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Not the final answer

Critical approaches to the quiz show and Who Wants To Be A Millionaire

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ABSTRACT The article aims to address and explore the apparent neglect of the quiz show in television and cultural studies by focusing on the programme *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* (1998–, UK). Existing work in the field emerged in the late 1970s/early 1980s, and this article argues that a key reason for critical neglect of the quiz show is the centrality of ‘class’ in the genre – a focus which has increasingly receded from view in television and cultural studies. The article operates under the assumption that as television studies develops a longer history of critical and theoretical approaches to the medium, it becomes crucial to respond to innovations by developing ‘new’ methodological approaches and to reconsider the relevance and dynamics of existing models. In this respect, an analysis of *Millionaire* suggests that the emphasis on ‘class’, work and production remains central to the quiz show, and its political and ideological significance.

KEYWORDS *capitalism, class, knowledge, performance, quiz show, television, work*

Introduction

In 1955 the popular magazine *Picture Post* reported on the newly expanding genre of the television quiz show:

There is a ... socially dangerous aspect to *Double Your Money*. Take the example of the telephone mechanic who won thirty-two pounds for correctly answering questions on opera. After each question Hughie Green asked him, ‘And you say you’re a telephone mechanic?’, implying that a man cannot be a telephone mechanic and yet know so much about opera. In the earlier days of *Double Your Money*, the prize money was showered in pound notes over the contestant’s shoulder. Thankfully, this exhibition has now stopped. (Anant, 1955: 27)



The mid-1950s was a time when the quiz show was seen as emblematic of the impact of commercial television in Britain – its association with ‘trivial’ and commercial fare which was antithetical to the concept of public service. Yet *Picture Post*’s observations here invoke themes which have continued to characterize the cultural circulation of the quiz show, whether in terms of general critical commentary or academic analyses of the form. First, these include a middle-class disdain for the cultural value of the genre – here surrounding the blatant and hence ‘vulgar’ display of material gain. Second, they include a recognition that the genre exploits disguised class ideologies in the service of entertainment. Although *Picture Post* does not articulate fully what it sees as ‘socially dangerous’ here, it clearly relates to the ways in which the quiz show mediates constructions of class, knowledge and social status. In fact, it is striking that with a substitution of host and, of course, a considerable increase in monetary reward, the quote could be a description of the globe’s most successful contemporary TV quiz show, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* (Celador for ITV1, 1998–, UK). With UK host Chris Tarrant’s tendency to foreground a perceived disjuncture between contestants’ ‘ordinary’ professions yet (occasional) display of knowledge worth thousands of pounds, the similarities seem clear. Although the showering of pound notes ‘over the contestants’ shoulder’ may have been replaced by the more measured close-up of the tantalizing cheque (also reflecting the shift to the electronic transmission of money), a £1 million win is still celebrated with a fanfare and an explosive shower of blue and silver foil. However, at the same time it is evident that *Millionaire* has developed in a markedly different television landscape and cultural climate than *Double Your Money* (ITV, 1955–64). At the time of *Picture Post*’s report on the genre, British television had only just seen the advent of its second channel (ITV, 1955), and despite the expanding consumer economy, the population could still remember the hardships of postwar austerity. The technological and cultural development of television was still in its infancy, and the monochrome aesthetic (and simple question board) of *Double Your Money* is a world away from the impressive spectacle of *Millionaire*.

This relationship between the history of analytic approaches to the quiz show and its textual and ideological form is the focus of this article, particularly in terms of the rejuvenation of the genre prompted by the domestic and global success of *Millionaire*. An examination of this relationship is particularly pressing in view of the marginalization of the genre in television and cultural studies. Existing academic studies of the genre were written primarily between the late 1970s and 1980s (Clarke, 1987; Fiske, 1987, 1989; Fiske and Hartley, 1978; Lewis, 1984; Mills and Rice, 1982; Tulloch, 1976), which means that in approaching, researching and teaching a genre which has an economic and cultural centrality in the contemporary television landscape, more recent work remains scarce. As



television and cultural studies since this time, as well as transformations in the genre itself. At the same time, as television studies develops a longer history of critical and theoretical approaches to the medium, it becomes crucial not only to respond to innovations by developing 'new' methodological approaches (discussion that has recently circulated around reality TV, for example) (see Holmes and Jermyn, 2004), but also to reconsider the relevance and dynamics of existing models.

First, this article considers the potential reasons for the academic marginalization of the genre and, in particular, the factors which have maintained and exacerbated its relative invisibility in scholarly work. Of crucial importance here is the centrality of Marxist approaches to the genre and their emphasis on class as the primary analytic category. This is a perspective which has receded subsequently from view in television and cultural studies, creating a rather uneasy space for a genre which, in dealing so literally with money, status and capitalist relations, appears to 'speak' explicitly to discourses of class. These earlier interventions are indicated in relation to the changing paradigms of Marxist analyses in television and cultural studies, before a consideration of their implications for approaching the key case study of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*.

