REEL PLEASURES: EXPLORING THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF MEDIA VOYEURISM AND EXHIBITIONISM[1]

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Counterblast: The e-Journal of Culture and Communication, v.1, n.1 (November 2001)

Introduction

There has been a remarkable increase in both the academic and popular literature that problematize privacy and observation. Recently, reality TV shows and webcam sites have opened the floodgates to popular discussions of privacy. However, the interplay of social and cultural forces behind seeing, watching, and observing has not been traced historically—either in scholarly works or in mainstream media. The motives of persons who exhibit or make public their private affairs on TV and the Internet have not been fully explored. Moreover, questions about technologized or mediatized observation have not been put into a social, cultural, and historical context.

This paper attempts such a contextualization. It consists of two major parts: The first part traces the historical roots of mediatized observation and exhibitionism. I refer to two TV shows—*Candid Camera* and *An American Family*—as past examples of media observation. Building on this historical account and supplemented with an exploration of social, cultural, and psychological elements, the second part argues that the current cultural landscape, deluged with reality TV shows or exhibitionist web cam sites, is not necessarily a novelty or the end result of new technologies. Questions I try to answer include: How have the mundane and the ordinary become objects of attention? What are the historical roots of the motives and desires for observing everyday life, on the part of the observer, and for being seen, on the part of the observed? Last but not least, is this phenomenon of mediatized observation just harmless entertainment, just another example of lie-back-and-enjoy-it-ism? Or does it signal a disturbing trend? By making us keen observers and also rewarding our self-exposure, does mediatized observation familiarize us with the idea of surveillance? Does it make us *too* comfortable with surveillance, so that its potential for social control might escape our attention?

A Brief Analysis of the Social and Cultural Context that Cultivated Observation and Exhibitionism in the Media

During the last half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, there was a remarkable rise in the quantity of visual material available to the public. In *Life, the Movie*, Neal Gabler refers to this change as a momentous shift in American culture and consciousness. Publications, previously limited to text, were flooded with illustrations.[2] With the advent of photography and graphic reproduction, newspapers and magazines, as well as people, had become extremely concerned with visual representation. By the 1880s there were around a hundred portrait studios in New York City with people lining up to have their portraits taken.[3] The rise of the visual image, or the Graphic Revolution, as Daniel Boorstin calls it, involved more than the increasing availability of graphic reproduction and visual technologies. What really worried Boorstin was the switch from "ideal-thinking"—thinking in terms of some idea or value—to "image-thinking"—thinking in terms of "an artificial imitation or representation of the external form of any object."[4]

These changes in consciousness and in thinking foregrounded images and added a new emphasis on seeing, thereby privileging sight above other senses. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the rise of the image and, with it, the arrival of department store windows, visual displays, neon lights, signs, billboards, outdoor advertising, attractive packaging, and iconographic trends in newspapers and magazines.[5] Maximum visual stimulation resulted in the "ascendance of the eye."[6]

The early twentieth century was by and large characterized by a determination to expose secrets and an obsession with keeping up appearances through clothing, behavior, and language. Modernists set out to "overthrow Victorian euphemism in favor of 'terrible honesty.'"[7] Dark family secrets and everyman's innermost fantasies were explored by writers and artists alike.

Americans have had strong feelings and a deep regard for being left alone. Since the nineteenth century, privacy has been valued among other liberties and freedoms. In 1890, privacy was for the first time posited within the legal framework when two jurists, Louis D. Brandeis and Samuel D. Warren, published "The Right to Privacy" in the *Harvard Law Review*. However, alongside with various attempts to protect the individual's right to privacy, openness ruled. Beginning with the post-World War II era in particular, suspicion of secrecy and democratic impulses to openness had some negative bearings on privacy. The zeitgeist of the fifties, dominated by Cold War anxieties and the Red Scare, fueled government surveillance. The government started to play a decisive role in institutionalizing the invasion of privacy. Technological developments such as wiretapping, and their widespread use, played their part as well.[8] However, the government also took some steps toward the protection of privacy. Invasion and protection of privacy are intertwined, and the legal history of privacy shows how paradoxical the issue can be.[9]

The 1960s and '70s witnessed not only the courts legitimizing the invasion of privacy and the government and Congress passing laws to protect privacy. The sixties also saw the increasing interest in the self (not the other) that prevails to this day. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch attributes this shift to Americans' retreat to purely personal occupations and self-absorption, particularly after the political turmoil of the sixties.[10] Lasch argues that the combination of a lack of hope of improving their lives, a retreat from politics, and a repudiation of the recent past made Americans see theirs as a futureless society that compelled them to live for the moment. Previous conventions were now regarded as constricting, artificial, and deadening to emotional spontaneity. Past boundaries between the self and the rest of the world collapsed. Family and community ties, the Protestant work ethic, and the control others had on the individual yielded to more personal interests. Concern with physical and mental well-being ushered in self-absorption through beauty and wellness regimes as a "seize-the-day" mentality reigned.

