

## Beyond the Tailfin: Education and the Politics of Knowledge on Big Money Quiz Shows

*This article analyzes the cultural formations from which 1950s big money quiz shows emerge. Using Bourdieu's notion of the field, the analysis focuses on three key sites that articulate issues of knowledge and education related to 1950s television: (1) the public debates about education in the cold war United States, (2) broadcast network policies geared toward the production of knowledge and education, and (3) big money quiz shows and their public reception. The author argues that the specific social and cultural conditions in 1950s America, especially the debates surrounding education and the need for the television industry to produce enlightenment programming, created television programs that reaffirmed traditional versions of authority and selectively endorsed elite culture and a narrow definition of national identity under white, upper-class leadership.*

### The Development of Big Money Quiz Shows, 1954-1959

By most standards, the 1950 film *Champagne for Caesar* is an insignificant part of film history. However, if this film is related to the history of quiz shows in the United States, it becomes a remarkable historical document. In this film the protagonist, Beauregard Bottomley, appears as a candidate on a grotesque and banal quiz show named *Masquerade for Money* and single-handedly transforms it into a showcase for intellectualism and academic knowledge. Since he refuses to quit after winning the customary maximum of \$160, the jackpot continues to rise up to \$20 million, at which point he decides to sacrifice this amount in the interest of the love life of both his sister and himself. As a final irony, it turns out that the morally upstanding protagonist has agreed to a secret deal with the sponsor of *Masquerade for Money*, the *Milady Soap Company*, which gives him a significant amount of money, stock, and merchandise in return for not answering the \$40 million question. In a surprising series of historical parallels, the film anticipates many elements of the big money quiz shows that rose to popularity five years after the premiere of *Champagne for*

*Caesar*. Not only does the film voice common concerns over the possible rigging of quiz shows, but it also makes academic knowledge the topic of a quiz show and transforms a bookwormish, out-of-work, arrogant intellectual into a popular hero who is at the center of media attention.

*Champagne for Caesar's* vision of a jackpot quiz show that has spectacular amounts of prize money and is centered around a highly popular intellectual contestant did not become reality for several years. In 1954, however, a Supreme Court ruling gave the impetus for the development of a new type of quiz show. This decision settled an ongoing dispute over the legality of jackpot quizzes and ruled that they are not a form of gambling and are therefore legal. Thus, it became possible to use jackpot quizzes as a form of entertainment on television. Producer Louis Cowan, in cooperation with CBS and the sponsor Revlon, developed the idea for a new jackpot quiz show based on the radio quiz show *Take It or Leave It* (1940-1950). The result—*The \$64,000 Question*, which premiered on June 7, 1955—raised the prize money to a new spectacular level and changed the style and format of quiz shows significantly.

*The \$64,000 Question*, its spin-off *The \$64,000 Challenge*, and other imitations following between 1955 and 1958 (e.g., *Twenty-One* and *The Big Surprise*) focused on high culture and factual, often academic knowledge. They were part of television's attempts in the 1950s to gain respectability and, at the same time, a wider audience. They introduced a much more elaborate set design and visual style, and generally created a serious and ceremonious atmosphere that corresponded well with the placement of these shows in the most lucrative part of the network television schedule: prime time. *The \$64,000 Question* also introduced an IBM sorting machine, bank guards, an isolation booth, and neon signs; other shows built on the same ingredients to create similar effects. In an effort to keep big money quiz shows attractive, the prize money was constantly increased and became unlimited on a number of shows. *Twenty-One* and *The \$64,000 Challenge* also created competition between different contestants to heighten audience identification with individual contestants (cf. Hoerschelmann 1997b). Big money quiz shows transformed people who were not celebrities or recognized experts in their field of competition into superstars, and thus created a new audience appeal that was significantly different from the previous quiz shows. However, their reliance on returning popular contestants also created a motivation to manipulate the outcome of the quizzes. Quiz show sponsors in particular required and advocated the rigging of quiz shows to create the desired audience identification with popular contestants. The quiz show scandals consequently undermined the popular appeal of big money quiz shows and, together with lower ratings, led to the cancellation of all these shows in 1958-1959 (Hoerschelmann 1997a). Following the scandals, the networks used the involvement of spon-

sors in the rigging of the shows as an argument for the complete elimination of sponsor-controlled programming in prime-time television.

