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Ethics of Exposure

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Posted by [Brad Gyori Tribeca Flashpoint Media Arts Academy](#) on March 5th, 2013 [6 Comments](#) [Printer-Friendly](#)



James Fry and Oprah Winfrey

Reality stars flout convention, so we may be tempted to consider their behavior merely aberrant. Yet a closer look reveals that something more complex is going on. These pseudo-celebrities are not just running amuck. They have entered into a contract with the viewing public and are deliberately fulfilling the obligations of an alternative value system.

Ethics of Anomie.

Emile Durkheim defined the condition of “anomie” as mismatch between individual and social norms and a break down of the bonds between the individual and the community. According to this definition, anomie is a kind of side effect that occurs when an individual eschews normative behavior in pursuit of a self-serving goal, i.e. robbing banks to become rich. However, by recording the actual misbehavior of real people and marketing it as entertainment, so-called “reality programming” transforms anomie into more than an unfortunate byproduct of ethical lapses. Today, it is an actual *means* of achieving stardom.

Andy Warhol helped popularize this trend when he began making films in the mid-1960s. His early efforts focused on static subjects: a sleeping body (*Sleep*, 1963), the Empire State Building (*Empire*, 1964), and people staring directly into the camera (*Screentests*, 1964-66).¹



Edie Sedgwick: *Screen test*

Warhol didn't "direct" his actors. He just let the cameras roll, allowing them to write and perform their stories simultaneously. Sensing that good storytelling demands a break with routine, these proto-reality stars devised ad hoc strategies that allowed them to meet the narratological demands of their burgeoning art form. Soon, they were shooting up, having sex, shouting and slapping one another on camera.

Today, this irony-laden ethos pervades nearly all so-called "reality programming." The formula is simple: outrageous behavior = more screen time. Thus reality stars are incited to break with traditional norms in increasingly shocking ways. In such a context, pro-social behavior is commonly ignored, while anomie becomes its own reward.



Andy Warhol and Mario Montez on the set of *Chelsea Girls*

Ethics of Identification.

Reality stars aren't just people, they are specific *types* of people, representing viewers who

embody particular subject positions: white, black, male, female, straight, gay, etc. When the cameras are rolling, these individuals often sense the eyes of their peers upon them. This may impel them to take personal risks in the name of a favored social group.

In 1973 the PBS series *An American Family* became the prototype for the countless reality shows to follow. It was publicized as an unblinking look at the day-to-day existence of a more or less typical, upper-middle class American household, **the Loud family** of Santa Barbara, California. The program proved controversial, however, when twenty two year old **Lance Loud**, a fan of reality-genre pioneer Andy Warhol, was shown rejecting the heteronormative lifestyle of his parents and siblings, becoming one of the first openly gay “characters” on television.

Watch [Preview Trailer](#) on PBS. See more from [An American Family](#).