In the "therapeutic" climate of the sixties, people displayed narcissistic tendencies to validate their self-esteem and hungered for the attention of others. The obsession with keeping up appearances made Americans only more self-conscious. People came to believe that public actions revealed their inner personality, which came to be seen as the unique expression of individual traits. People were soon obsessed with giving themselves away through outward appearances—through details of dress, actions, and facial expressions. The hunger for attention, rooted in the desire for self-validation, found its medium. Photography appeased the yearning for self-representation. Movies created the celebrity culture that created a lust for the camera. Later, television brought a whole new world to the living room. Home videos reflected Americans' self-consciousness of performance, making the video technology a medium for entertainment and a springboard for each person's share of fifteen minutes of fame.

How did this shift of attention from the other to the self take place? How was the interest in the outer world relocated to that of the inner?[11] People found themselves in a dense interpersonal environment. Also emerging was a "therapeutic ideology" that promoted narcissism. As Philip Rieff notes in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, becoming "kinder to the self as a whole, to the private parts of it as well as to the public ones" was what brought along such a cultural change.[12] The twentieth century held that the new

center was the self. The purpose was to direct the self outward. Politics was set aside; the self was to be saved through one's emotions, not through the community. This was the revolt of the private man, who could unashamedly display his private matters in public.[13]

In light of the social and cultural changes of the sixties, we can better understand the cultural environment that developed and nurtured the fascination with the private and the ordinary. It was in such a climate that *Candid Camera* reached the peak of its popularity and *An American Family* televised the Loud family's inner struggles—long before *The Real World*, *Survivor*, and *Big Brother* hit the airwaves.

Reality TV or VTV (Voyeur TV), an example of media voyeurism or mediatized observation, shares some qualities with *Candid Camera,* which first aired on national television in 1948. *Candid Camera* is considered to be the forerunner of "reality slapstick" shows, such as *America's Funniest Home Videos*, which eventually familiarized audiences with the exhibition of domestic video recordings in a mass media TV context.[14] In addition to making people comfortable with private images on public screens and familiarizing them with images of actions by others who were unaware of being filmed, *Candid Camera* heightened people's awareness of the recording and transmission of actions. As audiences watched the show's tricks, they came to think that it could happen to them as well. Such a state of mind and the intrusion of the camera into everyday life possibly made people more conscious of their actions in public settings and thus encouraging them to respond to others as if their actions were being taped. Perhaps *Candid Camera* was the first TV show to incorporate self-scrutiny or self-surveillance into the stage-like everyday life.

Candid Camera's creator and original host Allen Funt devised the show "to catch unsuspecting people in the act of being themselves."[15] Funt implemented this idea for the first time in 1947 in a radio show on the ABC Radio Network, *Candid Microphone*. Because of its popularity, the show moved to television in 1948 and was renamed *Candid Camera.* The show achieved top ratings in network runs and syndication. It was a hit from 1960 to 1966 on CBS, and during the 1960/61 season, it was the number seven rated show in the nation. It was followed by *New Candid Camera*, which ran for five years in the 1970s, and by adult versions shown on cable television. Today, Peter Funt, Allen's son, is hosting a new version of the show on CBS, and reruns of the original show air on cable.

At a time when popular entertainment forms like drama and sitcom relied on writers, directors, and performers to reconstruct reality, Allen Funt focused his energy on what he argued didn't need a rewrite: human nature itself. However, catching people in their most natural roles would be a challenge if he let them knew he was taping.

