It is by now a postmodern truism that identity is split, multiple, diffuse and constantly on the move: all bits and motion, as it were. Whether this state of affairs is advantageous or no depends upon one’s perspective and one’s situatedness amidst the various power structures of the social realm (see, for instance, Appiah and Snow, and Bucholtz). Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” makes the best of a bad situation by contesting capitalism’s techno-military monopoly on the identities implied by new technologies. “Miniaturization has turned out to be about power; small is not so much beautiful as pre-eminently dangerous, as in cruise missiles” (153). Not incidentally, we also see that naming is power, as the 1960s adage, “small is beautiful,” becomes fearfully transformed in the new rhetoric. Jen Baudrillard writhes between his own exhilaration at having glimpsed the unhinged future-present and his rootedness in all older “European” solidity. More playful than Haraway (he would call her Puritan), Baudrillard can laugh at his nostalgic ways, even as he observes with mock horror the movement from the old-fashioned “sex” to the new-fangled “gender,” available for best viewing in “America”: “‘Gender benders’. Neither masculine nor feminine, but not homosexual either. Boy George, Michael Jackson, David Bowie…Whereas the idols of the previous generation were explosive figures of sex and pleasure, these new idols pose for everyone the question of the play of difference. For want of an identity, most of them have gone in
search of a ‘gender model’, a generic formula” (47). Judith Halberstam takes us to
dizzying new heights of gender difference/indifference: “We are all transexuals. There
are no transexuals” (132).

As many theorists agree (for instance, Castels, Kellner, Poster), the media and its
“information” bytes contribute to, if not constitute, these new variable and changing
identities. The question we would like to consider is how these formations occur through
the relatively democratic medium of the television talk show. We have examined closely
an entire season of episodes of a 1997 Flemish talk show, Jan Publiek (or “John Q.
Public”), to see how the most successful speakers—ordinary Flemings—deployed
identity to create a television persona that other panelists, the host, the producers, and the
audience responded to, indeed co-created. In this paper, we will follow the construction
of identity of two of the 20 panelists, one a 40-year-old bourgeois gay man, Rudi; the
other, a 70-year-old working class straight woman, Simone; both native Flemish. Our
objective will be to see how the participants interact through discourse in all of its
multiplicity to achieve both striking and sympathetic personas—the kind, we will argue,
this brand of talk show requires. From the point of view of technologies of discourse,
Rudi’s identity we certainly see as cyborgian; from the point of view of feminist politics
and “women weavers,” Simone’s may appear so. We do see very clearly a variety of
gendered discourses in both performances.

First we should say that much of our discourse analysis depends upon a
method derived from two language philosophers, M. M. Bakhtin and J. L. Austin, whose
work before now has rarely appeared in conjunction, yet we see no philosophical reason
to keep them separated. We will identify the characteristic speech acts (Austin) and
speech genres (Bakhtin) used by each panelist to intervene in the talk, since these are the primary means by which panelists can act on a talk show. For Austin, an utterance is a performance comprised of at least two parts: it is a locutionary act (roughly speaking, it has semantic content: “I am Simone” tells us something about Simone) with illocutionary force (e.g., the force of announcing an identity: making that identity happen) and often with perlocutionary effects on their hearers. One of those effects is the responsive utterance of the listener: this is Bakhtin’s territory. For Bakhtin, the utterance is a speech genre, dialogic in nature. Thus, while Austin brings our attention to the action that is language, Bakhtin continually reminds us that language comes from somewhere and heads toward something. Each utterance/speech genre is at the outset in dialogue with previously-uttered genres—even an individual word is “shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents” (1981, 276) that arise from all the former uses of that word, whether known or unknown to the speaker. As well, the speaker always anticipates reception, choosing words and genres with response in mind. Thus, any individual genre will be virtually vibrating with an interanimating set of meanings that are grounded in history and social relations.