Pat and Lance Loud: *An American Family*

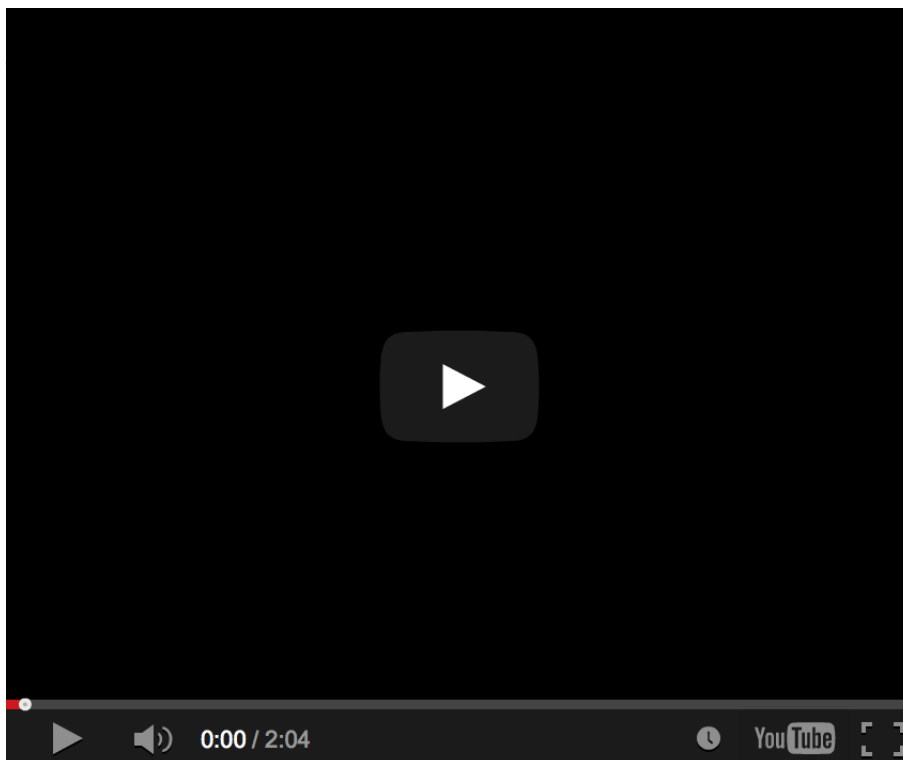
While Lance was certainly a stand out, the climax of the series occurred when **Pat Loud**, Lance’s mother, confronted her husband, Bill, about a string of infidelities and asked for a divorce. In her autobiography, *Pat Loud: A Woman’s Story*, Pat describes herself as “too old for women’s lib,”² yet in *An American Family: A Televised Life*, Jeffrey Ruoff argues that, while Pat never overtly identifies as a feminist, her “character” in the documentary “was widely used as a foil to discuss general issues related to the woman’s movement.”³ In fact, “during the promotional tour, Pat claimed to speak for the anonymous American wife and mother: ‘Every housewife I know has a story they are dying to tell but never do.’”⁴

Ethics of Trauma.

Reality TV and daytime talk often feature emotionally charged mediations on traumatic events. This approach conjures monsters and victims, those who have inflicted abuse and those who have had abuse visited upon them. No one escapes this process unscathed, as the monsters necessarily become victims themselves when they are subjected to public exorcism.

In 2006, the ***Smoking Gun website*** reported that author James Fry’s confessional bestseller ***A Million Little Pieces*** contained fabricated plot points. This triggered a firestorm of controversy. Pundits either condemned or defended Fry’s actions, but generally failed to consider what cultural forces may have influenced them. Oddly enough, the best selling author was guilty of

pretending to be *less* law abiding and well adjusted than he actually was!



James Fry on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*: Shame on Who?

In an era in which tell-all memoirs become best sellers, fabricating shameful deeds to confess makes good business sense. Publicizing a work that details such “secrets” amounts to a somewhat painful and protracted act of public contrition, but for a young novelist seeking any type of exposure, the potential payback can be substantial.

Human societies have long required ritual **scapegoats**, figures who affirm the validity of specific beliefs, by first rejecting them and then by paying a steep, sometimes fatal, price for doing so. James Fry offered himself up as such a figure and was both punished and richly rewarded in return. The story *behind* his falsified story reveals how an ambitious individual can set aside scruples and attain social empowerment by placing himself at odds with normative structures in a particularly titillating way.

After the scandal broke, Winfrey invited Fry on her show and publicly castigated him—*not* for engaging in the criminal behavior depicted in the book—but for failing to meet the requirements of his chosen role. He had doctored his resume, writing the type of confessional, tell-all memoir her show characteristically endorsed without having his scapegoat “credentials” in order. Heaping irony atop irony, this surreal anti-scandal proved precisely the type of high profile disgrace that allowed Fry to finally claim the status of a true tabloid star, one whose shameful secret (not having enough shameful secrets) had been revealed for the world to see. After Winfrey lambasted him, *A Million Little Pieces* attracted even more readers. It has since been published in twenty-nine languages and has sold over 5 million copies.

Ethics of Confession.

When reality becomes entertainment, privacy becomes unethical. The public is entitled to know everything about the personal lives of reality stars, *especially* the most incriminating details. This is the lesson that **Jon Gosselin** learned when he attempted to hide an extramarital affair from fans of the hit TLC reality series ***Jon and Kate Plus Eight***. In 2009, a scandal erupted when Gosselin was accused of cheating on his then-wife, Kate, with a 23-year-old schoolteacher.