Marginalizing the quiz show: production, consumption and the politics of class

Clearly, the existing analyses of the genre have been shaped by the historical uses of Marxism in television and cultural studies and various theoretical and methodological shifts beyond this. Depending on when they were produced, explorations have been influenced by Althusserian Marxism (e.g. Tulloch, 1976), Gramscian Marxism (e.g. Mills and Rice, 1982; Whannel, 1992), and perceptions of the move toward the 'new revisionism' or 'critical populism' (McGuigan, 1992) in television and cultural studies (e.g. Fiske, 1987, 1989).¹ In this respect, the genre was seen variously as ideologically powerful and repressive, as ideologically contradictory, or as a combination of both these positions, fostering a space for potentially 'resistant' or subversive audience pleasures. Nevertheless, in the 1980s the quiz show only seemed to benefit from the critical interest in popular television genres in limited ways and almost without exception, scholars writing on this subject have felt compelled to begin their analyses by speculating as to why this is. A later piece by Michael Skovmand begins by attempting to synthesize this speculation, suggesting that the genre may have been seen as a less than innovative form ('a carryover from radio'), difficult to analyse as a televisual 'text', or perhaps most interestingly, 'an unlikely vehicle for political debate' (2000: 367). Yet some 20 years on from the institutionalization of scholarly criticism on popular television, it seems difficult to account for the neglect of the quiz show, or at least its continued marginalization, primarily in terms of

difficulty of approach. Far more so than its 'elusive' textual form, it is arguably the primacy of class in the genre which has played a key role in marginalizing its visibility in television scholarship.

Despite its initial centrality to the project of British cultural studies, the extent to which class has receded from view can be related to epistemological shifts (in terms of changing trends in theoretical and critical approach), as well as to perceptions of social and cultural shifts which have been perceived to undermine the empirical validity of class. Although these narratives differ in the UK and US contexts (see Munt, 2000), clearly the increasing focus on the areas of gender, ethnicity and sexuality in television and cultural studies in the 1980s was considered an important corrective to the overwhelming focus on the 'universalism' of class. While class seemed to become what Andy Medhurst has described as the 'lost identity' of identity politics (2000: 29), poststructural and postmodern theory played a significant role in challenging essentialist notions of identity. Marxist conceptions of selfhood defined class in economic terms and, from this point of view, class was perceived as an *essentialist* category, hence conceptually flawed. Equally, particularly under the wider influence of work in the American context, the shift toward consumptionist perspectives in the study of popular culture has had a decidedly ambiguous relationship with the concept of class. In this respect, 'symbolic work', rather than production as work, became the order of the day (Barker and Beezer, 1992: 12).

The increasing marginalization of class in cultural studies has been mirrored (as well as shaped) by empirical arguments concerning the decline of class. Since the postwar period a number of complex social and cultural shifts have been seen to have eroded its usefulness as a social category (or at least have led to a very concerted discussion about what now constitutes a 'class') (Day, 2001). It is argued that changes characteristic of postmodernity have rendered older categorizations of class outmoded (see Frow, 1995), although many of these arguments have been critiqued and challenged, not least of all because there is no evidence to suggest that class differentiation has declined in any material way in contemporary Britain (Edwards, 2000; Munt, 2000).

This brief historical trajectory does suggest why the quiz show has found it difficult to penetrate the institutionalization of the study of popular television more fully. It seems undeniable that the genre in all its variations, perhaps more so than any other, insists on its contestants as stratified, categorized and hence 'classed' in terms of their relationship with the economic structures of *production* – not least of all in defining participants by their jobs from which we, as viewers, inevitably make assumptions about their class, education, lifestyle and likely performance. This is not to deny that the quiz show clearly also speaks to the structures and practices of consumption, but as *Millionaire* in particular makes clear, the emphasis on production and 'work' in the quiz show remains crucially



'They're only easy if you know the answer': the politics of 'knowledge' on *Millionaire*

Described by the trade as the 'Millionaire effect' (Robins, 2000a: 8), the initial impact of *Millionaire* prompted a rejuvenation of the quiz show on an international scale (the programme now circulates in over 40 territories). In the UK context, this resurgence spanned the daytime and prime-time schedule, and included the use of both national and international formats. Examples have ranged from *The Weakest Link* (BBC One, BBC Two, 2000–), *The Greatest Show in Town* (ITV1, 2001), *The Vault* (ITV1, 2002–), *Britain's Brainiest...* (ITV1, 2002), *The Enemy Within* (BBC One, 2002), *No Win, No Fee* (BBC One, 2001–) and *The Chair* (BBC One, 2002) to *Beat the Nation* (Channel 4, 2004–), to name but a few. However, the advent of *Millionaire* was not welcomed by all and did provoke some initial criticism in the press. Teachers expressed concern about giving children 'the wrong idea about money' or divorcing the concepts of work and wealth, while 'traditionalists waxed lyrical about the days when contestants were happy to go home with a food mixer or a toaster' (Hughes, 1998: 18). It is true that historically the British quiz show has been associated with (substantially) smaller prizes than the US – linked to a rather abstract sense of British 'restraint', as well as the institutional infrastructure of British television. Equally, rather than an exporter of native formats, Britain has been more often an importer of American concepts (Creeber, 2004). From this perspective, *Millionaire's* British origins clearly contradict these trends. Mike Wayne has linked this to the broader commercialization of British television, as introduced by Conservative rule in the 1980s, and the resultant erosion of public service values. As he explains:

Under public service broadcasting, examples of the quiz/game show genre tend to foreground such values as camaraderie, for example, *It's A Knockout* and *The Generation Game*, or specialist knowledge, e.g. *Mastermind* or *University Challenge*, or physical/problem-solving skills such as *The Crystal Maze...* but the more exchange values permeate television, the more we can expect consumerism, consumer goods, individualism and hard cash to be at the centre of the game show. (2000: 200)

More specifically, the suggestion here is that the shift can be linked to the government's bid to create a 'more commercially driven ITV' (Wayne, 2000: 205). The replacement of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) with the 'lighter' regulatory touch of the Independent Television Authority (ITA), led directly to the relaxing of institutional controls over prize-giving on British television (until 1999 the limit was £6000), and thus the promise of the spectacular reward offered by *Millionaire*.