## The Field of Knowledge and Education

Previous research on big money quiz shows (e.g., Real 1996; Boddy 1990b), as well as popular writing on the genre in the 1950s, has emphasized the importance of discourses of knowledge on big money quiz shows so much that it has become commonplace. However, this particular form of production of knowledge is usually treated as a highly decontextualized phenomenon and is not related to industry practices or larger cultural formations in a satisfactory manner. Consequently, I will analyze the specific formations in American culture and specifically within the broadcast industry that might explain the distinct form and ideology of big money quiz shows. For this purpose, I use Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) notion of the field as an organizing entity that informs a variety of seemingly unconnected practices. Bourdieu and Wacquant describe the operation of a field as follows:

The field as a structure of objective relations between positions of force undergirds and guides the strategies whereby the occupants of these positions seek, individually or collectively, to safeguard or improve their own position and to impose the principle of hierarchization most favorable to their own product. . . . In a field, agents and institutions constantly struggle, according to the regularities and the rules constitutive of this space of play, with various degrees of strength and therefore diverse probabilities of success, to appropriate the specific products at stake in the game. (Pp. 101-2)

We can assume that the field of knowledge and education informs and structures a variety of different institutions, individuals, and forms of cultural expression without, however, determining these entities in any sort of reductive manner. While Bourdieu and Wacquant thus observe a significant degree of coherence within a given field, they also insist on the contingency of its determinations and on the existence of struggle over the meanings and logics of the field.

In this article, I will focus on three different sites related to big money quiz shows in which issues of knowledge and education emerge in particularly interesting ways. First, I will assess the public debates about education in 1950s America, especially in connection to the sputnik crisis of 1957, to illustrate the ideological stakes in the debates over the role of knowledge and education in the postwar United States. Second, I will discuss broadcast network programming policies of the 1950s and their relation to the field of knowledge and education. NBC's operation frontal lobes, a programming policy that was

specifically designed to address concerns over education in cold war culture, will be of particular importance for this purpose. Finally, I will analyze a number of big money quiz shows and their popular reception to understand how the logic of the field of knowledge and education is connected to the production and reception of quiz shows as a specific form of cultural expression. I will pay particular attention to the ways in which big money quiz shows naturalize class-based cultural distinctions (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) while they also produce a hegemonic form of white, upper-class cultural identity under which all other class and ethnic identities are submerged.

### Education and Knowledge in Cold War Culture

In his book *The Culture of the Cold War*, Stephen Whitfield (1991) argues that 1950s television was largely complicit with the mainstream political climate of the time, and with McCarthyism in particular. He claims that a general cold war consensus that characterizes 1950s culture can be traced in genres such as game shows:

The commitment of television to the Cold War consensus can also be found in the popular, apolitical genres of entertainment. . . . Shows that on the surface had nothing to do with foreign or domestic policy nevertheless reinforced the faith in "the American way of life" that Communism seemed to threaten. Game shows demonstrated that ordinary people could seize the fabulous economic opportunities that capitalism promised. (Pp. 169-70)

Whitfield also claims that big money quiz shows were important in reinforcing the ideology of consumption, but does not acknowledge that consumerism was clearly subordinate to the issue of knowledge in big money quiz shows. Similarly, May (1988) also puts a heavy emphasis on the issue of consumption. She argues that the construction of domesticity and the suburban family as the most desirable form of social organization in 1950s culture provided an element of social and ideological stability that was seen as an important weapon in the cold war: "Although they may have been unwitting soldiers, women who marched off to the nation's shopping centers to equip their new homes joined the ranks of American cold warriors" (May 1988, 168).

It needs to be emphasized that consumption is not a monolithic ideology at the center of 1950s culture that informs all cultural products. As big money quiz shows illustrate, the field of knowledge and education provided an important counterbalance to consumerism and also informed popular culture to a significant degree.

Despite the centrality that the above historical accounts give to consumption in 1950s culture, consumption was not necessarily treated approvingly in American public discourse. The threat of the cold war and the need to compete with the USSR in a multitude of fields induced many cultural critics to call for a national renewal. The conservative Senator Styles Bridges alluded to the relation between consumption and the cold war in the following quote:

The time has clearly come to be less concerned with the depth of pile on the new broadloom rug or the height of the tailfin on the new car and to be more prepared to shed blood, sweat and tears if this country and the Free World are to survive. (Divine 1993, xvi)

Divine (1993) shows that other intellectuals of the 1950s also voiced their concern over the prevalence of consumption in American culture, claiming that “pundits such as Walter Lippmann and Norman Cousins joined in the chorus advising Americans to give up their love affair with material goods and strive instead to improve education, science, and the quality of national life” (p. xvi).