Viewers were outraged for a number of reasons. Jon and Kate had been married for ten years. They were raising a set of sextuplets along with two other children. And soon after the scandal broke, Kate was accused of having an affair with her **bodyguard**. Yet the biggest outrage centered on the fact that Jon and Kate initially refused to discuss the matter in the press. By keeping such an important aspect of their marriage off screen, they were violating a tacit agreement with the viewers who had made their show a hit. These two upstart reality stars were only famous because they had agreed to allow cameras to photograph their personal lives, and now they were censoring the juiciest details. Many fans considered this a serious ethical violation.



Kate Gosselin on the cover of *People Magazine*

For almost a month, the Gosselins maintained their silence. As the scandal snowballed, Baltimore Sun critic, **Sarah Kickler Kelber** criticized Jon and Kate, not for being bad parents, or unfaithful spouses, but for refusing to share enough details about their personal lives with reality TV fans. Adopting a tone of righteous indignation, she wrote, “At some point when you open your life up to the public that much, you lose control over what is public and what is private.” Pressing further, she added, “It would be so much clearer if they would just say their version of what happened. This is just more complicated than it needs to be. It’s not like they aren’t used to sharing the details of their lives, you know? ... We saw Jon’s hair-transplant surgery as it happened, and Kate recovering from her tummy tuck, and the kids going through potty training. Most of that was probably too much information, but now we aren’t quite getting enough.”⁵



Jon Gosselin on the cover of *In Touch*

The Gosselins Speak: Finally!

For viewers, turning reality programming on or off is a matter of personal choice. But reality stars that wish to maintain the status of high profile public figures must offer up a steady diet of shocks on demand. This is no longer an optional strategy. It has become an ethical obligation.

Image Credits:

1. **James Fry and Oprah Winfrey**
2. **Andy Warhol and Mario Montez**
3. **Kate Gosselin**
4. **Jon Gosselin**

Please feel free to comment.

NOTES

1. Koch, Stephen (1973). *Star Gazer: Andy Warhol and his Films*. New York: Praeger Publishers. [↔]
2. Loud, P. with Johnson, N. (1974). *Pat Loud: A Woman's Story*. New York: Bantam Books. p. 118 [↔]
3. Ruoff, J. (2002). *An American Family: A Televised Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. 127 [↔]
4. Ruoff, J. (2002). *An American Family: A Televised Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. 123 [↔]
5. Kelber, S.K. (5/25/2009). And you thought Jon and Kate week was over? Critics Pan Season 5 Premiere of Jon & Kate Plus 8. Retrieved from <http://ohnotheydidnt.livejournal.com/35549103.html#ixzz2CCEnU57u>. [↔]

Comments

- **Tevans said:**



It's true that people act differently when they are aware of cameras on them. I am particularly interested in the Ethic of Confession part. I wonder in that situation that Jon and Kate are in if anything is off limits to the public. A cheating scandal is pretty far to go, but we as the audience shouldn't demand that they do anything for us. If that's their business, so be it. You can yell and scream at them for NOT wanting to discuss it on the show, but don't worry, it's all over the tabloids anyway. If you want to know about the scandal how about getting up and reading a magazine?

In reality tv I guess though that the tabloid culture and the tv culture are connected too closely. Things that are in the tabloids are directly connected to the tv show, and to deny the existence of whatever scandal is talked about in the magazines is a denial of the "reality" and maybe the integrity of the show.

I'm curious about your thoughts on the other types of reality shows, the "hidden camera" shows like "Punk'd" or "Boiling Point" where only a few people are aware of the cameras while the target isn't. I'm always interested in how those people react to their situation. It's usually pretty boring, that is until they realize the camera is there.

-March 8th, 2013 at 11:03 pm

- **pys said:**



I think "Ethics of Exposure," brings up some interesting points. Andy Warhol challenged the art world with his representations of reality, with little regard for the ethics behind his art making practices. Warhol began his career as an advertisement artist, so it can be said that he was conscious of selling his work from the beginning. When James Fry wrote "A Million Little Pieces," he clearly is selling a product – his book. Oprah sells drama on her show, for her, anger about the ethics behind the book is performance. Jon and Kate plus eight, like most reality TV, is quite transparent in that the stars of the show are paid, and make money from 'baring all' to the cameras.

I guess what is most interesting to me is that all of these examples show various levels of knowledge of ethics, levels of self-reflexivity and awareness, and levels of commitment to financial reward.

Like a graph of types of films worlds (Reality, virtual reality, animation, live action etc.)— which often signal to a viewer how "real" TV or Film is, we could separate levels of 'art' and 'reality' and 'performance' with the examples in this article.

