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Reality TV or Voyeur TV: Television Shows Instigating Voyeurism

In contemporary entertainment industry, the increasing popularity of reality television cites voyeurism as a vital reason for its accomplishment among viewers. Numerous studies suggest that television spectators themselves recognize reality programs to be both “exhibitionistic and voyeuristic” (Hill 2005: 27), and admit that they are drawn to this voyeuristic attitude of reality programs. Similarly, studies centering on the psychological appeal of reality television provide preliminary empirical facts regarding the positive connection between the tendency to use media for voyeuristic purposes and the consumption of reality programs. Therefore, the reality shows such as ‘soap operas’, daytime television, talk shows, real life documentaries and ‘docudramas’ are spreading voyeurism on a global scale. Also programs like *Big Daddy*, *Big Brother* and *Big Boss* are revealing personal activities of the characters through hidden cameras. They are considered as soft-core pornography on mainstream television and satellite channels.

In psycho-biological words voyeurism (from French, *voir*, to look at) is a paraphilia of “the solicitational/allurative type in which erotic arousal and facilitation or attainment of orgasm are responsive to, (and dependent upon) the risk of being discovered while covertly or illicitly watching a stranger disrobing or engaging in sexual activity” (Pranzarone). It is the reciprocal paraphilic¹ condition of exhibitionism. A voyeur is also known as a peeping Tom. The risk of exposure while illicitly watching or overhearing nudity or sexual activity particularly contributes to the stimulation of the paraphilic voyeur. If we cross out the word “sexual”, then it reads: one who seeks stimulation by visual

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means. This latest depiction seems proper for the current world. Some psychiatrists apply another word to tag our appeal to visual media which is scopophilia. Scopophilia essentially means to derive pleasure from looking. Freud associated scopophilia with objectifying others with a controlling and curious gaze.

In spite of growing concentration on non-pathological voyeurism, there are few researches that demonstrate its “psychological dimensions” (Metz 1982: 9). The raise of voyeurism as an ordinary appearance of guilty pleasure points to several main dimensions of a typical individual’s voyeuristic inclination. First, in contrast to the secret temperament of pathological voyeurism, normal voyeurism is fulfilled through more satisfactory and consensual forms such as films, gossip news and/or webcams. Second, as evidenced by the high number of government and private sector employees browsing personal information just for sport—Calvert labels this data voyeurism—the normal voyeur is “opportunistic”, and the act of looking or listening can be considered “an end in itself” (2000: 22). Third, not all forms of observation will be satisfactory: the appeal of voyeurism is the pleasure derived from learning about what is typically forbidden or private.

While observing these voyeuristic shows, a central tenet of the uses and gratifications perspective is that viewers actively engage in content selection in order to fulfill certain needs. If so, to the extent that non-pathological voyeurism is defined as an opportunistic tendency to derive pleasure from learning about others’ private details, the question is whether, and to what extent reality programs can accommodate this form of voyeurism.

Part of the answer to this query comes from the trade-marking of reality programming as privacy insidious “voyeur television” (Calvert 2000: 22). Extant research proposes that genre labels may provide significant signals for viewers, persuading their “preferences for specific television programs” (Hill 2005: 28). Measured from this viewpoint, reality programs assure (and partly convey) the “thrill of seeing something intimate...and doing so remotely and without accountability” (Hill 2005: 28). Deery’s remark about remoteness of the gaze emphasizes another factor of the voyeuristic appeal of reality programs: the panoptic manner of observation within which there is an

informational asymmetry between the audience member and the program partaker, who cannot gaze back at the viewer. This panoptic mode and the seeming distance between the viewer and the target allow the viewer to benefit from the private and the stolen.

Long before reality television, from 1900s, current society observed the beginning of the cinematic gaze through which viewers enjoy this panoptic mode of staring. Therefore, reality programs differ from movies and other forms of content due to the atmosphere of realism and spontaneity they invoke. Regardless of producer interferences and viewers' consciousness that participants often operate for the camera, the voyeuristic demand of reality programs differs from other genres because "viewer detection skills are exercised not on...celebrities...but on the 'real' people 'just like the viewers' " (Metz 1982: 22).