In Wayne's analysis, then, as well as some of the press reactions to the programme, *Millionaire* is conceived as a direct descendent of the

commercialization of broadcasting, as well as the wider legacy of Thatcherism and its emphasis on acquisitive individualism and rampant greed. (While New Labour came to power in 1997, just before *Millionaire* emerged, it is widely perceived that they represented an ‘open capitalist’ party which embraced the market and the policies and ideology of Thatcherism) (see Thomas, 2003). At the same time, it is worth emphasizing Garry Whannel’s (1992) earlier point that, while he is careful not to imply any direct ‘reflection’ here, Thatcherism may have had a potentially more contradictory influence on the genre than this narrative suggests. The 1980s in Britain saw the rise of quiz programmes relying on either ‘public opinion’ or ‘everyday’ knowledge (*Family Fortunes*, *The Price Is Right*), just as Thatcherism attempted to appeal to the ‘common sense of the ordinary people’ (‘every housewife knows you can’t spend more money than you have’) (Whannel, 1992: 198). While still clearly driven by an ethos of consumerism, such shows could be less ‘ruthless’ and individualist in their approach as well as more ‘democratized’ in terms of knowledge. At the same time, other strands played out the Conservatives’ reassertion of competition and individualism in education (e.g. *Fifteen-To-One*), and the bid to reintroduce ‘ability hierarchies’ in a return to more traditional models of education (Whannel, 1992).

The point here is that the quiz show always incorporates a range of strands which articulate different discourses on wealth, consumerism and education. Furthermore, Wayne’s description of the genre under public service seems highly selective. From its inception, a genre that exchanges money or prizes for ‘knowledge’ (mixing the referents of ‘education’ and commerciality), was never perceived to have an easy relationship with public service, and the BBC were criticized for prize-giving (‘buying the audience’) (BBC, 1926), well before ITV emerged. In this sense, the quiz show seems an odd choice with which to demonstrate the ways in which ‘the gravitational pull of commercialization . . . is warping what is left of public service television’ (Wayne, 2000: 197). Equally, as Glen Creeber has argued, while the prize money and aesthetic construction of the show may indicate a break with the past, the format of *Millionaire* is also ‘surprisingly traditional’ (2004: 233) – the ‘double or quit’ formula can be traced back to early programmes such as *Double Your Money*.

This is only to emphasize that there is a danger of simplifying the genre’s history in Britain, as well as its cultural associations, as it is certainly also the case that the institutional and economic contexts surrounding *Millionaire* illuminate its emergence. The generalist channel (ITV1) which screens *Millionaire* has struggled to retain its audience share and advertising revenue in the competitive multi-channel landscape. ITV was struggling with the success of its prime-time schedule at this time (and thus its flow of advertising revenue), and *Millionaire* was conceived as a ‘high concept’ and ‘event’ format which was stripped initially across the schedule for intermittent, maximum impact



(Bazalgette, 2001) (a strategy later taken up by reality TV). Furthermore, due to the increasing commercialization of its schedule, the channel was seen to be attracting predominantly poorer audiences (more so than usual) (Wayne, 2000). Historically, quiz shows have been understood to draw predominantly poorer and older audiences – groups that are less attractive to advertisers because of their restricted spending power (Wayne, 2000) – and *Millionaire*'s strategy was to attract more 'upmarket' viewers. In this respect, Mike Wayne notes its production values (the expensive presenter and set), the use of monetary reward (commodities can be categorized more easily in terms of class 'taste') as well as its broader aesthetic construction – the move toward intense drama, which edges it away from the traditionally 'downmarket associations of the quiz show' (Wayne, 2000: 210). The programme was originally to be called *Cash Mountain*, but the new title offered what one ITV controller significantly described as a 'more classy aspirational feel' (Wayne, 2000: 210). The aesthetic appearance of *Millionaire* is in many ways 'cinematic': the swooping camerawork, 'orchestral' musical score and dramatic lighting system are integral to the innovation of the show and its dramatic rendering of the game (Creeber, 2004: 235). Indeed, in evaluating the aesthetic appearance of the pilot show, creator Paul Smith has described how key 'problems' were considered to be the bright lighting, 'glitzy' set and unsuitable sound that failed to generate the desired tension. His brief became to make it 'very, very dramatic', and he instructed the producers to 'throw away conventional lighting' – or to avoid the traditional visual appearance of light entertainment (ITV, 1999).

In many ways this supports the suggestion that the dramatic aesthetic of *Millionaire* worked to distance the programme from the traditional (working) class connotations of the genre, and many quiz shows have aimed since to divest themselves of the association of 'naff old men in sparkly jackets' (Robins, 2000b: 8). Hence, while *Millionaire* makes the (ideological) claim to be the 'people's show' (Robins, 2000b: 8), the specific institutional and economic contexts surrounding its emergence suggest a more complex orchestration of class address. But for Wayne (and notably returning us to confront the theoretical limits of Marxism), it seems that the entire textuality of *Millionaire* can be explained by its bid to aim for maximum 'exchange value' – that is, to secure an appeal to a more up-market audience in an increasingly competitive television environment. But as discussed later, the contestants who make for the 'best' televisual performance (which in Wayne's paradigm means 'dramatic'), are not necessarily those that the programme wants to attract as viewers. This creates a contradiction in the text where, far from 'binding audiences together' or repressing social divisions (Wayne, 2000: 201), inequalities also must be dramatized and performed.

