

Gossip Girl, Foucault, and the New Fame

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My response to the prompt deals with the “public imagination” aspect of the question, using one recent example of how the new stardom – where one truly can be “famous for being famous” – has entered it: the CW’s *Gossip Girl*. The show’s heroines are, like Paris Hilton and Lauren Conrad, besieged wherever they go by amateur paparazzi, who report their every move to the Upper East Side’s answer to Perez Hilton, the anonymous “Gossip Girl.” Gossip Girl’s witty, catty voiceover directs the viewer’s attention through the scandals and triumphs of our private-school protagonists with equal measures of schadenfreude and sympathy.

Sites like Gawker, a notoriously snarky New York media – and gossip – blog, have given *Gossip Girl* a tremendous amount of coverage that belies the show’s low ratings; and Gawker’s presumably educated, plugged-in readership has responded. In May, Gawker linked approvingly to a blog, called “All These Sad Young Gossip Girls¹,” a reference to frequent Gawker target and *n+1* editor Keith Gessen’s novel *All These Sad Young Literary Men*, devoted to recreating found objects from within the *Gossip Girl* universe (Lawson). Essentially, it is highbrow fanfiction. But why the highbrow fandom? What is *Gossip Girl*’s appeal to Gawker’s readership? I would suggest that the show’s gossip blog conceit is part of it; but the way that *Gossip Girl* treats the gossip is revelatory.

This manner points to a shifting approach to privacy. Though having their every move followed by Gossip Girl and her readers must complicate their lives, for Blair and Serena (and, eventually Jenny), it is just the “price” they pay for the privileges and power afforded them as high school celebrities. It is, however, unclear what this “power” really is – Blair and Jenny fight for dominance, but there doesn’t seem to any kind of destination to reach – “winning” only seems to afford one control over a couple of girl minions. Whatever pleasures Gossip Girl “fame” has are in the game, not the victory.

¹ As of writing, still online at <http://allthesesadyounggossipgirls.tumblr.com>.

Secrets are hard to keep in the Upper East Side. Most of the show's stories involve the attempt to keep a secret, followed by its revelation. At the same time, Gossip Girl is as often as not used as a tool – as, in real life, all avenues of publicity are – in order to plant rumors or to get someone's attention, as Dan does when he, instead of talking to his sister, sends a tip about her boyfriend into Gossip Girl.

In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault writes of two competing sexual economies – the *ars erotica*, associated with non-Western cultures, wherein “pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself” (57); and the *scientia sexualis*. *Gossip Girl* both exemplifies the constant surveillance and the pleasures of the contemporary iteration of the *scientia sexualis*, linked with Western cultures that have medicalized sex and transformed it into discourse. The West is, Foucault says, “the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession” (58). This interplay of knowledge, power, and pleasure also hints at its inherent pleasures, suggesting, as Foucault does, that “our *scientia sexualis* is but an extraordinarily subtle form of *ars erotica*” (72). There is, of course, a difference between the confessions that characterize the *scientia sexualis* and the forcible revelations of one's secrets on *Gossip Girl*. This seems to be linked to one of the great changes that the internet has brought to our day-to-day lives: it has become nearly impossible to control information, so the only solution is to cede privacy and enjoy the ride.

This has some interesting implications in terms of theorizing these new types of fame. Rather than seeing its women – and they are always women – as either victims or cynical whores, it is possible to consider these new celebrities as entering into a new kind of sexual economy, one where secrecy and revelation are part of the game, and where – as Gossip Girl puts it when ice queen Blair takes off her signature headband *and* her dress in a burlesque show – “prohibition never stood a chance against exhibition.”

Bibliography

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction: Volume 1*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1978.

Lawson, Richard. "Found Magazine meets Gossip Girl, And We Like It." *Gawker*. 21 May 2008. 9 Sept 2008. <<http://gawker.com/392456/found-magazine-meets-gossip-girl-and-we-like-it>>.