

Celebrity and the Para-Confession

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In this paper I situate the dynamics of the Talk show in the historical context of the development of the religious ritual of confession and its vernacular development in the mass media.

In Foucault’s genealogical account, the 19th century development of psychiatry fused the religious institution of the confession with a scientific discourse in order to create a confession regulated theory of human sexuality. Foucault identifies a number of ways in which this fusion was effected. Through development of new methods and techniques that postulate sexuality as the primary cause human behaviour. Foucault’s work has cited in support of the pervasiveness of a therapeutic culture on Television. I argue instead that is necessary to recognize that there are demotic and celebrity forms of confession. The Celebrity talk show, unlike its more demotic variants, represents a controlled process of revelation which is designed to display the celebrity’s persona from a position of authority in relation to the host (as an professional equal) and the audience (live and mediated) as an admiring mass.

The paper concludes with a brief analysis of the Tom Cruise- Oprah Winfrey May 2005 interview as an example of the pragmatics of the celebrity para-confession.

Celebrity and the Para-Confession

As some writers have argued, contemporary television culture is obsessed with confession as a source of dramatic production values. (White 1992). The pressure to confess, or, at least, engage in self-disclosure, is a centrepiece of talk Shows. Reality Television shows, irrespective of theme or setting, constructed around “peak” confessional experiences in which stressed out contestants own up to what they “really” feel. The staged confrontation between pretence and “authenticity” is reported to be the key attraction of such shows for many viewers which perform a hybrid logic of revelation situated somewhere between the public confession and the intimate scenarios of psycho-therapy. Moreover if we follow the example of Mimi White and include the Home Shopping Network as another variant of self-disclosure (in this case of consumer preferences rather than sins, though the latter may be potentially sinful) then it appears that we are dealing with a veritable cultural constant that transcends the vagaries of medium and form. The tendency to indulge in portmanteau formulations, such as White’s Therapy/Confession/Television, argues for the pervasiveness of the phenomenon but arguably at the expense of a finer set of distinctions.

Michel Foucault is routinely cited in support of the view that we live in a confessing culture and that contemporary “man” is a confessing animal. Yet Foucault’s account of the confessional process is more nuanced than those who source him for studying television. For a start, his true object is not the spread of confession, but rather of confession as one of the modes of governmentality, alongside medicine, psychiatry and eugenics. Certainly, confession is one of the methods through which individual subjects are formed, normalised and a closely regulated direction imposed on desire. But Foucault makes an historical distinction between different regimes of confession (his term is avowal). In one, pre-modern, regime – and here the term confession evokes some of the sense of a profession of belief – the individual attests to his or her membership of a collective which is perceived as the taproot of identity. In the other, the regime emerging during the modern period, the confessional process is restructured to intensively examine and discipline the interior urgings and experiences of the individual. The latter process is connected to sexual essentialism – that the self is defined at core by its history of sexual proclivities and practices. (Foucault 1979, pp.61-62). Moreover, running parallel to the processes identified by Foucault, is a shift in the predominance of differing modes of sensibility with sincerity being steadily replaced by authenticity as a public performance of selfhood. (Sennett 1979)

If Peter Brooks observes, the requirement of Confession imposed by Catholic Church in 13th Century plays a key role in the formation of the modern sense of selfhood with the individual responsible for his or her actions and the acts of speech that lay them bare, the mode of what is to be disclosed have differed over time as well the norms of truthfulness that are deployed. (Brooks 2000, p.5). Differences have been observed in the confessional process. Pastoral manuals of the Middle Ages, for example, link absolution with the minute and exact description of physical acts that the modern sensibility would find prurient. Conversely, the confessional practices of the modern period seem invasively centred less on the acts than on the disclosure of the thoughts and urgings that underlay it. For Foucault, of course, this shift ushers in new practices of normalisation and control in which an older ethic of self-cultivation or care of the self is discursively erased.

In sum, confession is an historically complex process and it may be necessary to recognise tropes of confession rather than blanket notions of “ therapeutic culture”. From a strictly religious point of view, a confessional process contains the following elements:

- to be forgiven sinners have to feel sorrow at having lapsed.
- they must consistently make some explicit confession of their sins and sinfulness.

they have assumed or had imposed on them some kind of penitential exercises. they have participated in some ecclesiastical ritual performed with the aid of priests who pronounce the penitents absolved from sin or reconciled with the communion of believers. (Tentler 1997, p.3)