As these examples demonstrate, the criticism of America’s obsession with consumerism is often articulated to an emphasis on education. National survival in the cold war is seen as difficult to reconcile with a culture focused on leisure and consumption. Thus, education was frequently considered a key to survival in the cold war: “The cold war rivalry seemed to dictate that the nation mobilize her brainpower, including schoolchildren and undergraduate and graduate students, on an emergency basis” (Clowse 1981, 4).

These calls for an increased national effort in the field of education were present throughout the 1950s, but clearly gained in urgency when the USSR launched its first sputnik satellite on October 4, 1957. While the immediate reactions to the sputnik launching emphasized the national need for more scientists and engineers to support the defense industry, the public debates in general incorporated the humanities and social sciences in the call for educational and moral renewal as well. The specific demands in the field of engineering that were identified in the sputnik crisis were thus translated into a general demand for educational reform. The intense competition with the USSR in military technology was extended into the realm of culture or values, that is, into the realm of ideology.

At the center of debates over education in the early to mid-1950s was the tradition of progressive education, which originally focused on the encouragement of critical, independent thinking in students, but was gradually replaced by life-adjustment education, which focused on job preparation and practical training. Conservative critics essentially claimed that life-adjustment education neglected to instill moral values in students and did not lead to the forma-

tion of a new intellectual elite of students in the service of the nation. The unspoken subtext of these criticisms is the demand that education return to traditional, supposedly American values to educate a generation of students who are morally and intellectually prepared to fight the Communist threat. Dow (1991, 19), for example, points out that "many Americans believed that the challenge posed by the expanding scientific and military power of the USSR could only be met in the long run through the development of more effective scientific training. Mental flabbiness had become equated in the public mind with moral weakness."

While the launching of sputnik in 1957 intensified the debates over education and ultimately led to legislation, it did not initiate these debates.<sup>1</sup> Although most accounts of the school reform movement of the 1950s focus on the response to sputnik, Clowse (1981) in particular points out that the issue of educational reform has been present in debates throughout the 1950s. A second issue that was present in these debates was a conservative criticism of the lack of ideological commitment in the practices of progressive education. Thus, critics of the U.S. educational system frequently demanded an emphasis on moral as well as intellectual education. In the context of the cold war, even before the sputnik crisis, it was thus an almost universally held belief that improving the quality of education was one of the keys to winning the cold war.

This new emphasis on excellence in education was also connected to specific forms of social organization. Especially in response to the egalitarian thrust of progressive education, a redefinition of the idea of equality in education occurred. In 1956, the federal Educational Policies Commission stated that the "naive egalitarianism which urged in the name of democracy the same amount and kind of education for all individuals is giving way to a more genuine democracy which calls on education to lift every individual to the highest of his capacities" (Clowse 1981, 38).

While this critique of egalitarianism and encouragement of individualism in education seemingly advocated a meritocracy, the educational policies implied here translated into the implementation of very specific educational and cultural values, namely an emphasis on the creation of educational elites, a focus on dominant cultural values, and an increasing sense that education needs to serve the interests of the nation-state. Thus, the types of knowledge desirable under these policies would be utilitarian, that is, easily put to use in the cold war, based in a positivist belief in the value of seemingly neutral facts, and again, in concurrence with dominant cultural distinctions. Big money quiz shows, with their emphasis on fact-based questions and a frequent reliance on topics that belong to the area of high cultural distinction, were clearly structured by the field of knowledge and education and were in close connection to the highly contentious debates over educational policy in the United States.



## Network Programming Policy and Operation Frontal Lobes

One of the important characteristics of a field is that it has the power to extend its logic over a variety of institutions and agents, governmental and nongovernmental (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 110). Thus, the reproduction of cultural distinctions becomes a crucial, if unacknowledged, part of the policy of public and private institutions. Bourdieu and Wacquant emphasize the fact that the state as an assembly of various fields of culture has “the power to constitute and to impose as universal and universally applicable within a given ‘nation,’ a common set of . . . norms” (p. 112). Despite the inherent contradictions in state policy and discourse, we can witness in educational policy a relatively stable network of discursive positions that articulate dominant interests in the public as well as the private sphere. The operation of some of these processes is witnessed through the efforts of representatives of higher education and government of bringing high culture back to the center of American public discourse.

