowledge. During the afters, when the dating couple returns from the holiday trip, this situation of foreknowledge is reversed. This time the participants are in a position of superior knowledge – they know how things went on the holiday trip, whereas the viewers don't – and the viewers scrutinise the mutual comments and body language of the returning couple for the slightest hints. This became particularly clear when I showed viewers the fragment of John Ray and Nancy. Even before getting to the end of the holiday movie viewers often already mumbled "nah, it didn't work out, you can see that already"⁷. In short, although it takes a different form during the befores and the afters, *Blind Date*'s format stimulates a hermeneutics of the participant, a reading of participants' personality and behaviour.

How does *Blind Date*'s format stimulates hermeneutic activity? Apart from the general thematic of dating shows and their discourse of fitting there is another structural component in *Blind Date* that enhances hermeneutic sensibility: the structure of revelation that characterises the before/after structure. The two parts mimic in a formulaic fashion the different stages of the dating process: first, the process of getting-to-know-each-other, in which participants are supposed to keep up appearances and present an idealised version of themselves, followed by the moment when the dating couple returns from the holiday trip and promises to tell us how the other participant "really" is. The before/after structure plays upon the common sense feeling that on our first date we present an idealised version of ourselves, but once these initial moments have passed "the real" self will come out. This is what *Blind Date*'s before/after structure promises to deliver: in the first part we will only see appearances, in the second part we will get access to the truth. It is this play between appearances and truth/reality that encourages and at the same time complexifies the hermeneutics of the participant, because the viewers cannot (an do not) take the performances of the participants during the first part at face value. This gets even more complicated because of the obviously rehearsed quality of the first part. As we have seen, all respondents at one time or another mentioned that they thought the befores were rehearsed and prompted, which makes reading participants an even more difficult enterprise. Hermeneutics of the participant, in other words, is the art of reading between the lines, of reading personalities and predicting whether they go together well despite the fact that they are presenting an idealised version of themselves and despite the fact that they are so visibly rehearsed.

Why is reading participants and predicting whether they go together well such a pleasurable activity? The answer is that viewers can pride themselves on being a good judge of human character – or not:

⁷ Note that the format postpones the moment of revelation as long as possible: the afters consist first of a very short studio talk, then we get to see a Holiday movie (which in most of the cases is dubious enough to be open to interpretation), next we return for another short studio conversation about the holiday movie and only then do we get to see the bish-bash in which it usually becomes clear whether they got romantically involved or not. Because the format postpones the moment of revelation viewers are invited to read the slightest gestures or visual cues as an indication of how things went, up to the point that even the physical posture of the returning couple in the sofa already becomes an indication.

Romy: What I like about Blind Date? To see whom they choose: see who is up there on stage and then make a prognostication. And next you realise that you're a bad judge of character (laughs).

Christiane: I am often right in whom they are going to choose. Or otherwise, that I say aloud "come on, can't you see that he's not the right one". Another frequent thing is that I am disappointed myself when afterwards you learn that he was a real asshole during the holiday [...] because he chatted up other girls or left her sitting there all day.

Romy: I didn't like it when they left out that thing with the heart⁸ at the end of the show. Because you were also often wrong in assessing them. Like, that a couple would be very sweet for each other, like "we don't fit together but we had a good time" and blah blah blah. And then when they ask "are you going to see each other again?" the answer was no. Weird things like that ...

Iris: I am mostly right in guessing who they are going to take. My husband is not. We're quite different characters (laughs).

Rita: Yes yes, I also make prognostications. I am often right, but sometimes I am not. But mostly I am right. But then again, it's logical, because we see how they look, don't we?

These quotes reveal exactly what kind of gratification viewers derive from watching the participants play the game of love. If they are right in their assessment of a certain couple, the "reward" is an affirmation of your good judgement of human character. But participants are also quite unpredictable and sometimes even enigmatic beings. All of the people I interviewed mentioned the fact that you can never be entirely sure about participants, that people kept surprising them even when you thought you had pinned them down. As Romy indicates in one of the above quotes: there is never a final moment of closure, even at the last instance participants can come up with a surprising twist. It is this element of unpredictability that gives the show the dramatic tension that makes viewers tune in, and that is, in the end, never really and fully answered. In either scenario – in getting them right or getting them wrong, the viewer is rewarded. In the case of the former his/her insight in social matters receives a boost, whereas in the latter case the viewer's expectations are challenged, which is fascinating.

3.2 (Dis)identification and othering

Pleasure in reading participants should not be mistaken with "liking participants", to the contrary: it is perfectly possible to completely dislike a participant while at the same time having a (devilish) pleasure in seeing him choose a girl that does not fit with him at all. In other words, one does not have to empathise or identify with a participant in order to derive a pleasure in reading them. In fact,

⁸ In one of the previous versions of Blind Date each episode would end with the question "are you going to see each other again?". The couple would then simultaneously push a button, and a neon-light heart would indicate what both had chosen. Only if both answered positively the heart would light up, accompanied by uplifting music. It often happened, however, that one of the holiday partners answered positively while the other answered negatively, which was a humiliating situation (emphasized by a "negative" sound-effect). The audience would often make compassionate cheers when this happened. Note how Romy saw this as an ultimate way of seeing "how things really went", as a kind of last chance to read the participants and their true intentions. Note also how "the heart-scene" was, in terms of chapter 4, a technology for enacting "strong" identities, forcing participants to take up an extreme position (either yes, either no).

viewers psychological attitude towards participants exists of an oscillation between two contradictory movements: identification and disidentification.

The general mode of viewing seems to be disidentification: participants are simply perceived to be completely different from the viewers. The question which brought this disidentification with participants most clearly to the surface was the question whether the respondents would consider participating themselves. Of the nine people I interviewed only one answered positively. Moreover the heftiness of the reactions showed the disdain with which viewers look upon participants:

Georgette: No, I wouldn't want to participate. I really wouldn't feel like making a fool of myself. No thanks.

Peter: Never, never! (laughs) Why not? Because I don't think anybody would be interested in what I have to say about somebody else. That's private.

Veerle: No no no! No thank you. Really no!

Christiane: *Jamais!* Never, absolutely never.

Katelijne: I would never participate, no.

Rita: I would never participate, no. It's all stuff and nonsense.

There are many reasons viewers cite as reasons for never participating: they do not want to make fools of themselves, you must be desperate to go on the show, my private life should not be made public... If participants really want to be in such a ridiculous show, they must either be desperate for a relationship or they must be ridiculous themselves, so the reasoning goes. Whatever the reason, viewers see and create a mental distance between themselves and participants. This mental distance is the exact opposite of identification, because it creates an unbridgeable gap between "us" and "them". As Peter puts it: "I have never seen anybody on the show of whom I thought it could be a friend of mine. There is always something wrong with them".

The process of disidentification can take several forms. Sometimes this means that viewers see participants as belonging to a certain category of people. Especially viewers of a middle class background tended to dismiss participants as being of a "certain type". Veerle described them as "cashiers", Katelijne "materially-oriented people that collect porcelain elephants", Christiane as "certainly not intellectuals"... In quotes like these class connotations are quite openly articulated. Viewers that did not make class-related remarks tended more towards assessments in terms of personality, like "people that are quite adventurous", or "most of them are just in there for the free holiday trip", "they are desperately looking for love".

These moments of disidentification, however, are often accompanied by statements like "I wonder what I would do in those circumstances?". This is the phenomenon referred to earlier: the fact that participants are ordinary people makes viewers reflexively think about the production context. Take for instance the following quotes, in which viewers – be it momentarily – take up the subject position of the participants:

Katelijne: For me it would be horrible to have to make my choice based upon four or five questions.

Katelijne: What happens a lot is that when a woman has to choose is that I think "I would, for myself, choose person B". Or, if there is a man behind the curtain and he has to announce his choice that I think by myself "luckily I am not one of them".

Peter: I usually don't try to predict whom they will choose. It's more like "who would I choose"?

Rita: If I would have to choose I would make my choice based upon the voice.

Inge: [about the introduction of the Repêchage] I like it very much but I wouldn't want to be in the place of the [rejected participant]... I mean, I think you really have to get over a certain feeling of diffidence in order to go on the show, and then they humiliate you in front of a very large audience. Ok, maybe you shouldn't look at it as a humiliation but I think at the moment itself it feels horrible.

Christiane: I really don't like the macho types that go on the show, like the guys with tattoos... That in itself is a reason for me not to want to participate, I can't imagine myself going on a holiday trip with such a guy.

In instances like these viewers *are* empathise with the participants, putting themselves mentally in their place: all of the above quotes reveal a certain empathetic movement, in which viewers – at least linguistically – occupy the subject position of the participant. Hence there are very contradictory mental processes at work while watching *Blind Date*. At times viewers look at and experience the programme from the viewpoint of the participants, aligning themselves mentally with them, while at other moments they distance themselves from them. Viewers can literally oscillate between the two modes from one sentence to another. Take for instance Veerle's answer to the question how she would describe the kind of people that participate in *Blind Date*:

Veerle: Cashiers. I know, it's not nice to categorise people like that, but [I would describe them as] cashiers and truck drivers. I always think "how would I react?", and I nor somebody of my friends would even consider participating. And if you see what kind of people go on the show then it really confirms what I think, time and time again. [...] And even the younger participants, you know, that I really think "come on, you can't seriously mean this?". As if they had already lived everything and were now *Desperately Seeking Susan*.

In the course of a few sentences Veerle switches a few times between complete disidentification and more identificatory remarks: on the one hand perceiving participants as radically other yet at the same time asking herself how she would react.

This contradictory attitude is not exclusive to *Blind Date*. Researchers working on reality TV genres have also observed similar attitudes towards participants. For instance, studies of *Big Brother* have described viewers' attitudes in terms of distance and involvement (Biltereyst et al, 2000: 46, Mathijs et al. 2004). It is difficult to decide what to make of this double and contradictory movement, but here is what I think is going on. The fact that participants are "ordinary", that they are not media professionals but "common" people just like the viewers, makes viewers align with them *by principle*. They are, so the reasoning goes, "like us" because structurally they don't belong to the media world: unlike Ingeborg, who is a

celebrity (an “FF”), participants are “matter out of place”: they are on television but it is not their natural habitat, just like I would feel if I was up there. Even if I wouldn’t want to participate myself I can imagine how it must feel up there. This process of mental alignment with the participants includes the latter as “one of us”.

On the other hand there is a sense of alienation. Put simply, although participants are “one of us” they act and do things which are deemed ridiculous, foolish, rude, and so on. So despite their structural position as ordinary people they do not behave “ordinarily” – read normal. They lie, are rude or uneducated, criticise each other needlessly, are too exuberant, say horrible romantic clichés or sex-obsessed lines and so on. Even when one likes a participant and his/her actions one cannot readily empathise with him/her, since there is always the danger of being deluded during the afters. This is why most viewers create a mental distance between “us” and “them”: the identification *by principle* is made impossible because of the actual performances of the participants.

When the mental distance between viewers and participants becomes too large (in other words, when the disidentification is complete) the latter are *othered*: they are, quite simply, that which I am not. “Othering” participants happens quite frequently, it is in fact that which happens when Peter says that he has never seen a participant which could be a friend of his. For Peter, the behaviour of participants is so utterly alien that he considers them to be beyond normality: “there is always something wrong with them”.

3.3 Othering and superiority

We now have all the elements in place to better describe why viewers are often irritated by participants yet at the same time receive some form of gratification from watching them do irritating things. Whereas in principle participants are “one of us” their actual behaviour is so different from what the viewers expect from “ordinary” (read normal) people that they become other, alien or even abject. This othering can take two forms.

First of all, there is what I would like to call *moralistic* othering: it is the moment when participants behave in such a manner that is deemed immoral. From the moment a participant crosses the line of “decent behaviour” s/he is esteemed to be an immoral being that does not know how to behave well. What exactly constitutes “indecent” behaviour can differ from person to person, although general tendencies can be observed. For example, Christiane often blames participants for being vulgar or sex-obsessed, whereas Katelijne reproaches participants for being disrespectful. Although the terms in which participants are judged differ both viewers judge the participants in moralistic terms, terms that make a distinction between “good” and “bad” behaviour. This is what I referred to earlier as the psychologisation of participant behaviour: if participants are behaving in a vulgar/disrespectful/stupid manner they must *be* vulgar, disrespectful or stupid.

Although “indecent behaviour” is irritating, it has a gratifying aspect: it puts viewers in a position of moral superiority. It is as if participants, through their immoral behaviour, show the viewers whom they are *not*. Watching participants criticise each other offers viewers a kind of moral consolation: “I certainly wouldn’t

participate, but if I were to do so I would certainly not be hard on my holiday partner” is the underlying logic. That this is exactly what all participants promise each other before recording the bish-bashes does not really crosses viewers’ minds.

Besides moralistic othering – judging participants in moralistic terms – there is another form of othering, namely incomprehension for participating in the first place. If participants are willing to go on such a show to start with, they must “seriously lack something”, as one of the respondents put it succinctly. Here we also find a feeling of superiority towards participants, one that says “I would never want to be in the show in the first place”. This also explains the lack of compassion towards the way participants are treated: if they really wanted to be on the show (and their presence is proof of that) they must be willing to bare the consequences of it:

Rita: Once you decide to participate you are open to criticism, both negative and positive. You shouldn’t take it personally, but participating means you risk being made ridiculous. Unfortunately people are more likely to say negative things first.

Iris: If you are made to look foolish you just have to live with it. After all, nobody forces you [to go on the show], do they?

Peter: You know, sometimes you have people that say they didn’t apply themselves, that they say “it was their mum who wrote the letter-of-application, and see me here now”. I mean if you don’t want to be on the show you are not on the show, it’s as simple as that. That’s just a specious argument: “it wasn’t me, it was my mummy”.

The crucial thing, then, is that both modes of othering offer viewers a *position of superiority* and blame *the participant and the participant alone*. Either the performance of the participant is taken at face value – his or her performance is taken to be a genuine performance – and the participant gets chastised for being an immoral being, offering the viewer the moral high ground from where to look down with contempt; either the participant is made to look foolish but s/he should not complain but it was his/her choice in the first place – and the viewer can look disdainfully down upon the participant for not foreseeing or anticipating this faith. This is, in short, the pleasures viewers derive from watching irritating participants: irritating they may be, but they are to blame – and we are so different, aren’t we?

4. Two modes of viewing

If we now bring the production context, the participants and the viewers together we can discern two modes of watching Blind Date: the naïve and the savvy one. The first is a mode of watching Blind Date that takes the performances of the participants at face value: participants, are, quite simply, taken to be performing their authentic self. Just like watching live theatre involves a suspension of disbelief – we know the actor is not really dying but just pretends to be so – viewers know that participants’ behaviour takes place in a particular context that influences their behaviour but nevertheless this knowledge gets suspended or bracketed. In the naïve mode participants become like characters in a play or a movie: they are *personae* with an internally consistent psychology (and figuring the latter out is part of the

fun) but the concrete and highly artificial context in which the participants play out their "role" is, well, not really deleted from sight, but temporarily suspended.