Regarding Television “confessional” practices, they cannot be said, even on a cursory glance, to represent a common style of penance. Consider the differences in the penitent styles of say Oprah and Jerry Springer. At the same time, given the deep historical influence of the Catholic church, some differences in the perception and representation of the moral tissue of the self are just as likely to be active today as historical memories or precipitates that furnish a stock of folk understandings upon which Television representations of the confessional process draw. The selective mobilisation of such memories and clichés of abasement, revelation and, Jerry Springer again, defiant transgression produce a variety of confessional modes. (Gamson 1998). Moreover as a matter of methodological principle, one would expect that there are not only different modes and expectations surrounding the act of self-disclosure but also important differences in the way different contestants are managed through the process of self-disclosure according to their social position and status. There is a clear status hierarchy and power dimension operating behind the rituals of talk and self-disclosure. Ordinary people only get to speak on television by being categorised by prevailing stereotypes of the ordinary e.g. trailer park trash, misfit etc. Celebrities are assumed to be individuals marked out by their success in the media. It is a cliché of media discourse that ordinary people in order to appear as significant agents have to do extraordinary or outlandish. (Couldry, pp. 47-48) Having said that, a workable hypothesis is that celebrities today, in search of a common connection, despite amassing of extremes of wealth, are increasingly constructing ordinary behaviour (having children, falling in and out of love, recovering from addictive behaviour) as extra-ordinary. (King 2003)

Modes of Confession

In order to situate contemporary television rituals of disclosure, it is useful to consider, albeit schematically, the genealogy of confession. As it has evolved, confession has been differentiated around a number of modes:

Canonical confession – pre-Lateran IV to the representatives of the church and the community. Involving the induction of the confessing sinner into the social status of a penitent (a third class of Christians alongside the catechumens and faithful) – visibly manifested in wearing of sack-cloth and ashes, shaven heads (tonsure) etc. the undertaking of arduous penitential and publicly staged humiliations. The giving of absolution, or laying on of hands, usually occurring at the point death. In this mode of *exomologesis*, the primary function of the confession is the exercise of discipline and social control over the individual and the cure of the guilt conscience as a matter of salvation. (Tentler, p.13).

Private Auricular Confession

Following Lateran IV Council in 1215, the Church decreed that all members of the faith must confess at least once a year, thus removing the uncertainties and, possibly, the urge to fabricate contrition *in extremis*. The, at least, yearly confession was a private process before a priest or, in other words, an organisationally designated confessor, empowered to grant absolution. But such a shift from public to private also introduced the possibility of a more direct engagement with God since the priest was merely the enactor of the forgiveness that God had granted to the truly contrite. (Brooks, p. 92, Tentler, pp. 22-23, Bossy, pp. 21-38)

Pietistic confession – a private dialogue directly to an omnipresent God without benefit of the priest as interlocutor and governed by a reflexive process of self-examination, circulating

between a recording of inner thoughts and feelings (often in the form of diary), and the use of the Holy text as a spiritual guide. (Mucke, p. 13- 15)

Martin Luther, the major proponent of pietism, held that true penance should last for a life time, not just the space of a confession. Moreover, the human condition is inherently sinful so a complete confession is neither necessary but, more importantly, possible. True contrition is manifested in a changed heart, spirit and disposition and life conduct that ensures as far as possible that one sins no more.(Tentler p352 -353)

Luther was one of the first individuals in the West to conceive of the individual in a direct relationship with God with any necessary interposition from earthly (priestly) institutions. This entailed restricting notions of human freedom and authenticity to purely inner experiences and their expression, outside the roles and institutions of society. This conception, most deeply rooted in German pietism, later transpired into a secular Romanticism, a movement that downgraded sincerity – the matching of the self to social conventions- in favour of authenticity – the assertion of the self against the perceived constraints of social conventions. The romantic conception of the self that emerged – as a submerged “luminosity” revealed in peak experiences – was connected to the rise of the confessional autobiography as a literary genre. This genre was codified by Rousseau in his *Confessions* where the demand for complete transparency – the abolition of all veils between the auto-biographer and reader is coupled with the flight from society as recurrent motif. (Brooks, p.160.) This grammar of the romantic self is quite at odds with the performative model of the self, as developed by Goffman, as stream of situationally-determined performances in which pretences are deployed so to manage the on-going contingencies of role play. (Brown, p.34)