The relationship between big money quiz shows and the debates over education that surrounded the sputnik crisis is made explicit by Whitfield (1991, 177), who argues that “the sense that intellect itself had to be drafted into the Cold War, which was one general consequence of sputnik, may explain why the [quiz show] scandal was so reverberant.” The increasing focus on education after sputnik grew out of the already existing notion that education and the production of knowledge would be of central importance for the survival of the United States in the cold war. The above quote illustrates that the debates over education, the nation, and big money quiz shows as a cultural form are clearly informed by the logic of the overall field of knowledge and education, thus displaying the same ideological orientation while retaining a degree of autonomy from each other. In Raymond Williams’s (1977, 101-7) terms, this relationship can be referred to as a homology, that is, specific social or cultural forms that have common forms of origin.

The power of a field becomes most obvious where it succeeds at influencing policy decisions in a seemingly independent institution, such as a broadcast network. One of the most pronounced cases in which this power manifests itself is NBC’s operation frontal lobes. *Operation frontal lobes* was a policy designed by NBC’s chief executive Sylvester Weaver with the intention of integrating culturally desirable, educational, or enlightenment material into a variety of programming forms on television. Kepley (1990) sees operation frontal lobes primarily as a tool for NBC to demonstrate the network’s efficiency in providing public service programming that can be differentiated from commercially oriented entertainment fare. Thus, he claims that operation

frontal lobes was primarily “pro bono broadcasting” (Kepley 1990, 49) and ignores the influence of Weaver’s frontal lobes policy on entertainment programming. Kepley thus argues that the main significance of frontal lobes lies in its character as a symbol for NBC’s efforts to create quality programming in the public interest. However, Wilson (1995) demonstrates that the reach of frontal lobes extended well beyond the area of public service programming. The areas on which operation frontal lobes touched regularly included the area of high culture, art, opera, theater, and so forth; intellectual debate about current social and scientific issues; and issues relating to politics or democratic processes in general.<sup>2</sup>

The increasing demands for a return to classical educational values in 1950s culture clearly also provided a framework for the articulation of these discourses on network television. The enlightenment ideology of frontal lobes was closely connected to the American national agenda in the cold war and “television as ‘a democratic arm of national enlightenment’ was seen as a way to develop the intellectual levels of America’s citizenry, to build up the intellectual forces against the Communist threat” (Wilson 1995, 86).

A quote by Davidson Taylor, an NBC executive, illustrates the integration of operation frontal lobes into the ideological formation of cold war anticommunism:

The self-interest of American industry demands that the American idea shall grow and spread. It will continue to grow and spread if the American people learn how to live up to their position of world leadership. How pleased would the Communists be if television, with its great power to command attention, spent all its time amusing the American people and never brought them information or made them think. (Wilson 1995, 92)

As evidenced in the above statements, the recruitment of the media as a central tool in the construction of national unity is fairly common in the 1950s, as it was in previous decades (cf. Hilmes 1997). Similarly, Curtin’s (1995) discussion of public debates over the role of broadcast media in American culture in the early 1960s shows significant parallels to the debates over television’s role in the cold war in the 1950s. In both cases, the media are regarded as an important tool in the fight against communism. Curtin argues that criticism of television, “when articulated with debates over citizenship and the ‘national interest,’ led in turn to the suggestion that television, with its privileged access to the suburban family home, had an important role to play in the global struggle against Communism” (p. 8).

The television spectacular, as an important programming form in the 1950s, makes it clear that the networks were particularly interested in creating a television viewing experience that would incorporate a large part of the nation. The spectaculars were specially scheduled programs outside of the regular



broadcast routine that were meant to command nationwide public attention and increase viewership. As Anderson (1994, 85) points out, the spectacular “represented a potential strategy in the networks’ early efforts to constitute the experience of television viewing, in this case as an extraordinary national event delivered to the American home.”

Many of the highly successful big money quiz shows certainly shared one central trait with media events or spectacles, that is, their ability to unite large portions of the nation in a shared televisual experience. It thus becomes obvious that frontal lobes is closely related to the general project of creating an ideologically unified and enlightened nation.