In earlier work on the quiz show, writers often categorized programmes in relation to their use of knowledge. A distinction was made between the



use of 'factual'/'academic' knowledge (e.g. *Mastermind*, *Sale of the Century*, *Jeopardy*), and 'populist' shows drawing more on 'everyday' knowledge, whether shopping/prices (*The Price Is Right*) or knowledge of people and social experience (*Family Fortunes*, *Play Your Cards Right*, *Blankety Blank*) (Fiske, 1987; Mills and Rice, 1982). Some of these shows still exist, but the majority of quiz shows to emerge in recent years depend on 'general/academic' knowledge, with other factors coming into play in terms of categorization.² But whatever type of quiz show is under scrutiny, the central theme in academic work on the quiz show has been the ideological construction of knowledge, particularly in terms of class. While drawing on previous approaches to the genre, this was articulated most clearly in Fiske's work. Drawing on Levi-Strauss's conception of the difference between 'games' and 'rituals' (games move from similarity to difference – a winner has to emerge – while rituals perform an equalizing function by bringing together individuals and implying commonality) (Fiske, 1987), a key argument is that these structures enable the quiz show to function as an 'enactment of capitalist ideology':

Individuals are constructed as different but equal in opportunity. Differences of *natural* ability are discovered, and the reward is upward mobility into the realm of social power which 'naturally' brings with it material and economic benefits ... Such an ideology ... grounds social or class differences in individual natural differences and thus naturalizes the class system. (Fiske, 1987: 266; emphasis in original)

Also reproducing the structure of the education system in western societies, Fiske's point is that it is ideological to perceive the chance of success in the quiz show as related to 'natural' ability, given that all individuals are not – and cannot be – equal in opportunity here. In this respect, it is clear that *Millionaire* works through a ritual/game structure. It begins with the equalizing ritual of introducing contestants for 'fastest finger first' in a medium, frontal shot (identified by name and region only), after which the winner is differentiated from the others by entering the game space, as signified by their place in the aesthetic and spatial construction of the *mise-en-scène*. The camera pans back to focus on the contestant joining Chris Tarrant at the head of the set ('Do you want to play for a million?'), and follows them as they perform the ritual walk to the chair. The contestant is immediately rewarded with what Bill Lewis earlier described as the 'power and freedom of movement' (1984: 42), signifying their path to potential upward mobility, and what Mills and Rice conceived as the glow of 'remarkable . . . visibility' (1982: 20). Indeed, reinventing the searchlight aesthetic (pioneered by *Mastermind*) within the technological space of a 'Perspex and chrome amphitheatre' (Sutcliffe, 2000: 16), the other competitors are returned immediately to the obscurity of darkness as the music and lights plummet in unison and the game



begins. In many ways, the very function of ‘fastest finger first’ is to accentuate the ‘special’ space and ‘privilege’ of occupying the chair (it is not structurally necessary to the game), while it simultaneously peddles the myth that ‘everyone’ has an equal chance at the starting line (but that ‘luck’ or speed may propel the contestant ahead).

While *Millionaire* primarily trades in what can be conceived as a combination of general and academic knowledge (see Fiske, 1987; Tulloch, 1976), much has been made of its apparently ‘democratized’ knowledge and format, although appealing to a ‘classless’ rhetoric this has figured historically in the ideological promise of the genre. One producer described how élitist shows such as *University Challenge* and *Mastermind* were previously ‘a forum for people showing off, but the type of questions [on *Millionaire*] now mean the man in the street feels empowered to participate’ – with the multiple choice strategy seen as enhancing this impression for both contestants and viewers (Leahy, cited in Thynne, 2000: 18). However, the description of knowledge on *Millionaire* as ‘trivia everyone’s got a grasp of’ (Leahy, cited in Thynne, 2000: 18) is highly problematic. At the most obvious level, questions relating to popular culture are situated more often, although not exclusively, at the lower end of the scale. This is both literally in terms of monetary reward, and discursively in terms of cultural value. For example, such questions are equated often with the concept of ‘the masses’ by their frequent connection with the ‘Ask the Audience’ lifeline, and there is often an implicitly shared agreement between contestant and host that the group cannot fail to deliver the truth of ‘popular’ opinion. Equally, we might note here Tarrant’s exaggerated expression of surprise when the ‘Ask the Audience’ lifeline is to be used at the top end of the monetary scale, and the playful suggestion that any answer received is to be treated with suspicion. In this respect, Tarrant frequently and playfully casts doubt on the cultural capital of the studio audience by saying, for example, that he ‘doesn’t like the look’ of them, or by calling them ‘riff-raff’.

Of course, this hierarchy need not be in place given that ‘harder’ questions on popular culture simply could be more specific in nature. However, the format’s creator, Paul Smith, masks (and inverts) the hierarchy in the programme’s construction of knowledge when he claims that:

We’re attracting all ages and demographic groups, but we still get by far the most division over popular culture. It’s an area where a lot of people don’t participate. You would be surprised by the number of people who can’t name anyone behind the bar in *Coronation Street*. (Smith, cited in Thynne, 2000: 18)

As this quote suggests, it is impossible to consider an invocation of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture without also drawing on discourses of gender. For example, contestant Andrew Whitely (a ‘shopkeeper from Kent’) is asked for £1000: ‘Lou Beale was a character in which TV soap?’ With a 92

percent majority, the 'Ask the Audience' lifeline returns the correct answer of *EastEnders*, to which Tarrant responds: 'You sad people. I wonder what *you* do in your spare time . . . Right – I think we've found out the cultural level of this audience now' (*Millionaire*, 12 April 2003). What is apparent in the invocation of soap opera is both the class, yet also the gendered, associations of such knowledge (soap opera as 'low' culture and as 'women's' form).

