Popular Culture

Voyeurism on the Truman Show

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The 1998 hit film *The Truman Show* mocked modern voyeuristic society. In it, Truman Burbank is a man whose entire life is captured by thousands of hidden cameras broadcasting to millions without his knowledge. A year later, *EDtv* portrayed a similar story only in this instance, Ed agreed to have cameras follow him. Are these examples of exaggeration or have audiences really found entertainment in the mundane lives of others? Both *The Truman Show* and *EDtv* are reflections of cultural voyeurism expressed through modern media.

Voyeurism is most commonly thought of as a sexual disorder or deviance. Sigmund Freud described it as occurring "when the pleasure in looking becomes a perversion (a) if restricted exclusively to the genitals, or (b) if it is connected with the overriding of disgust (as in the case of voyeurs or people who look at excretory functions) or (c) if instead of being preparatory to the normal sexual aim, it supplements it" (Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* translated and edited by James Strachey, 1962, 23). The American Psychiatric Association likewise defines voyeurism as a sexual disorder involving the unsuspected observance of sexual activity. Their diagnostic criteria includes a recurring, distressing behavior that is paired with intense sexual arousal, fantasies, or urges.

The sexual nature of voyeurism in modern culture is clear. Websites advertise images of young women and girls caught on camera showering, undressing, or engaging in sexual activity. By simply searching the word "voyeurism," one

will find an abundance of these sites. One, started in 1997, is www.voyeurweb.com, which displays pictures taken through windows and by hidden cameras in locker rooms. Not just women are subject to this. In 1999, hidden camera tapes of members of the University of Pennsylvania men's wrestling team changing and showering in their locker rooms were sold and displayed as pornography on the Internet.

However, modern media is not always overtly sexual in its voyeuristic nature. *America's Funniest Home Videos* is a perfect example of nonsexual voyeurism and exhibitionist media. The show features amateur recordings of people caught in funny, unsuspecting moments and reveals them to the world. Often the subject is surprised, injured, frightened, or humiliated, and the audience laughs at their expense. It hit number one in national ratings after it premiered in 1990 and ran for nearly a decade after.

These "caught on tape" types of entertainment, have become a part of modern culture. *COPS* allows the audience to seek entertainment through the distress of suspects while they are chased, arrested, and interrogated by law enforcement. Similar "caught on tape" shows include *World's Most Amazing Videos*. Episodes have featured situations like volcanic eruptions, BASE jumping, car crashes, and explosions.

However, modern voyeuristic culture goes beyond these examples. Reality television is a rapidly emerging genre featuring ordinary people or celebrities in situations without scripts. Portrayal of unscripted situations began in 1947 with Allen Funt's *Candid Microphone*, which became *Candid Camera* in 1948 and featured ordinary reactions to pranks. Later, the 1964 series *Seven Up!* aired in the UK and featured seven-year olds of varying demographic backgrounds being questioned on their reactions to daily life. Every seven years following, the same individuals were further documented. While the films featured only structured

interviews, at the time they had the new effect of creating celebrities of ordinary people via reality-based media. The 1973 12-part PBS series, *An American Family,* portrayed a nuclear family going through divorce. It was the first series similar to reality shows that air today, such as *Jon and Kate Plus 8*, *19 Kids and Counting*, and *A Baby Story*. These shows have all portrayed documentary-style reality as drama, editing together scenes to create a manufactured reality for an audience.

Modern reality television and voyeuristic media is most evident in the shows that came about in the late 1980s and 1990s. These shows introduced the cinéma vérité style, which has become the feature of reality television popular today. The cinéma vérité style combines naturalistic techniques with devices of editing and camerawork, as well as staged situations and the use of the camera to provoke participants. One year after a similar Dutch series aired in 1991, MTV employed this technique in *The Real World*, which is still running today. Each season features seven young men and women, ranging in age from 19 to 25 and varying in race and social class. *The Real World* is "the true story... of seven strangers...picked to live in a house...work together and have their lives taped...to find out what happens...when people stop being polite...and start getting real" (*The Real World Diaries*, 1996, 7).

The show allows viewers to watch social issues unfold. One alcoholic 1999 cast member was recorded falling down, throwing up naked, and driving drunk, all of which contributed to the season's high ratings. Cameramen were instructed not to interact with the cast under any circumstances, raising the ethical question of whether producers have the responsibility to step out of the role of voyeur and intervene in the lives of others when things go too far. Eventually the producers of *The Real World* did and were able to find help for the young woman and sign her into a rehabilita-

tion program, which was documented on the show. *The Real World, San Francisco*, which aired in 1994, featured an HIV-positive gay man and a homophobic roommate. The season forced audiences to face the struggle with HIV/AIDS and discrimination. The voyeuristic media in this case serves to benefit the voyeur by providing knowledge and the ability to experience a situation they might not otherwise deal with in their daily life.