While NBC usually gets credited with attempting to integrate high culture into its programming, primarily through operation frontal lobes, CBS has a reputation for focusing on producing widely popular programming. Thus, Boddy (1990a, 76) points out that “CBS maintained its reputation for popular, less elevated fare.” However, both CBS and NBC were obviously subject to debates over educational reform and the function of television in the nation during the cold war. Consequently, CBS’s efforts at prestige programming, which reflects the sensibilities of elite culture, and a traditional system of cultural distinction, also need to be taken into consideration. While CBS gained a reputation in the area of high cultural distinction primarily for its news division under the leadership of Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly, other types of CBS programming were also influenced by the calls for cultural uplift and national renewal. The programming strategies of CBS needed to negotiate between the network’s desire to gain cultural acceptability and its economic need to retain a large popular audience. As a result of these contradictory forces, CBS initiated the wave of big money quiz shows in 1955 with the premiere of *The \$64,000 Question*. Despite the prominence of big money quiz shows and their well-known focus on intellectuals, knowledge, and education, the specific strategies for integrating enlightenment material into regular television programming has not been adequately addressed.

According to NBC policies provided in the 1954 *Responsibility Report*, operation frontal lobes was to be implemented in programming on three different levels: (1) “single programs—enlightenment,” or special programs exclusively geared toward enlightening the audience; (2) “regularly scheduled informational, educational and cultural programs,” or news, current affair, and educational programming; and (3) “integrated enlightenment material—on regularly scheduled programs,” or enlightening elements integrated in regular shows that are usually regarded as entertainment. The first and second of these levels were comparatively easy to accomplish, since they dealt with programs that were often specifically created for the purpose of enlightening the audience; but according to most historical accounts, operation frontal lobes failed crucially at implementing its third level (Wilson 1995; Bergreen 1980; Boddy

1987). The 1954 *Responsibility Report* thus lists seven programs in Category 1, eighty-three programs in Category 2, but only eleven programs in Category 3, thus indicating NBC's difficulties at accomplishing the integration of enlightenment materials into regularly scheduled programs. There were attempts to incorporate little lessons into children's programs (e.g., *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie*), to address social issues in sitcoms (e.g., *The Goldbergs*), and to showcase high art in programs such as *Texaco Star Theatre*, but NBC's responsibility reports on the success of operation frontal lobes included long lists of programs that had failed to integrate content of high cultural distinction or enlightenment material. In general, NBC regarded frontal lobes as most successful when it provided specific high culture programming or documentary programming on a variety of social and cultural issues. Thus, most historians are led to the assumption that entertainment programming was influenced by operation frontal lobes only to an insignificant extent. Wilson (1995, 99) in particular claims that operation frontal lobes' "most notable failure seems to have been its attempts to integrate 'enlightenment material' into existing entertainment series," and even points to the fact that according to NBC's own assessment in 1952, "a few sitcoms, several game shows, and many comedy and musical variety shows" did not live up to frontal lobes standards. While NBC's own negative assessment of its enlightenment project gives an indication of the amount of public pressure on the network, it does not make clear to what extent operation frontal lobes actually did shape entertainment programming and quiz shows in particular.

Beginning with the premiere of *The \$64,000 Question* on CBS and *Twenty-One* on NBC, big money quiz shows were closely linked to the enlightenment project proposed by operation frontal lobes. As part of this enlightenment project, big money quiz shows are notable for the strong presence of educators as contestants:

Educators were especially popular as contestants; a Brooklyn school teacher appeared on *The \$64,000 Challenge* in 1958 and told the host that his salary was \$400 a month. The host responded incredulously: "After eighteen years of study, they pay you only \$400 a month?" "That's correct," the teacher replied. The host: "It may be correct, but see me after the show and we'll campaign together." (Boddy 1990b, 106)

The frequent appearances of educators or highly educated contestants on big money quiz shows and the centrality that these shows gave to high culture and academic knowledge is one of the articulations of the enlightenment project of operation frontal lobes. Another articulation of this enlightenment project is the reproduction of specific forms of cultural capital, such as classical music and literature and European history and culture, which were at the center of operation frontal lobes. As Wilson (1995, 100) points out, operation frontal

lobes thus “reinforced the dominance of patriarchal, Anglo-European social formation which reflected the supposed culmination of cultural evolution through Western civilization.”

