

Reality TV: Deja Vu All Over Again?

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In 1937 in the town of Owensboro, KY, 20,000 people gathered in the town square to see Rainey Bethea, a convicted rapist and murderer, hung in the last public execution in the United States. Were those 20,000 in a town with a listed population of 6,000 incensed by the crime, in need of viewing justice for the criminal, or was there not much better to do in the quiet Southern town at 5:21am, August 14th 1937? The argument could be made that those surrounding the hanging scaffold were barbaric and inhuman because they went out of their way to see a man punished for a crime he was convicted of, but should they be admired because they were at least willing to get off of their couch to do it? How different are they from the viewing audiences of popular television today?

Foucault outlines a shift from punishment of those that break the laws and rules of our societies from the visible space (town square), to the hidden space (thick walls, the outskirts of town). This highlights the dominant structure and placement of prisons as we know them today. The extension of the dominant system leads to the internalization of discipline, whereby the threat of punishment leads a society to control their behavior.

While the argument can be made that punishment taking place out of view of the population is more humane than being drawn and quartered in the streets, there remains a value to the ability to view punishment of those functioning outside the rules and laws the populous commonly adheres to. The idea that our desire to view punishment is merely voyeuristic is short-sighted. Many simply dismiss the notion with a myriad of terms with common meanings; epicuricity, shadenfreude, or morose delectation. These terms don't explore the concept deeply enough. The ability to view punishment functions as a reaffirmation of our own law-abiding behavior.

Without a town square where punishment can be viewed, we look to the common mechanism of entertainment, our televisions. There is a traceable link throughout the popularization of television that supports the theory that the public sought out, and continues to seek out, punishment. Taking a cue from the popularity of boxing in the 1950's and 1960's was another "sport" which fell under the same heading, professional wrestling. Punishment began to trend toward the cartoonish as it was simultaneously being scripted. This allowed matchmakers the ability to carefully create villains, embodied at the time by Gorgeous George, which the live and television audiences would watch week after week in hopes of seeing punishment carried out.

Based on declining ratings coinciding with the proliferation of reality television in the late 1990's and early 2000's, perhaps professional wrestling's scripted punishment wasn't enough to satiate the viewing public who now had new characters that could be judged. The difference was that these characters were, as far as we could tell, real. Some of the reality shows that have survived season upon season employ those same mechanisms, the created villain combined with the continued pursuit of or the application of punishment to the deserved.

Who sets the standard for behavior, who performs the examination, and who applies punishment? What we can be provided with in certain reality shows is a subject to be judged. The MTV show My Super Sweet 16 provides the viewer with a profile of 16, 15, and 14 year olds preparing for what they believe will be the most important day of their life. What we are typically shown is a profile of a wealthy teen in their everyday environment and highlighting their extravagant material possessions and typically spoiled behavior. They also outline high expectations for their birthday party. Price tags run into the hundreds of thousands, celebrity guests attend, and entrances range from helicopters to Lamborghinis. The tagline for the show, however, tells a different story. During promotional spots for the show and during the show open, the title cards read "Sometimes 16 isn't so sweet." The promotional spots highlight those moments where it doesn't look as if details are falling into place, and typically the audience is treated to a meltdown when everything isn't going as planned.

Why would the promotional materials highlight those moments where the party is seemingly ruined and we find our subject in tears? What is being done is villain creation. We are shown a subject who functions outside of the accepted behavioral norms, and then we are led through commercials into thinking that there could be some comeuppance for our spoiled subject. We see meltdowns, we see details out of place, but what tends to happen is the parties proceed as planned. Celebrities attendees show up, the entrances are opulent and mistake free, and our birthday boy or girl is rewarded with their final present at the conclusion of the show, along with testimonials from fellow partygoers on how this bash was the party of the year. This conclusion ultimately leaves the audience feeling unfulfilled. We watched the creation of the villain, we waited through commercials to see if the party had been ruined and the villain ultimately punished, but are left without punishment and the villain stands unencumbered. Prior to proper ending credits however, the episode is immediately followed with a promo for the next episode with more problems, more tears, and another opportunity for the audience to satisfy that need to view punishment with a brand new and more boastful villain. Tune in next week for the same thing, all over again.