Chapter 20

The Tangible Lure of the Technoself in the Age of Reality Television

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ABSTRACT

This chapter studies the notion of technoself in a contemporary media phenomenon, reality television. How can we explain the attraction of the globalized formats of a genre without plot, actors, or director? Our most private human territory, the self, becomes a spectacle through the technological enhancement of its minute bodily expressions. The approach combines Peirce's semiotic theory of meaning as the upshot of the interplay of different kinds of signs with Goffman's order of interaction, the micro-social realm of face-to-face encounters. A vast audience is lured into observing the constant production of nonverbal language, which exposes the self through its visible manifestation in concrete, shifting identities. The true protagonists of the genre are the signs closest to the body: indexical signs create an almost tangible lure, the index appeal of reality television. They furnish access to what used to be the most private human realm, which has now become the technoself.

INTRODUCTION

Near the end of a film about a fictional reality show that came out a year before the Dutch launching of *Big Brother*, a revealing dialogue takes place between the producer and the protagonist of the TV program called *The Truman Show*, in the film of the same name (Weir, 1998), as the latter is about to quit and thereby end with the longest running show on earth:

Truman: *[to an unseen Christof] Who are you?*
Christof: *[voice-over] I am The Creator of a television show that gives hope and joy and inspiration to millions.*
Truman: *Then who am I?*
Christof: *You're the star.*
Truman: *Was nothing real?*
Christof: *You were real. That's what made you so good to watch.*

In a last desperate attempt, the omnipotent producer played by Ed Harris cajoles the unwitting protagonist of his eerie RTV show to stay. Had Truman accepted, he would have fallen prey to the same double bind demand as the rest of the people who accept to participate in the reality genre: '*Be yourself!*' It is undoubtedly true that the mediated existence of Truman was "so good to watch," *because* he was unaware of being part of a TV show that overlapped with his entire life.

The Truman Show may be construed as an insightful narrative attempt to come to terms with a new-fangled media phenomenon: the spontaneous *and* staged performance of ordinary people jeopardized by the self-consciousness that haunts such a paradoxical endeavor. This chapter aims to contribute to the understanding of the socio-cultural trend that is manifest in the avid consumption of reality-based programming which millions of people find "so good to watch". This televisual phenomenon has grabbed the social imagination in the first decade of the 21st century and is taking over the globalized media

environment. In a remarkable convergence, TV programs and factuality films produce a wide range of non-fictional representations of reality performed by nonprofessional, ordinary people engaged in everyday activities. The popularity of reality shows, docudramas and documentaries has grown exponentially over the last decade. Coincidently, there is widespread scholarly suspicion of any claim to the real of non-fictional media, as the title of a book that discusses at length the phenomenon evinces: *Staging the Real* (Kilborne, 2003).

What can the genre of Reality Television (henceforth *RTV*) tell us about human identity in this age of intense and ubiquitous mediation (Livingstone, 2009, p. 7)? This query brings together the contemporary technology of televisual representation and the most intimate moments in the lives of ordinary people. To answer this question, I rely on a socio-semiotic framework that combines Peirce's semiotic theory of the working of different kinds of signs, and Goffman's study of the self in the order of interaction. For Peirce (*CP* 5.314),[1] anything that exists, including the human self, also represents something else to somebody, it is a sign or representation:

…the word or sign which man uses is the man himself. For, as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an external sign, proves that man is an external sign.

For Goffman (1959), that most cherished possession that we call our own is not even something we own: "The self does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action" (p. 252). He analyses the tension that arises in face-to-face relations, as we adopt roles to become legitimate and realize that it is impossible to do so flawlessly. This is the force of the "countervailing self, the self that resists the (social) definitions" (Smith, 2006, p. 103). Regardless of how well

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