If one compares the cultural forms preferred in operation frontal lobes to the content of any big money quiz show, an astonishing correspondence can be found. A short overview of the subjects covered on several episodes of big money quiz shows currently available in several archives demonstrates this.

- *Tic Tac Dough*: geography, history, comic strips, kings, politics
- *The \$64,000 Question*: current events, the history of the Wild West, opera
- *The Big Surprise*: the roaring twenties, twentieth-century music, ships and the sea
- *Twenty-One*: film, English literature, poetry, current events

Operation frontal lobes is a very pronounced version of the cultural preferences and ideologies that were circulating in the broadcast industry—and to some extent in American culture in general—in the early to mid-1950s. While frontal lobes was closely identified with NBC executive Sylvester Weaver, who served at NBC in various positions from 1949 to 1956, it articulates programming philosophies that were widely held in the broadcast industry at the time. The way in which frontal lobes is caught between the ideal of audience enlightenment and the need to produce popular entertainment is indicative of how the broadcast industry as a whole was positioned in American culture. In this instance, the field of knowledge and education and the economic requirements of the broadcast industry created a cultural form that bears some of the contradictions in which broadcasting itself was caught. The cultural tensions that inform operation frontal lobes also clearly informed the structure and ideology of big money quiz shows.

### Big Money Quiz Shows and Their Popular Reception

Many historical accounts of the 1950s and many contemporary debates emphasize the high degree of uniformity in American culture, stemming from the dominance of consumption as a unifying discourse and from the rise of broadcast television as a homogenizing force. Lears (1989) concludes that the frequent emphasis on homogeneity in debates of the 1950s implies an unwillingness on the part of intellectuals to investigate class structures or power relations. In contrast, Spigel (1992) and Lipsitz (1990) describe the process through which 1950s television facilitated a smooth transition from an urban-based lifestyle (which encompassed a variety of ethnic identities) to a suburban lifestyle (which erased differences in class and ethnic identity). However, Marchand (1982) claims that the popular media in the 1950s largely portrayed

the United States as a classless society in which consumption is an egalitarian activity that unites all citizens/consumers. He sees big money quiz shows as inserted in this system of classlessness, since their emphasis on common people as candidates also tends to erase social difference:

Producers of the big money TV quiz shows nurtured popular enthusiasm for illusions of equality by creating such folk heroes as the “cop who knew Shakespeare.” The sponsor of the “\$64,000 Question” explained: “We’re trying to show the country that the little people are really very intelligent.” (P. 169)

What Marchand does not acknowledge is that the appeal of the “cop who knew Shakespeare” or the “cobbler who knew opera” to a significant degree stems from an acknowledgment of the contradiction between their class and the cultural capital that they deal with.<sup>3</sup> These working-class candidates become interesting precisely because they are willing to accept the superiority of a cultural capital that is identified with the ruling classes, but certainly not with the working class. Thus, these candidates are instrumental in constructing a cultural consensus under the leadership of a white, Anglo-European upper class. The process of giving upper-class cultural capital a character of universal validity works specifically by rewarding the adoption of a particular cultural capital with financial capital. Hence, elite cultural capital becomes desirable for the common people/television viewers who might not desire educational capital, but who certainly desire and appreciate financial capital.

This emphasis on the outstanding financial rewards of education is, for example, also present in an episode of *The \$64,000 Question*, in which Hal March, the host, constantly emphasizes the contestant’s low family income, which is dwarfed by the comparatively high winnings on the show. Marilyn Southern’s field of expertise is opera, and her husband is a medical resident at Mount Sinai hospital.

March: What do medical residents get these days?

Southern: Seventy-five dollars.

March: Seventy-five dollars a week?

Southern: A month.

March: Seventy-five dollars is what your husband makes? Well, you can live on that if you cut breakfast, lunch, and dinner!

After finding out that Marilyn Southern also has two children, the host gets even more upset and continues to refer to the financial rewards of *The \$64,000 Question* in the following rounds of competition.

March: Want to try for \$2,000? We’re getting wealthy so fast.

March: Want to go for \$4,000? Seventy-five dollars a month [whistles].

