

“The Worst Show in the History of Television!”
Uncovering the Truth Behind the Popularity of The Jerry
Springer Show

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Introduction

I. The Jerry Springer Show: From 6 weeks to 20 Years

“The standards of television have gone to an all-time low, and I’m here to represent the change.”
– Jerry Springer¹

Since 1991, the popular television series, *The Jerry Springer Show*, has cast a shadow over daytime talk shows, and, in October 2010, the show received the rights to air on the NBC television network through 2014.² Often referred to as a product of low culture and even proclaims itself as being “The worst show in the history of television,” *The Jerry Springer Show* has been critiqued by many as an irresponsible media text and a televised freak show that profits from the exploitation of people’s “physical, emotional, and psychological misfortune[s]”.³ Former NBC chairman Grant Tinker, the man once responsible for the show’s syndication, called the show, “the worst I’ve seen from the breed...they just feed on human misery, or create it, as the case may be.”⁴ However, what began as a humble six-week television contract has expanded into over 200 U.S. markets and 50 countries worldwide.⁵ The show’s popularity transformed the already blossoming daytime television and tabloid talk show genre and left an

¹ Mary Dickson, *Jerry Springer and Howard Stern light up the ratings and networks rake in the dough, Trash TV?*, 26 May 1998, 30 Nov. 2010, <file:///Users/carliculicchia/Desktop/Senior%20Fall/Senior%20Essay/News%20clippings...>.

² Chuck Darrow, *After 20 years of 'Jerry Springer,' he's amazed, too*, Philadelphia Daily News, 29 Oct. 2010, 30 Nov. 2010, <<http://www.philly.com/dailynews/features/20101029...>>.

³ Darrow.

⁴ Bianculli, David, *'It's a Circus' Is Jerry Springer's No-Holds-Barred Talk Show Harmles Populist Escapism, The End of Civilization As We Know It or Both?*, Entertainment, The New York Daily News, 8 Feb. 1998, 30 Nov. 2010, <http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/entertainment/1998/02/08/1998-02-08_it_s_a_circus_is_jerry_spr.html>.

⁵ *The Jerry Springer Show Celebrates 3,000 episodes*, Breaking News, The Futon Critic, 5 May 2006, 30 Nov. 2010, <<http://www.thefutoncritic.com/news.aspx?id=20060505nuts01>>.

indelible mark on the psyche of contemporary American popular culture. The question, then, is: what has facilitated the rise and continued the success of the show?

The original premise of the talk show format was based on the traditional female genre frame. “They were developed as a service centered on interpersonal and psychological matters, to women.”⁶ As time progressed, there was an increased competition from cable companies to gain market share in this profit-drenched genre. Syracuse University professor Robert J. Thompson notes that, “In TV today, you have to have something that either shouts louder and is more outrageous or is better than all the other choices, so people will watch it.”⁷ The response was a program that showcased confrontation, hostility, and humiliation. Originally named, *Springer*, The new show revolutionized the talk show market with common themes such as sex, homosexuality, personal failures, dysfunctional relationships, and physically deformed people. Often seen as an opposing response to the social and moral majority, Springer’s show built upon the traditional female genre and added other elements like wrestling and cartoons.⁸ The key difference here is the absence of conflict resolution. Springer mentioned that, “you go [on it] for entertainment. If you really need help, you go to [a professional]. You don’t come on a television show for help.”⁹ Like other daytime talk shows, Springer’s program brought ordinary people into the public spotlight, thus blending the private and public sphere and creating confusion between reality and fantasy.

⁶Carmen Gregori Signes, *A Genre based Approach to Daytime Talk on Television*, ed. Francisco Fernández, (Universitat de València: Lengua Inglesa), 17.

⁷ Bianculli.

⁸ Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, “Life in the bleep-cycle: inventing Id-TV on the Jerry Springer show”, *Discourse*, (2003).

⁹ Chuck Darrow.