I guess what is problematic is that in a case like James Fry or Warhol, the art makers are the ones reaping the rewards and are aware of their access to them. Warhol studies Edie with his camera. As she stares into the camera, we begin to question the art maker and their relationship, but the artist is protected. In James Fry's case his "tell all" book had elements of fiction. But the very nature of literature frames itself as an art form. Once again the artist is protected. In this interview setting, this boundary become less clear – Oprah takes the role of Artist, while Fry becomes the subject.

The lines between art and reality, with a show like Jon and Kate, become blurred, because the true artists (filmmakers, producers) are never displayed. While they have signed on to a show, they do not get the direct profit from their exposure. The artists are never displayed, the audience does not wonder who they are.

“When reality becomes entertainment, privacy becomes unethical” — Only by defining and framing what makes reality “reality,” and clearly establishing who controls the performance and finance, then we can better understand the ethics of privacy.

-March 9th, 2013 at 5:43 pm

- **Victoria said:**



I agree with you when you say that reality stars “must offer up a steady diet of shocks on demand” and that “it has become an ethical obligation”. I am a huge fan of music, and I enjoy watching reality shows with musicians, however, as a conscious viewer, it is obvious that there’s a cyclical flow. First an individual does something shock worthy, then a show is birthed, then you have them gracing the pages of magazines alongside A-list celebrities (e.g. actors), and in some instances, obtaining product endorsements simultaneously. YouTube has been a forum used for many individuals to achieve stardom via “misbehaving”. Interesting enough, viewers cosign these actions, thus enabling individuals to “market” themselves. It’s almost as if doing the craziest, wildest action almost always guarantees some sort of attention, and in this era, any attention, regardless of how “good” or “bad” it is, is good attention. The outrageous behavior = more screen time formula is the norm. However, one of classmates shared an interesting story in which her friend made it to the final stages of a reality show, came to the interview drunk with the expectation of being selected for being “outrageous”, only to not be selected for the show. This girl is a prime example of how persons are “[impelled] to take personal risks in the name of a favored social group”. She was trying out for a “party girl” role, however despite exhibiting behavior with America’s famous party girls, she was passed for being “too outrageous”. Furthermore, it’s important to not that public excoriation has been the platform of many celebrities (e.g. Kim Kardashian, Rhianna). Kim’s sex tape and Rhianna’s incident with Chris Brown has done nothing but positively impact their careers. Each has increased viewers, infinite product endorsements, and can be seen intentionally “placing [themselves] at odds with normative structures” so as to attain and maintain social empowerment. Now, Kim is notorious for her booty and glorified for her looks and Rhianna is the poster child for battered women and recognized as one who has risen about her situation. Interesting enough, coverage regarding both women’s entrepreneurial pursuits is almost always coupled what relationship they’re entering/exiting. Lastly, the Jon and Kate infidelity issue is one that I find troublesome. The fact that fans considered their not being open about the issues existing in their marriage, as a “serious ethical violation” is a sign that reality TV is reached a new high. There’s only so much surveillance any individual can take, and the fact that strangers feel entitled to each and every waking second, minute, and hour of your life is almost sickening. Jon and Kate are not the only couple with sextuplets nor are they the only couple dealing with infidelity. The public’s deep interest in observing how Jon & Kate navigate their marriage during and post being “outed” highlights the fact that they are no longer seen as human beings but as pure entertainment. At the end of the day no married couple would want to confirm infidelity rumors, see their “acts” featured in tabloids to pry and dig deeper than they already have, and most importantly, give strangers front row seats to their life as its playing out.

-March 11th, 2013 at 10:18 pm

- **Jessica said:**



This article brings up many interesting points to contemplate when thinking about what we

expect from reality stars. I think the James Fry case is really interesting because his “reality stardom” started off when it was uncovered that his life was not as scandalous as he claimed in his “memoir” A Million Little Pieces. The uncovering of his embellishments led to some contradictory consequences. First the Smoking Gun story then a spot on Oprah, which then led to an increase in book sales, but also a termination in his book deal and then later another book deal surfaced because of Fry’s popularity from the sensationalized book scandal.

My question is, do you think this was all part of Fry’s plan? Who leaked the information to the Smoking Gun that Fry’s autobiographical memoir wasn’t completely true? or who felt it necessary to follow-up on the story and verify it was all true?