Despite Paul Smith's comment previously, it is clear that as the financial rewards rise, more and more questions come from what Tulloch identified as 'a traditional, received, liberal definition of the "Humanities" – principally History and Literature' (1976: 6), and in *Millionaire*, also science. What Smith's comment masks here is that it is of course equally these questions, and their position within the game structure, which create the most obstructive barrier to 'success' for the 'wide' range of people that he describes. Given the perpetuation of these traditional hierarchies it is not surprising that it is difficult to conceive of any of the first three UK contestants to win £1 million as 'the sort of pub-quiz every-person you could really root for' (as one critic described the typical participant on the programme) (Collins, 2000). When there is a deviation from this pattern of success, such as the memorable edition in which Miles Robson, 'a yogurt factory worker from Whitby in North Yorkshire', won £250,000, class ideologies may still remain intact. As Olaf Hoerschelmann explains in relation to the 'Big Money' American shows of the 1950s, there is a long history of the genre foregrounding 'the "cop who knew Shakespeare" or the "cobbler who knew opera" as integral to its "classless" ideology' (2000: 188). (The quote about *Double Your Money* and the telephone mechanic 'who knew opera' also reminds us of this.) But as Hoerschelmann acknowledges, the appeal of such a spectacle effectively stems from a perception of a 'contradiction between the class and the cultural capital they deal with' (2000: 188). Such scenes are of interest precisely because of the assumption that class status and knowledge are in some way in tension here. At the same time, elite cultural capital is given a universal validity and desirability by being offered in exchange for financial capital – precisely that which is most useful and attractive to the contestant (and perhaps the viewer) (Hoerschelmann, 2000). As Miles rapidly moves further up the scale, Tarrant exclaims: 'Miles, I think you might be a bit of a dark horse!' (*Millionaire*, 29 September 2001), a perception which precisely pivots on this 'contradiction' between class and cultural capital (and in so doing naturalizes the perception that manual and mental labour are antithetical; see Frow, 1995). As Bonner (2003) notes, it does not seem possible to ask questions about a contestant's educational qualifications on quiz shows, largely because it may be divisive in revealing hierarchies which would contradict the ideology of open competition and equality of opportunity. It is true that references to education on *Millionaire* are extremely rare, although interestingly it is



invoked in the example of Miles Robson. He explains how he will use the money to resume his studies at university, which he was forced to suspend due to financial constraints. On one level, this can be seen as quite openly foregrounding the ways in which we do not all have an equal chance on the quiz show, given that access to education is indeed structured by class differences and inequalities. (An aside here is that this is a debate that has been on the agenda all the more urgently with Labour's economic policies on higher education which, despite increased support for government spending, often have worked to erode the idea of 'free higher education for all'; see Thomas, 2005.) While Tarrant tries to solicit Miles to discuss how he will spend the money (and to express his consumer fantasies), Miles's main emphasis is on returning to education. But at the same time, this scenario maintains the structure in which 'élite' capital is represented as desirable, useful and worthwhile, particularly when (as discussed later), it is offered as the escape route from the class conditions of labour.

Yet it is worth noting here that in promoting its ideological claim to be 'the people's show', the opening title sequence is imagined in terms of a plurality of 'difference' that implicitly acknowledges the historical existence of other inequalities (reflected in the post-class trajectory of cultural studies). To this end, it makes use of the more visible signifiers of gender and ethnicity, although 'class' is also implied by including people in both formal and casual attire. Featuring a group of contestants walking zombie-like toward the illuminated logo of the programme (and by extension, its promise), by far the most prominent figures in this sequence are women, notably both black and white. Black or Asian contestants, and then women in general, have been the most conspicuous by their absence on the UK show, which makes for an overwhelming predominance of white men (something also initially true of the American context; see Holmes, 2005). For a programme which pivots so clearly on an ideology of opportunity, the disjuncture between the imagery of the title sequence and the content of the programme immediately raises questions about its egalitarian promise. This is particularly so when it offers such a stark contrast to other popular genres in television which have been increasingly deliberate in their fostering of multi-ethnic representation. Again reminding us of the problems of foregrounding class, or more specifically, separating it from other political inequalities such as gender or ethnicity, it is crucial to note here that 'knowledge' in the quiz show is gendered and racialized also. For example, Whannel has acknowledged how the 'shared culture' of quiz shows is often an 'exclusive and excluding white culture', which trades in references to a 'distinctly white past' (1992: 197), not to mention the extent to which access to educational opportunities is often also a consideration of ethnicity. While the gendering of knowledge deserves more consideration than is possible here (see Holmes, 2005), it is not simple to suggest that it is a straightforward factor which undermines the ideology of 'equal opportunity for all'. But as discussed later, the contestants are



required nevertheless to 'perform' both class and gender roles on the show which are inextricably linked.

Despite the arguments concerning the decline of class boundaries at an empirical level, the quiz show reminds us of the absurdity of suggesting that we do not make judgements concerning precisely questions of 'class' when we hear people's professions, accents and aspirations, and when we survey their performance and attire. Particularly in the British context, class is seen to be inextricably linked to speech (Bonner, 2003), and in the previous example, Miles' northern accent is crucial. In this respect, in addition to physics teacher David Edwards (in a profession already recognized as being imbued with intellectual power), the programme's first and third millionaires, Judith Keppel and Robert Brydges, were striking for drawing on the codes and connotations of a decidedly upper-class identity. Although presented as a 'gardener from Fulham', the first winner Judith Keppel had an explicitly received pronunciation accent, and was revealed later to be distantly related to Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall – Prince Charles's wife. These signifiers of class were also clear when it came to the third winner, Robert Brydges from Hampshire (introduced as an 'aspiring children's novelist', but previously a banker). Brydges was already rumoured to be a millionaire before going on the show. In short, while the range of contestants in terms of occupation and likely wealth is fairly diverse, in many ways these people were conspicuously different from the wider context of competitors on the show.