Iconic guests like Kenny Easterday, the man who lives with only having half of a body, the conjoined twins, and the KKK¹⁰, Jerry Springer's show can be easily compared to a Barnum and Bailey-like circus performance. On the other hand, the show can be viewed as a liberating forum that gives a voice to the marginalized few who are cast aside by the social majority and labeled as the oppositional cultural sphere of American society. After all, a trademark feature of the show is the realistic on-stage portrayal of the backstage aspects of everyday life. Jerry Springer notes that, "Our only responsibility is to make sure that all segments of the community, all lifestyles, are given free air. You can't get a few people in the room, and have powerful presidents and companies and networks or whatever deciding what America shall believe and see and watch."¹¹

Does *The Jerry Springer Show* serve as a democratic and egalitarian forum, or is it simply a profit-seeking consumer mechanism? In other words, does the show empower oppositional culture or reinforce the ideals endorsed by the majority? The purpose of this essay is twofold. First, I will prove that *The Jerry Springer Show*, through coded mechanisms within and surrounding the show, creates a democratic facade that appears to promote oppositional culture and challenge social norms. Grindstaff notes, "Daytime talk shows both challenge and reinscribe longstanding hierarchies between "high" and "low" culture, expert and ordinary knowledge, and the ways in which these hierarchies are related to social-especially class-inequality."¹² These veiled techniques are the cornerstones on which the show's popularity is

¹⁰ *The Jerry Springer Show Celebrates 3,000 episodes.*

¹¹ Bianculli.

¹² Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 17.

based. In the following essay, I will expand upon this argument and show that the coded mechanisms within the show are meant to create a particular perspective for the viewer. In turn, these mechanisms create what I define as a participatory illusion that veils the underlying profit-based motivations of the show. I argue, then, that the show is not a democratic forum, but a consumer product accepted by the social norm. In turn, these coded mechanisms do not negate, but conform to hegemonic social norms. The second portion of this essay will explain that the participatory illusion created by the show is dependent upon the assumption of a hierarchal social order. I will employ theories of the transformation of the public sphere during the Restoration period in England and show how *The Jerry Springer Show*, through the politics of transgression, is emblematic of the way in which this transformation enforced the boundaries of the social order. These theories are crucial in investigating the popularity of the show in that they permit the coded techniques to function and succeed within the show, which, in turn, serves to maintain the social order.

II. Coded Techniques of Perspective and Identification: The Roles of the Camera, Conversation, and Profit in the Creation of Illusionary Freedom.

The proper starting point when attempting to uncover the coded techniques within *The Jerry Springer Show* is at its source. Who owns and operates the show and how is this related to the show's ability to serve as a radical media format that challenges American social norms? Recall that *The Jerry Springer Show* is a program produced by NBC Universal Television.¹³ One

¹³ "The Jerry Springer Show," IMDB, 2 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120974/>>

can then assume that the show is directly regulated and controlled by the preferences of NBC's management structure. Jerry Springer appears to broadcast and investigate the true daily occurrences in everyday people's lives. One can say, then, that the show is directly related to its surrounding social atmosphere. Although it is formed through existing social forms, it is still highly controlled by NBC, the site in which it is produced. The show's dependency on the supporting network produces the need to create the participatory illusion. The show cannot afford to be a blatant profit-seeking consumer product because it would then lose credibility as a realistic display of the private lives of ordinary people. Birmingham defines television as a tool of the consumerist society that is "inherently undemocratic" and "articulates the hegemonies of the status quo" with the end goal being an "apolitical consumer society."¹⁴ People are transformed into generalized commodities controlled by the corporate producers of the patterns of discourse.¹⁵ Television sells products and reinforces the dominant majority by blurring the lines between viewing and consuming, reality and fiction. This is a covert mission played out by inventing anxiety while, at the same time, offering relief. The formation of the democratic illusion begins with the creation of perspective.

The advent of national broadcasting allowed television networks to widen their audiences, ultimately creating a 'generalized other.' This 'Other' allows for a new perspective outside of traditional social groupings. The television permits this perspective to infiltrate the homes of millions of viewers. The networks that create shows still heavily mediate this 'Other'

¹⁴ Elizabeth Birmingham, "FEARING the Freak: How Talk TV Articulates Women and Class," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 28, no. 3, (2000): 133.

¹⁵ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1986), 80.

perspective.¹⁶ Ultimately, the institutions that control the production of media do not permit those different standards and beliefs of the oppositional minority to infiltrate and poison socially acceptable practices and structures. This ‘fear’ of a collision between these two worlds creates the necessary threat that delivers an audience to advertisers.