Vernacular Confessions

Alongside the religious traditions of confession, and in part set against them, are the age old vernacular processes of gossip which have been selectively appropriated by the development of the mass media. In particular, confessional discourse as a public media commodity would seem to date from the early twentieth century in the US through Bennar Mcfadden’s publication, *True Story Magazine*. Read primarily by working class women and ostensibly written by them in a first person confessional mode, *True Story Magazine* established as a media variant of confession (getting it off your chest) as therapeutic process without a therapist/ confessor or a concretely defined confessant. Such stories could operate in a didactic mode staging the media equivalent of a public shaming as a kind of penance or alternatively allow for the exemplar setting exploration of common dilemmas – infidelity, unplanned pregnancy, abortion, weight problems etc- by a process which might be better termed testimony. There are obvious templates worked out in True Story Magazine that become the specialisation of contemporary talk Shows from Oprah or Dr Phil through to Jerry Springer. (Mandziuk 2001)

Celebrity Confessions

The Celebrity confession is essentially an extension of the interview. The interview is a recent invention – for example, the Oxford English Dictionary has no recorded usage of the transitive verb to interview before 1869. The term interview derives from the French “s’entrevoir” meant a face to face meeting with a person for a private conversation, an event of mutual seeing. In such a dialogical setting, in a way that is reminiscence of Habermas’ conception of the Ideal Speech Situation, the participants are nominally equal regardless of the external differences in status and power and they are operating in private. The standardisation of the journalistic interview disrupts this exchange by introducing a third syntactical position: the reader or the audience to whom the interview is communicated. It makes public what once was private and thereby transforms the relationship between the

direct participants by rendering what is occurring as overseen. In time, the term interview operates to blur the distinction between the physical event and its retrospective transcription and, it is necessary to add, its prospective scripting. In Foucauldian terms, the interview is an exercise of disciplinary power which works by withholding the privilege of social visibility or conversely by imposing it, all the while striving to efface, its own discursive procedures.

Moreover, if celebrity interviews are conceptualised as a hermeneutic practice by which the journalist and the reader/audience might discover the “nature” of a famous individual this was always open to contestation by the person being interviewed or by the interviewer seeking to use the interview to advertise his or her opinions or judgements on the interviewee. The rise of indirect speech methods of reportage in celebrity journalism is but an expression of the journalist’s control over the interview process – occasioned, admittedly, by the fact that the journalist and celebrity may not have a significant (or indeed any) face to face encounter.

Types of Television Talk Shows

Televised interviews or talk shows are (potentially if not essentially) a struggle around who controls the definition of the situation – the interviewer and interviewee – carried out in front of an actually and remotely present audience of on-lookers. Depending on the social class or ethnic status of the subjects to be interviewed, the process of control over the on-going strip of question and answer is more or less centred.

Daytime talk shows with a more demotic framing and audience have been observed to be – “more in line with the Protestant activity of testimony or witnessing before the group, or even the more mysterious activity, speaking in tongues.’ (Masciarotte, pp. 84-85, 88, 91) In such shows, the framing of the spectacle of talk is not focussed on exposing or revealing the deep interiority of the individual, his or her unique intimate experience or intimate life so much as a collective mode of being. Rather the panellists, the on-show audience, the host and guests talk in order to coalesce around a common story or narrative of being. Such a coalition being formed as much by affirmation as the use of forms of verbal (and in some cases, actual physical) sanction.

The variability on daytime shows depends more on the operative concept of appropriate behaviour than on their organisation which entails elements of the “bitch session” cell group, committed to consciousness expansion. Hence the dramatic value given to respect for personal testimony, the display of participant opinions around a key topic, frank cross examination and strong moral criticism, the need for “starting to stop” negative practices and bad behaviours and the recognition of self-complicity in the enactment or endurance of bad or harmful behaviour. These framings offer a virtual summation of the format of the Daytime Show from the more urbane – Oprah, Dr Phil, Vanessa – through to the more carnivalesque – Geraldo, Morton Downy, Jerry Springer – that play on the edge of an epic dislocation in categories and knowledge and publicly appropriate behaviour.

Celebrity shows – Letterman, Parkinson, Tonight with Jay Leno and the celebrity interview specials of Oprah – present a smoother, less striated, spectacle.

In such upscale events the well known strategies for the felicitous management of intimacy at a distance are in play. Features such as the managing of the relationship between front and back stage, the scripting in advance of questions, the surrogate role of the studio audience in tutoring home audience reactions and the infolding, circulating logic of visual and oral modes of address – ensure that the television celebrity interview is largely a process of persona affirmation or, in the case of Hugh Grant style misdemeanours, of redemption. (Thompson 1995) For the audience, in studio or at home, and, indeed, the interviewer – even Oprah has problems as we shall see – the fantasy of power over the celebrity rarely accomplished because the celebrity is less an object of surveillance than a deflective spectacle. The well recognised phenomenon observed at the very origins of the celebrity

interview is compounded by the regimes of visualisation found on television: the more knowable or ordinary the celebrity became as a datum of experience (through detailing his or her home, tastes etc.) the more mysterious his creativity activities seemed as a possible experience. (Salmon, loc. cit)