The savvy mode, to the contrary, demystifies and grounds the performances of the participants in the concrete production context in which they take place. It is a way of "seeing through" the coherent world the text attempts to create, and it includes extra-diegetic elements like the production process or reasons for participants to participate (for example, when viewers suspect that participants are in the show for the "wrong" reasons, that is, for the free holiday trip rather than finding a new relationship). In other words, the savvy mode explains participant behaviour by referring to extra-diegetic elements, elements that are not textually foregrounded. Savvy viewers are also more likely to explain participant behaviour in terms of the managerial relationship between production team and participants, as for example when they criticise the first part for being artificial and rehearsed, or when they conclude that the bish-bash must have been shot immediately after the holiday trip because participants give their uncensored and honest version of it.

Both modes of watching are ideal types, in the sense that no respondent is purely naïve or purely savvy; rather, viewers seem to switch constantly between the two modes, at times making savvy comments followed immediately after this by a naïve reading. There are important differences, however, between viewers. Some respondents were far more likely to make savvy comments, whereas others were more likely to do naïve readings. In other words, viewers can be situated on a gradient between two extremes without ever reaching the extreme. And, not surprisingly, the respondents that watched the show regularly, like Romy, Inge, Katelijne or Inge, were more savvy in the sense that they displayed more knowledge of the production process and in general were less morally condemning towards participants. But even these savvy viewers underestimate the influence of the production process and switched to "naïve" modes of explanation, calling participants "disrespectful" or "rude".

Although both modes of watching seem radically different they share one common characteristic, namely both put viewers in a position of *superiority*. The savvy mode offers viewers the pleasure of seeing through things, of grasping the machinery behind Blind Date and not being fooled by it: "you try to delete your functioning from sight, but you don't fool me". The savvy mode of viewing, in other words, offers a feeling of *intellectual* superiority, of looking behind appearances and unmasking that what plays underneath the surface. This demystifying look has two objects in its focus: the *production process* ("I can see through how everything is being made") or the *participant* ("you pretend to have come up with these lines yourself but I know somebody prepared them for you").

The naïve mode, to the contrary, the mode in which participants are taken to behave "as they really are", only has one "object" in its focus: the *participant and the participant alone*. Since the performances of participants are seen as disconnected from the concrete material context participants' behaviour is psychologised: if participants behave rude/selfish/disrespectful they must *be* rude, selfish or disrespectful. Given the fact that indeed participants tend to be negative about each other – a feature that, as we have seen is eagerly sought after by the production team

– the savvy mode of viewing puts participants in a position of *moral* superiority: “look at how rude and disrespectful *they* are, *I* would never behave like that”.

But even in the savvy mode, which is in general less critical of participants, participants are at risk of having to bear the full weight of responsibility on their shoulders. In the savvy mode participants can only be puppets on a string: they are the dupes of the production team, not seeing through the mechanisms which are set in place to manage them (mechanisms that the viewers, on the contrary, see perfectly – or so they think). This became particularly clear at moments when participants were actually blamed for allowing themselves to be managed:

Veerle: You always get the same questions and the same replies: a bit sex-related but not too much. Really, really stupid that is. But if it is prompted – which I think it is – I don’t understand why participants go along with it!

In other words, in both modes of viewing participants risk losing much from their participation in *Blind Date*. Either they are seen to be dupes of the production team that do not realise the managerial context, or even worse, that willingly *allow* themselves to be duped. Either they are immoral beings that do not know how to behave properly. Participating in *Blind Date* is a difficult exercise in steering a middle course between pity and contempt. And all of this for a free holiday trip.

5. Conclusion : amoral televisual capitalism

In *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (2004), the book I have taken the concept of savvy viewer from, Mark Andrejevic argues that the boom of reality TV has led to a whole new genre, one that foregrounds the apparatus of the media industry as a whole. In formats like *Making The Band*, *Pop Stars* or *Idol* viewers are promised a behind the scenes look of the entertainment industry, revealing and displaying out in the open the artificial and promotional apparatus of the entertainment industry. Formats like these promote a demystifying look at the products of the culture industries – of which it is itself a product. The resulting savviness of viewers – “I know how things really function and I am not duped” – presents itself as kind of free thought, thought standing outside of ideology. After all, one has to believe in ideology in order to be “inside” it, isn’t it?

Drawing on the work of Žižek, Andrejevic argues that the moment when one declares oneself outside of ideology is the ideological moment par excellence:

“If reality TV caters to our scepticism by showing us how mediated appearances are constructed by the apparatus of the culture industry – if it enacts what it displays by simultaneously debunking celebrity and creating new stars – we can concede that the savvy attitude becomes a strategy for protecting artifice by exposing it” (2004: 16)

Andrejevic argues, in other words, that the savvy mode of viewing likes to think of itself as a debunking strategy that can see beyond appearances, but contemporary capitalism no longer requires the consumers to believe in its ideology. To the contrary: scepticism and the display of artifice have become the tools

contemporary capitalism, tools that lock consumers into consumption without them having to believe in it.

Whereas *Blind Date* is not *Pop Stars*, and whereas my interest lies not so much in whether savvy viewers are inside or outside of ideology it is nevertheless clear that there are many parallels between Andrejevic's analysis and mine. If we look at the savvy mode of watching *Blind Date*, the demystifying mode that pretends to see beyond the text, it becomes clear that its pretensions to superiority are misplaced, and this for two reasons: first, even the most savvy viewers do not even get half of the strategies used for managing participants, and all too often they switch back to naïve readings of participants, blaming participants for their immoral behaviour; secondly, far from restraining their consumption of *Blind Date* the savvy mode of watching is exactly the mechanism that locks them into consuming *Blind Date*.

How does the savvy mode lock viewers into consumption? The answer is that knowledge of the production context and the managerial relationship between participants and production team adds an extra layer of interpretation to what I have called the hermeneutics of the participant. Whereas the naïve mode of watching reads participants in psychological and/or moralistic terms, the savvy mode reads participants in *psychological terms within a production context*. For the naïve viewer a rude participant is just that: a rude person that does not know how to behave. For the savvy viewer, however, a participant can behave rudely for several reasons – for example, s/he can be managed to be rudely, or s/he can be selected with this quality in mind. Knowledge of the production process, then, stimulates the hermeneutics of the participant and adds an extra layer of interpretation to it, making participants even more enigmatic beings that require even more interpretation work. Seen from this light the observation that the most avid viewers are the most savvy ones loses its innocence – and its implicit determination: perhaps they have become avid because of their savviness instead of vice versa.

Rather than being critical of the capitalist entertainment industries, then, the latter need the savvy mode of watching because it stimulates viewer involvement and ultimately loyal – but savvy – consumers, thus reproducing the status quo. Does this mean we should *en masse* defect from critical readings and advocate the naïve mode of reading? In other words, is the naïve reading (despite it blaming and judging participants in moralistic terms), a more viable or even desirable political option? This question has to be answered negatively, because the alternative is not much better. The naïve mode of reading is perhaps not as complicit with capitalism as the savvy mode, but it is equally politically conservative because of its moralistic and normative dimension. Although viewers have an idiosyncratic normative profile, – each viewer condemns participants for particular reasons – there are nevertheless structural elements to this normativity. To advance an example that we will elaborate upon in the following chapter: despite appearing to offer men and women a public arena in which they are treated equally, *Blind Date*'s moralistic universe judges men and women on a double standard, one that privileges men and subdues women. The naïve mode, then, also lacks emancipatory potential and ultimately reproduces the status quo.

The moralistic treatment of participants, by the way, contrasts starkly with the complete lack of moral judgements about the way the television industry treats its participants. Take for instance the following exchange from the interview with Romy and Inge, both “savvy” viewers, and notice how they perfectly see the managerial mechanism, even sympathise with the participant, but never arrive to the point where they morally condemn the production practice:

Jan: What do you think about some of the changes they implemented in recent years?
Like the introduction of the Repêchage?

Romy: (laughs silently) That’s a good change. It is poignant for the people though.

Inge: Yes, me too. I like it very much but it is poignant. I wouldn’t want to be in that person’s shoes. Especially because I think you have to conquer a feeling of diffidence before you decide to go on the show, and then they humiliate you in front of everybody. I mean, you shouldn’t look at it as humiliating, but I think at the moment itself it feels horrible.

Jan: But so you think it is a good change?

Romy: Exciting!

Inge: Yes, funny and exciting.

Romy: It’s also funny that they don’t necessarily get the better option.

Romy and Inge are perfectly aware of how the managerial mechanism of the Repêchage functions: by allowing the Hunter to get back on his/her first choice the “rejected” participant is publicly humiliated. Moreover, they identify with the rejected Prey, living as it were the moment of humiliation through his or her eyes. But the combination of empathy with the victim, together with the knowledge of how the damage is inflicted, is apparently not sufficient for creating a feeling of moral indignation about the way the television industry treats “its” participants. Instead, Romy suggests that the Hunter sometimes gets “punished” by the fact that his eventual choice is not necessarily the better option. Here the political sterility of the savvy mode becomes blatant: although Romy and Inge are perfectly able to decipher its logic and functioning the television industry is seen to be an amoral machine that is ultimately kept out of range, and therefore beyond criticism. It is amoral, not immoral, because its is beyond good and evil – it just *does*. The production team is, eventually, not made accountable for its actions.

Chapter 7: The gender game and the moral audience

"Good girls go to heaven
Bad boys go to hell
And I believe in miracles"
(From "Kickin' Up Dust" by the Backyard Babies)

"Hey
Been trying to meet you
Hey
Must be a devil between us
Or whores in my head
Whores at my door
Whores in my bed
But hey
Where
Have you
Been if you go I will surely die
(From "Hey" by the Pixies)

In the previous chapter we have seen that the naïve mode of watching is a thoroughly *moralistic* mode of watching, because it judges participants in terms of good and bad behaviour. I also mentioned that, as a consequence, the naïve mode not only blames the participant but can also be seen as preserving the moral order, thus reproducing the *status quo*. This chapter will develop and substantiate this claim by showing how the naïve mode of watching Blind Date reproduces patriarchal and heterosexist notions of masculinity and femininity, or in short patriarchal heterosexuality. More precisely, we will see that the format – and especially the way it draws on and enacts the romantic form – is fundamentally heterosexist and patriarchal in its orientation but that this does not necessarily imply that *all* performances of masculinity and femininity follow this pattern. Occasionally some participants perform a masculinity or femininity that is not hegemonic and thus subverts the norms of masculinity and femininity. The moral mode of watching, however, will "castigate" such performances, making Blind Date in the final analysis a conservative show that perhaps reluctantly allows for subversive gender performances but these performances are instantly discredited because of its moralistic framework.

In order to make such an analysis we will have to shift perspective, leave the televisual power relationships momentarily aside and focus on *gender* power relationships. Or, more precisely, we will have to think both modes simultaneously; in order to avoid the kind of "naïve" reading – the one that takes the men and women playing Blind Date as performing "spontaneously", expressing their "true self" – it is crucial to take into account the context in which these performances of masculinity and femininity take place, for it is this context that will shape the performances to a large extent: if two holiday partners criticise each other in gendered terms (for

example “she knows how to dress well, especially if you have a body like hers”) this is a gendered critique but one that is actualised in reaction to the question “What do you think of your partner’s clothing style?”. In other words, the crucial move is to connect the performances of masculinity and femininity to the concrete material context in which they take place. And this context, as I have argued *ad nauseam* throughout this PhD, is a highly specific one, one that stimulates certain performances while blocking others. This is the task before us: to analyse which kinds of masculinity and femininity Blind Date produces, allows for and blocks, and how these performances are “read” by the audience.

1. Romance, gender and patriarchal heterosexuality

The key to understanding Blind Date from a gender point of view lies in the way dating shows “invoke and rework contemporary cultural myths about true love, love at first sight, and marital bliss” (White 1981: 192). Indeed, dating shows, and hence Blind Date too, cannot be understood without some reference to *romance* and the romantic fantasies this brings along. To give a simple example: in Blind Date Hunters have to make their choice while they are not able to see the Preys, thus invoking the idea that love is a meeting of kindred spirits rather than a question of physical attraction. (The format does so, however, in a rather ambivalent way. The first thing Ingeborg, the host of the show asks after The Wall has been lifted, is “and...?”, thus reaffirming the importance of physical beauty).

Whether Blind Date reworks romantic myths in an ambivalent fashion or not, the point remains that dating shows hardly make any sense without some reference to romance, and in this section I want to argue that the latter is inherently linked to gender. It does so in at least two ways. First of all, within our heterosexist society romanticism has as its implicit model the heterosexual couple. The great romantic stories like Romeo and Juliet, Bonny and Clyde and Titanic are all built around the heterosexual couple. But romanticism is not only “about gender” because of its implicitly heterosexual orientation; its relation with gender is far more implicated. In fact, romanticism – defined as that particular structure of feeling that came into being in the 19th century – can be seen a *technology of gender*, it is a regulatory ideal that attributes different roles to men and women and in the process creates norms of masculine and female behaviour. It is not a coincidence, then, that the emergence of romanticism in the 19th century coincided with new norms of masculinity and femininity, together with a reconfiguration of the family and the home (e.g. Barret-Ducrocq 1991, Armstrong 1987, Davidoff & Hall 1987).

In order to illustrate this normative dimension of the romantic relationship, and the way it attributes different roles for men and women let us examine for instance the following extract from a little handbook on relationships, called *Love and Dating* (1994), written by George Eager. It is aimed at an audience of teens and has a distinctively Christian Right tone to it, arguing consistently and with unflagging zeal that “infatuation is not love” and that “good relationships” are not built upon sexual attraction. Under the heading “good dating manners” we find the following, which is worth quoting at length:

"Guys, when you go to a girl's house to pick her up, you should go to the door and escort her to the car. Never sit in the car and honk the horn. If her parents are present, tell them where you are going and ask them when they would like to have their daughter home. Girls, if your parents don't set a curfew for you, set one for yourself. No guy is going to think much of a girl he can pick up any time and bring home at any hour of the night.

Unless there is some understanding otherwise, the fellow pays the expenses. When a fellow is paying for the tickets or a meal, the girl should step aside. If the girl is sharing the expenses, she should give him her share of the money ahead of time and let him take care of the expenses. In a restaurant, the guy asks the girl what she would like and he places the order. Fellows, be frank about your finances. And girls, be considerate of his finances.

Girls, a minor touch-up job may be all right at a restaurant table, but if you have to make major repairs to your hair or face, excuse yourself and go to the restroom. But don't make it a lengthy stay. What seems like only a few minutes talking to the girls can seem like a long time to the guy who is waiting. [...]