Thus it is not entirely surprising that the egalitarian promise of the programme's title has been seen as hollow by many critics. An excerpt commenting on Keppel's win indicates how certain newspaper critics explicitly acknowledged the ideological discourses which saturate the programme. Intriguing in terms of reading the class codes of a contestant, and hence worth quoting at length, was Euan Ferguson's commentary in *The Observer*, which recalled:

[The] wonderful body language as Judith Keppel – gamely trying, like the Queen Mum in the Blitz, to go along with the cattle-class long enough to take their plaudits . . . But this apart, Judith, 'a gardener from Fulham' . . . was sweetly unashamed of her accent, her knowledge, her difference . . . Judith knew about Eleanor of Aquitaine because she's recently visited the grave in France; knew about 'squabs' because she's eaten them in America (which she refrained from calling the New World). If there was any 'fix' going on,⁵ it was the rather larger one that conspires still to make a private education better than a state one. (Ferguson, 2000)

In this respect, *Millionaire* can be conceived as paradigmatic of Fiske's key argument that the genre functions as an 'enactment of capitalist ideology' by attempting to ground 'social or class differences in natural differences and thus naturaliz[ing] the class system' (1987: 266). But while



the critic above invokes the concept of a privileged education to support his argument, he also foregrounds the more elusive influence of the contestant's lifestyle. This points us back to Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) famous concept of 'cultural capital' in which he argued that judgements of 'taste' are always entrenched within discourses of class. It is not merely money (economic capital) that works to differentiate class groups, but dispositions, knowledges and experiences (cultural capital). Following on from this it is clear that the discussion of Keppel's penchant for fine foods, travel and history is saturated within discourses of class, and it is these that the critic finds advantageous. It is true that evidence of these technically 'resistant' reading strategies were to be found in the 'quality' (broadsheet) press. However, what this article is interested in here is the extent to which they can also be seen as evidence of the extent to which *Millionaire* tends to negotiate, explore and display discourses of class so explicitly that, even while it may never actually name them, they are never smuggled easily under its ideological door.

This directs us to Mills and Rice's earlier Gramscian reading of the genre in which they argued that in order to present itself as 'popular' (and connect with the audience), it needed at some level to raise 'the spectre of oppression and subordination' (1982: 24). Arguably, *Millionaire* pivots on raising this 'spectre' in its personalization of the contestant – it is fundamental to how it works as a dramatic and emotionally engaging text.⁴ In this respect, *Millionaire* has constructed a particular space for us to consume individual or personal life narratives. Designed to facilitate identification with contestants, we learn not simply of the contestant's occupation or family context but (usually following the ritualistic chat with the host, once £1000 is secure) how much they hope to obtain. This is not simply how much they would like to win, but also how much money is 'needed' to make a difference to their lives. This can range from discussion of their consumer desires, the burden of financial debt, to the possibility of giving up work – and vastly different sums of money are cited here. While this discursive space is not necessarily a radical innovation, such personalization of the contestant has been invoked more explicitly than often has been the case in the history of the British quiz show.

'Not bad for a night's work': the performance of the personal on *Millionaire*

This increased emphasis on the subjective can be linked to the elevation of personal narratives in television discourse. This is particularly as theorized in relation to talk shows and reality TV and conceived by Jon Dovey (2000) as 'first-person' modes of subjectivity and address – although as suggested later, this is not to imply that identical types of performance are solicited here. However, Annette Hill's suggestion that viewers of reality TV may

look for ‘the moment of authenticity when real people are “really” themselves in an unreal environment’ (2002: 324) seems equally applicable to *Millionaire*. As creator Paul Smith described with reference to the second ever edition of *Millionaire* in 1998 (featuring contestant Rachel da Costa):

There were tears of emotion streaming down my face, watching her struggle at £8,000, and knowing what it meant to her. What I realized then was that this was not just a game show. I went in to the director in the break and I said: ‘You are directing the best drama on ITV at the moment.’ (Anonymous, 1999: 12)

Clearly, the use of the word ‘directing’ here foregrounds how the emphasis on television as offering ‘first-person’ narratives is highly circumscribed within its ‘third-person’ context – the subject in front of the camera is rarely also the producer (Dovey, 2000). Equally, it can be argued that quiz show contestants are required to be ‘ordinary’ in a way that differs from reality TV. From the outset, reality TV pursued the ‘casting’ of telegenic personalities and has found itself increasingly with subjects who are highly literate in televisual performance. However, this is not what is required to facilitate identification with ‘ordinariness’ on the quiz show. Root’s suggestion that ‘real’ people on television are employed precisely to be ‘ordinary’, ‘to act as viewers momentarily whisked to the other side of the screen’ (1986: 97), is still very much true of the genre. On *Millionaire*, where participants cannot be vetted for their telegenic appeal, contestants are caught in close-up as they are encouraged to display some nervousness about appearing in the ‘special’ space of television (‘How are you feeling?’) and in the ‘event’ site of *Millionaire* in particular. In doing so, they are encouraged to maintain a connection to their role as a viewer – reflecting on how they usually ‘do at home’, why they like the show and how different it is to actually be in the chair itself. Thus any emphasis on the contestants’ subjectivity is articulated very much within the broader dynamic of power in which ‘ordinary’ people remain ‘the subjects of somebody else’s show’ (Root, 1986: 96).