Also, we should offer some background on Flanders and Flemish public television, of which Jan Publiek is a product. Located in the north of Belgium, Flanders is one of three linguistic communities in Belgium (Dutch or Flemish-speaking); as such, it has its own government, which yet co-ordinates with the federal one in Brussels. It has its own public television station, which very explicitly seeks to operate within the public interest. Jan Publiek was born in this environment, through the auspices of a popular public television host, Jan Van Rompey, who also served as one of the producers of the
show and a committee from the public TV station. The social-welfare government of Belgium lays great stress on the representative nature of its programming, so the 20 ordinary Flemings—“the unknown Flemish people”—chosen as panelists on the show were divided equally between men and women, and included gays and non-native Flemings. Globalization entered the picture when Van Rompaey canvassed European and American offerings among talk shows for ideas for the format of *Jan Publiek*. He said he wanted to avoid a *Jerry Springer* atmosphere, but we think we see something of the therapeutic discourse of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on *JP*. We do note the greater emphasis on the citizen-panelists of some British shows, described by Livingston and Hunt, which *JP* also mirrors. *Jan Publiek* appeared weekly for 13 weeks per season and continued for several years beginning in 1996. We are analyzing the first season, but in later ones, *JP’s* popularity was significant, placing it in the top 20 shows in Belgium in its evening time slot.

**Rudi: Many Men in One**

Rudi liked the format of *Jan Publiek*, where ordinary people can ventilate their own opinions. His main argument for putting himself forward as a candidate was his desire to experience the impact of the media. On his website, he announces himself as a businessman, and being involved with the marketing of 40 garden centers, he is interested in media himself. In the last segment of *Jan Publiek*, Van Rompaey comments about audience response to Rudi: “Rudi, people thought you were sympathetic, a handsome man.” It is true that he is handsome and well-dressed, a man who exhibits a certain charisma and easy authority. There might be many identities for Rudi: Entrepeneur, Politician, Self-publicist, Peer Counselor, Son, Gay Man—and as he himself put it,
Friend. And not only do all these identities become enacted on *JP*, they exist in dialogic relation.

Unlike some panelists, Rudi often reveals private things about his life. During the episode on “Children, a Blessing?” [2 Oct 1997], Rudi outs himself as a gay man. Typically, however, he does this smoothly, without any of the awkwardness some men might exhibit. Jan Van Rompaey himself is taken aback by the admission, but Rudi responds with what Austin might call a verdictive, a pronouncement made by someone with great authority. “This,” he decrees, “cannot be such an important revelation,” and carries on with talk about his home life, moving effortlessly into quite another speech genre: the living room chat. Rudi clearly works well within a number of genres, including the ones featured in therapeutic and confessional discourses, encouraged, if occasionally satirized, by the host. In the emission on “Dieting” (16 Oct 1997) when Van Rompaey asked if people thought that one could lose weight through their own will power, Rudi answered:

Rudi: Yes, I er.. at a certain moment I thought that I was too fat and I started a diet, called Montignac. I can strongly recommend it to everyone, I did suggest it earlier this week to Kristel [one of the celebrities who is on the show].

Van Rompaey: So, your Body Mass Index is a bit too high?

Rudi: Yes, err, I’ll have to diet again. I have eaten cakes today, so …

Here, Rudi performs a rather stunning set of speech acts by means of several dialogic genres. First and last we have the confession (“I was too fat”; “I have eaten cakes today”) in dialogic relation with the commercial testimonial (“I can strongly recommend
the diet to everyone”), all of which perhaps belong to the genre of the late-night infomercial. Yet all this is close, too, to the personal testimonials on afternoon talk shows like Oprah: more of the (simulated?) living room chat. One thinks of Oprah as Rudi’s peer: no star-struck yokel he, but a man who “suggested the diet earlier this week to Kristel [the celebrity guest].) This he manages through the mild performative known as informing, the illocutionary force being: No big deal, folks.