It's up to the fellow to see that the girl gets home at the agreed-upon time. But he can hardly be expected to walk away until the girl says goodnight and goes inside. So girls, it's up to you to take the initiative here. You can do this with a pleasant "I've enjoyed the evening. Thank you so much for taking me" (Eager 1994: 34-35)

The example is extreme and nostalgic for the long-lost 1950s, but it illustrates well that romance contains a regulatory ideal – an ideal that is at once unattainable and normative – and that the practice of dating is a technology of gender, a practice that *creates* masculine and feminine forms of behaviour. First of all, the mere fact that Eager has to write a guide on how to date "properly" indicates its normative dimension, and it is literally a prescription for "proper" behaviour. Moreover, Eager does not even consider the fact that two girls might be dating – in fact it is quite amusing to think how his dating rules could work in such a context (paying the bill becomes quite difficult). Also striking is that Eager gives completely different guidelines for the boys than for the girls. The mere structure of these few paragraphs ("girls, do so and so" is juxtaposed to "boys, do so and so") shows to what extent dating is, in fact, an entirely different practice for men and for women, in which they both have their own responsibility (boys have to pay, girls have to indicate when it is time to say goodbye). In this sense, dating is *the* interaction through which masculinity and femininity define themselves as mutually exclusive *yet complementary*: the boy pays, the girl doesn't but they go out *together* and have an "enjoying evening". Finally, although romance presents the romantic relationship between men and women as "different but equal" it is decidedly in favour of the boys: the girl cannot order her own dish – well, she can choose which one she wants but she cannot ask for it herself – and even if she pays for the dinner herself she has to give the money in advance to the boy so that *he* doesn't lose face.

The latter remark also shows us how romance is not only a heterosexist discourse, it is also *patriarchal*. It attributes different roles for men and women but does so by putting women in a position of subordination. In Eager's clammy 1950s fantasy virtuous girls impose their own curfew, they step aside when the boy pays, they do not order their own meals, and don't let their male date sit on his own, not even "for a few minutes". Good girls, in other words, are self-sacrificing, subdued and generally behave in function of their male date (note also how the girl is repeatedly reminded on how the boy will look at her, whereas the reverse is not the case: the boy at no moment is encouraged to see himself through the eyes of the girl). In short, romance is not only heterosexist but also patriarchal, and I will use the term "patriarchal heterosexuality" to describe the norms of masculinity and

femininity that romance encourages. (For those readers who are tempted into doing away this example as a religiously inspired conservative fantasy: bear with me)

2. The gender game

This short description of romance and its relationship to patriarchal heterosexuality contains all the building blocks needed for analysing the gender power relationships in *Blind Date*. First of all, because *Blind Date* is a dating game that draws heavily on the discourse of romanticism it is also, in the most general way, “about gender”. Put simply, through the romantic relationship the men and women on *Blind Date* define their own and each other’s masculinity and femininity.

But romance is also, as we have seen, a *normative* concept, in the sense that it tells us how “good” men and “good” women *ought* to behave. Unlike *Eager*, however, the men and women that play the love game do not have a single vision of what the ideal man and the ideal woman is. The show can in fact be seen as a public arena where masculinity and femininity are hotly debated by juxtaposing them in a romantic framework. Take for example *Blind Date*’s afters. If John Ray complains about the fact Nancy is “too quiet” this criticism implies an ideal of how women should be. If Nancy says about John Ray that she thought it was considerate of him not to chat up other girls in her presence this is also a normative statement about how men should behave. What a “real” men is and how he should behave, what a “real” woman is and how she should behave, that is what is being debated in dating shows. It is at once a struggle about definitions as it is normative and moralistic: John Ray was “considerate”, a “decent guy”. Dating, then, is an *ethical activity*, of doing “good” or “bad” things, making the dating show a particularly moralistic universe, the studio audience functioning as the moral majority that attributes guilt and shame through its indignant cheers or disapproving silences.

The struggle over masculinity and femininity does not present itself as such, however. Or rather: it does not present itself as a definitional struggle about *all* men, or *all* women. When two holiday partners return from the trip and comment about each other’s desirability (or the lack of it) they don’t make claims about men and women in general but about themselves. In other words, through particular men and women and their particular dating experience, notions of masculinity and femininity are debated. Because of this the gender politics of the show is often packaged in a rhetoric of personal preference: “He was wearing white socks which I absolutely hate” is indeed just that, a statement that reveals something about a personal preference. But behind this personal preference there lies an implicit model of what men should wear.

The “battle between the sexes” also presents itself as a “fair” battle, a battle in which each participant has an equal starting position and hence, at least in principle, has equal chances of “winning” (that is, imposing their definition of the situation). Indeed, at a formal level *Blind Date* is completely gender neutral. Each show consists of two departure–return cycles, and if in the first part the Hunter is a woman, in the second Hunter it will always be a man. Moreover, each of the subparts of a departure–return cycle consists of the exact same routines for men as for women: first “Quickies”, then “Own Opinion”, the Dilemma question”, and “The

Reference”, to be followed by the Moment of Truth when the Hunter announces his or her choice. The returns are also gender equal since the bish-bash shows both participants alternately, and during the second studio talk both participants sit next to each other in the notorious sofa and thus they both have the chance to have their say. In other words, in purely formal terms Blind Date’s approach is gender equal: men and women get to do the exact same things and have equal opportunities to have their say.

In this chapter I want to deconstruct this “equal chances” discourse by showing the following. First, I will argue that before entering the public arena a number of important decisions have already been taken, and that these decisions already imply a normative mechanism. Second, I will argue that the battle of the sexes is not an equal battle since the theme of romantic love imposes different standards for men than for women, privileging the former and subduing the latter. We will do so by analysing the different parts of the shows (the before and the after), which gender performances and gender critiques they allow for, and what this tells us about how Blind Dates reproduces patriarchal heterosexuality.

3. Selecting is normalising

The apparent equal starting position of participants in the show hides from sight the normative decisions about love, dating and gender that have been taken *before* the participants enter the public stage. I am referring here to the selection procedure and the way the panels are composed, because an analysis of these production practices allow us to examine how romanticism is intrinsically linked to patriarchal heterosexuality. It is important to stress that these normalising practices are not visible to the viewers, since these preproduction decisions take place off-screen, and thus help to naturalise the gender performances of the participants.

First of all there is the issue of heterosexism. Until recently Blind Date was quite clear-cut in this, in the sense that only heterosexual couples were allowed to participate. I say until recently, because a few years ago the production team thought the time had come to do “a gay episode”. Especially Ingeborg, the host of the show, was very active in trying to convince the broadcaster that the zeitgeist had changed, and that it would not hurt their audience ratings. In fact, she used her popularity to “blackmail” VTM. Since she had been doing Blind Date for a few years and gradually had grown tired of it, she made the gay episode a *conditio sine qua non* for renewing her contract. Since then we have a yearly gay episode.

It is hard what to make from this. On the one hand it opens up the exclusively heterosexual format to include homosexual people, and by doing so it disrupts the idea that love is something between a man and a woman alone. The mere fact of showing homosexual participants, and letting them play the exact same “game of love” as their heterosexual colleagues, makes hetero- and homosexual participants “equal”. But at the same time it confines homosexuality to the safe – because delimited – space of “the gay episode”: when you tune into Blind Date and see an all-male participant panel, it is clear from the start that this must be the gay episode. The gay episode loses much of its radical potential for disrupting the normality of heterosexuality because it puts homosexual participants into the televisual

equivalent of the *preserve*. There is no way homosexuality could “contaminate” heterosexuality, exactly because the gay episode is a nicely delimited *episode*, that is, an exclusively gay space. It would be far more threatening for heterosexuality, for example, if the Prey panel would consist of three men and three women. In such a scenario it would not be taken for granted that we are watching either the “gay episode” or the “normal” (heterosexual) one, and every episode would potentially be “dangerous” because disruptive of the heterosexual norm.

What we see, then, is that the gay episode, far from abolishing heterosexuality as the norm, might actually be reinforcing heterosexuality as “normal”. The exceptional status of the gay episode, its once-a-season characteristic, perhaps makes homosexuality more visible but also separates them from the rest, from the usual (read normal) course of affairs. It pins participants down in an either/or scenario, and thus it can be seen as an identificatory practice – with a vengeance. If before the introduction of the gay episode heterosexuality was the unquestioned, invisible norm, it now became visible but nevertheless remained the norm, because it could be contrasted with its “other”, located in a non-threatening because separate space. This became quite clear when I was doing the interviews with the respondents: every respondent I interviewed talked positively about the fact that there was a gay episode but whenever we were talking about participants in general the implicit model was always the heterosexual couple. In short, the introduction of the gay episode as a separate episode makes the heterosexual couple as “the normal course of affairs”. This has profound consequences for masculinity and femininity as it is performed in *Blind Date*, since they become *heterosexual* masculinity and femininity.

The selection procedure and composition of panels is also a normalising practice in another way, namely at the level of age. One has to be over 18 to participate to start with. Moreover, panels are composed in such a way that internal age differences are minimal: if a Hunter is in her early twenties the three Preys will also be in their early twenties. The normalising mechanism behind dating is clear: dating is an activity between people of the same age. Moreover there is an overrepresentation of young people: the majority of participants are people in their 20s and 30s. It is true that in recent years we have seen some special episodes with “older” people (in their 50s and 60s) but just like the gay episode it loses much of its subversive potential because it is confined within the borders of a single episode and thus it does not allow for “cross-breeding”.

What we see, then, is that the selection procedure together with the composition of panels is one of the ways in which *Blind Date* structures but also normalises the romantic interaction between participants. In *Blind Date*, only interactions between young, heterosexual couples of more or less the same age will occur. “Other” categories *do* get their public forum, but they are confined to a separate space (the “special interest” episodes) where they do not pose a risk for disrupting the ageist, heterosexist hegemony. In what follows, I will focus on the “battle between the sexes” and the struggle for masculinity and femininity in these “normal” episodes, exactly *because* they are presented as “the norm”.

In other words, an analysis of the selection procedure shows that *Blind Date*’s self-presentation as an arena in which all participants have equal starting

positions does not stand the test. However, once the shootings start we are, apparently at least, confronted with the equal treatment of men and women. Hence the battle between the sexes, and the struggle for masculinity and femininity that comes along with it, should from then on be an equal battle, shouldn't it? In order to answer this question we will have to distinguish between the two parts of the show (the befores and the afters) because they invite and provoke fundamentally different gender performances. As we will see, the befores allow for a struggle for masculinity and femininity at a general level, but ultimately it remains toothless because of the game-like and staged quality of the first part. The afters, to the contrary, are far more personal and intimate, and it is there that the "battle between the sexes" becomes a genuine struggle for masculinity and femininity.

4. The befores and the staging of romance

During the befores we are essentially confronted with the *staging of romance*. "Staging" in this context means two things. First, the befores mimic the getting-to-know-each-other process: the Hunter asks questions to the three Preys who have to convince him/her that they are "the right one". In other words, this first round is all about making a good "first impression", and Preys have to present a best possible version of themselves: Preys will always present themselves as thoughtful, dedicated and romantically (if not sexually) available. In sum, staging is all about *pleasing* the other. But staging also refers to Blind Date being a show, a public event that literally takes place on a stage with a live audience in front of it. Consequently the staging of romance should also be taken literally, namely as performing romanticism in public.

Because of this the staging of romance during the first part often becomes very *stereotypical*. Romantic clichés are abundant: candlelight dinners, tropical islands in the sun and erotic massages are some of the more reoccurring ones. Staging the romance, then, does not have much to do with the romantic feeling as such (whatever that may be) or everyday romanticism; rather, it is more about the rhetoric of romanticism, about using the cultural imagery and "props" of romance.

It is important to stress that the production team has an important role to play in this. Although they often complain about the abundance of romantic clichés and the lack of originality of participants they often push participants towards the more stereotypical answers. Nancy, for example, remembers the following:

Nancy: Everybody answers like you are supposed to answer in Blind Date. It has to be as erotically as possible...

Jan: Yes, did you feel as if they pushed you a bit towards more erotic stuff?

Nancy: Yes, somehow they did. [...] Like the question that you prepare beforehand. They tell you things like "if I were you I would say this or that", and it's always more erotic. Like "if you say this you will have more success". It's not that they tell you what to say, but they tell you "saying this or that will be better for you".

Nancy also remembered the first answer of one of her fellow participants, and how the participant coach did not like the violation of the romantic code:

Nancy: In my group one of the questions was as follows: "You have a car break-down and a handsome motor driver passes by who only wants to take you along, not your date. What do you do?". And this girl said "I drive along with him and make sure that afterwards somebody else comes and pick you up". And that he [the participant coach] really didn't like, because you have to pretend you care about your date. Something like [with artificial accent] "I drive along with him and at the next stop I take his motorcycle and turn around to come and fetch you". But "I'll send a taxi", no, that answer he didn't like.

When I visited *Blind Date*'s production set I witnessed a similar scene as the one Nancy recounts. A participant was rehearsing one of his lines and the participant was telling him to make his line "a bit more poetic" – and the participant indeed ended up with a much more romanticised line.

Whoever is responsible for the abundance of romantic clichés, the fact remains that the *before*s are a rapid succession of romantic stereotypes. Important, however, is that it does so with a wink. Its obvious and self-conscious staged quality – the visibly rehearsed lines, the abundance of romantic clichés – makes it difficult to take the literal content of the *before*s very seriously. Nevertheless I would like to argue that even in such a staged romance a struggle for masculinity and femininity can be discerned, be it in sometimes contradictory ways. In order to do so, take the following example taken from *Blind Date*:

Ingeborg: And it gets tougher and tougher, because it's Dilemma-time. Inge, what's the Dilemma today?

Inge: Yes, it's a tricky one "You've got VIP tickets for the soccer game of the year. But, that same evening is my birthday, and we also have free tickets for a fancy restaurant. Now, what is your choice? Me, or the soccer game?"

Ingeborg: And who has to answer that question?

Inge: Ken can answer this one.

Ken: Of course I will choose you. And I am not interested in soccer anyway. And er... I think you are more important.

(the audience is touched by this answer: "ooooh")

Inge: (laughs) Yes Tim?

Tim: I agree with Ken. I am not interested in soccer and... of course we can make it an exciting night.

Inge: (laughs) Can I change the question please?

Ingeborg: Yeah, you didn't expect this, right? Two of the participants don't like soccer, so it's easy for them.

Inge: Mike, do you like soccer?

Mike: Not at all! No doubt I will choose only you.

Ingeborg: At least that's what they say.

Inge: (laughs) Yes.

Ingeborg: Do you think it is possible that there are three men on the other side that don't like soccer?

Inge: I don't believe a word of it.

The above sequence contains, as I have argued, some of the "props" of romantic love: "fancy restaurants", "exciting nights" and "choosing only you" are indeed what romance is all about. Moreover, it is quite obvious that the romanticism is staged: we all know in advance that the three boys will say they prefer going out with her instead of going to the football game. What is most interesting here, however, is the way in which this staged romanticism leads to a "toothless" critique of masculinity-in-general. Or, to be more precise, through the rhetorics of romanticism Inge and Ingeborg at the end of the fragment arrive at a point where they question masculinity but in a rather harmless way. This might need some explanation.