Springer utilizes this mechanism by showcasing the outcasts and unacceptable people in society. The guest’s differentiated behavior, speech, and mannerisms threaten to degrade contemporary moral standards. The way in which they exemplify the possible destruction of the moral order separates the guests and turns them into something unidentifiable with the viewership. The audience represents the group in charge of upholding moral and social order within the Springer forum. Therefore, the viewership, which is assumed to be the social majority, views the show through the audience’s perspective and identifies with that group. In short, the format of the show is created and conditioned by individuals like Jerry Springer and corporate interests seeking to profit by affirming social biases. The mediation and control over the threat allows the show to pacify the anxieties of the viewership, thus offering relief. If this is how the discourse is created and controlled, then the ‘ordinary’ people on the show must also be constructed rather than essential reality.

I argue here that the guests are not ordinary, but are constructed by the network’s demands. An obvious feature of the show is the way in which the opposing viewpoints of the guest, in relation to the social majority, serve to maximize interest. Grindstaff notes that the guests are “Concerned with generating lively interaction, which is partly a function of the guest’s

¹⁶ Steve Bailey, Media Audiences and Identity: Self-Construction in the Fan Experience, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 42, cite from Meyrowitz, 1985, pp. 131-32.

performative potential and partly a function of their strategic combination.”¹⁷ In this way, the guests are similar to actors. However, unlike actors, *The Jerry Springer Show*'s guests are not assumed to have any specific knowledge or expertise. In this way, the guests seem like ordinary people. Yet, one can conclude that they are, in fact, not so ordinary when their purpose on the show is dependent upon the expectations of the audience. They are expected to adhere to untraditional societal norms. The illusion of reality exists in that they present their cases with the understanding that they are bringing to the public what is perceived to be private. The more that the guests adhere to the role of the generalized other, or the more eccentric and untraditional they act, the more they seem real and ordinary. Again, Grindstaff points out that “It is the loss of the “civilized” self that occurs when the body transcends social and cultural controls, revealing human behavior in its “raw” rather than its “cooked” form.”¹⁸ In other words, the loss of the “civilized” self is regulated by the network controlled discourse of the show. In the end, the guest's identity is subservient to the authority that constructs them. In turn, this illusion of ordinary, or “raw” people satiates viewer's anxieties while masking the truth behind the facade of a democratic forum. The assumption here is that viewers are malleable investors, however it is not that simple.

Fans do not always interpret messages or objects in the manner that institutions expect or desire. Bailey mentions that fans have a “profoundly aesthetic view of the objects of their engagement” and that these aesthetic practices are “key in the formation of the ‘self

¹⁷ Grindstaff, 18.

¹⁸ Grindstaff, 20.

consciousness’.”¹⁹ The result of the aesthetic attitude can range from a utopian integration between the self and other, where traditional societal hierarchies are replaced with models of self fulfillment that are free from alienation, to a complete separation between the self and other, where the self is defined through negation of the other. Either way, the susceptibility of the fan to embrace a product is dependent upon his or her vulnerability, the more emotional the better.²⁰ We have seen the ways in which the show creates perspective and identification for the viewer. Springer utilizes specific techniques that aim to alter the way in which the consumer identifies with the guest and audience and, through this identification, creates the illusion of participation.

The role of the camera within *The Jerry Springer Show* is to create an intricate method of identification. Birmingham notes that the trick is to subtly force the viewer to identify with the camera and the “look” that the camera conveys because it is precisely this “look” that “objectifies the viewed for the viewers consumption”.²¹ In other words, in order for the media to create the message the camera must objectify the image of the guest because an object will have a lesser effect on the human consciousness than a person. The degradation of the guest into an object allows him or her to be transformed into something unidentifiable to the audience and viewers back home. As a guest named Brian, an anemic male with an unkempt mustache, approaches the stage wearing nothing but women’s lingerie, the camera’s gaze is set to facilitate a connection with the audience. The camera quickly pans over the audience’s reactions to the oddly dressed man on stage and discovers a wide variety of facial responses from disgust and

¹⁹ Bailey, 49.

²⁰ Signes, 16.

²¹ Birmingham, 133.

disbelief to hearty laughter. Audience members are seen covering their mouths in amazement, draping their eyes in shock, and pointing their fingers in ridicule. After the camera surveys the audience's reactions, the focus is then put back on the guest while the audience is heard in the background saying, "Take it off! Take it off!"²² Before the guest has had an opportunity to speak, the camera has already objectified and placed him into the realm of the outcast. Similar to viewing the bearded lady at the circus, the looks of disgust and disapproval by the audience negate the guest's equality and status as a participant in the show, which transforms him into an easily ridiculed object on display. Through the camera, the viewer's interpretation of the guest is pre-consumed. The audience is exemplifying the proper reaction to the sights on stage. In this way, we see that the egalitarian forum can be easily programmed and standardized. However, the illusion of the democratic forum is further manipulated when one analyses the dialogue within the show.