Funt, who studied psychology at Cornell, was probably aware of people's tendency to focus on their "performances" and the "impressions" they give off. As Erving Goffman points out, the self-as-performer takes over when one is under the observation of others. In his analysis of how we act in social settings and present ourselves to others, Goffman compares everyday behavior to dramaturgical experience. In their constructedness, Goffman likens social interaction to drama, and behavior to performance. He argues that people act with their "audience" in mind and are aware that others may be checking the consonance between their behaviors and their roles. Such "performance" is not a staging by the individual *only*. Rather, it is an interaction between the individual, the environment, and the audience, constructed to provide others with "impressions."[16]

Funt's original intention with *Candid Camera* was to show comparisons of human behavior in real life and in drama. He tried "to rewrite the script of everyday living to test people's responses"[17] and to give the audience some food for thought about their own "real me." "The self-image that people have is generally two-dimensional, consisting of what they *feel* about themselves on the inside and what they *see* of themselves on the outside," said Funt.[18]

For the broadcast industry, *Candid Camera* signaled the "spirit of experimentation" with a new model: realistic dramatic shows. Mike Dann, then Vice President of CBS network programming, said there was a "tremendous impetus to combine the real world and the entertainment world."[19] Almost three decades later, reality TV hit the airwaves with *The Real World* and its spin-offs, shows based not on contrived voyeurism and humorous gags, as was *Candid Camera,* but on vérité voyeurism.[20] In January 1973, PBS aired the first reality TV show to feature "real" people and their everyday "reality": *An American Family*, a show centering on the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California. It documented the lives of the family members for one year—unscripted, unrehearsed. The result was one of the most controversial PBS features. The unprecedented documentary on everyday family life recorded William and Pat Loud getting a divorce, their son Lance coming out of the closet, his parents' reluctance to acknowledge it, and the family's eventual break-up.

So far I have tried to show that voyeurism and exhibitionism on television are not necessarily novelties. Indeed, the desire to secretly watch others is as old as human history. Web cam sites or Reality TV shows fulfill similar functions as peeping through keyholes did years ago. In the following sections I will discuss the implications of today's mediatized observation, which is more available and accessible, more sensational, and more technologically-perfected than keyhole voyeurism.

The First-Person Era

The current TV landscape is replete with reality TV shows, while the Internet is burgeoning with thousands of web cams beaming private life images into strangers' private domains.

Reality-based TV shows[21] and Internet sites satisfy not only the desire to watch but also the desire *to be watched*. More than 6,100 people applied to be on *Survivor*. MTV's *The Real World* receives 35,000 applications every year. There are around a quarter of a million web cam sites up and running, and EarthCam—a web cam portal—adds some thirty web cams a day to its site. The sale of web cams jumped from a third of a million in 1997 to 2.5 million last year and is expected to hit 36 million by 2003.[22]

Why the Yearning for the Intimate, Private, Banal

Contemporary culture is stitched together with personal modes of expression and personal confessions. There's an unflagging interest in human stories, personal stories, and authentic stories. Media scholar Jon Dovey argues that the yearning for subjectivity, for the personal, for the intimate is the "only remaining response to a chaotic, senseless, out of control world in which the kind of objectivity demanded by grand narratives is no longer possible."[23] In a similar vein, Georg Simmel argues that the experience of social reality in the modern world is that of retreat, indifference, or nervousness, exacerbated by complex social relations and sensory bombardment. We experience the modern public sphere as one that holds no comfort; so our communicative acts depend upon the performance of more and more open, individual, "authentic" versions of the self. The personal becomes the political, and communications media provide the terrain for the struggle for public visibility. In Dovey's words, in a world in which objectivity no longer reigns supreme, we're left with the "politics of the self to keep us ideologically warm."[24] As the individual subjective experience is foregrounded as the guarantor of knowledge, new representations in media are sought, and new genres explode, such as trauma TV, chat shows, docu-soaps, video diaries, televised tragedies.[25] The new "regime of truth" turns into a theater of intimacy, a spectacle, marked by the imposition of the private onto the public.

The voyeuristic and exhibitionist culture is a strange yet potent mix of authenticity and contrivance, pleasure and repulsion. The desire for the real is bound up with a repulsion from what is *not* normal or safe. Audiences usually moan about the "freaks" they see on daytime talk shows or a participant eating a rat on *Survivor.* The paradox of voyeurism is contained in the coexistence of revulsion ("Thank God

that's not me!" and "That's so gross!") and attraction ("I can't help watching it!"). In a Bakhtinian sense, reality TV is borne out of our hatred, fear, affection, and desire for the "low." The grotesque, the debased, the carnivalesque provide a transgressive excitement. They are demonized and excluded by the civilized bourgeoisie and made socially peripheral. Yet these images of the abnormal and the dangerous become symbolically central and transfix audiences.