At first glance the fragment is rather critical about men. The whole sequence turns around the question of sacrifice: are the men willing to give up something they really like. When the three men claim that they don't like football, Ingeborg remarks scornfully "Do you think it is possible that there are three men on the other side that don't like football?", to which Inge adds "I don't believe a word of it". In a first reading, then, the sequence can be read as being critical of men: of course they pretend they don't like football, but we know this is too good to be true, and as soon as the honeymoon period is over it is fairly sure their true, lazy and selfish nature will emerge. It is important, however, that this is a critique of men *in general*: perhaps these three particular specimen really don't like football but the essentialist premise ("all men like football and they will prefer to go to a game") remains intact.

What is crucial for what is about to follow, however, is how the rhetoric of romanticism, even in its staged form, already attributes different roles for men as for women. Take for example Inge's question. Even before it is answered she has already limited the options and positioned herself and the three Preys in different terms. One might rephrase her question as follows: men are interested in football ("with the mates", so it is assumed) and women want to drag their men away from it to spend "quality time" in fancy restaurants. The mere phrasing of this, however, already attributes different roles: Inge had already positioned herself as "taking men away from what they really want" (and assumingly are entitled to do), and hence she ended up with one possible role: that of "the nagging wife" (note how she says "who do you choose: me or the football game?"). For the men however, the conventions of romanticism left two possibilities: either they want to go to the football game but they give up their privilege and thus become "good" men; either they say they don't like football and then they are "exceptional" men. For the three male Preys, then, Inge's question was a win-win situation, because whatever they choose they would come out as "good" men, whereas Inge could only come out as the victorious but nagging woman¹.

¹ Compare this for instance with the following question by a male Hunter: "after all these years you finally have success in your job. Your boss asks you out for a dinner and wants to sleep with you. What do you do: do you obey your boss or do you loses your job". Apart from the obvious sexist undertones of the question (sexual harassment apparently is a *choice* for women) it also offers the women different options: either they say they would sleep with the boss and they would

In short, even when the staging of romance seems to be offering a critique of masculinity-in-general, it only does so in a rather toothless way (because it remains exactly that, a critique of masculinity-in-general). However, once we scratch below the surface the romantic relationship already displays its normative mechanism, in the sense that agency, guilt and responsibility are distributed unevenly for men and for women. Whereas in purely formal terms the dilemma is indeed a dilemma, that is, a choice between two viable options, the romantic requirements of the *before*s effectively delimits the number of possibilities. Moreover, it does so in ways that men automatically end up in “good” positions, whereas women have less options and have to work harder to obtain the same result.

It is important to stress that this normativity is not very stern because of the light-hearted and funny nature of the *before*s. Its game-like, almost carnivalesque nature allows for and even stimulates answers that jump “out of the ordinary”. Once and a while this leads to answers that upset the expected patterns. For example, in *Blind Date 2* a male Hunter asks the Preys what they would do if they would be trapped in a forest, and the only way to get out of it is by sleeping with the forest guard. The first two Preys say quite predictably that they would not even think about it, but the third Prey comes up with the answer: “I wouldn’t mind trying out a forester, and since the forester knows the forest by heart we know for sure we will get out”. Short, “witty” deviations or reversals of the norm are quite frequent, but less so than those that remain within the normative expectations of romance. All in all the *before*s are too much of a game and too fast-paced to attach much importance to its normative framework. During the *after*s the latter will become much more pronounced, since in this part that the *staging* of romance is pushed into the background in order to be replaced by a much more *personal* tone.

5. The *after*s and the struggle for masculinity and femininity

Once a dating couple returns from the holiday trip the programme changes its tone and is less concerned with the props and imagery of romance (what I have called *before* the staging of romance) in order to move into the terrain of interpersonal relationships. At that time, the returning couple has already spend some time together and they comment upon their collective experience, hence the less superficial tone. Of course the romantic theme remains important, but it is of a different kind, less concerned with the *staging* of romance and oriented more towards the question whether the dating couple became romantically *involved*. The bish-bash is the climax in which we, the audience at home, get to know whether it worked out between the returning couple, what obstacles they encountered and so on. In short, the *after*s explore the experiences from the dating couple from one viewpoint: the *presence* or *absence* of (physical and/or romantic) *attraction*. Take for

be cheap, disloyal and easygoing; or they refuse to sleep with him and then they become a “good” because monogamous woman. For the women this is a loses-win situation, with only one viable option: to tie herself to one single man. The male Hunter to the contrary can only win: if the girl sleeps with the boss he will get showered with declarations of support and sympathy; if she does not his male ego remains untouched.

example the following questions that are part of the standard set of the bish-bash, and notice how they all evolve around the presence or absence of attraction²:

- What was the first thing you thought when you saw your partner?
- What do you think of your partner's clothing style?
- What is the most attractive about your holiday partner?
- What has bothered you during the holiday trip?
- Was there a romantic moment during the holiday trip?
- Which atmosphere was there on the holiday trip?
- Do your personalities match?
- What kind of person matches your partner?
- If you were to compare your partner with an animal, what animal would that be?

What we see, then, is that during the afters participants and their accounts are *juxtaposed*: the format confronts two versions of the same holiday. But it does so in a very specific way, namely by framing the whole experience by the presence or absence of attraction. By doing so, it creates a discursive environment that forces participants to comment upon each other in terms that they otherwise might not have used. For example, the excessive focus upon liking and disliking gives participants many opportunities to praise or criticise each other. Moreover, its binary either/or logic forces participants towards extreme positions and quotes that often come across harder than they were meant to.

Secondly, because the afters abandon their general, free-of-engagement or carnivalesque tone the tone becomes much more personal, up to the point that participants feel their personality is being judged. If one participant says "I would like to advise Eric to pay more attention to his shoes" it is hard not to take this as a personal insult. Moreover, the fact that this happens in public put the stakes even higher: being criticised is one thing, but being criticised in front of one million viewers is something qualitatively different.

It is these two characteristics, namely the public juxtaposition of particular accounts that makes Blind Date's afters into an arena for the struggle for masculinity and femininity. In contrast to the before, where the critique of masculinity (and femininity) remained sterile and toothless, the afters do not remain at a safe because general level; it is *this* man and *that* woman that interact, comment upon and often criticise each other. The often discordant nature of the afters makes them into a public arena where conflicting definitions of masculinity and femininity are launched, circulated and played out against each other. The struggle over masculinity and femininity does not present itself as such, however: it hides itself in the language of personal preferences and tastes. When a male participant says "I think Jessica really knows how to dress herself, especially with a body like hers" it is indeed just that: a statement that reveals something about Erik's personal taste. But

² The bish-bash works with a standard set of questions, and it only happens rarely that deviations occur. Note however that they are always cut out of the montage, so that it looks as if participants come up spontaneously with the answer. Anybody who watches Blind Date regularly, however, knows them more or less by heart.

behind this personal appreciation (a backhanded compliment) there is an implicit model of what kind of body women should have – it's difficult to say what it looks like, but it is definitely not Jessica's.

What we see, then, in short interactions like these, is that two competing versions of femininity are launched: the one Jessica performs by her mere presence, and her holiday partner invoking another, supposedly "better" one. To be fair, Jessica herself is not very laudatory for her holiday partner: to the same question, she replies "There is nothing in Erik that attracts me". In other words, Jessica also articulates a definition of masculinity, and it is as obvious that Erik does not comply with it. This is, in sum, the struggle for masculinity and femininity in its purest forms: men and women commenting upon each other's desirability. In the remainder of this chapter I would like to address the following questions:

- What kind of gender definitions and gender performances come out of Blind Date? Are all of them hegemonic – in concordance with patriarchal heterosexuality – or does Blind Date's constellation allow for performances of masculinity and femininity that do not fit within this scheme?
- Is the struggle for masculinity and femininity an equal battle, or do men have more means to win it? We have already seen that Blind Date treats men and women equally – at least so in formal terms – and thus in principle women should be as capable as men to impose their "definition of the situation".

It is very difficult to answer these questions in a general way, for the simple reason that Blind Date gives rise to a whole plethora of gender performances that are hard to systematise. Moreover it proved to be far more fruitful and workable, especially when doing the interviews with the viewers, to talk about specific participants instead of "men and women in general" (see chapter 3). Because of this reason I chose to examine and analyse two concrete episodes that in many ways are each other's opposite, namely the one of John Ray and Nancy on the one hand, and the one of Gerry and Muriel on the other hand. As we will see, the story of John Ray and Nancy is an example of a couple in which hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity were performed. Gerry and Muriel is an example of an interaction which is in many ways anti-hegemonic. In a final section of this chapter, we investigate audience interpretations of both episodes, in which we will see that even anti-hegemonic gender performances can reproduce patriarchal hegemony.

6. John Ray and Nancy

John Ray and Nancy were both in their early twenties when they went together on a Blind Date holiday trip. From the start however, it was clear that they did not get along very well: John Ray was more of a going-out type, he listens to hard-house, likes clubbing and likes streetwear. Nancy, on the other hand, is calmer, prefers bars instead of clubs ("because it is more of a chat environment"), she is dressed more conservatively than he is, and her hobby is making bobbin lace. Hence their story, as it is told to us, was one of complete failure: in the beginning John Ray tried to chat up Nancy, but since she was too quiet and not fun enough he soon gave

up and instead focussed on other girls during the holiday trip. Nancy didn't mind this too much because it wouldn't have worked out anyway, and she even thought it was "thoughtful" of John Ray not to chat up other girls in her presence – he waited till she had left the club for exploring new and probably more promising territory. The subsequent studio debate then focuses on their differences and how they dealt with it.

The first thing which is quite striking about their story is the way their interaction fits into a traditional gender scheme. John Ray is a young, slightly male chauvinist working class "lad" whose main interest lies in going out and chatting up girls. He is also portrayed as the more active type, looking at the holiday trip as one big adventure that has to be maximally enjoyed, as long as it is not too "cultural" (when asked for the worst moment of the holiday was, he replies "the excursion to Malaga: way too hot and way too long. And too much chitchat"). Nancy is definitely more at the passive side of things: she is quiet and restrained, prefers a good talk and will definitely not start chatting up boys she doesn't know. In other words, in their interaction we find the typical active-passive gender dichotomy, including the idea that men take the initiative in romantic encounters, whereas women passively wait to be chatted up.

What is most striking, however, is how this traditional gender division is intersected by class relations between John Ray and Nancy. Although in Belgium a class background is not as visible as in other European countries like the UK there is nevertheless a visible class difference between both, John Ray being (roughly) working class and Nancy middle class. For example, John Ray's accent is easily locatable, whereas Nancy speaks more or less Standard Dutch. Also, John Ray does not have lots of cultural capital at his disposal, as becomes clear when he has to interrupt Ingeborg to ask her what making bobby lace means – needless to say this leads to hilarious reactions amongst the studio audience. Nancy even touches shortly on the class difference between them, when she says that John Ray isn't able to talk about his emotions and is more likely to be upfront and challenging "because that's normal if you went to a technical school³ where you have to fight to survive".

Although Blind Date's format offers people from a middle class background a certain advantage (as the example of bobbin lace illustrates) it is nevertheless striking that John Ray is able to dominate the conversation. Or better, he is able to impose his version of the holiday trip, constantly returning to the fact that Nancy was too quiet and not dynamic enough. Whereas Nancy does not necessarily *agree* with John Ray's assessment of the trip (when John Ray repeats for the umpteenth time that she was too quiet she suddenly outbursts "you act as if I didn't say a single word during the holiday trip"), she does not *challenge* the fundamental dynamic of the conversation, namely that the failure was somehow Nancy's fault because there was something wrong with *her*, not John Ray. Nancy is far more reflexive about the whole

³ In Belgium high school education is divided into three types: general (aimed at continued education after the age of 18), technical (oriented towards the labour market at the age of 18), and professional (education for manually skilled labour types, also intended to entering the labour market at the age of 18). As one might expect, professional and – to a lesser extent – technical schools are generally frowned upon.

holiday than John Ray, who doesn't show any sign of reflexive thinking. Take for example the following extracts from the bish-bash:

Nancy: He took the initiative far more than I did, because I am kind of reserved and shy.

JR: She was just too calm and quiet. She waits and sees.

Nancy: At a certain time we were talking and he told me "I didn't know that there were people like you", by which he meant shy and quiet. At that moment I felt like "What does he say now?", but when I thought about it afterwards I understood what he meant because we come from a different background.

JR: At a certain moment I told her "I didn't know this kind of people existed" because I had never met people as quiet and passive as her.

What is striking in the first fragment is that, although both are asked the exact same question, John Ray does not talk about *himself*, but about what is wrong with *Nancy*. Nancy, on the contrary, starts from a positive statement about John Ray ("he took the initiative") and then defines herself *starting from John Ray*. This is not a mere grammatical construction but is an index of how differently self-reflexivity works for both of them: John Ray simply is not self-reflexive, whereas for Nancy self-reflexivity is the precondition for "identity" (who she is). This becomes particularly clear in the second fragment: Nancy first was shocked by John Ray's frontal attack on her timidity but then started thinking about it and eventually accepted his assessment of the situation. The only way that she can accommodate the critique is by thinking the difference in terms of class, which gives her an advantage over him. Nevertheless, there is a strong feeling of failing to conform to his norms: he is the standard, the starting point, to whom she self-reflexively compares herself. John Ray, on the other hand, doesn't seem to suffer from this mental disposition: there is just something wrong with *her* (not with him), and he happily leaves his own values untouched by their interaction. Against all (class) odds, Nancy was playing defence.

The interaction between John Ray and Nancy, then, is a prime example of *patriarchal heterosexuality*. Within patriarchal heterosexuality, femininity is a function of masculinity: a "good" woman is one that pleases men. This means that within patriarchal heterosexuality femininity has no positive value as such, but that it gets its meaning from the extent to which it conforms to the male definition of what a woman is (ought to be). Patriarchal heterosexuality is a hegemony in the marxist sense of the word because women as well as men incorporate it in their sense of self-being, in their self-identity. Nancy, though not agreeing with John Ray, still defines herself in the terms set by John Ray, exactly because she is a "good", heterosexual woman. And John Ray, being the "normal" heterosexual man he is, does not even arrive at the point where he starts to question his own position. In short, within patriarchal heterosexuality, masculinity sets the norm to which femininity has to conform, or put more simply, women have to please men. This also explains why Nancy thought it was "considerate" of John Ray to wait until she had left for her hotel room before chatting up other girls. Implied in the statement is the idea that men are entitled to "have" women (if not Nancy, any other will do). And since they have this

right, any man who has the decency to do it out of sight is somewhat of a modern knight (they kill and they rape, but have a code of honour).

John Ray and Nancy's story illustrates how Blind Date's afters, though in principle offering every participant an equal starting position, is *not* an equal game. To be sure, in principle Nancy could have rejected John Ray's definition of her and the holiday trip - as she occasionally did during the interview. But it is a struggle about details, about whether she *really* was as quiet as he made her to be. The fundamental dynamic of their interaction was that John Ray had *defined* Nancy, and she could only do some correcting afterwards. The norms of heterosexuality, the way it defines femininity as a function of male desire, were too strong for her to launch a positive definition of herself, and it was too incorporated into her own sense of being to change the fundamental thrust of their interaction.