This is a possible reason as to why culture has adopted such a voyeuristic nature: knowledge is power, and one could argue that this is acquired by watching others in exchange for nothing. They are able to learn about other lives simply by observing on television, websites, or in magazines.

The idea that power is held by the voyeur is evident in "caught on camera" types of voyeuristic media, and even more so in tabloids and exploits of celebrities. The night of the 2008 Grammy Awards, pop star Chris Brown assaulted and hospitalized his then girlfriend, fellow pop star Rihanna. When photos of her injuries surfaced the next day, followed shortly after by nude pictures of her and Brown, one wonders how much of a celebrity's private life should be made public. Shows like *TMZ* and *E! News* have been criticized for their use of paparazzi photography and video. Stars are chased by the paparazzi in a manner that is clearly unwanted and possibly dangerous. However, photographers who sell to TMZ.com and other sites that appeal to a voyeuristic audience can make thousands of dollars a week. Even the sex lives of presidents and other politicians are routinely exposed.

One of the major forces driving voyeuristic media is society's declining expectations of privacy. Audiences now expect more information to be made public, and little consideration is given to the effects on the observed. Privacy is es-

sentially a social construct, mostly influenced by members of the media. It may be evaluated in terms of the power and ability of individuals to control the information about themselves that others receive. Those observed should have this control.

By bringing alcoholism, discrimination, and assisted suicide to the surface, are we forcing society to face these issues and find truth? The media has influenced the modern mind with images that depict values and societal norms, and engaging with the media helps an individual shape their sense of self. But by participating in the audience of the voyeuristic media, individuals are able to construct their own concept of truth and morality. With this subjectivism, is it ever possible for the media to report an objective truth? Is this why culture has accepted voyeurism? Recent media studies research has focused not on how messages may or may not influence people, but rather on how people choose and use messages. It suggests that audiences decide to participate by being an active member of the media audience for a number of reasons.

Reality and voyeuristic media may be a means to escape the reality that society faces. The nation is currently involved in two wars and an extreme financial crisis, yet through the media one may easily forget. The popular news media seems to spend most time on pop culture or matters involving health and beauty. It was considered breaking news and regular programming was interrupted to report the death of Anna Nicole Smith, a well known television personality and former *Playboy Magazine* centerfold playmate. In the days following, much of the media was dedicated to investigating the possible causes of her death, and who would get custody of her child. The media's choice to focus on stories such as this and the audience's choice to view them is evidence of how much the media serves as a means to escape reality.

Many people are also socially motivated to participate in the media audience. Watching the same shows provides a common ground in social situations. Viewing social interactions through the media may also sometimes supplement a lack of social interactions in one's own life and serve as a means to temporarily satisfy a sense of loneliness, by forming superficial relations with characters. Since the 20th century, a rise in the quantity of visual material available to society has transformed it from thinking in terms of thoughts or values to thinking in terms of images as superficial representations of them.

Essentially, the 20th century was characterized by the desire to expose secrets while still appearing to maintain composure. Americans had a strong desire to maintain private lives, and privacy was challenged during the Cold War with McCarthyism. The 1960s and 1970s were a time when courts justified the invasion of privacy, but Congress also passed laws to protect it. The '60s marked the advent of a culture with an increased interest in the self, particularly after its political turmoil.

It was this that sparked people's fascination with voyeur reality television. People began watching reality television and taking an interest in others' private lives in part because it made them comfortable with private images being public, but also because they feared to some extent that this could happen to them. In their fear they conversely found relief in watching the distress of others. The fear of intrusion made the public more aware of their actions, and thus society acted as if there was always a possibility they were being taped, and as if they were performing for others. This is the effect on society of the voyeuristic media: a society in which people are constantly aware and censoring their actions as if they are in front of an audience.

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Book Reviews

Jews as Capitalists, Communists, Zionists, and Victims of Nationalism

Paul H. Elovitz—Clio's Psyche

Review of Jerry Z. Muller, Capitalism and the Jews (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010) ISBN 978-0-691-14478-8, 267 pages, Hardcover $24.95.

How can a man be both a capitalist and a Communist? This was a question I wrestled with from an early age. As a young teenager, my immigrant father, after a conversation in Yiddish with a man I never remembered seeing before, declared with some amazement, "that man is both a millionaire capitalist and a Communist." His utterance was during the Cold War, when capitalism and communism were presented as polar opposites. They had spoken in a language I only knew a few words of and I puzzled over the comment for several decades as I studied American labor history, explored Communist Russia, and earned a doctoral degree in modern European history. Muller both confirms my understanding of what I learned about the subject and offers additional insights regarding the complex relationship of Jews to capitalism, communism, economic activity, ethnic identity, socialism, and the sociology of religion.

Jerry Muller is an erudite professor of Modern European intellectual history at Catholic University in the American capital. His primary foci are Jews as capitalists and Communists and as the victims of modern nationalism. He