Willing Captives

The underside of the theme in the 1998 movie *The Truman Show* is that the captive of television isn't Truman Burbank, whose life is being televised—it's the audience. As media critic Mark Crispin Miller tells us, the audience has blithely endorsed the very product, television, which has made it its captive. Drawing a comparison between the Oceanic audience of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the TV audience, Miller argues:

> The TV viewer does not gaze up at the screen with angry scorn or piety, but looks down on its images with a nervous sneer which cannot threaten them and which only keeps the viewer himself from standing up. As you watch, there is no Big Brother out there watching you—not because there isn't a Big Brother, but because Big Brother is you, watching.[26]

The audience's voluntary participation in its own observation further complicates the analysis. So far, I have tried to show that mediatized observation goes both ways, fulfilling the desire to observe and the desire to be observed, to be visible. Now I want to discuss what changes are taking place in the way we feel about and respond to surveillance as we become more vision-oriented. What is the relationship between mediatized observation in the name of entertainment and different levels of surveillance? Are the media peering in the name of entertainment, distracting us from the potential threats posed by surveillance, such as increasing social control?

A Time/CNN poll taken in June 2000 (when *Survivor* was enjoying unusually high summer-time ratings) showed that 59% of respondents thought that reality-based shows are "just harmless entertainment," whereas 30% thought they showed a "disturbing trend for society."[27] The *Time* article citing the poll doesn't make clear what exactly is meant by "disturbing trend"—it could be anything from the vulgarization of culture to the poisoning of kids to the usurping of public airwaves. I argue that the subjectivity, the sense of informality, and the domestic familiarity of these reality shows make us too comfortable with surveillance processes in society. Common are the surveillance cameras at ATM machines, in shopping malls, stores, or on public streets to fight crime, in workplaces to guarantee employee productivity, and in daycare centers and private homes to check up on caregivers and nannies. We do not question if and how these cameras might add to social control or invade our privacy. We welcome them for their benefits: crime reduction, containment of drug trafficking, employee monitoring. Again, as Miller notes, we have internalized the "diffuse apparatus of surveillance built all around us."[28]

Technology is not the culprit

Despite the persistence of technologically determinist views, technology alone does not provide an explanation for media voyeurism and exhibitionism, nor for the rise of surveillance practices. It would be naïve to conclude that technology is the sole catalyst for the invasion of privacy or our voluntary surrender to it. We do not decide to watch just because we have the ability and the tools to do so. Technological, economic, and cultural forces all play a role in the rise of media voyeurism and surveillance.

Technology is a factor, a significant one indeed, in the rise of mediated voyeurism and exhibitionism. Technologies and communications media are more prevalent, easy-to-use, interactive, and affordable than ever before. However, it is the human thinking that gives rise to technological developments in the first

place and consequently shapes their uses. In *Technics and Civilization*, Lewis Mumford argues that technics have the potential not only to do things but also to change social and cultural relations in ways we cannot foresee. But Mumford also notes that technics do not form an independent system of their own. They are a part of human culture. Mumford refers to the development of technics spurred by the mind as "a reorientation of wishes, habits, ideas, goals."[29] Mumford's model emphasizes that technics and technologies do not exist all by themselves; they are a part of the whole, constantly engaged in interdependent and complex relations with other parts. Technology works within a complex social structure. According to Gilles Deleuze, a society is defined by its amalgamations, not only by its tools. Tools exist only in relation to the interminglings they make possible or that make them possible.[30]

Conclusion

Contemporary pop-cultural voyeurism and exhibitionism are not phenomena specific to the nineties, nor are they the end results of the explosion in visual technologies. We do not watch simply because we have the ability to do so. Technologies and the media are new, but the choices are as old as human history. People have always liked to watch other people. Technology has only made it simpler to do so. Recently, reality-based shows have become nodes where the media and the non-media (ordinary) worlds—to use media scholar Nick Couldry's terms—collide. In an image-saturated world, we are in continual search for the real and for experiences that are not filled with images or filtered by media. Reality TV has become a blurred frontier between the spectacle and the experience. Through so-called interactivity it provides between the media and non-media worlds, reality TV promises to satisfy the search for an "underlying level of social life that is still real [. . .] free of representation."[31] Ironically, we are searching for the real in the very medium that exploits the real to the fullest, saturates it with images, and gives it back to us. Hungry for the real as ever, we find our selves hopelessly emerging in our stage-like world.

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ENDNOTES

[1] I would like to thank Todd Gitlin for his support and guidance in this project.

[2] Neal Gabler, *Life, the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) 53-54.