Does this mean that Blind Date inevitably can only give rise to hegemonic forms of heterosexual masculinity and femininity? In other words, is Blind Date's format so intrinsically heterosexual that all women end up reproducing femininity as a function of masculinity? Here I want to give the format some doubt. It is true that most participants follow the John Ray and Nancy scheme, but the sheer "openness" of the format allows once and a while for alternative forms of masculinity and femininity to emerge. To be more precise, the formally equal starting position of male and female participants occasionally gives rise to a situation in which patriarchal heterosexuality (and their associated norms of masculinity and femininity) are challenged. Gerry and Muriel's story is such an example.

7. Gerry and Muriel

Gerry and Muriel's story is another story of failed romance, be it for entirely different reasons. Their holiday movie "looked promising" in the words of Ingeborg, but as soon as we get to the bish-bash these high spirits proved premature. To the question "Was there a romantic moment between both of you?" Muriel replies "For me there was no romantic moment, no. There could also not have been one, because I am seeing someone else". We next discover that Muriel had met somebody in between the selection procedure and the first studio shootings, but that she had felt obliged to participate (moreover she was selected as a Hunter, which meant she had a guaranteed free holiday trip, a fact which was also an important factor in her choice as she told me afterwards). Muriel had informed Gerry about this even before they left on holidays, and thus it was clear from the start that from a romantic point of view the trip was a blow in the water: they had lots of fun together, but there was never even the possibility of romance, not for Muriel but also not for Gerry, since he "would never touch somebody else's woman". Ingeborg, in a rare moment of irritation, initially gives Muriel a hard time for going on the holiday trip ("I don't want to hear this, you all go on Blind Date but have boyfriends!"), but when she hears that Muriel is still together with her new boyfriend all is well again.

Though Muriel and Gerry's story is, like that of John Ray and Nancy, one of failed romance their interaction is nevertheless entirely different. Muriel is a young woman with an energetic - some would even call it hyperkinetic - swirl-through-life. She completely dominates the conversation, often interrupting Gerry, who is much

more shy and calm in comparison to her. But somehow he enjoys her energy and independence. For example, he describes Muriel as "ardent, a loose liver ... and she know what she wants". Muriel on the other hand describes Gerry as "cute, insecure and shy". There is certain imbalance between them, with Gerry being unequivocally positive about her (perhaps even in love) whereas Muriel remains more critical of him. Some examples from the bish-bash:

Muriel: You can compare Gerry to a koala bear. He's cute, but lacks initiative.

Gerry: I think she should have waited for me, and waited for the Blind Date holiday.

Muriel: He shouldn't have nagged about my boyfriend.

Gerry: The thing I missed most during the holiday trip was romance.

Muriel: I missed my son and my boyfriend.

Gerry: An advice to Muriel is that she first should get to know the person before she starts a relationship with him.

Muriel: Gerry, let me give you a good piece of advice: think about yourself first, don't mind what other people think of you, go crazy once and a while and live your life.

From fragments like these it becomes clear that Gerry and Muriel's interaction is almost the exact opposite from John Ray and Nancy's. Here Muriel is the most active one, and Gerry is following her lead. But more important for the purpose of this chapter is that Muriel is not defining herself in relation to Gerry. In fact, she has a quite ridiculing stance towards masculinity, and she affirms a positive self-identity that is *not* a function of masculine desire. There is one fragment that illustrates this clearly:

Gerry: Muriel danced with somebody in a club, and... the guy was kind of, er, considerably excited.

Muriel: I can't say that there was an erotic tension between Gerry and me. There was some erotic tension with one of the Dominicans, though - I was dancing merengue with this guy. And this guy, he had... a serious hard on (laughs)

So here we have a woman who, on prime time television, publicly makes fun of a man desiring her, being in control and keeping her agency within the situation. That is, she does not let her femininity, though heterosexual, be defined in terms of male desire. Muriel, in other words, performs a female identity that does *not* comply with patriarchal heterosexuality, because it is unapologetically positive and does not need male approval, nor is she looking for it.

It is tempting to look at Gerry and Muriel as the exact mirror image of the John Ray and Nancy. For instance, a possible interpretation might be that Muriel reverses the gendered power relationship and dominates Gerry. Whereas it is true that she dominates the conversation and often interrupts Gerry there is no dynamic between them where Gerry is defining his identity through her criticism (as was the case with Nancy). Gerry, quite simply, remains untouched by Muriel's view of him, and instead

opts to leave the floor to her. For example, when Muriel interrupts him for the umpteenth time he literally says “ok, ok I shut up already”, makes a gesture that leaves the floor to her and says “Muriel, go ahead”. Gerry’s masculinity, in other words, is *not* defined in terms set by Muriel, he simply retreats and does not further engage with her.

The point I am getting at is that the apparent disequilibrium between both (Muriel dominating the conversation, Gerry passively looking from the side) remains in comparison to John Ray and Nancy’s interaction very shallow. It is, so to speak, a conversational characteristic but it does not go into the depths of their souls. Gerry’s masculinity is not fundamentally challenged: unlike Nancy he did not need his dating partner for defining his sense of self. Rather, what the Gerry-Muriel story offers is the performance of two positive identities, two identities that stand on their own, instead of one defining the other. What makes their interaction exceptional and counter-hegemonic is that in it we find a woman defining herself *not* in function of men. This is the true scandal of Muriel – and as we will see, scandalous it was indeed: she refuses to behave in a “feminine” way, where feminine refers to the norms of female behaviour to the extent that it is appealing to men. She does not even get to the point where she challenges Gerry *in his masculinity*, as for example when Gerry would start doubting about himself and start defining himself in function of her. Seen in this light, Ingeborg’s reassured reaction (combined with the touched “oohs” of the studio audience) when hearing that Muriel is still together with the new boyfriend is telling: perhaps Gerry (nor the Dominican) were incapable of “taming” her, but at least off-screen she is together with a man. The social order, though slightly upset by her actions, is luckily enough not fundamentally challenged.

What the Gerry and Muriel story makes clear, then, is that *Blind Date*’s format is sufficiently open to allow the performance of alternative versions of masculinity and femininity. Although the majority of gender performances are closer to John Ray and Nancy’s we occasionally get to see a gender performance that does not follow the patterns of patriarchal heterosexuality. Whether a participant will perform hegemonic gender identities or not depends largely on things like temperament or personality: Muriel just has a different, less submissive personality than Nancy has. This should not be confused with something like “political consciousness” – Muriel did not have an intentional political agenda but behaved “instinctively”, just like Nancy did. This explains why the majority of the gender performances follow the patterns of patriarchal heterosexuality: the women and men that appear on the show use and draw on their pretelevisional identity when performing in *Blind Date*, especially during the afters, and the fact remains that we live in a society that is characterised by a high degree of patriarchal heterosexuality, perhaps increasingly so.

The fact that occasionally counter-hegemonic gender performances come out of *Blind Date* should not be confused with the idea that they are all appreciated equally by the audience – both the studio and the television audience. I have already stressed a few times that dating shows are moralistic universes that consists of “good” and “bad” behaviour, and both audiences play a crucial role in this. The *studio audience*, through its cheers and boos, loudly voices its approval or disapproval when a participant does something which is considered to be “unethical”. The audience at home, though physically not present is similarly ethically inclined, often offering harsh judgements

of participants and their behaviours. It is to that “moral audience” that we will turn our attention to now.

8. The moral audience

What does the audience make of both stories? How do they interpret the John Ray and Nancy story, and how do they relate to Gerry and Muriel? And, more importantly for the concerns of this chapter, what do their interpretations – their opinions about who was doing “the right thing” – tell us about patriarchal heterosexuality? Do Blind Date viewers challenge or sustain patriarchal heterosexuality and the way it defines fixed roles for men and women? In other words, through audience interpretations of the story of respectively John Ray–Nancy Gerry–Muriel we can investigate how the gender performances come across, and what it tells us about the politics of gender at the reception-side of things.

In this context it is important to remember the gender composition of the respondent panel: all were women except for one man. Though initially I had not chosen for it to be so (see chapter 3) it undoubtedly had the advantage that I was confronted with an almost homogeneous sample from the gender point of view. Concretely this meant that I could investigate how *women* looked at Blind Date, instead of the general category of “viewers”. Perhaps naively, I supposed that women were more likely to display empathy towards female participants – in other words, that they were going to take up the female subject position – or at least be more sensitive towards the gender dynamic within the programme. Men, so I thought, would be more likely to identify with the male participants, and because they occupy an unquestioned privileged position they would be more likely to be “blind” to the gendered dynamics of Blind Date.

8.1 John Ray and Nancy

Starting from this logic I expected that the John Ray and Nancy storyline contained enough elements for the female viewers to recognise the extent to which John Ray dominated the interaction between him and Nancy. In other words, before taking the interviews I had thought that the respondents would dislike John Ray and criticise him for being a male chauvinist. And indeed, all respondents (even the male one) used very gendered terms to describe John Ray. For example, almost all of them used at one time or another the word “macho” to describe John Ray, and “a Kevin” was a close second (which in Dutch connotes a certain type of (working class) male chauvinism). Other terms that were used for describing him were “arrogant”, “self-assured”, “lacking human judgement”, “adventure-oriented”, values that also describe what traditionally are “male” characteristics. Though the word “womaniser” was not used explicitly there were many remarks that pointed towards it:

Christiane: He tried to flirt there with a French girl, with a Spanish one...

Georgette: He’s not really looking for a relationship, I think.

Iris: It looks as if it was clear from the beginning of the week that they weren’t going to get along, so it’s quite normal that he tries to chat up other girls...

Katelijne: He is somebody who wants an immediate response, and she is more of the wait and see-type.

Jan: Who is most ready for a relationship?

Inge and Romy: (together) She.

Jan: But isn't he much more of a chat-up person?

Romy: Yes, of course. But that's not a relationship, he just wants to score.

Jan: (laughs) His little black book!

Inge: Exactly! He already has a library full of them and wants to add another one.

Whereas quotes like these clearly indicate that the viewers were quite susceptible for the gendered subtext of their interaction the general opinion about John Ray was nevertheless remarkably mild. For instance, when I asked the nine respondents whom they liked most, opinions were fifty-fifty: four preferred John Ray, one was undecided and disliked both, and the remaining four preferred Nancy⁴. In other words, though respondents were not blind for the way John Ray dominated Nancy, and although they realised that John Ray was "a bit of a macho", this didn't seem to interfere with his likeability. Even his "adversaries" (those that did not like John Ray) were quite forgiving towards him. Christiane, for example, described him as "not really a macho. He tries to be one but is not really one".

The issue that brought up this forgiving attitude towards John Ray most clearly was the fact that John Ray had started chatting up other girls during the holiday trip. I was expecting respondents to be outraged by this, but even those respondents that explicitly did not like John Ray as a person were very forgiving towards him, thinking it was "considerate":

Christiane: I don't think he was rude. He did when she was in her hotel room, so he spared her. He didn't make her look like a fool in front of the other. No no, that was a decent thing of him to do.

Katelijne: As long as it remained a chat, that's fine for me. And even then, you know... If it really doesn't work out and there are other people around whom you feel like chit-chatting with, that's fine with me. And the fact that he didn't do it in front of her I think is courteous. Although, apparently she knew, so she must have heard or seen it. But as long as he didn't do it in a provocative way...

Peter: I think it is typically male to do so. "It doesn't work out with her, so I am going to broaden my scope..."

⁴ I deduced this by asking two questions: first, very straightforward, "whom do you like most?"; because feelings about John Ray and Nancy were rather lukewarm (only a few respondents answered very affirmative to the question), I tried to force respondents to make a choice by asking "with whom would you like to go on a holiday trip?".

Rita: I think he would have liked to [get involved] with her. But he's polite, because he only chatted up other girls when she wasn't present. [...] while she was at her room, resting. So that's positive about him, that he takes her into consideration.

When reading quotes like these it is hard not to think that John Ray is a modern saint! Even if respondents did not really approve of him chatting up other girls they never were outraged by it, calling it "understandable" or "normal". In other words, John Ray's "masculine" behaviour is not only considered to be normal, he can also count on a fair share of glossing over, even gets patted on the back for having the "decency" to chat up girls *out of sight*.

This forgiving attitude towards John Ray contrasts starkly with the divided opinions about Nancy. One group of viewers described her as "honest", "quiet", "mature", "friendly", "respectful", "pleasant", but another group thought she was "aggressive", "closed", "choosy", "dominant", "coming from a nun's school", even "frumpy". Let us start with the group of adversaries, that is, those respondents that do not like her, and see what their arguments are.

A first interpretation is that Nancy is "choosy" and "difficult". Here respondents are actually blaming Nancy for not being open to John Ray's *avances*. As Peter puts it:

Peter: But I think she was not as open to it as he was. She had prepared a list beforehand – "he has to be like this, and this" – whereas he went there with less high expectations. So he is definitely less choosy than her. [...] She wants to present an image of herself like "it was not my fault, it was his", whereas *she* was the picky one. I think John Ray was much more spontaneous, straightforward and also more respectful.

Peter's quote is fascinating, because it is the exact opposite of the analysis I made in section 4. John Ray, in his account, is easy-going and respectful, and because Nancy refuses to respond to his undoubtedly generous offer (after all, he offered himself, so how *could* she refuse?) she makes short-lists beforehand, is "picky" and is generally a difficult woman. In short, women that say no to men are difficult, and, as Peter warns later on in the interview, "If she continues to be as choosy she will have a hard time finding somebody". The underlying message is clear: women better do not set their standards too high, because they will end up alone. (When reading this, I cannot but think about that famous phrase of the late Marlon Brando: "the horror, the horror").

A similar reasoning lies behind the idea that Nancy was "dominant":

Rita: She is the most dominant of the two. She doesn't say much, and when he finally manages to make her talk they instantly have a fight. So she must be reacting aggressively.

Again we see the reversal of the analysis I made before. In Rita's account the mere fact that Nancy *objected* to John Ray's definition of her is considered an act of aggression (of course this is so, because within patriarchal heterosexuality women should never argue with men). That John Ray might be the aggressive one because he is the one attacking Nancy in the first place just does not come up in Rita's head,

since a woman should always conform to the standards set by men. Notice also how her phrasing defines Nancy's quietness as a lack, a problem to be solved: "Nancy doesn't say much, and when he *manages* to make her talk...". The use of the word managing clearly indicates that John Ray's was the way to go.

Nancy bringing up John Ray's class background was also disliked by some of the respondents. As I argued before, it was one of the few moments in their interaction when Nancy actually tried to reverse the dynamics between them, or at least alleviate the feeling of failure, by sliding back onto her class position. Some respondents did not like this, because it was deemed arrogant:

Romy: It sounds a bit denigrating, like "I grew up in a calm, intellectual environment".