This episode demonstrates the articulation of various forms of high cultural capital (namely, the husband's profession) and the wife's interests in elite culture (i.e., opera), and rewards these forms of distinction with financial capital, which previously has been missing from the equation. Again, this episode of *The \$64,000 Question* performs a hegemonic cultural function by naturalizing class-based cultural distinctions and rewarding them financially, thus fulfilling the 1950s version of the American dream.

The egalitarianism that is seemingly displayed in big money quiz shows is also an important focal point of the popular press coverage of quiz shows before the scandals. The popular reactions to these shows are organized in what Bennett (1983, 1985) calls a reading formation. Bennett explains that a reading formation activates a given body of texts and the relations between them in a specific way. Reading formations thus organize extratextual relations within and around texts, and often create a unity between text and context. However, these relations are not structured evenly, but are subject to the power relations already present in a culture. Thus, it can be assumed that the reading formation of big money quiz shows that can be observed in the popular press will to some extent be structured by the field of education and knowledge as well.

The premiere of *The \$64,000 Question* was anticipated and commented on regularly from March until June 1955. Previews of *The \$64,000 Question* refer to the sensational amount of prize money on this show and to the similarity to the radio quiz show *Take It or Leave It*. After the premiere, these first reports were gradually replaced with more detailed descriptions of the show and behind-the-scenes stories on the show in popular magazines such as *TV Guide*. All these reports were entirely uncritical, and generally gave accounts of the rules of the game, the amounts of money that could be won, and how the questions were selected. At the same time, a number of magazines (*Newsweek*, *Cosmopolitan*, *TV Guide*, *Life*, and *Look*) began to treat host Hal March as well as some of the successful contestants as stars. March was characterized as a dedicated show business professional, whereas the contestants were usually portrayed as regular people within the context of their families. However, the emphasis on the quiz shows' hosts was increasingly superseded in the following two years by articles focusing on the contestants as stars, Charles Van Doren in particular. Van Doren appeared on *Twenty-One*, an NBC imitation of *The \$64,000 Question*, between November 1956 and March 1957 and won the record amount (at that time) of \$129,000. His job as instructor at Columbia University is regarded as one reason for his success, and he even published an article in *Life* (Van Doren 1957) explaining his position on education and quiz shows.

The treatment of contestants as stars in the popular press is implicitly explained by the reasons that are given for the success of big money quiz

shows. It is frequently argued that plain people as contestants offer easier identification for the audience. An article in *TV Guide* (TV's biggest find 1956), for example, observes that "plain people—not big names—provide the world's best entertainment. It's 'real folk,' like Gino and Gloria and Myrt, who register best with the viewers. . . . The amateur on television is apparently here to stay." Similarly, television critic Jack Gould (1955, 11) argues that "there's no people like non-show people. The TV that deals with actuality, with real unglamourized people behaving as themselves, is still the most fascinating TV of all." This emphasis on plain people as stars ultimately led to an egalitarian rhetoric that was adopted by the producers of these shows as well. Charles Revson (sponsor of *The \$64,000 Question*) exemplifies this position by saying that "We're trying to show the country that the little people are really very intelligent and knowledgeable. That's why the show has caught on—because of the little people" (Gehman 1955, 81). The creator of *The \$64,000 Question*, Louis Cowan, apparently agrees with this position in an interview in *Newsweek* (*The \$64,000 Question* 1955): "I've never subscribed to the belief that the average American radio and TV listener has a 12-year-old intelligence. The average American has a brain and an integrity that's really wonderful. You just have to look for it. Everybody's smart at something" (p. 42). This egalitarian rhetoric that aggressively tried to claim cultural respectability for the quiz shows, television, and its viewers remained fairly common until the rigging of the quiz shows became publicly known.

Overall, this popular reading formation is highly uncritical of the genre. Most of the texts dealing with the big money quiz shows focus on the star contestants of the shows and the egalitarian potential that they represent. This discourse of egalitarianism erases the social differences implicit in the class-based, elite cultural knowledge of quiz shows. The reading formation of big money quiz shows that emerges in the popular press thus serves to naturalize class-specific forms of acquired (educational) cultural capital by articulating these shows to the discourse of the common man.