The voyeuristic notion of gazing upon persons who come from the audiences' ranks is also intimately linked to the reciprocity of the voyeuristic requirements of television viewers and the exhibitionism of the program participants. Therefore, in an era of widespread surveillance, webcams, blogs and reality television allow individuals to participate in "empowering exhibitionism" (Sardar 2000: 11) to regain control over the broadcasting of information about themselves. The reciprocity of the association between the voyeur and the exhibitionist is not only because the exhibitionist wants viewers to flourish in reclaiming control over the information, but is also for the verity that the non-pathological voyeurs, searching for secure ways to gaze, need the exhibitionist. Then, what reality programs do is to offer this safe, lawfully authorized (though potentially less satisfying than corporeal) site for the voyeur to convene the exhibitor.

A suitable apprehension regarding this conceptualization of "normal" voyeurism is that it is very analogous to emotional drives (social curiosity) to discover other individuals. For instance, it has been revealed that some people who are more likely to be curious about others will either "appoint in social comparison" (Gabler 2000: 4), or adjust their own conduct (self-monitoring) by observing others. Social comparison researchers propose that the ultimate goal of social comparison is self-evaluation. Likewise, lofty self-monitors have been found to be susceptible to the behavioral cues of other people primarily

for the purposes of self-adjustment and corroboration. Theoretically, then, these two orientations differ from voyeurism in their determined employment of looking at others to please social needs such as figuring out how one fares in comparison with others. With their spotlight on the understanding of individuals from viewers' ranks, reality programs may also be a basis of information for communal comparison and self-monitoring. In that case, an imperative question that needs to be answered is whether voyeurism is different from such a tendency for social comparison and self-monitoring in terms of predicting the use of reality programs.

Although genre labels may have significant power over the programming choices that viewers make, these choices are more likely to rely on the content of specific programs as viewers get more "familiar with a genre" (Hill 2005: 9). As suggested in the discussion above, a vital dimension of non-pathological voyeurism is its reliance on "consumption of revealing images at the expense of privacy" (Calvert 2000: 23). Considered from this viewpoint, social norms concerning privacy and intimacy are an appropriate starting point for the recognition of features that may contribute to a reality program's voyeuristic appeal.

A frequent usage of the notion of privacy is to refer to private spaces. The walls themselves operate to segregate the private from the public due to their symbolic purpose as a communication barrier. On the other hand, like other forms of intervened experiences, reality programs go beyond these normative barriers suggested by physical space and do so at changeable levels (with, for instance, *Big Brother* operates inside a house, and the *Jerry Springer Show* taking place in an auditorium open to the public).

Evidently, the existence of television cameras and participants' consent to be recorded by these same cameras make each reality television set an essentially public setting. However, in assessing audience-content interface, the proper question is not whether the mediated experience replicates the real one, but rather what correlation is implied by the mediated experience. For example, in a gay bar show, during which a stripper, after dancing on stage, goes back to the changing room to take a shower while the bar patrons observe him on a

live camera feed. Regardless of the patrons' consciousness that their viewing was consensual (and staged), the voyeuristic pleasure of the live camera feed was allegedly higher than the dance show on stage. Similarly, it is probable that in reality shows, symbolic signs, representing that an interaction is taking place in a setting that implies a private rather than a public space, will contribute to the voyeuristic appeal of reality programs.

The pleasure of a live camera feed depicting an average private space also points to the position the camera may operate on situating the viewer vis-à-vis what's happening on screen. To intensify the voyeur position, the camera is usually located to adopt a "fly on the wall" perspective—a production technique that makes the extra diegetic² elements less visible, helping the viewers assume the position of an unobtrusive, distant observer (like a voyeur). In contrast, when the camera's existence becomes more perceptible, the "fourth wall"³ between the viewer and the character on screen, breaks letting the spectator to become more like a confidante interacting with the character. In reality programs, breaching the fourth wall generally occurs through conventions such as voice-over descriptions from participants or video diaries within which a private participant directly addresses the viewers to tell their side of the story. If the "fly on the wall" standpoint creates a distance between the viewer and the characters on screen, it may be more favorable to voyeuristic enjoyment of reality programs than conventions that break the fourth wall.

A conceptualization of seclusion that relies solely on bodily demarcations does not paint the whole picture with respect to content features that may accommodate the voyeuristic needs of viewers to have access to the private. An unconventional way to think about social relations is to treat them as information systems that differ from each other in terms of the convenience of social information, with certain "behaviors being less accessible (with higher backstage bias) than others" (Gabler 2000: 5). As such, privacy is not only physical seclusion but also the ability to selectively determine which behaviors are shared with whom. This purpose of privacy is closely linked to establishment of close—shared and exclusive—relations.