Inge: She didn't put it like that.

Romy: No, but you can deduce it. And street fighting⁵, I mean, fighting for your rights... She could just as well have said that they were completely different because they come from a different background.

Peter: She mentions things that she shouldn't mention, like his social background for example. Probably he told her that at a moment when they had a serious talk, like "yes, perhaps I come from a different social environment, and I do indeed go to a different school". But that's information that is not really relevant for understanding why it didn't work between them.

(On a side note: both quotes show that class and gender often articulate in very complex ways. Whereas throughout the interview Inge definitely sides up with Nancy (calling John Ray "an asshole") Romy remains undecided whom she likes ("I don't like him but neither do I like her"). For Inge the mentioning of John Ray's class background is not a serious offence – hence her defensive reaction – but for Romy this is a bridge too far, and she blames Nancy for being "denigrating". By doing so she teams up with Peter, the only man in the sample and definitely speaking from a masculinist subject position, who castigates Nancy because she "shouldn't mention things that are not relevant". The relationship between class and gender has indeed always been a complex one).

All of these negative assessments of Nancy have one thing in common, namely that they blame Nancy for being not sufficiently accommodating towards John Ray's wishes ("picky", "dominant") or that she was too assertive ("mentioning the class background). Even though I had chosen the fragment because Nancy behaved as a "good" heterosexual woman should do – questioning herself, seeing herself through *his* eyes, being submissive – she is for her "adversaries" not submissive enough. Being a "good" woman, then, is not an easy endeavour, because one is never sufficiently "good".

⁵ Nancy did not say streetfighting in the fragment: she says literally "a school where you have to fight, come up for your rights".

It is therefore interesting to investigate the reasons why Nancy was *liked* by some of the respondents (her fans, so to speak). If we look at the lists of words that these respondents used for describing her (and that had a positive connotation within the context of the interview), we get terms like "honest", "quiet", "mature", "friendly", "respectful", "pleasant". It does not come as a surprise that these are all "soft" values, that is, values that have a certain feminine touch to them. Most of all, they are certainly *not* threatening for her (male) holiday partner. In other words, the people that like her do so exactly because of her "feminine" (accommodating, yielding) behaviour. In short, although their appreciations differ dramatically, both "adversaries" and "fans" of Nancy judge her by the extent to which she complies to the standards of "female" behaviour. For her adversaries she is not accommodating enough, whereas her fans praise her for being exactly that: accommodating. For her adversaries, Nancy is not sufficiently "feminine", whereas her fans hail her for being exactly that: "feminine". Despite both camps' opposed interpretations they share a common characteristic: they judge Nancy by the degree to which she behaves woman-like.

These audience interpretations of John Ray and Nancy were – at least to me, very surprising. Initially I had thought that the viewers, especially the women, would be highly critical of John Ray and supportive of Nancy because of the obviously gendered subtext of their interaction. My guess was only partly right: respondents indeed "saw" the gendered subtext, talking about John Ray in terms that stressed his male chauvinism. What I had not expected, however, is the extent to which this does not seem to interfere with his likeability. "Sure, John Ray is a macho, but he isn't that bad" is the dominant tone of the interviews. Even more surprising is that he gets praised for being considerate and thoughtful. Nancy, on the other hand, was far more negatively appreciated than I had expected. The most extreme of these reactions was when she was actually *blamed* for not being able to live up to John Ray's standards, or when she was blamed for not being sufficiently accommodating. But even those that did not blame her but did the opposite – praise her – did so in the exact same terms, namely for being accommodating.

What this shows is that the respondents are far more embroiled in patriarchal heterosexuality than one might think. For sure, they read the story in gendered terms, as a power struggle between a man and a woman, and they might even be critical of a particular gender performance, like those respondents that do not like John Ray because of his male chauvinism. But the fundamental principle that remains unquestioned is that women should behave "femininely", that is, women should behave in such a way that it is pleasing to men, or at least not threatening to their male dating partner. Men, to the contrary, are judged by entirely different standards, and accommodating is not one of them.

John Ray and Nancy's story also shows how the moral economy of patriarchal heterosexuality (who gets appraisal, who receives criticism?) works differently for men than for women. For women, even though they are "good" heterosexual women and define themselves in function of male desire, there is always the risk of being criticised for being not accommodating enough. For men, however, the risk of getting blamed are minimal: when they behave "masculine" (aggressive, non-

reflexive, lacking understanding) it is perhaps not appreciated but it is nevertheless considered to be "normal"; and from the moment when they don't act in such a masculine fashion (as when one chats up other girls while the date is in her hotel room) they receive applause for being "considerate". In short, Blind Date's moral economy – the way guilt and appraisal are distributed – privileges men and handicaps women. The men can only do better and receive applause. The women can at best fulfil but are more likely to disappoint.

8.2 Gerry and Muriel

It is therefore interesting to see what the respondents make of Gerry and Muriel's story. As we have seen, Muriel was an example of an anti-hegemonic performance of femininity, one that refused to define herself in function of his male desire, even making fun of it (as the infamous erection moment made clear). What do the respondents make of their story?

The answer is very straightforward: everybody disliked Muriel, almost with a passion. There were simply no "fans" of Muriel, only "adversaries". They reproached her for being "tiresome", "too tough", "kind of arrogant", "a blab", "artificial", "a know-all", "full of herself", "a cunt", "over the top", "fake". The sheer heftiness of reactions is best exemplified by a fragment taken from the interview with Romy and Inge, immediately after shutting down the video:

Romy: That's an episode that I remember very well. I remember *her* especially.

Inge: Me too. I can't stand her. She makes me want to hit her.

Jan: (laughs) Why?

Romy: She is so artificial and knows everything better, speaks in the guy's place, decides in his place...

Inge: Yes, and she pretends to know everything better. Oh my God, and the way she said "Gerry, let me give you a good piece of advice". I really thought "you know where you can stuff your good advice."

Romy: Talks, talks [Romy refers to at a moment in the bish-bash when Muriel says they had some good talks], I don't think they ever had a talk. Monologues, rather.

Reactions like these are the rule, not the exception. The only respondent who was more or less moderate in her opinion about Muriel was Katelijne, but even she eventually chose for Gerry when I pressed her for an answer. The above quote illustrates well what exactly is annoying about Muriel: she is simply not submissive enough. When Romy says "she knows everything better, she speaks in the guy's place, decides in his place" we get to the core of Muriel's "scandalous behaviour": the fact that she is the one taking the initiative, refusing to let her agenda being determined by Gerry. The contrast with John Ray is striking: when he behaved in a similar fashion, trying to impose his agenda (and being far more successful at it than Muriel, by the way), he was perhaps not liked but he was never met with the same moral outrage Muriel had to endure. Why? For John Ray it was "normal" to do so, it

was in the line of expectations, and so he did not deserve any “blaming”, let alone a moral outcry.

That Muriel already had a boyfriend while leaving on the holiday trip only made matters worse: this was simply unfair, even perverse:

Georgette: She shouldn't have participated, because she already had a boyfriend. Gerry didn't stand a chance from the beginning, did he?

Inge: She looks like the type to invite her boyfriend and her Blind Date beforehand to go and eat something together.

(In this context some behind-the-scene information is extremely illuminating: when Nancy left on the holiday trip she actually also had a boyfriend at that moment. However, being the “good” – that is, available – heterosexual woman she is, she kept this quiet, not mentioning it to anybody from the production team nor to John Ray. Hence the moral indignation of the audience members in Muriel's case is misplaced, or at least misinformed. It does show, however, how the moral economy of Blind Date reinforces patriarchal heterosexuality: Nancy *pretends* to be a “good girl” and gets (some) praise for it, whereas Muriel is completely honest but gets chastised. Either way, patriarchal heterosexuality is victorious).

In short, for the respondents Muriel is not “feminine” enough, if we define feminine as accommodating towards men. Her refusal to play along the rules of patriarchal heterosexuality is very badly received by the respondents, who blame her for being exactly that: a “bad” woman. How do the members of the audience look at Gerry? He was also described in rather negative terms, like “lethargic”, “not tough”, “correct”, “shy”, “a bit too soft”, “a good soul”, “lacking that extra oomph”. The striking thing about these terms is that they seem to imply a failure to be masculine enough: a man that allows himself to be dominated by a woman (who moreover is perceived to be unpleasant, to put it mildly) cannot be a “real” man. However, despite lacking masculinity Gerry is nevertheless much more likeable than Muriel, if only because they felt sorry for him. If Gerry was to be reproached something, it was that he was not man enough to make Muriel into a “real” woman, one that played along the rules and that was above all more submissive.

The audience interpretations of Gerry and Muriel make clear that it is easier for a man to lack masculinity than it is for women to be lacking femininity: Gerry was pitied but liked, whereas Muriel was fiercely disliked. So even when we are confronted with anti-hegemonic performances of masculinity and femininity we see that Blind Date's moral economy privileges men and blames women.

If we take the two stories together, and compare for instance the treatment of John Ray with the one of Muriel, the picture becomes even more bleak. It is very interesting to see that Muriel was blamed for being dominant, for imposing her definition of the situation, whereas she does not even come close to the way John Ray was imposing his definitions upon Nancy: there was never a moment when Gerry doubted himself, or started to think about himself in the term set by Muriel (perhaps he did, but he did not display it publicly, whereas Nancy did). In other words, the reproach that Muriel was dominant is not even fair. Yet she was, so to speak, on the

verge of being stoned whereas John Ray received a smooth treatment, getting even praised for his considerate behaviour. When we compare Gerry and Nancy a similar observation occurs: even though Gerry was considered to be lacking masculinity he was nevertheless liked by everybody, whereas Nancy, who went at lengths to be a “good” heterosexual woman barely managed to get half of the votes.

The “moral” audience, then, the audience that cheers and boos, praises and chastises, uses a double standard: if a man chats up other girls it is ok, if a woman does so she is “cheap”. This is nothing new, as decades of feminism has taught us. But that is exactly what is so worrying about it: decades of feminism don’t seem to have taught us very much. I was particularly surprised about the hefty reactions to Muriel. Although it is problematic to make quantitative statements starting from such a small panel it is noteworthy that even the younger women in the panel, the women that are supposed to be the product of feminism, hated Muriel with a passion. And to be honest: when I first transcribed their episode I was not particularly keen on her either, though I did not expect such fierce audience reactions. The loathing of Muriel is frightening because she is performing a femininity which is not even *radically* threatening for patriarchal heterosexuality. For instance, Muriel’s performance does not challenge heterosexuality as a norm, it only challenges the way heterosexual women are supposed to behave towards men – she is, in other words, more a threat to patriarchy than to heterosexuality. Her subversion, if it can be called that way, is relatively harmless, yet she receives the full weight of public outrage on her shoulders. And the full weight, in her case, was heavy, because as mentioned before she lost her job due to her Blind Date appearance. With the thematic of this chapter in mind the reasons that were given to her obtain a fresh meaning: because she was “running around naked on television”, and because she was “an unmarried mother going on a holiday with a man she didn’t know” – in short she was a “bad” heterosexual woman. The moral of the story? Even minor subversions can have large consequences – at least for women.

9. Conclusion

In this chapter we have examined Blind Date not from the viewpoint of televisual power relationships but from the viewpoint of gender power relationships, that is, the power relationship between men and women. Although the programme presents itself as a public arena in which “the battle of the sexes” offers its “combatants” equal starting positions, I have argued that the theme of romanticism that inspires and runs through the programme privileges men and subdues women. This is because romance is a regulatory ideal that assigns different roles to men and women, and I have called the hegemony that underpins this ideal “patriarchal heterosexuality”. This gender hegemony is heterosexist because it privileges the heterosexual couple as the “normal” couple, and it is patriarchal because it defines femininity as a function of masculinity. In other words, although Blind Date seems to offer its participants a “fair” battle, the terms of the battle are such that they privilege men and subdue women.

I have also argued that different parts of Blind Date give rise to different types of struggles over masculinity and femininity. During the before, when romance is staged, a critique of masculinist positions is possible but remains rather

sterile because it remains at the general, essentialist level. During the afters, however, a different type of definitional struggle arises, one that is more personal in tone and therefore also more political. What we see in this part is that *Blind Date*'s format is sufficiently open ("equal", if you want) to allow for gender performances that break with the patterns of patriarchal heterosexuality, as exemplified by the story of Muriel and Gerry. In moments like these, patriarchal heterosexuality is indeed threatened by the texts of popular culture. However, if we look at audience interpretations of the Gerry and Muriel story, it is obvious that such moments of "opening" are not well received, as for example when Muriel symbolically gets chastised for being a "bad" (heterosexual) woman.

This analysis, then, goes against much of the 1980s cultural studies work. During this period, many studies argued that the texts of popular culture were "structured in dominance" (that is, that they confirmed the status quo) but that the moment of reception was the moment of counter-hegemonic readings – the moment, in short, where the hegemony had to incorporate critical elements (the negotiated reading) or was challenged (the aberrant decoding). My interpretation of *Blind Date* points to the exact opposite. In my analysis, *Blind Date*-the-text is the "open" entity, the place where the gender hegemony occasionally gets challenged. The moment of reception, on the contrary, is the moment when much of this radical potential is closed down. In short, whereas the 1980s saw the active audience as the agent of ideological openness, in my account the reception moment is the moment of ideological *closure*. Yes, the viewers are interpretatively active – there were different readings of Nancy, for example – but this does not mean that patriarchal heterosexuality is challenged, quite the reverse. The different interpretations of Nancy were only superficially "different", because both fans and adversaries judged her to the extent that she was a "good" – read accommodating – woman.

Let us now return to the general line-of-investigation of this thesis. This chapter has shown, in my opinion, two things. First of all, it shows how the naïve mode of watching *Blind Date*, the mode that takes participants to be displaying their true self, is not a viable political alternative. Section 8 of this chapter is in fact a detailed account of naïve readings by the audience. When the viewers (and me) were talking about John Ray, Nancy, Gerry and Muriel, the latter were assessed in terms of their *personality*, not in terms of the production context in which they were operating. As I had argued before, these naïve readings judge participants in very moralistic terms. Dating proved to be, at least in the eyes of the moral audience, a highly ethical activity, a question of doing "good" and "bad" things. But such moralistic assessments of participants use a double standard for men and women, and in the process patriarchal heterosexuality gets reproduced. In short, the naïve mode of watching *Blind Date* is perhaps not as complicit with televisual capitalism as the savvy mode, but it is, culturally speaking, an equally conservative force: it sustains the existing moral order and thus reifies existing power relationships.

Secondly, by focusing on the power relationship between men and women instead of televisual power relationships this chapter has also touched upon a fundamental limitation of the materialist approach to power. As I have argued in the first two chapters, the mixture of Foucaultian analytics of power and ANT is a very

useful tool for analysing institutional settings. Settings, in other words, that are characterised by *intentionality*, by plain and ruthless goal-oriented action. The televisual power relationship between production team and participants is a good example of such a goal-oriented setting: the whole production process can be explained by referring to its intention, namely to make “good television”. This is where the strength of the materialist approach lies: in the analysis of power relationships that are characterised by a high degree of intentionality. But it is at the same time its greatest weakness, because it is in danger of being overwhelmed by its focus on intentionality.

