

# Talk shows



If social order is not a given, if it is not encoded in our DNA, then to some extent we are always in the process of producing “ virtual realities,” some more functional than others. Habits, routines, and institutions are the patterns that create the “ world taken for granted. ” Knowledge of how to behave is contained in cultural scripts that are themselves products of human interaction and communication about the nature of “ reality. ” Shame, guilt, embarrassment are controlling feelings that arise from “ speaking the unspeakable” and from violating cultural taboos.

Society is a result of its boundaries, of what it will and won't allow. As we watch, listen, and are entertained, TV talk shows are rewriting our cultural scripts, altering our perceptions, our social relationships, and our relationships to the natural world. TV talk shows offer us a world of blurred boundaries. Cultural distinctions between public and private, credible and incredible witnesses, truth and falseness, good and evil, sickness and irresponsibility, normal and abnormal, therapy and exploitation, intimate and stranger, fragmentation and community are manipulated and erased for our distraction and entertainment.

A community in real time and place exhibits longevity, an interdependence based on common interests, daily concerns, mutual obligations, norms, kinship, friendship, loyalty, and local knowledge, and real physical structures, not just shared information. If your neighbor's house is on fire, you are motivated to help put it out, or at least interested in having it put out, because you care about your neighbor and the fire is a threat to your own house. Television talk shows create an ersatz community, without any of the

social and personal responsibilities that are attached to real life. Therapy as entertainment is the appeal of these shows.

The so-called hosts rely on the cynical use of the therapeutic model for psychological sound bites. The need to educate and inform the audience is the voiced rationale for getting the so-called guests to give ever more titillating details of their misdeeds, or of the misdeeds done to them by family or friends (often not on the show). The underlying assumption — that most social pathology is the result of a medical problem beyond the control of the so-called “victim” — encourages, at least indirectly, people to come on to these shows confessing outrageous stories of anti-social behavior to millions of strangers.

Rather than being mortified, ashamed, or trying to hide their stigma, “guests” willingly and eagerly discuss their child molesting, sexual quirks, and criminal records in an effort to seek “understanding” for their particular disease. Yet these people remain caricatures, plucked out of the context of their real lives, unimportant except for their entertaining problem. (In real life someone might question the benefits of publicly confessing to people who really don’t care about you or don’t have the expertise to give advice. Exploitation, voyeurism, peeping Toms, freak shows all come to mind. )

The central distortion that these shows propound is that they give useful therapy to guests and useful advice to the audience. And that they are not primarily designed to extract the most riveting and most entertaining emotional displays from participants. This leads to such self-serving and silly speeches by hosts as: “I ask this question not to pry in your business but to

educate parents in our audience” (Oprah, trying to get graphic details from a female guest who claims to have been sodomized by her father) and “ Do I understand, Lisa, that intercourse began with your dad at age 12, and oral sex between 5 and 12?

Do I understand that you were beaten before and after the sexual encounters? (Phil, reading from prepared notes, to a crying teenager). The audience at various points in the hour has a chance to get on television too. Their questions are often rude by conventional standards and reinforce the host’s requests for more potentially entertaining details. Their advice ranges from merely simplistic, under the circumstances, to misleading and erroneous.

For example, in a recent Sally Jessy Raphael Show entitled “ When Your Best Friend Is Sleeping With Your Father,” the daughters on stage were advised to “ just love them both and accept the situation. ” The most problematic part of this is the generally nonjudgmental tenor of the dialogue. Society’s conventions are flouted with impunity, and the hidden message is that the way to get on television is to be as outrageous and antisocial as possible. The 20 million home viewers have no direct contact, physically, with the social situation in the studio.

Home viewers can be listening to people recounting concentration camp horrors while popping a frozen dinner into the microwave. The ordinary, everyday world of the home audience is made bizarre by the contrasting tales of horror and woe they are only half listening to. The viewer has two basic options: He or she can, like the hero of Nathanael West’s tragic Miss

Lonelyhearts, go crazy listening to these stories of hideous pain and pathology. Or he or she must become inured, apathetic, or amused, or, to use the darkly delicious German word *schadenfreude*, he or she may get a deep sense of glee at another's misfortunes.

People come into view, talk, cry, disappear, and in between we watch the commercials for consumer products that promise to improve our lives. Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* revolves around the seemingly out-of-place confessions by a husband and wife of their most private life together to two guests in their home who are virtual strangers. Traditional expectations of polite formalities and barriers are constantly breached within the action of the play. The husband, at one point says, "Aww, that was nice, I think we've been having a, a real good evening, all things considered.

We've sat around, and got to know each other, and had fun and games.. ." *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* , however disconcerting to the audience, is just a play with actors. Television talk shows are arenas for real people. Their manipulation by " hosts," who alternate between mocking, a patronizing cynicism (" I want to be as smart as you someday" — Phil), and a carefully constructed verisimilitude of caring (" Thank you for sharing that with us" — Oprah) must have repercussions for the " guests" after the show is over.

These people may really be seeking help or understanding. Appropriate reactions seem virtually impossible under the circumstances. We the viewing audience have entertained ourselves at the disasters of real lives. This is one of the more shameless aspects of the talk show spectacle. As passive

witnesses, we consume others' misfortunes without feeling any responsibility to do anything to intervene.