Study on the psychology of intimate relations points to numerous self-expressive behaviors that individuals predictably relate with intimacy and hence to what should be less frequently accessible. Starting with teenage years, the exposure of personal details becomes an important “behavioral dimension of establishing intimate friendships” (Hill 2005, 22). Therefore, before revealing personal details, individuals require the establishment of reciprocal trust. A second form of disclosure that develops over time with intimate relationships is gossip—broadly defined as negative and positive talk about others in their absence. Not only are people less likely to hearsay around people with whom they have not developed secure ties—potentially because gossip may include risky opinions—but also the act of gossiping may operate as an indication that a special bond has been established. The third category of self-expression, commonly linked with intimacy, is the expression of emotions. The notion of display rules, for example, refers to individuals’ efforts to manage (via attenuating or inhibiting) expressions of emotions. Particularly, for pessimistic emotions, there is usually a silent rule that emotions are a private matter with offstage prejudice and should be reachable only to the right people.

It is important to note that societal conventions related to the detachment of these private behaviors (such as self-disclosure or gossip) need restraint both on the side of the source and the latent recipient. Individuals are supposed to be essential to show restraint (modesty) in exhibiting such behavior because it may cast a negative light on them, or construct them to present as more defenseless and/or immoral. Likewise, for potential witnesses, the failure to identify boundaries for backstage behaviors is related with incivility. On the other hand, reality programs may demonstrate the chance for both sides to shatter these social outlooks concerning intimacy. The partakers choose disclosure instead of modesty, and the viewers choose not to look away, but rather gaze cautiously when private moments are revealed. Thus, viewers consume the voyeuristic reality shows where participants disclose personal information, engage in gossip, and exhibit private emotions, sexual behavior and nudity.

While nearly all media companies struggle to formulate internet effective programs to instigate these voyeuristic behavior, Endemol, a

Dutch production company, declares to have achieved it. ("Reality TV" 2000). *Big Brother*, a show that spies on a group of people imprisoned in a house for two to three months, has established the most successful way to employ the Internet to increase television viewing. The concept is voyeurism, which is what the show is about, and what the web is perfect for. *Big Brother*, a set-up that generated in the Netherlands, has been publicized across Europe, and has now moved to America and India where ten people struggle to be the final one present in the house, who obtains a huge cash prize. Spectators watch the dwellers plot against each other, and, in a two-part voting method, decisions come who is rejected next.

The program has been strikingly victorious. In the Netherlands, for example, 27% of the public audience watched it on a regular basis ("Reality TV" 2000). Similar to "reality" programming that has swept Europe, the charm of *Big Brother* lies in peeping into other people's lives when they cannot observe yours. The website, with live video footages, presents improved voyeurism. In Britain, where the show is now continuing for years, the figure of website hits has increased from 350,000 a day in the first week to 3 million a day now (with each visit lasting an average of 16 minutes). That places it at the pinnacle of the British Internet league. *Survivor*, the American counterpart, which is located on an island, does not have the additional pleasure of the webcam, and yet the show was just as successful as *Big Brother* has been in Europe.

In India, *Big Brother* came as *Big Boss* comprising so-called 'celebrities' who are ready to demonstrate their coarse personalities. Desperate to save their drooping reputations, the celebrities have latched themselves on to the show in the hope that its shooting TRPs⁴ might improve their careers. They yawn, brush teeth, bare skins, scratch bottoms, display their idiosyncrasies and share their obtuse conversations in front of the camera. The surroundings and situations in the house are planned to induce clashes, jealousy, prejudice and insecurity.

Now, their exhibitionism under the influential glare of open gaze makes it repulsive. The camera turns into a seed-bed of base human emotions — intrigue, manipulation, embarrassment, depravity and so on — to satiate the viewer's thirst for such action. Moreover, the inclusion and use of a trans-gender individual to stir up that extra titillation is

certainly unpleasant. It sensationalizes and dilutes the seriousness of issues that sexual minorities have, time and again, attempted to highlight. Here we find the hypocrisy of the middle classes. As a mark of celebrating progressive minds, we endorse despicable sexual innuendos and pour scorn on those 'puritans' who disagree, while screening individuals with a diverse sexual orientation as perverts.