Indeed, important here are the ways in which as ‘ordinary’ people, contestants are subject to the shaping influence and role of the host. While Celador maintains strict control in terms of the ‘rules’ and general aesthetic appearance of the show, contestants, host and (to a certain extent) the use of ‘knowledge’ (see Hestroni, 2004) all inflect the series with national differences and specificities. In this respect, hosts often bring with them discourses of an existing media persona (Bonner, 2003). In the UK, and depending on the age of the viewer, Tarrant was already well-known as a TV presenter in shows such as the Saturday children’s programme *Tiswas* (1974–81) and *Tarrant on TV* (1992–), and was already familiar also from his role as a broadcaster for the London radio station Capital FM. He exudes an arrogant self-confidence associated with a DJ persona, with a bold address which enables him to be mildly insulting



to contestant and/or studio audience. But this bold, loud and brash approach also has class undertones, conveying a certain 'common touch' that fosters an illusion of connection with working-class life. This is despite the paradox that it was essentially *Millionaire* which catapulted him into a higher stratosphere of stardom and wealth – at least in terms of the money that he can command per hour and his aura of prestige. But in this sense, Tarrant is also emblematic of the success myth (working from 'ordinary' beginnings to become a millionaire) (Bonner, 2003: 183). This is not irrelevant to his interaction with the contestants – a context in which he plays out an empathy (if not identification) with participants' employment/financial situations, while effacing the 'value' of his own labour in the process. (He is surely earning the equivalent of any large winnings he 'gives away' as he commands the show from his chair.)

However, what is at stake here is the political impact of this 'drama' – the contestants' narratives – on the text. It is significant that the previous example concerning Rachel da Costa focuses on a female contestant (often perceived as offering a more emotional, and hence better televisual performance), given the wider absence of women on the UK version of the programme. In terms of the UK, the programme constructs a very gendered dichotomy between production and consumption and their related associations of activity and passivity. While the male contestant is constructed as actively producing capital and 'bringing home the bacon', not only is the female partner positioned in the reactive and emotional role of supporter (or as being 'at home with the kids'), but Tarrant's invocation of gender roles invariably positions the wife/partner as consumer ('I wouldn't turn around and look at the wife in the audience – she's *already* spent it . . .') (Holmes, 2005). Also accompanied by images of henpecked male spouses, nagging mother-in-laws and lazy teenage children, Tarrant's repertoire of images and social roles here perhaps finds its closest companion in sitcom (Holmes, 2005). Significantly, jokes about the 'universalism' of gender may work to play down more divisive barriers surrounding class or ethnicity (certainly, the humour with which gender is treated can contrast at times with the more sober treatment of the contestants' financial status, as discussed later). This of course immediately returns us to the critique that issues of class can never be separated from the politics of other fields such as gender, and a key critique of traditional Marxism by feminist critics was clearly that its privileging of the male, working-class subject led to a devaluing of consumption and the political struggles of women.

Given that *Millionaire* and other contemporary quiz shows have been accused of playing to the idea of 'wealth without work' (Anonymous, 2000), the reference to breadwinning (work) may seem to contradict this critique. Bonner has argued that 'work' is in many ways a 'quarantined' discourse on 'ordinary television', in which it is often disguised as 'play or leisure' (2003: 156) (the 'docusoap' would be an example here). As Bonner

explains, work and employment 'have never been particularly productive discourses for television, because however ambiguously television may situate itself as a leisure pursuit ... it certainly establishes itself in opposition to work' (2003: 137), and she references Richard Dyer's famous argument that light entertainment must provide an 'alternative to the world of work ... drudgery and depression' (1973: 23). Certainly, *Millionaire* deliberately represents itself as 'non-work' and a chance for contestants to cheat the system. Not only is the programme constructed as a spectacle for entertainment or leisure in which money is described as being given away (for 'free'), but Tarrant sometimes introduces the show with such comments as: 'Who'll be the first to have a chance to wave goodbye to the bills, the job and the 9–5?' (*Millionaire*, 26 April 2003). Arguably, crucial here is the repeated emphasis on how the contestants' winnings are 'not bad for a night's work', followed by Tarrant's traditional quip: 'It's good here, innit?' The intention here is to equate the quiz show momentarily with work, but only to emphasize their oppositional nature: that this is nothing like work, and to earn that amount so quickly would be an impossibility for most. But the argument here is that in order for the mini-narratives of drama to function successfully in the text, the everyday, mundane world of labour and production – of work under capitalism – also must be invoked explicitly.

This does depend on the occupation and status of the contestant, and it is the low-paid and particularly manual jobs which are often invoked here, ranging from refuse collectors, window cleaners, supermarket shelf stackers to factory workers. There are striking similarities between the edition including Miles Robson from Yorkshire (*Millionaire*, 29 September 2001) and the show featuring Andy Collin from Somerset (*Millionaire*, 12 March 2002), both of whom happened to be yogurt factory workers. Tarrant introduces Andy by explaining that he:

Chris Tarrant (CT): [addressing the viewer] Works in a well-known creamery and packs 90,000 yogurts per day. [addressing the contestant] So is it fun, filling yogurt pots?

Andy Collin (AC): Um, no. But we have a laugh – everyone working with me.

CT: What would be the amount at which you would stop being a yogurt pot worker?

AC: £64,000?

Similarly, in introducing Miles, Tarrant explains how he:

CT: Gets to stare at 10,000 gallons of yogurt per day . . . So you're a factory worker – what would be realistically a nice sum of money for you?

Miles Robson: Well, £1000 would be nice.

CT: Fingers crossed.



