Abstract
The recent proliferation of reality-based television programming anticipates the development of interactive media insofar as it deploys the promise of participation: that "real" people can be more than just viewers — they can also participate in shaping the content of the programs they watch. In this respect, reality programming helps to reinforce the promise that new media will revolutionize society by de-centralizing power relations and democratizing access to the means of production. At the same time, such programming highlights the role of interactivity in the on-line economy: as a form of comprehensive surveillance of the rhythm of day-to-day life. The continued development of niche marketing and "flexible" forms of customized manufacturing is, in other words, dependent upon the ability to gather detailed information about consumer preferences and behavior. In this sense, reality TV doesn't so much anticipate Andy Warhol's vision of a future in which everyone has their 15 minutes of fame as it does an on-line economy in which new technology allows for the comprehensive surveillance of everyone's day-to-day existence. In this version of the future, members of the public will not become broadcasters over the Internet, rather they will narrowcast their consumption decisions, their preferences, and even their location at any given time to corporations in exchange for the promise of convenience in the form of customized goods and services. Such an economy is reliant upon a revision of the traditional Orwellian version of surveillance as oppressive, conformist, and totalitarian. This dissertation explores the ways in which one reality TV format — appropriately titled "Big Brother"— anticipates the rehabilitation of surveillance as that which allows for personal growth, self-expression, de-centralized control, and the validation of individuality. The turn to reality is, in short, equated with the recuperation of participation and community, and thus with the end of "mass" society. Far from surpassing the logic of mass society, however, the dissertation argues that interactive media work to extend its grasp. As the case of reality TV demonstrates, the equation of surveillance with interactivity and even participation serves as a means of rationalizing the labor of consumption in the emerging on-line economy.