The power relationship between male and female participants is a case in point. Although it is undoubtedly a power relationship the materialist approach has relatively little to offer here. The materialist terminology of strategies, obligatory passage-points, or nonhuman actors is of little or no use in the analysis of the gender power relationship, precisely *because* the latter is not an intentional power relationship. Instead I had to draw on structuralist-Gramscian terms like hegemony in order to explain participants’ behaviour. Moreover this chapter revealed the weakness of ANT’s refusal to talk about structural power relationships. One cannot understand the power relationship between men and women in *Blind Date* without invoking some notion of patriarchy, which is a prime example of a structure of domination.

This mean does not mean, however, that the materialist approach has nothing to offer for analysing gender power relationships. The idea, for example, that the material context shapes the performances of masculinity and femininity in which they take place has been an important theme throughout this chapter. Put simply, the men and women in *Blind Date* do not perform their gender identity “out of the blue” but do so within the context of the dating show. When Eric made the gendered statement “I think Jessica really knows how to dress herself, especially with a body like hers” he does so because he is asked to comment upon her clothing style in the first place. Similarly, if a participant uses romantic clichés during the *before*s it is because the *before*s require him or her to stage romance. In short, the gender performances of the participants cannot be thought independently of the production process, yet at the same time the power relationship is not intentional. In fact, this has been the difficult juggling act this chapter had to perform: how to combine attention for the influence of the material context with the fact that the gender power relationship is *not* an intentional one. In other words, the gender performances of participants are a by-product of *Blind Date*’s very intentionally organised production process. They are a very real effect of it – but they were never intended to be there in the first place.

In this chapter, then, the network has shown to be an *assemblage*, in the sense that it is, from the management’s point of view, *overproductive*. The *Blind Date* team “just” wants to make good television, but they also, unintentionally, end up reproducing patriarchal heterosexuality. Perhaps this is what makes media production such a fascinating field of study, because it shows how mundane and banal production practices participate in wider structures, and sometimes have surprising, society-wide effects.

Conclusion

Let us end this thesis with the image with which it started: a breast popping out of a shirt. In one of those bizarre twists of history, chance has wanted that in between the writing of the introduction and this conclusion a second breast incident occurred. It was also a television show, but a different one, in a different continent, and the breast belonged to a different woman. A comparison of the two breast incidents and the way the audience reacted to it provides a handy entry into the problematic of this thesis: the televisual power relationship between media professionals and “their” ordinary participants.

1. Nipplegate 2004

The second breast incident – and this is already a first indication – actually has a name: Nipplegate. During the US Super Bowl 2004 half time, probably the most expensive commercial time slot on the planet (a 30 second spot averaged \$2,3 million in 2004¹) Janet Jackson flashed one of her breasts during a duet with Justin Timberlake due to what they afterwards called “a wardrobe malfunction”. But let us, for the moment at least, bracket the question of who and why. If we compare Nipplegate with the breast incident we see two situations that are roughly the same: two women, one black and the other white, accidentally show their nipple during a prime time television broadcast. And, just like with Blind Date’s breast incident, it only took a few minutes for the first posts to appear on the internet. The following quotes have been taken from a forum called macrumors.com² (I have edited some of them for convenience):

Poster 1: Janet's right boob made an appearance at the superbowl today care of Justin Timberlake. Thank you Justin!

Poster 2: Hey, was it just me, or did Justin Timberlake show Janet Jackson's breast during the halftime show? I tivo'd³ it, and I paused it, and it really looks real... anyone know anything about this?!?

Poster 3: Yeah, it looked real, and it had to be planned. That shirt had to have been made that way!

Poster 4: It wasn't really clear to me, I did see Justin Timberlake pulling on Janet Jackson blouse. Maybe someone will have a link so that we all can get a better look at this situation!

Poster 5: Did you see the reaction on her face? I don't think it was on purpose. I'd like to see a video or picture again though. Please post if you find a link.

Poster 6: Photo at <http://www.drudgereport.com/>

¹ <http://advertising.about.com/library/weekly/aa012301c.htm>

² <http://www.macrumors.com>

³ TIVO is the brand name of a device that allows you to record television images on your computer. It is essentially an analogue/digital converter.

Poster 5: Thanks!

Poster 7: Saw the pic on drudge. Yuck. Well, after the Brit/Madonna kiss, what else can you do to get 10 more min of fame. I guess this is the next step for those with failing careers. I just hope Queen Latifa doesn't show us something next.

Poster 8: Thank you poster 6. Janet Jackson is very lucky that it wasn't a completely bare breast. She had some sort of silver jewellery covering the nipple and areola. <http://www.hyperdictionary.com/medical/areola>

Poster 9: Why do these celebs think that these stunts are going to get them anywhere. They might be good at selling a couple more albums today but no one is going to ever respect them in the future. It's all about the shock value. I don't even want to imagine what's next.

[...]

Poster 10: Yeah, it looked real, and it had to be planned. That shirt had to have been made that way! Check drudge[report]. He links to an MTV article promising something shocking from Janet. The Super Bowl Pre and Halftime shows are really getting pathetic. Maybe the NFL will get rid these increasingly edgy performances.

Poster 11: Worst half time show in awhile in my view, and what was that all about? She did have a pasty.

Poster 12: She really has nothing to be proud of anyways. I wouldn't care for her breasts even if she was completely topless. Like the Jacksons don't have enough exposure in the media these days. I'd kick freakin' MTV's ass for this sh%t [sic]. This isn't HBO or spice channel. True that they say MTV is a sewer of the television. And CBS says they knew nothing about it? Last time I checked both CBS and MYV [were] owned by VIACOM. And VIACOM have been asking to get a boot shoved up its ass for a long time. Shall see what develops out it.

Poster 13: Here it is... [inserts link] I can't believe this. They should get a HUGE fine from the censors!

Poster 14: Geeze....a tit so what? What's the big deal?

Poster 15: It's bad enough that the halftime show featured such marginally talented entertainers(they're not singers...and yes, there is a difference...) but to lower the bar to this sad bump and grind and saggy maggy flashing is just inexcusable. I hope heads roll tomorrow morning.

Poster 16: I doubt it was on purpose. Look at her face on the Yahoo pics posted above... she looks very shocked. And Justin looks so embarrassed. I really don't think it was a publicity stunt. It had to be an accident.

A comparison of these internet postings and those quoted in the introduction shows some commonalities but also some differences. With the posts in the introduction they share the idea that commercial television is in a continuous downfall to increase its market share. Also, some posters are morally outraged by the fact that it is broadcast, arguing that it is not the right thing to do.

The differences, however, are more striking. If we look at the first six posts the forum participants are debating whether they had seen it correctly. Only when provided with a link to another website did the posters accept that indeed they had seen it correctly. In other words, the moment was so short-lived and ephemeral that it took several high-resolution images to actually see the nipple everybody was suddenly talking about. In fact, as soon as the director in the direction room realised *what* the

was broadcasting he instantly switched to another camera. This contrasts starkly with Blind Date's breast incident, where the camera relentlessly kept filming and the director decided *not* to switch camera. Moreover, it is clear that if the duet had not been broadcasted live the offending shots would have been left out of the montage, whereas the Blind Date nipple scene was *not* broadcasted live and yet the scene was consciously included in the final cut. In other words, Janet Jackson's breast was broadcasted *by accident*, whereas the Blind Date breast incident was a conscious, deliberate production decision.

Besides revealing something about camera work, the internet posting also tell us a lot about the difference between Janet Jackson and an "ordinary" girl. From post 6 onwards, the key question that keep these posters occupied is whether Janet Jackson did it on purpose. There is almost a consensus that it was not a malfunction but that she did it intentionally. Poster 12 even goes as far as making a connection between the incident and the economic structure of the US media industry. The differences with the reactions to the Blind Date girl are striking: in the latter's case, none of the internet posters came up with the idea that she could have done it on purpose⁴. In the eyes of the viewers, then, Janet Jackson and the Blind Date girl are two completely different beings. Whereas the former is perhaps frowned upon (she shows bad taste, is considered to be a careerist or suspected to create a commercial hype) she nevertheless gets attributed agency within the situation. Janet Jackson is, in other words, a full-blown "subject" – perhaps one does not agree with her, but nevertheless she is a person with motivations, aspirations and a strategy. The Blind Date girl, to the contrary, is just scoffed at, and does not get to the status of "subject".

The comparison of the two unrelated breast incidents shows that reality TV's promise to democratise television – "now ordinary people can become stars too" – is dubious to say the least. Ordinary participants are *not* treated in the same way as celebrities, nor by the production team (the director who in his direction room decides which images to broadcast), nor by the viewers. Reality TV producers like to proclaim that their genre blurs the boundaries between (media) elites and the non-elites, but a comparison between both incidents, as anecdotic as it may be, reveals that the opposite might be the case: far from abolishing the difference between ordinary people and celebrities reality TV might actually *maintain* the difference. The fact that the Blind Date girl remains nameless, also in this PhD, is testimony of this difference between celebrities and ordinary people.

⁴ The irony is that – after the breast incident had created quite a stir in the popular press – the Blind Date production team felt they had to defend themselves. Ingeborg: "During the rehearsals already the girl's breast had popped out. We suggested her to put on a different outfit for the shootings. She didn't think it was necessary, so her 'striptease' did not come as a surprise to us. Some participants are much smarter than people think, which immediately raises the question who is laughing at whom" (quoted in Vanderhaeghe 2003: 29). In other words, what Ingeborg is suggesting here is that the girl flashed her breasts *intentionally*, thus making her into a "full" subject. Another way of looking at it, of course, is that she puts the responsibility back on the girl's shoulders.

2. The asymmetric televisual power relationship

The different interpretations of the Janet Jackson and the Blind Date can be explained by what I have called throughout this PhD the *televisual power relationship* between ordinary participants and the production team. As we have seen: the production team wants the participants to perform strong identities, and therefore they will manage the participants. At this point I would like to stress that I do not have a problem with the managerial relationship *per se*. Making television is a highly specialised form of craft, and the ordinary people that enter into its orbit indeed do not know much about television, its rules and how they will come across. There is nothing wrong with explaining participants that they have to sit up straight because otherwise they “will look like the hunchback of Notre-Dame”, as Blind Date’s participant coach put it. There is also nothing wrong with the production team wanting participants to perform strong identities, because strong identities can indeed be fascinating to look at. In short, the problem of the televisual power relationship is *not* that it is a power relationship. All forms of organised, goal oriented activities will always entail a power relationship, so there is nothing inherently wrong with the fact that the production team manages its participants.

The problem with televisual power relationships is that they are, at least in the form as we have studied them, *asymmetric*, and quite fundamentally so. This asymmetry can be situated at two moments: the moment of production and that of reception. Throughout this thesis we have encountered many examples where the production process is structured in such a way that it becomes asymmetric. The fact that participants do not have a say in what happens with their footage is probably the most asymmetric of all production practices, especially because the production team can make or break a participant during the editing phase (by temporal reversion or time lapsing, for example). Also, the fact that shootings are not interrupted if a participant makes a mistake, stutters or hammers, contrasts sharply with the instant “cut” that follows when Ingeborg makes the slightest mistake – a mistake, by the way, that is less likely to happen since her entire text is on an autocue. Participants, by contrast, have to learn their lines by heart or have to look down upon cardboards. The asymmetry of the production process, then, lies in the *irreversibility* of things, or rather, in the way the capacity to interrupt or reverse is unequally distributed amongst media professionals and “their” invitees. The studio space is, as we have seen, an asymmetrical space, one that is *owned* by certain actors that “invite” others (and just like all property owners these landlords determine the house rules).

The same asymmetry that characterises the production process can also be found on the other side of the screen, when the viewers at home watch the programme during the reception phase. The viewers are more likely to blame the participants for those elements that irritate them. The clearest example of this is what we have called the *naïve mode of watching*, the mode of watching that takes participants to be performing their true, authentic selves. In this mode, viewers blame participants for the “personality traits” they do not like. In other words, the naïve mode leaves the production team “off the hook” and puts all the responsibility of the performances on the shoulder of the participants, which is the asymmetric gesture *par excellence*. But even the savvy mode, the critical mode of watching that pretends to see through Blind Date’s production machinery, is asymmetric in its attribution of guilt. Whereas this mode of watching at times sees through the managerial mechanisms, it nevertheless speaks about the production context in a-

moral terms, terms that stress the entertainment value but refuse to assess it in moral terms. The savvy mode, then, perhaps does not judge participants in moral terms, but it refuses to judge the production context (and the production team that creates and controls it) altogether. The savvy mode is a “guilty pleasure”, a pleasure one derives from seeing people getting humiliated while perfectly understanding *how* the damage is being inflicted.

The moral economy of the reception phase is, then, also asymmetric because it attributes guilt and responsibility differently across participants and production team. The latter are never made accountable for their actions: the savvy mode fathoms their strategies and managerial mechanisms but does not morally judge them, whereas the naïve mode does not see this influence and therefore morally blames the participants for their performance. In either scenario the production team is left off the hook and remains outside of the realm of criticism.

3. Televisual capitalism

If we switch perspective to the media industry in its entirety, it looks as if it has found in reality TV – a shortcut term for all genres that make use of ordinary people – the perfect televisual product. Indeed, from the industry’s point of view one could hardly imagine a better product. Most of reality formats are cheap since “the employees” work for free – even better, they queue up to participate, since it is such “a challenge” to star in the show. Whatever the industry makes its employees go through – humiliation, internal frictions, the occasional tear – it is never met with moral outrage. On the contrary: in true neoliberal style most of the time participants get to bear the full responsibility of their “own” actions. And those customers that perfectly see through the whole mechanism are the most loyal ones! In economic terms, it is hard to think of a more perfect product: cheap and no annoying questions.

Seen in this light, the fact that savvy viewers talk about the production assemblage as an amoral machinery – they perfectly decipher some of the managerial strategies but do not talk about them in moralistic terms – presents us with the ultimate victory of televisual capitalism. It has been able to make itself into a machine that is visible yet *beyond* criticism. This puts us in a deadlock situation. In general the basic thrust of critical theory has been that we should understand the way the culture industries work, and implied in it was the idea that increasing knowledge would somehow liberate “the people” – hence the importance of analysis and education within marxist and socialist strands of thought. If we look at the savvy mode of viewing, however, we might have overestimated the importance of analysis and the liberating effects of “grasping”. Savvy viewers are, in a way, marxists – that is, the Marx that made meticulous analyses of how capitalism functioned – but without the moral condemnation that came along with it⁵. Viewed in this light, it is

⁵ I am fully aware that I am moving into slippery territory here, because Marx saw his work as *scientific*, not as normative or moralistic. In the *Grundrisse*, for example, his target is Proudhon whom he reproaches to uphold a naïve, unscientific and ultimately bourgeois theory, and his whole analysis is aimed at showing where the Proudhonists and other naïve socialists do not understand bourgeois political economy (the latter being, of course, his second adversary).

perfectly possible to grasp the mechanisms by which we are subjected, yet at the same time consider it to be “normal” – “that’s just the way it is” – or even worse: enjoy it.