As stated earlier, the talk show format is characterized by the affects of current issues on ordinary people's lives. The viewer is depicted as a part of the participatory community and is grounded in common sense. Communication is paramount for the success of the participatory framework and is the root of the conversational process. However different genres have different rules. Turn taking conversational process within *The Jerry Springer Show* proves to be quite different than that of *Oprah*. In other words, the conversational process is not a homogenous framework, but is based upon the communicative rules set forth and enforced by the show's host and audience. This process is also based on cultural factors that, as Signes mentions, "construct

²² The Jerry Springer Show, Television, NBC Studios, Season 14, Episode 914.

their conduct over the course of talk...to constitute and hence jointly and collaboratively to realize the occasion of their talk, together with their own social roles in it.”²³ One must remember that the viewer is seen as an apolitical consumer. Competition for advertising means creating outrageous television shows and controversial line-crossing speech as a feature to attract viewers. Thus, the controversial conversational process within Springer’s show is informed and maintained by the television producer that creates it. In the end, the turn taking process appears to transform the show into a forum where all voices are welcome and heard. In reality, though, this is a format informed by the network and provokes the formation of power relationships and the delegation of authority within the show, ultimately suppressing the power of the marginalized. The conversational process’s role in the creation of the democratic forum extends past the turn taking method.

As the host, Jerry Springer frames the questions for inquiry or debate and manages the turn taking process between himself, the audience, and the guest. At times he asks for further clarification or questions the guest’s judgment. For example, Brian, a cross-dressing alcoholic, is worried that his girlfriend, Colleen, will leave him for his alternative and unacceptable life style. However, he refuses to drop the habit as it, “reminds [him] of childhood.”²⁴ Jerry then asks Brian a question: “Clothing is more important than a relationship with a woman you profess to love?”²⁵ It is important to note that Jerry is the chair of debate and, at times appears to reflect

²³ Signes, 29.

²⁴ The Jerry Springer Show, Season 14, Episode 914.

²⁵ The Jerry Springer Show, Season 14, Episode 914.

contradictory demands of private and public interest that allow for the combination of scrutiny and debate.

However, this is a veil that covers several coded ways in which the questioning framework within *The Jerry Springer Show* is meant to evoke specific reactions from the guest, audience, and viewer. When Brian initially prioritizes cross-dressing over his relationship with Colleen, Jerry asks him again if he is sure that his priorities are correctly in order. Upon further analysis, Jerry's question is framed to change the guest's mind. Jerry doubts his decision and implants this doubt into Brian's thought process. The scene becomes more personal when Jerry further interrogates the couple.

“Do you bring him to the Christmas party?”²⁶ Jerry asks Brian's girlfriend.

In the end, the question is whether Brian will conform to traditional heteronormative behaviors, or continue to be a part of the oppositional culture.

The audience is an integral part of the question-framing process. Towards the end of every show, the audience is given an opportunity to ask their own questions of the guests. Often times the audience members use their airtime to mock or insult the guests.

“Why [are] you with the pig when you can be with the hot ass girl over there?” screams an audience member to the boyfriend of an obese female guest.

They then exchange responses.

“Fuck you, you four eyes freak.” Says the obese woman.

“Sit your ass down. Fuck you, you cow!” responds the audience member.²⁷

²⁶ The Jerry Springer Show, Season 14, Episode 914.

On the surface, the interactions between the audience and guest appear to be a democratic forum where Jerry, without bias, elects an audience member to ask a question of the guests. The guests, in turn, are able to respond and defend themselves from verbal abuse. However, it seems that the emotional spectrum is filtered and only allows for negative comments aimed at provoking the guests to conform to their position as a part of the oppositional few. The audience, in an overtly hostile way, ridicules the guests for their physical deformities, mental disabilities, and life-style choices. In the end, the mask of the democratic forum is ripped off only to expose the network managed questioning framework that subjects the oppositional 'Other' to the ridicule of the accepted social majority. Rational discussion would only disrupt the potential for confrontation. However, these emotional exchanges appear to invert the same social hierarchies created by the institutions themselves.