One also thinks of Oprah when one reflects that it is typical of Rudi to make even his disarming self-revelations an object of commerce. The show’s website, as well as his own personal website, announce that he has written two books on entrepreneurism, *The Impossible Does Not Exist*, and *Because Things Should Change*. But given the dialogic relation among his many other commercially-oriented speech acts, one sees this “announcement” also as an advertisement with the illocutionary force Buy these books! On the website, he appears to commodify himself, while exhorting viewers of *Jan Publiek* to email him to discover “the man behind the public figure.”

When we reflect upon the public sphere Rudi might be imagining, we see something consumerist, individualist—and personally warm. One expects to find both Ronald Reagan and Oprah in his public, which seems to be oriented to celebrity (“the man behind the public figure”). As the U.S. talent show “American Idols” has recently demonstrated, many people today do not find the reach for celebrity status to be off-putting, as they have in times past (“stage mothers” were particularly vilified). As one of Dixon’s young college students put it, “we can all find someone on ‘American Idols’ we can relate to.” Rudi’s relatability index would seem to be high. Many women as well as
men will relate to his confession that after he lost more than 13 kilos of weight, he started eating French fries again. He concludes by saying:

But it gives you a pleasurable feeling and I think it’s up to you. I think that Damien goes too hard at it. I think that when you arrive at a certain moment in your life, that you stand in front of your mirror and you say to yourself: I’m not looking so good anymore. But yes, everyone has to decide for himself or herself [16 Oct 1997].

By the end of this utterance, one may hear in the dialogic what used to be political language. As the Marxist art critic John Berger puts it: “Publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of significant political choice” (1972:149). But Rudi’s rejoinder would no doubt be that he is not merely a consumer filled with “envy” (as Berger elsewhere asserts), but an entrepeneur: he is both consumer and producer. Thus he hasn’t exchanged a masculine identity for a feminine one; he occupies both spots simultaneously. (He is, notably, non-sexist in his use of language.)

Significantly, Rudi directs many of his speech acts to fellow panelists. He is the panelist who refers to Simone as “like a mother to me now,” which provokes a sly rejoinder from the more traditionally masculine Van Rompaey: “Maybe you need one, a mother like her, right now.” We read Van Rompaey here as “quoting” from therapeutic discourse. But Rudi, not an ironic man, is completely unphased. “I sure do,” he replies. To judge by other speech acts addressed to him, it appears that he has indeed achieved one of the perlocutionary effects he sought: the audience admires him, Simone returns his affections, and he himself claims that his biggest gain in being on the show is that “I’ve
made a lot of friends.” That he censures Damien for making fun of dieting can only go in his favor; dieting was, of course, chosen as a topic for *JP* because of its popularity, and Damien himself turns out to be not so very popular. Rudi gets our vote for the most media savvy “ordinary person” we’ve seen yet.

**Simone: Hostess, Mother, Advocate**

One of the most charming moments on *Jan Publiek* occurs in a prerecorded segment aired on the final episode. In documentary fashion, we follow Simone around Antwerp. The illocutionary force of this speech act is to apotheosize the 72-year-old Simone into Celebrity. She handles the role competently, but pleased and surprised as though she’d suddenly awakened and found herself the Queen Mother on parade. She graciously accepts questions from admirers on the street. “I’ve seen you on *Jan Publiek*, one gushes. In the pharmacy she exchanges important information on prescriptions with a fellow customer. Finally, at the Senior Center we’re among Simone’s friends, who joke and mug for the camera; a heavily mascaraed woman winks at the man behind it, salaciously, humorously. An interviewer queries as to whether they all feel Simone has changed over the three months on *Jan Publiek*, but they are hopelessly lost to another agenda, parodying themselves (their former identities?), teasing the bustling youth, us prurient viewers. And the discourse of *Jan Publiek*? Of television? In this episode of JP, we are treated to something rarely seen on television: old people and their ways. If Simone had achieved nothing else, this alone would be noteworthy.