As depressing as this analysis might seem I do think that this PhD contains enough elements not to despair. First of all, the savvy mode, as we have seen, might offer a *feeling* of superiority to the viewers that experience it but it nonetheless underestimates to a large extent the influence of the production context. Viewers *oscillate* between the two modes exactly because they are not savvy *enough*, switching to the naïve mode when they can no longer relate participants’ behaviour to the production context. Even the savviest of viewers are thus in a position of less-than-perfect knowledge, and what is needed is *more* knowledge on how reality TV works, not less. Secondly, ultimately the savvy mode is to be preferred above the naïve one. Although it is true that the savvy mode stimulates consumption (by adding an extra layer to the hermeneutics of the participant) I nevertheless think that the most fragile position in the assemblage is that of the participants: *they* are the ones providing the free “personality work”, *they* are the ones who risk to remain with the stickiness of their actualised identity, *they* are the ones who are “hiding in the light”. The good thing about the savvy mode of viewing is that it displaces blaming, away from the participant and towards the production context (while also, admittedly, locking the viewers into consumption).

Ultimately, the question boils down to these two points: Who is “the victim” of the assemblage? Who is most likely to lose from entering the network? The problem with studying televisual power relationships instead of, say, the wage relationship between capitalist and worker, is that we are confronted with *three* actors instead of two: the production team, the participant, and the viewers. These three actors are into overlapping but asymmetric relationships of domination vis-à-vis each other. For example, the production team is clearly into a superior power position vis-à-vis the other two: it can manage “its” participants while staying out of (visual and moral) reach of the audience. Similarly, the members of the audience hold a superior position vis-à-vis the participants but they are, inevitably it seems, the “dupes” of the production team (either they do not see their influence, or they do see it but they do not hold them accountable). In short, the subdued actor within the assemblage is, by far, the participant, and I think that increasing knowledge of their faith – the institutional regime to which they are subjected – is a first step into making people realise (again?) that televisual capitalism is not beyond morality but, on the contrary, that it is a moral system. It is a moral system in that it attributes responsibility and guilt, but also because it is *not* beyond morality – its, quite simply, *immoral*.

Put somewhat differently, I think – I hope – that more knowledge of televisual capitalism will make viewers aware that capitalism is not only a system of production but also a moralistic system, a system that attributes guilt and responsibility. If within our neoliberal societies being rich is no longer a question of education or class-background but of “hard work” and “taking your chances when

Despite this claim to truth, then, there is nevertheless a strong element of unjustness in his writing, as for example when he describes how the worker creates the surplus value but that it is the capitalist who receives it (Marx, 1993: 266-310).

the opportunity is there” this also implies that those that did not get rich were too lazy, too dumb or too passive – a classic case of blaming the victim. But because capitalism “works” by attributing responsibility and guilt to the actors that function within its borders, it places itself out of “the blaming loop” and hides its own immorality from sight. In short, what is needed is knowledge of how televisual capitalism achieves to morally blame its subjects while at the same time making its own *immorality* disappear from sight.

Perhaps contradictorily, I think that the road to such a “moral” understanding of televisual capitalism passes by the dissection of its functioning and rationality – the kind of analysis I have conducted in chapters 4 and 5. It is contradictory because savvy viewers do exactly the same as I have done, namely analysing how the television production context “functions”, yet they do not arrive at the point where they morally judge televisual capitalism. Yet a sustained critique of the *modus operandi* leads one to, eventually, question the morality of the entire system – that is at least how it worked for me. In this sense my analysis differs considerably from Andrejevic’s. His main argument is that the savvy mode of viewing always, and inevitably so, works into a conservative direction, because savviness accepts and naturalises the commercial model as the only available horizon, and thus refuses to imagine how things could be otherwise: “Being a savvy realist means admitting how things really are – sacrificing a particular illusion of progress in order to avoid being seen as a dupe” (Andrejevic, 2004: 135).

I am slightly more optimist, in the sense that savviness, in my view, does not necessarily lead to a conservative direction. Andrejevic’ is right in that it often does so, but it is not given in the course of things that this will always be the case. Just like Foucault, after making during years and years “savvy” analyses (and receiving lots of criticism for doing so – see chapter 1) ended up writing two books on ethics, I think that savviness, if taken sufficiently far, eventually leads to a questioning of the morality of television production. I, for once, had never thought that this PhD would end up as a critique of televisual morality, and if it did so it was exactly because it started from a savvy analysis of media production practices. And, as one of the posters in the introduction wrote about the breast incident: “It’s a shame that VTM doesn’t cut out things like these”. In remarks like these we find the promise of a savvy mode that does *not* consider the television producers to be beyond morality, but makes them accountable for what they do: making television at the expense of others.

4. What to do

To think about the morality of televisual capitalism brings to the fore the highly contradictory nature of our contemporary culture. We live in an era of rights: human rights, animal rights, civil rights, children rights, indigenous people rights, disability rights, renters’ rights, property rights, patient rights, consumer rights, cyber rights, identity theft rights, taxpayers rights ... Seen from this light it is utterly bizarre that the television participant is not considered to be in need of rights. The television participant – especially in its “ordinary” version – apparently does not need nor deserve protection. The comparison between newspapers, current affair programmes and reality TV is illuminating. Whereas the right of reply is used

frequently within print media, television is not perceived to be a medium one can challenge. Current affairs programmes on television occasionally receive a right of reply – it is rare, but it *does* happen – but in the “light-hearted” television sector I still have to see the first one.

The point is that the fundamental asymmetry of the televisual power relationship, in contemporary culture, is considered *normal* – and perhaps increasingly so. In this section I would like to propose a number of measures to counter that feeling of normality that surrounds televisual capitalism’s treatment of non-media people. Based upon the analyses in this thesis, a number of strategies can be formulated in order to make the televisual power relationship a more symmetric one. There are two main areas of application: the functioning of the media industries, and a society-wide change of mentality vis-à-vis the media..

First, the media industry should critically review its *modus operandi*. In line with some of the recommendations of the “screening gender” project (Aslama 1999) we need to determine a set of *good practices* for how the televisual power relationship should be dealt with. Whether this takes the form of a corporatist “board of ethics” or a state-controlled organ for “ethical media practices” is a debate I will not get into here. The important point is that the entire media industry needs to rethink how it treats ordinary participants. For example, in the case of *Blind Date* it is a *conditio sine qua non* that participants have the right to see the final montage before it is broadcasted. Also, participants should have the right to a second take. Good practices like these cannot be formulated into a single rule that is applicable to all reality formats. For example, formats like *Big Brother* do not allow participants to preview their own footage, whereas in *Blind Date* this is perfectly possible. In short, the modalities of these good practices can and will change from programme to programme, but the guiding principle should be clear: to make televisual power relationship *more symmetric* and *less irreversible*.

Media producers will undoubtedly argue that this will make the production process unmanageable. “If participants were allowed to have a say in the final editing”, so the argument would go, “we would do nothing but editing final versions”. This is not how I think it will be. In my experience participants are remarkably mild about the final product, and only a few would have wanted to change the final editing (John Ray, for example). In short, whereas the analyses in this thesis are rather critical, the participants in general are relatively satisfied with their portrayal, and the amount of extra work will be negligible. But participants should at least have the *possibility* to object to how they will be publicly represented, and this possibility to appeal is sorely lacking in the way the industry currently functions.

Apart from a critical re-examination of the production practices, what is needed is a general *change in attitude* towards the media, in the sense that the wider public should have a deeper knowledge of how television works. Participants particularly will benefit from such wide-spread knowledge on television, because it will allow them to shift the terms of engagement in the televisual space. Detailed, practical knowledge of how television works will allow participants to reclaim the initiative in the spaces of television. For example, if the production team refuses to interrupt the shootings, the participant can yell loud and clearly “cut” and make a time-out gesture at the same time, thus rendering the footage unusable. Practical

“guerrilla tactics” like this will give participants more control over how they are represented. Just like civil disobedience got us a long way because it cleverly understood how the system worked, *televisual disobedience* should get us very far in shifting the televisual power relationship to a more symmetric one.

Public knowledge about television’s functioning will also enable a different attitude towards the question of ownership. The media, by their very nature, are *public* institutions, yet the media professionals carefully guard “their” programmes and shield them from the general public. If the outside world is allowed in, it is not under the conditions of its own choosing – unless they are celebrities, of course. The self-evidence by which television producers claim ownership can be challenged by savvy viewers and knowledgeable participants. To paraphrase Indymedia’s⁶ slogan: “Don’t appear on the media, *be* the media”.

5. Materialism and cultural studies

A final word needs to be said about the theoretical tools that I used throughout this PhD. As it was put in the introduction, this thesis is not only a study of two particular dating shows; it also intended to make a theoretical contribution to cultural studies, by arguing for a materialist analysis amongst the lines of Foucault’s 1970s work and ANT. I argued for such a materialist approach out of a perceived inadequacy of the structuralist-Gramscian framework in the study of televisual power relationships. First, the structuralist-Gramscian approach within cultural studies has power equated with hegemony, that is, it conceives of power as *psychological consent*. In this study of televisual power relationship between production team and participants the category of consent did not prove very useful, for the simple reason that participants did not always consent to or “believed” in the things they were doing. In a way, then, the structuralist-Gramscian approach was too “serious”, it did not take into account that participants can fake, role-play or *not* believe in things while doing them. A second problem with the structuralist-Gramscian approach was that the categories that it used for describing the communication process are of not much use in the case of dating shows. As I have argued in chapter 2, the encoding/decoding model (which is a structuralist-Gramscian approach to mass media communication) separates production from reception in a quasi-transcendent fashion, whereas in *Streetmate* and *Blind Date* these different moments overlap to a large extent. As an alternative model, then, I proposed the materialist approach to communication, and argued that we should conceive of mass mediated communication as an assemblage.

We have now come to the point where we can judge how fruitful this materialist approach to power has been: what are its main areas of strength and what are its weaknesses? First of all, I think the materialist approach has proven to be very fruitful during the *production* analysis. When we analysed the production process, the conceptual apparatus of the Foucaultian “analytics of power” as well as that of actor-network theory was extremely illuminating. Both paradigms, each in their own

⁶ <http://www.indymedia.org>. An independent news website, grown out of and sympathetic to the anti-globalist movement. Their slogan is “Don’t criticise the media, *be* the media”.

specific way, helped me to disentangle the televisual power relationship, its governmental rationality and the way it defines and keeps the different actors aligned. The structuralist-Gramscian cultural studies framework, geared as it is towards “the problem of ideology” would not have gotten us very far, for reasons described above. If within cultural studies we want to study specific *fields* of government, like television’s production processes, educational projects like museums (Bennett 1995), or charity programmes as technologies of ethical citizenship (King 2003), I think the materialist approach to power has lots of analytical and theoretical purchasing power. The focus on *specific* fields of government allows us to examine how power works in particular settings that do not necessarily require their subjects to be “in ideology”, but instead rely on material and spatial constellations to obtain their governmental results.

Such an analysis is not without problems, though. First of all there is the problem that even such materialist analyses require a minimal level or some notion of psychological consent. To take an example from this thesis: whereas it is true that the material context goes quite far in explaining why participants do the things they do, it nevertheless cannot explain everything. As we have seen, participants subject themselves *willingly* to the production team’s managerial regime because underneath it all lies the firm and uncontested belief that the media are not “theirs”, that they are “guests” who should be “honoured” to be “invited”. This, in structuralist-Gramscian terms, is a hegemony, a belief system in which the subjected accept the terms of their own subjugation and even gain some advantages from it (a flattering feeling of uniqueness, for example). In short, even the most materialist of analyses at some point or another will need to rely on explanations that go beyond the narrow description of the material setting in itself.

A second limitation of the materialist approach is its focus upon power relationships that are *intentional*, goal-oriented and take place in institutional settings. The materialist analysis of the televisual power relationship worked so well exactly *because* the latter is an institutional setting that has an intentional and goal-oriented logic: the production team has a number of goals that are clearly defined and out in the open, and the institutional regime is the whole set of procedures that have been set in place to obtain that goal. However, the truth of the matter is that such a rational, calculated institutional regime has very real but *unintended* effects. It is for this reason that I insisted on adding the chapter on gender power relationships within *Blind Date*. Masculinity and femininity are not a specific aim of the management, on the contrary. The production team wants to make “good television”, and it could not care less about the politics of gender in *Blind Date*, let alone patriarchal heterosexuality. Yet the institutional regime they have set in place draws on, reworks and ultimately reproduces hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity. Materialist analyses do not have much to contribute to such unintentional, overproductive effects, apart from the fact that they arise in specific material constellations. The whole vocabulary of *strategies*, *obligatory passage-points* and *immutable mobiles* simply does not make any sense for analysing the power relationship between men and women in *Blind Date*.

A third and final limitation of the materialist approach is that it has relatively little to say about communication *per se*. Or, more precisely, whereas it proved to be a fruitful approach for analysing the media’s *production process* – exactly because

the latter is a goal-oriented, institutional setting – it had relatively little to offer for the reception analysis. During the latter I often had to draw on terms derived from the structuralist-Gramscian framework, like *signification*. Although chapter 6 is probably far removed from a classic structuralist-Gramscian analysis it can nevertheless be read as an analysis of what kind of *readings* viewers make of participants. Also, the analyses relied quite strongly on the notion of *interpretation*, as for example when I argued that watching Blind Date is pleasurable because of the interpretive pleasure one derives from the hermeneutics of the participant. Both “reading” and “interpretation” are terms that are treated with suspicion within (neo)materialism, since the latter grew out of a reaction against the linguistic turn, a train of thought that privileges analyses along linguistic or textualist lines. The truth of the matter is that I simply find it very hard to conceive of “watching television” without invoking *some* notion of signification, be it that my analysis has given it a different place and function than it usually occupies within the structuralist-Gramscian framework. In short, the latter has offered media and cultural studies some insights and a vocabulary that is, in my opinion, *incontournable*. One does not have to uncritically accept the entire paradigm in order to make valuable use of some of its central concepts.

This is precisely what I meant, in the introduction, with the *productivity* of theoretical encounters: it is not about one paradigm superseding the other, as if theories were nations that invade each other’s territory, and one nation’s advances come at the expense of another. To draw on Foucault one last time: theories are not some reified meta-level truths that have to be kept pure and intact at all costs. Rather they are more like *toolboxes*: they allow you to analyse, and in the process they pull you into certain directions. Sometimes they take you to places you never imagined you would visit; sometimes you end up in a cul-de-sac, and you need other resources for getting out of it. This is not a plea for theoretical pluralism, nor does it mean that “anything goes”. Rather, it foregrounds theory’s *creative* capacity, its capacity to change – not only the things that surround us, but also ourselves.

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