We see reality tv stars on the Jersey Shore, Real World and even the Bachelor/Bachelorette acting out their stereotyped “types” that they were cast to entertain viewers. Why was it so wrong for Fry to embellish his character in print?

-March 13th, 2013 at 2:29 pm

- **James L. said:**



hanks for this article, Brad–

I especially like the fact that you focus on the idea of “expectation” when it comes to reality stars—and the fact that it seems absurd when they refuse to “confess all,” especially since their unabashed revelation of their private lives is what gets them famous in the first place. Although on the flip side, I think a lot of the time people can’t believe that tabloids and gossip columns could possibly care so much or be so intrusive when it comes to stars’ personal lives, myself included. But the line between public and private is not so easily determined when speaking about reality TV. A basketball player’s job in the simplest of terms is to put a ball through a basket. A recording artist’s job is to put music out for the public. A reality TV star’s job, material, successes and failures—they’re all determined by simply living their lives (however fabricated it may seem in front of a camera). So when he/she withholds seemingly “juicy” information from the public—well, it would seem like LeBron James refusing to dunk, or waiting 5 years for a new Adele album just to find out it’s a 4 song EP where 3 of the songs are remixes of the first one; for all intents and purposes they’re still doing their job, but certainly not in a way we’ve come to expect. So I understand the frustration with something like Jon & Kate, because their “privacy” is their currency, their talent. Thus it feels like they owe it to the public to make it available.

To me, where things become difficult in our current era of all reality all the time is that surveillance is not limited to the world of reality TV. Those celebrities who seemingly wish no part of their private lives to become public, who do not invite society in in this way, still find their most intimate details being forced onto magazine front covers. I do wonder if a lot of it is self-promotion. But the obsession with celebrities’ lives and the expectation for those in the limelight to make all their business known to us (often when it has nothing to do with the reason they’re in the spotlight) I find to be a little problematic. Tiger Woods’ job, for 18 holes, is to guide that golf ball in in as few strokes as possible. When he steps on the course, he’s working. When he steps off, we should be done with him (hopefully similar to our bosses in our 9-5 work lives). Instead, we have witch hunts over his personal life and how many women he’s slept with besides his wife and if he’ll ever recover from the public disgrace that we the public orchestrated in the first place—and I wonder what you think about the fact that sports/music/movie/etc stars de facto become reality TV stars because of this surveillance culture/whether they should be fair game as well?

I guess even here the lines are becoming blurred, with celebrities of all kinds having Facebook pages and Instagrams and Twitters—which again looks to invite the public into personal details in unprecedented ways—so maybe everyone’s just getting what they’re asking for :)

-April 22nd, 2013 at 7:36 pm

- **AReedy said:**



While I do agree in part with the connection between reality television’s anomie and Warhol’s pieces, I think that there is a notable difference to consider when making this comparison. Yes, both reality television and Warhol’s films brought an exciting new sense of voyeurism to the world of entertainment. They also both have made marketing, branding, and selling “reality” what it is today, at least through a certain lens. However, the distinction that sets these two concepts apart is the way in which they portray alternative value systems, and, consequently, the way in which viewers see them as legitimate alternative value systems or not. When understanding these mediums that engage in new, contradictory social norms, it is important to look at the role of form versus function. Warhol can be considered “high art,” and comes from an art perspective of form over function, whereas reality television, on the other hand, serves a main function to engage the audience in direct entertainment that puts function first, and form as an extension of that, if at all. And so Warhol is a top down approach, while reality television is a bottom up approach.

Being a fan of both Warhol and reality television, I appreciate the comparison between them, and see how Warhol’s pieces may have led to a new kind of television that has now become what it is today, and yet I think that the distinctions here are important because they change the way that these alternative value systems are perceived by the audience. Warhol’s “otherism” is perceived as creative, authentic, and glamorous, whereas reality television is usually viewed as vulgar, fake, and trashy, the exact opposite. Ironically, in a way I can see all of these qualities as being applicable to both Warhol and reality television, but because of the tone and presentation of these works, a certain cultural capital and, therefore validity, is viewed by Warhol where it is not for reality television. I do agree that reality television most definitely is “deliberately fulfilling the obligations of an alternatives value system,” and it’s certainly a valid comparison with an interesting lesson behind it.

-April 22nd, 2013 at 11:36 pm