Yet this triumphant conclusion to Simone’s “career” on *JP* is capped by another achievement, gained finally after months, perhaps years, of effort—and briefly only: she airs her concerns for the elderly, their ghettoization, their loneliness and hers, and her
own inability while bathing to reach round and wash her back. On these homely matters she has been writing to newspapers for years, for months to Jan Van Rompaey, well before *Jan Publiek*. She always liked him. She writes as Jana Publiek, born in an era of letter-writing, to a class of women who wrote regularly of family news, history, and gossip. How can this woman who came of age before the birth of television make such good use of it?

Among her many identities is that of doting yet stern Mother—to Jan Van Rompaey, who takes up his properly corresponding identity as Son. On the live portion of that final episode, Simone reminds Van Rompaey with some asperity that she has been writing him. The host neatly deflects the criticism (he has not replied to her letters) by turning attention back to her and her feelings: “and you wrote that something bothered you.” Yes, she replies, the panelists should have had more time to speak their minds. And in particular, she had wanted to take up the cause of the elderly….During the prostitute episode, we see the host’s courtly attitude toward Simone. She begins her turn by referring to herself: “when I was still young and beautiful,” to which Van Rompaey replies:

> Yes, you’re still beautiful, Simone. If you—

Simone: Oh yeah, ha ha!

Van Rompaey: --allow me to say that. [18 Dec 1997]

Never replying to her letters, Van Rompaey nonetheless does repay her attentions. In general (and not just with Rompaey), Simone seems well liked. We recall that Rudi
regards her as a mother. As well, the audience and host comment favorably upon her propensity for good natured joking.

Retired now but formerly owner and worker in a café, Simone seems to have built a long-standing identity as hostess (20 Nov 1997). She is introduced at the beginning of prostitution episode because she lives near the red light district (the Zakstraat), a working to lower class area. When queried about that, Simone does not take offense, but embarks upon a joke:

Yes, yes the Zakstraat, because err, I have had a café and one day there were some Dutch people and, um, my place was full and one of them said they wanted a seat by the window, and I said, “Yes, but then you have to go to the Zakstraat.”

Van Rompaey: Yes, there you have a lot of people by the window [where prostitutes advertise their wares]. (audience and panel members laugh) [20 Nov 1997]

We note that while Simone’s joke is not crude or direct nor is it competitive. Simone’s ready deployment of joking and bantering as speech genres makes her a dependable dialogic partner for Van Rompaey—the cheerfully bantering hostess to his host—and he calls upon her with obvious confidence and pleasure. On the show and off, she lays a foundation of levity (the Hostess) and gravity (the Mother in her letter-writing campaign), and parleys to her advantage the authority traditionally accorded old women. Although the perlocutionary effects of these identities are changing (one can see this with the differing ways the younger, postmodern Rudi and the older, gallant Van Rompaey regard her), the locutions apparently still have, or can be made to have, sufficient force.
Marshall McLuhan isn’t much in vogue these days, but it does appear he was right that television is somehow a medium of participation; how it is so still awaits investigation. We tend to see participation as something that at least extends, even if it doesn’t exactly reproduce, social relations in the “real” world, that indeed, is why we examined speech genres, profoundly social in Bakhtin’s view. We have shown how panelists on *Jan Publiek* fared better when they understood how to play well the social game that is *Jan Publiek*. Friendliness and general likeability are more important than the ability to make a cogent argument—and perhaps it has ever been so, electronic mediation aside. Yet we can also see “technologies of television” phenomena at work. Rudi exercises a kind of connectivity to various postmodern discourses from consumerism to gender relativism. Is this also a way to understand Simone’s deployment of the hostess identity, connecting with all those she serves—including the TV audience? Does television prefer fluidity above rigidity? When an actor appears to have a political agenda (for instance, Simone’s advocacy for the aged), how can that end be achieved in this environment where personal popularity—celebrity—trumps all? *Jan Publiek* may provide some clues, and in this, our first assay into an explanation, we have made some conjectures we hope will stimulate more analysis.