By structuring conversation between the audience, host, and guest, the show's format alludes to some sort of finale. The majority of the show is engaged with managing the conflict between the experts and ordinary people with the expectation of a finale in the form of therapeutic resolution. The anticipation of resolve, adds energy to the program. However, Jerry never subjects his guests to therapists. He allows them to unfold and either resolve or not resolve their problems themselves. Yet, resolution within *The Jerry Springer Show* is unique. Springer mentions, "This is chewing gum. We're not going to bring peace to Bosnia, nor will we bring

²⁷ The Jerry Springer Show: Undressed Uncensored Unleashed!, Volume 3, DVD, Universal TV Talk Productions, 2007.

war there. It's an hour of escape."²⁸ The point here is that conflict resolution in the show is, in fact, an escapist technique. The mask of therapeutic resolution creates an aspect of reality that aids to the liveliness and popularity of the program.

At times Jerry gives the guests ultimatums. For example, when a guest is upset that her husband is cheating on her with another woman, Jerry asks the wife if she will take him back. After she agrees, he then gives the husband an ultimatum, "Are you willing to say that you are willing to leave her and go back to your wife?"²⁹ The husband eventually agrees and returns to his wife. It appears that the privacy that shapes heteronormative society becomes irrelevant, as the man accepted his traditional societal role as a monogamous husband. This emotionality is linked to the authenticity of the program. However, as Lunt and Stenner note, "emotionality is precisely rendered subservient to a predominant communicative agenda (whether 'public discussion-based' or 'therapeutic')."³⁰ If the communicative agenda is to maintain the role of the marginalized, as discussed above, then the authenticity of therapeutic resolution becomes diluted. In the end, the illusion of resolution adds to the entertainment aspect of the show. Jerry's attempt at resolving conflict can be understood as an attempt to force the 'Other' into heteronormative social culture.

Through the aforementioned coded techniques like camera positions, structured conversation, and therapeutic resolution, *The Jerry Springer Show* structures perspective, which,

²⁸ Bianculli.

²⁹ *The Jerry Springer Show: Undressed Uncensored Unleashed!*, Volume 1, DVD, Universal TV Talk Productions, 2007.

³⁰ Peter Lunt and Paul Stenner, "The Jerry Springer Show as an Emotional Public Sphere," *Media Culture Society* 28, no. 59 (2005): 64.

in turn, tricks the viewer into believing that the show is promoting the inversion of the social norm. This participatory illusion in the show is similar to the illusion of Carnival where hierarchies are questioned and inverted for a day.³¹ Like Carnival, Springer, “attacks the authority of the ego through degradation and flaunts the material body as a pleasurable grotesquerie.”³² In turn, this gives voice to the oppressed oppositional sphere that compromises traditional norms and behaviors. Gierman, notes that Springer’s stage is one consisting of “fear, hatred, comedy, the absurd or the carnivalesque.”³³ This portrayal breaks down traditional social structures. Like the popularity of the Carnival, *The Jerry Springer Show*’s viewership is infatuated with the physically or mentally different, thus suspending hierarchies, if even for a moment. However, the fundamental error in this argument is that viewers do not tune in to take part in a utopian fusion of different parts of society, but to recognize societies’ differences pleasurablely.

In the end, the grotesque inevitably comes to the sad realization of not belonging. “That moment, in which the subject is made the outsider to the crowds, an onlooker, compensating for exclusion through the deployment of the discriminating gaze, is that the very root of bourgeois sensibility.”³⁴ In Carnival, the institutions that govern are responsible for suspending hierarchies. However, Carnival displays the other for the viewing pleasure of the audience, thus diminishing the utopian urge that Carnival inverts hierarchies. Birmingham notes, “Jerry Springer is a

³¹ Birmingham.

³² Stallybrass and White, 183.

³³ Naughty Gierman, "Scandalous secrets revealed: performing queer on the Jerry Springer Show," *Canadian Woman Studies* 20, no.4 (2001): 120+.

³⁴ Stallybrass and White, 187.

truncated form of carnival that capitalize[s] on the frustrated desire for a truly egalitarian society by serving up distorted versions of carnival's utopian promise."³⁵ In Springer's case, the mechanisms of the show structure 'otherness', thus creating the facade of the other's inclusion into the social hierarchical structure. The show's popularity lies in flirting with the threat of social hierarchal inversion, which would destabilize the social order. In the end it is never enough to challenge it. Thus, the existence of these coded identifications that shape perspective proves that the show is not a product that promotes oppositional culture, rather *The Jerry Springer Show* shapes perspective for monetary profit.