In Daytime, demotic, talk shows, the accent is very much on the moral economy of behaviour and the meting out of approval for good contestants and the mortification of the bad. One of the key motives for risking the loss of face implicit in such a setting is to seek vindication – though other motives such as fleeting fame, self-promotion have been identified. (Priest 1995)

In Celebrity talk shows, by contrast, the process of solicitation of intimate facts or confession, is not about revelation so much as the control of revelation, a variously managed and fabricated performance that centres on self (or product) promotion and image repair and damage control. A fabricated and concerted performance or a pseudo-event the celebrity interview is a para-social variant of the confessional process or, for short, a para-confession.

Such a confessional process is designed to be a demonstration of competence, about survival, the rebuilding of a career or a comeback. The putative private life of the celebrity serves as source of affirmation of commonality – birth, marriages, separations and death experiences type locutions – or as a source of emotional and relational challenges to the pursuit of a professional career which the audience may have encountered in the smaller compass of their lives. It is not the redemption of the private self of the celebrity that is at issue in such a setting but the redemption of a prestigious and marketable self image – a persona.

To sum all this up, I would argue that both celebrity and demotic talk shows selectively draw upon the confessional tradition and that the cultural heritage of confessional practices in the West have subtend a discursive space in which different notions of the location of the self and different notions of what is to be affirmed or revealed in a confessional setting operate. From the point of view of what the individual does in making some sort of confession, this can be seen as positioning his or herself in a discursive space. Such a space, represented schematically, in Table One below, indicates the available trajectories for constructing a self-image that is at some level held to be real. The reality of the self is actually a matter of choosing a moral ground through which private experience is anchored within some larger frame of reference. Such a frame of reference, as a romantic or performative positioning of the self calls upon a collective or individualist framework of identity and relates these in turn to the touchstone values of sincerity or authenticity. Reduced to pragmatics, the issue for the individual entering the confessional realm of the media is to secure the best impression of the self according to the value space in which he or she is located.

Table 1.	Individual	Collective	Touchstone Value
Romantic	The Celebrity self as a unique revelation of private experience.	The self as the expression of universal passions and feelings.	Authenticity
Performative	The Star as a professional producer of a range of fictional characters	The Vernacular self as a ‘natural’ expression as a social type or moral character.	Sincerity

Breaking the Frame



In conclusion I want to focus briefly on Tom Cruise's appearance on Oprah in May 2005. His behaviour on this show occasioned a lot of adverse comment which was circulated on the Internet and, if not precipitated, at least offered a post-hoc rationalisation of the decision by Paramount not to renew his production deal. (Waxman 2005) Cruise bounced back economically by assuming the helm of United Artists, but the aura of weirdness, already associated with his involvement with The Church of Scientology, has been further solidified. Looking at the interview itself, a few general points can be made. As a celebrity interview this is an ugly or maladroit performance that disturbs the image of control associated with:

- Being an actor, an emotional technician. Exhibits a loss of contact with the values of control, articulacy and performance skills.
- Being a star as an assured and centred persona known to value control.
- Breaks with existing stereotypes about men controlling the expression of emotions to the extent that he is literally overwhelmed – Oprah – “he’s gone”. Love’s Fool.
- Breaks with the normalised pragmatics of an Oprah interview – invading Oprah’s space and visibly usurping the interview process as a an orderly conversation – Cruise mostly says nothing and substitutes Springer like unruly behaviour as a form of intense emotional expression.
- Breaks with back stage/front rules by going backstage to bring Katie Holmes on stage.
- Interferes with central focus on a two-way dialogue – in fact stops dialogue for most of the interview.
- Draws attention away from the pragmatic purpose of the interview to promote the upcoming release of Spielberg’s *War of the Worlds* and centres on the revelation of the inner passions of the self.
- Reveals an inner self that a professional actor is supposed to be able to control and those shows himself to be mastered by emotions so powerful that can be only inarticulately signalled through body language rather than discursively shared.
- Inverts the “natural” relationship of the subordination of women to men. He is an older man in his forties, a superstar with considerable institutional prestige and power in

Hollywood and she is a starlet. He is overpowered by a 27 year old “virgin”.
Conversely, as an aging star, Cruise is made younger by winning a virgin bride.

- While rendering Katie Holmes as the true subject of the interview, Cruise’s emotional reactions persist in to underscore that there is a discursive space of cynosure in which he should be fully present and is yet verbally “absent”.