[3] Keith F. Davis, *An American Century of Photography: From Dry-Plate to Digital* (Kansas City: The Hallmark Photographic Collection, 1995) 14.

[4] Daniel. J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1987) 197-98.

[5] William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 39-71.

[6] Gabler 54.

[7] Miriam Horn, "Shifting Lines of Privacy," *US News & World Report* 26 October 1998: 57-58.

[8] 1968 witnessed a serious blow to privacy when a landmark case, *Katz v. United States*, ruled that the protected zone of Fourth Amendment privacy was defined by the individual's "actual, subjective expectation of privacy" and by the extent to which that expectation was "one that society was prepared to recognize as 'reasonable.'"

[9] For example, a 1965 Supreme Court ruling in *Griswold v. Connecticut* struck down the statutes that criminalized contraceptives and ended the state regulation of marital sex. *Roe v. Wade* of 1973 recognized a woman's right to

privacy concerning her body. The *Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act* of 1968 provided regulation for the interception of electronic, wire, and oral communications.

[10] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978) 4.

[11] Conservative values—rooted in Puritanism—had compelled individuals to keep an eye on each other. Going back to Colonial New England, any demand for privacy was experienced as a threat to the spirit of community. Since the sin of one jeopardized the salvation of all, watchfulness, mutual surveillance, and attention to others were encouraged. See David H. Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England* (Charlottsville: UP of Virginia, 1972).

[12] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper Touchbooks, 1966) 55.

[13] Rieff 239-43. The language of therapy still prevails: When a *Survivor* participant explains how she decided to be a part of the show, one can read between the lines the language of therapy: "I had been through a lot in the past two years. Following this fantasy, doing this crazy thing was a way to try to heal myself. It was a survival instinct." A participant of MTV's *The Real World* confirms: "I felt suffocated and trapped in the life I was in. I certainly did a lot of growing up." Quoted in James Poniewozik, "We Like to Watch," *Time* 26 June 2000: 60.

[14] Jon Dovey, *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television* (Sterling: Pluto Press, 2000) 58.

[15] Wolfgang Saxon, "Allen Funt, Creator of 'Candid Camera' is Dead at 84," *The New York Times* 7 September 1999: B 9.

[16] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1973) 17.

[17] Allen Funt and Philip Reed, *Candidly, Allen Funt: A Million Smiles Later* (New York: Barricade Books, 1994) 11.

[18] Funt and Reed 21. Echoing Funt's venture to test responses, Mark Burnett, the executive producer of the CBS series *Survivor*, insists that the show is "a glimpse of raw human reality," which sets out to "see who would mate, who would fight." Quoted in Marshall Sella, "The Electronic Fishbowl," *The New York Times Magazine* 21 May 2000: 53. Producers of like shows argue that their shows are human experiments. The producer of the original Dutch *Big Brother* claims that "less educated people see the soap opera [in the show] [. . .] people with more education see the social experiment, which is interesting even if nothing happens." Quoted in Sella 102. Testing the outer limits of what people can do in front of cameras, UPN's *Blind Date*, for example, follows young couples through their awkward blind date, whereas ABC's *Making the Band* and WB11's *Pop Stars* tag along with a group of young men and women competing and training to be part of a boy and a girl band, respectively.

[19] "CBS-TV sees year ahead patterns emerging," *Variety* 6 September 1961: 21.

[20] I use "vérité voyeurism" to imply that reality TV—as cinéma vérité—attempts to show real people in unrehearsed situations, in which they are supposedly just themselves forgetting the presence of the camera. In this sense, vérité voyeurism refers to reality TV's claim to truth through its so-called peepshow quality.

[21] There are different types of reality-based shows, such as vérité (*The Real World*), tell-all (*Jerry Springer*), dramatization (*Cops*) and game show (*Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire*). I believe *Big Brother* and *Survivor* are shows where these four types come together. Because I mostly focus on social and cultural forces in this paper, I treat all four types under the blanket name reality TV. Further discussions and textual analyses are certainly worthwhile, but at this time have to await another study.

[22] Poniewozik, 56-62.

[23] Dovey 26.

[24] Dovey 26.

[25] Dovey 5-26.

[26] Mark Crispin Miller, "Big Brother is You, Watching," *Georgia Review* 38:4 (1984): 719.

[27] Poniewozik 62.

[28] Miller 718.

[29] Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963) 3.

[30] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1987) 90.

[31] Nick Couldry, *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 28.