One of the most famous moments from the history of quiz shows, the competition between Charles Van Doren and Herb Stempel on *Twenty-One*, brings the preferred cultural heritage and the dominant ideology of big money quiz shows well into focus. The competition between these two contestants has to be seen as a staged event that expresses specific cultural predispositions in a particularly interesting way. Michael Real (1996) contrasts the two contestants-as-cultural-symbols in relation to the cultural capital they carry:

Stempel is the *common man*, a self-taught working-class New York Jew with phenomenal recall, doggedly accurate, but lacking charm and charisma . . . with his unflattering haircut and ill-fitting clothes. At the opposite extreme, Van Doren is *superman* and *the boy next door*, an intellectual's hero, an Ivy Leaguer with graduate study in astrophysics, mathematics, and literature at Cambridge,



the Sorbonne, and Columbia, but also a charming and self-effacing nice guy.  
(P. 228)

The confrontation between Stempel and Van Doren captures the dynamics of cultural politics in the genre, the medium, and American culture rather well. In particular, big money quiz shows provide a highly reified form of ethnic identity that overrides a diversity of other experiences and identities. For example, the Italian-born Gino Prato becomes acceptable within the discursive realm of *The \$64,000 Question* only because, as an expert on opera, he is willing and able to subsume his Italian-American cultural identity under the larger issue of Eurocentric cultural literacy through his unexpected connection to high cultural capital. In contrast, Charles Van Doren can be described as a combination of two types of cultural capital that Bourdieu (1984) differentiates—on one hand, as an instructor at Columbia University, he possesses high acquired capital, that is, an Ivy-League education; and on the other hand, he possesses high inherited capital, since he belongs to the well-known and highly regarded Van Doren family, which also includes Pulitzer prize winners, professors, and magazine editors. Consequently, Van Doren is free to demonstrate his mastery of both high culture and trivial knowledge. Hilmes (1997) observes in relation to radio in the 1930s that many programs created a compound white identity that included a wide variety of European ethnicities, but specifically excluded African Americans from the imaginary American mainstream. A similar process of creating a “unifying and nationalizing discourse” (Hilmes 1997, 76) is at work in quiz shows, even though its character seems to be less all-encompassing. Big money quiz shows, as part of 1950s television, relied on an extremely rigid model of cultural distinctions that are rooted culturally in European high culture and ethnically in the East Coast white elite, which Charles Van Doren exemplified. They demonstrate that the field of knowledge and education does not simply produce specific, preferred forms of knowledge, but articulates forms of knowledge closely connected with dominant groups to specific cultural practices.

## Conclusion

The short period of proliferation of big money quiz shows between 1954 and 1959 represents a unique instance in the development of the genre and in the history of broadcasting. These shows represent knowledge as “the accumulation of discrete facts, atomized and offered unproblematically within a priori categories and levels of difficulty” (Boddy 1990b, 104). Independent thought, reflection, or any sort of critical thinking were thus clearly precluded on these shows. Instead, they tended to celebrate the centrality of accepted authority figures, such as college professors or bank presidents. Both in terms of the

knowledge required on quiz shows and the people appearing on these shows, traditional versions of cultural authority were maintained. The highly coherent ideological structure of the shows, as well as their spectacular visual style, remind us of the power exerted by a variety of forces in the process of cultural production.

While Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) rightfully emphasize the presence of contradiction in and between given fields, the case of big money quiz shows demonstrates that oftentimes we can also observe the existence of cultural products that are heavily (over)determined by dominant cultural formations. I argue that the specific conditions in 1950s America, especially the debates surrounding education and the diverse pressures on broadcast networks, created television programs that, for a short period, presented a highly reductive model of national values and norms.

The image of Charles Van Doren thus sums up one of the crucial hidden contradictions in the ideological operation of big money quiz shows. On one hand, the discourse of the common man was evoked to demonstrate the universal validity of the knowledge and values represented on quiz shows. On the other hand, the character of Van Doren, a representative of a small elite culture, stood at the center of the egalitarian discourses in *Twenty-One*. It becomes obvious that a naturalization of this contradiction is a central part of the ideological work of big money quiz shows.

## Notes

1. One of the main outcomes of the sputnik crisis was the National Defense Education Act, which allocated significant amounts of federal funds for college fellowship in the hard sciences as well as the social sciences and humanities.
2. Information on operation frontal lobes is drawn from NBC's *Responsibility Reports* (1954, 1955).
3. Both of these characterizations refer to popular candidates on *The \$64,000 Question*, Redmond O'Hanlon and Gino Prato, and were widely circulated in popular magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time*, as well as in newspapers such as *The New York Times*.

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