Given these broad observations of the interview itself, it is useful to note some factors of context. These are more a matter of rumour and innuendo than of established fact but factuality is not really an issue. Such things are “said” about Cruise and retain an enunciative force even if only in need of denial. Moreover, given the context of an interview that is supposed to reveal the “private life” of the star such factors of attribution are the very substance that a confessional process might hope to reveal. It is arguable that such background factors are the real motives behind Cruise’s performance. These then are the factors that the Cruise’s performance, probably unconsciously, is designed to neutralise or deny:

- Persistent rumours, aggressively litigated against, that Cruise is gay or bi-sexual. The declaration of love for Kathy is therefore an affirmation of an active and kinetic heterosexuality. Subsequent to the interview, but before the marriage which was declared to be a self-saving virgin bride, Holmes’ pregnancy cancelled out rumours of impotence and sterility that had surrounded his previous marriages.
- The denial of the calculative, unfeeling robot image that is strongly linked to popular conceptions of Scientology as mind control. Oprah, in fact during the interview, does suggest that Cruise is calculatedly engaged in body language behaviour, such as falling to his knees, to gain time for formulating answers to her questions about his being in love. If so his delaying tactics pass into the realm of the carnivalesque and become marked features in their own right that recall a more demotic talk show setting.
- His behaviour works against his standing as a skilled performer in control of his emotions in the service of character – in this situation, of course, the character to be reproduced is the Tom Cruise persona of a hard-working actor committed to “deep” acting in character. It is doubtful that this professional self-image would attract much consent – Cruise’s acting style is generally thought to be exterior and behaviouristic. Ironically what is seen on the Oprah interview may also work against Scientology as a behavioural technique. If Cruise is a product of the higher Theta levels of training he is remarkably out of control. Perhaps, then, one would be entitled to conclude that Scientology as a technology for clearing emotional blocs is about producing a low self-monitoring individual that is inflexibly focussed on the self rather than on the context or the experiences of others. Given that Synder in his original paper on self-monitoring found that actors are likely to be high self-monitors – as a requirement of profession – doubts surface about Cruise’s competence as a professional. (Synder)

Conclusion

As Table One indicates the options for representing the self are already keyed into a matrix of relationships that define what the core reality is – the individual or the collective – what the moral basis of behaviour might be – as a romantic expression of the self or as the performance of one’s social position and role. The key values of sincerity and authenticity are dramatised by the actual vector representations of the self take through the matrix and to what degree the known facts (and they are to some extent fabricated) about the actual life course of the individual is taken into account. In demotic talk shows, contestants have little say over how they are placed – as types rather than individuals – and lack the appropriate

skills (or for that matter the privilege of isolation from the criticism of others) to control what is revealed about them. The performance of a ‘positive’ self image is therefore largely determined by others. In Celebrity talk shows, the conditions for a positive performance are present and offer two routes of reference as an individual: the star as a professional performer and the celebrity as a unique individual. There are always the possibility of contingent threats from the reference realm of the collective and from collective scepticism about the glamour and grandeur of the celebrity or his or her professional competence.

Taking Cruise as my example, his normal mode of operation is to position himself as a professional actor, known for working hard and giving his “all” to various roles. His actual ability as an actor is subject to question but such questions are easier to address than matters of personal life. Consequently, Cruise is known as a control freak who will only talk about matters related to his activities as an actor/producer. For a number of reasons – some of which I have touched upon above, this defensive sequestration is abandoned by the time of the Oprah interview. One may speculate on why this is so (as did many in on-line chat rooms) but the fact remains whether driven by drugs, infatuation, declining credibility as an ageing star, alien invasion, lack of a firm guiding hand following the replacement of his public relations manager by a more compliant relative or any other of a range of more or less plausible theories, that Cruise choose to regroup his persona. In doing this his options are limited: as the kind of star he is, he lacks plausibility as a character actor. Given his public declarations as a Scientologist he can scarcely claim commonality with the general public – Scientology is an elite discourse that, as Brook Shields discovered, condemns remedies to widely experienced problems as weaknesses. As star, Cruise cannot claim that he is just an “average Joe” even though this is often a type he sometimes portrays as in *War of the Worlds*. This is simply too déclassé an option. The only available quadrant available to him is to be a figure of the universal, to reach for the mantle of the passionate young lover. It is not that he is too old to be Romeo, though certainly some have waspishly said that, but rather that as Tom Cruise he will bring to this new role an extraordinary energy level and verve so what emerges is hyper-real level of concretization. At the same time, he is still committed to the policy of not talking about his private life – hence the giving up on words and hence the tortuous demands on gross bodily behaviour as a signifier. Whereof he would speak, he must be silent.

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