As we all know 'reality' portrayed, in these shows, is the result of a well-devised brief. However, in case of *Big Boss*, it is clearly not reality but debauchery that makes reality shows saleable. An implementation allowing the viewer to revel in their prejudices, by encouraging them to build snap judgments about 'good' and 'bad' characters, while presenting them sleazy scoops reeks of a mania with profits nurtured by private and 'free' media corporations. The argument, which revenues market forces and also shapes popular culture, public taste and consumption patterns, thus, gets more glaring evidence.

As India's neighbor, we also discover these glaring evidences in Bangladesh. Breaking the "fourth wall" always remains as an urge for the voyeuristic viewers. And, even in Bangladesh, we observe the viewer affected by such voyeuristic notion. A private television channel, in Bangladesh, broadcasted *Uttaradbikar (The Inheritance)* which follows the notions of voyeurism of reality shows. We find the Bangladeshi viewers breaking the "fourth wall", and peeping into the personal lives of Bangladeshi celebrities. As viewers of this country are considered conservative, the show does not portray any bare skin spices but it does portray the uncensored personalities of the celebrities. Therefore, viewers turn voyeurs while they are exposed to the "evil" side of celebrity characteristics. We find the soul of the zaminder, operating like hidden cameras, is watching and hearing the celebrities and their gossips. The show explores how they support one another, or even yell and get angry at each other. To add to the thrill, there is also a room where they can converse with the zamindar (much like *Big Boss*) and get a chance to voice their true reaction against each other. The show is able to quench our innate nosiness about some of the celebrities of the entertainment industry, revealing the best and worst side of each contestant.

We know products of consumerist industries, like *Uttaradbikar*, could bring Bangladeshi viewers simultaneously in a discussion around the tea-

stalls. But these shows in fact alienate us more from each other by the insinuation that behind closed doors we all have dubious and interesting dealings. "Reality"-based television originates a dehumanizing effect, which diminishes its subjects to commodities. Therefore, it is not likely that we could learn precious and optimistic information about ourselves from a "reality"-based show. What we may coin as narcissism, others may judge it as self-actualization by exploiting others for the study of the self and how we accommodate into a community.

Gabler writes that it is the dissident characteristics of voyeurism that lend to its appeal, and that "reality" television permits us to be "moral outlaws" (2000: 4). He also refers Freud with the declaration, "to watch unobserved is to appropriate lives and assert oneself over them" (Gabler 2000: 4). Robert Thompson, head of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University opposes Gabler's proposition. He states "that a voyeuristic tendency is deep in the human heart, and that there were cavemen peeking into the caves of others thousands of years ago" ("Reality TV"). While I can have the same opinion that some stage of our interests in television and film has a bit voyeuristic roots in our psyches, I think that classification of us as "moral outlaws" is a bit heavy handed. I would be more suitable to concur with Thompson's caveman theory. Our eyes are usually drawn to living things. We cannot help but be paying attention in the lives around us, whether those lives are imaginary, actual, or somewhere in between as in the case of "reality" TV. Movies and other media have, certainly, utilized this draw to life.

As we all possess a right to our own confidentiality, there should be no disgrace in confessing that we watch from time to time. "Voyeurism" is too simple as a term with too hideous connotation to express the full range of our ordinary curiosities. Whether we denounce it or recognize it, there is no doubt that voyeurism is an inevitable component of our society. Contemporary culture, with its loud demand for freedom and individuality, has muffled other voices. Its strong gaze too might be turning us into confident voyeurs who sneer at their closet counterparts. Yet, making money out of offering a peep into others' privacy cannot be justified as creative entertainment. We should keep in mind that whether this media claims to be "real" or fictional, it can perform as both senseless amusement or as parable. As we consume our media, we are required to

be strong in our intellectual thinking skills. We must identify when “reality” is in actuality plain entertainment. Likewise, we must utilize these same vital intellectual skills to resolve what we observe from our own windows is whether something worth further surveillance or not.

Notes:

1. Paraphilic is a biomedical term used to describe sexual stimulation received through objects, situations, or individuals, which are not part of natural stimulation. It may cause distress or serious problems for the paraphiliac or persons associated with this scenario.
2. Related with ‘Digesis’ means a narration or recitation. Diegetic is related with film music that occurs as part of the action (rather than as background), and can be heard by the film’s characters.
3. An imaginary wall between the viewers and visual characters.
4. TRP means target rating points. It is a measure of the purchased television points representing an estimate of the component of the target audience within the gross audience.

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