In both cases, *Millionaire* is presented as a potential fantasy space of non-work, but which needs the 'real' world of work to be invoked as its binary opposite. On each occasion, this is deliberately imagined in numeric, quantifiable terms in which potential winnings are measured against detail from the mundanity of everyday life. At £16,000 Tarrant interjects: 'Now Miles, I won't ask you, but I expect I know how long working in a yogurt factory it would take you to earn £16,000', and despite this verbal nod to the potentially 'personal' nature of the question ('I won't ask you'), Miles' financial circumstances become explicitly intertwined with his progression through the game narrative, and its presentation for the audience. When asked the same question again at £32,000, Miles admits that it would take him six years to earn such a figure, and when considering the possibility of £64,000, Tarrant continues the equation by reminding him that it is worth '12 years' labour'. Here we are arguably presented with the traditional image, in Marxist terms, of the worker alienated from the very act of production who apparently gains 'no intrinsic satisfaction' from the act (or product) of his labour (Du Gay, 1996: 12). It also creates a vivid image of the generation of 'surplus value', and the extent to which rewards are not necessarily related to the effort or time devoted to the task (Day, 2001). Notably, these questions are far less likely to be asked of contestants in professional jobs, perhaps because this may function to reveal the economic disparities and inequalities that exist between competitors. If this does occur, it is usually articulated as humour – such as when solicitor Adrian Fitzsimmons is asked, 'So, you're at £32,000. That's about half an hour's work for you, isn't it?' (*Millionaire*, 23 March 2003).

While it is certainly the disjuncture between 'real work' and quiz show money that is being paraded here, it is precisely this 'real world' which is a constant presence in the dramatization of the individual's life and game narrative. While traditionally the quiz show may have effaced work from our screens, and hence functioned as what Fiske calls a 'typical capitalist text' (1987: 275), *Millionaire* would appear to be one of very few spaces on contemporary television where this emphasis on the 'reality' of everyday labour is brought into play, however brief and constructed such glimpses may be. In order to structure and play out its egalitarian promise, the quiz show must indeed invoke 'the spectre of subordination' even if, as Mills and Rice suggest, this may be neutralized or contained (1982: 24). It is open to interpretation as to whether this is the case with *Millionaire* but (although of course we do not witness the actual act of labour), these images of exploited workers are not necessarily recuperated by the programme's promise that it 'really can change lives'. The crucial point here is that, within the particular aesthetic, cultural and ideological space of *Millionaire*, this sense of duality still functions as a key tension. In this respect, it remains the case that the necessity of evoking the spectacle of subordination in the genre always involves the risk of exceeding its egalitarian promise.

Still not the final answer . . .

It has been argued here that a key reason for the academic marginalization of the quiz show is its explicit negotiation of class, and the extent to which this is now perceived as a problematic cultural and epistemological category. However, while based around the specificity of *Millionaire* (and the UK version discussed here), a contemporary analysis suggests that it remains crucially, and perhaps uniquely, important to the quiz show. While this needs to take account of considerable variation within the genre, there remains much in these earlier analyses which offer a useful framework for approaching the form. This certainly needs to allow for a greater degree of historicization in terms of how knowledge and class are actively defined, as well as the ways in which class remains inseparable from other political spheres such as gender and ethnicity. But a focus on class need not involve a return to the more essentialist perspectives of traditional Marxism. (Indeed, the fact that this article finds what is essentially a Gramscian approach most useful here indicates the continued influence of this perspective on television and cultural studies.)

In *Millionaire* it is not enough to simply suggest – as has been argued with respect to popular factual programming – that this increasing emphasis on the ‘personal’ represents a depoliticization of televisual discourse. It is precisely these elements of ‘subjective’ experience and drama that push the genre’s structural contradiction (the need to raise the ‘spectre of oppression’) to its outer limits. As John Corner describes, it is also evidence of a broader context in which ‘television can be seen, almost inadvertently, to have opened up new connections with popular aspirations and experiences’ in the increasing pursuit of ‘market popular’ fare (2001: 354). Nevertheless, as the quote from *Double Your Money* at the beginning of this article suggests, clearly we should remember that this is constructed in the service of drama and entertainment and that, as a money-making capitalistic venture in itself, *Millionaire* is ultimately ‘like a casino . . . Sure it’s fun, but the house always wins’ (Williams, 2003: 72).

Notes

1. This narrative is well-known, but Storey (1993) and Turner (1996) both offer comprehensive summaries. In positioning Fiske’s work within this shift, it is worth acknowledging that it is seen often as more of a conclusive break with earlier Marxist paradigms (and thus the kind of work that led to a marginalization of the quiz show in academic analyses). However, it is significant that Fiske’s ‘Quizzical Pleasures’ (1987) begins by examining the ideological power of the quiz show text in terms of class, but then moves toward a consideration of gender (women) when it comes to considering reading strategies and ‘resistant’ pleasures. This in itself plays out the trajectory in which class became sidelined as an emphasis on gender, ethnicity and ‘active’ audiences came to the fore.



2. For example, one notable shift has been the influx of a newer strain of meaner, 'psychological' shows which (in the UK), extend to everything from *The Weakest Link, No Win No Fee* (BBC One, 2002–), *The Chair*, the short-lived *Shafted* (ITV1, 2001) to *The Enemy Within*. Although displaying considerable differences in format and structure, the shows share a common ground insofar as winning is no longer solely dependent on knowledge (or 'luck'), but on gaining psychological or physical control over a situation (*The Chair*), or competing psychologically with other contestants.
3. The reference to a 'fix' in many of the press reports referred to the (unfounded) speculation that ITV had 'fixed' the big win in order to compete with the last-ever episode of a popular sitcom on BBC One.
4. This is notably quite different to the psychological strain of the genre, as these shows tend to devote less space to personalizing the contestant. What is apparently important in these programmes is not one's place within a wider social structure, but how the person can negotiate the internal dynamic of the game: Who can they trust? Can they form an alliance? How will the strategic plans of the other contestants determine their fate?

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