III. The Politics of Transgression as Maintenance of the Social Order

In the following section, I argue that *The Jerry Springer Show* ventures great lengths to maintain the structure of the social order, as it is this key element that allows for the creation of the aforementioned participatory illusion, which is the foundation of the show's success. I have explained the specific coded techniques that direct the viewer's identification with the audience rather than the guest. The show is able to utilize these techniques and cast out the threat of the success of the 'Other' because the ways in which the show forces identification are dependent upon the assumption that there is a separated social order. In other words, the shaping of a particular perspective can only happen if there are two distinct sides. The threat of social integration leads to the formation of these techniques for containing and controlling emotional expression and social boundaries.

³⁵ Birmingham.

I will demonstrate that the show, through the politics of transgression, serves to maintain societal cohesion, rather than expand the social norm to include the ‘Other’. The shaping of perspective is dependent upon the separated social sphere regulated and enforced by the America’s dominant culture. Punishment of those who transgress social norms heightens feelings about non-conforming appearance and behavior, while relieving high culture through validation of their values. I argue that this is a cyclical process allowing the subordination of the marginalized and the success of the show to occur simultaneously. The enforcement of the social order, then, does not allow the ‘Other’ to gain a foothold in the mainstream. Since this argument is directly reliant upon the theory of the transformation of the ‘public sphere’, one must first understand the social schism responsible for the formation of the ‘Other’ before one can properly analyze the argument at hand.

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the bourgeoisie went to great lengths to expel the grotesqueries of the body from the social norm. In turn, they reshaped class boundaries and determined the geography of these boundaries through, “negotiating their ideological struggles within a distinctive network of places and sites of exchange.”³⁶ Thus, the different social classes were rooted in and represented by this social space. It was here that the formation of proper behavior and good manners took shape. Sites of assembly like the theatre, carnival, and coffee house were regulated by behavioral norms and transgressors were consistently met with punishment. *The Jerry Springer Show* is representative of this transformation and mirrors

³⁶ Stallybrass and White, 80.

the ways in which the theatre, carnival, and coffee house maintained the social norm through the punishment of transgressors.

In theatre, the unruly audiences were separated from the civilized bourgeois through the creation of elevated boxes. The uncivilized masses stood on the ground level, while the bourgeois sat above them. Often times, the bourgeois would undergo verbal endeavors to quiet the raucous crowds on the floor. Stallybrass and White speculate:

“It is not a new territorial division of course, for it was often inscribed in the opposition between locus and platea on the Elizabethan stage, but what is new, and contrasts strongly with the Shakespearean stage, is the urgent attempt to expel the lower sort all together from the scene of reception.”³⁷

In turn, the bourgeoisie transformed themselves into a differentiated audience that held authority over those below them.

Physically, *The Jerry Springer Show* separates the audience from the guest. Similar to the way in which the bourgeoisie were elevated from the masses, the audience members sit above the guests in stadium seating. This serves to visually demonstrate the power that the audience has over the receptive guests. Like theatre, unruly behavior influences the audience members to verbally attack the floor-level guests. The physical separation from the guest and audience allows the success of the coded identifications and creation of perspective. Viewers are led to identify with the audience and host who provide commentary from afar in response to the guest's unruly behavior. Birmingham notes that the viewed is degraded and placed outside the

³⁷ Stallybrass and White, 87.

normative social boundaries making identification with them impossible.³⁸ Their lower physical status alludes to their lower social status. Like the groundlings on the theatre floor, the guests remain the transgressors of the social order that are trapped on the stage as receptive hosts to the punishment of the social majority.

Looking closely at the show, you will discover that the guest is never able to truly articulate their position in a way that is identifiable to the viewer because their speech or attire does not conform to American social norms. Since the guest is unidentifiable with the viewer, he or she is objectified and placed into a lower social status, which allows the audience to interject. In other words, there is a class system within the show. The non-conformative behaviors of the guest force the physical and mental separation from the audience.

Like the show, separated sites of assembly like theatre were not the results of the creation and division of two parts of society, the civilized and the vulgar, but were formed through self-regulation and self-exclusion of the grotesque by the bourgeois. In other words, the bourgeois identity was carried out by exclusions of the 'Other' and the negation of the habits that surrounded and threatened them. Habits not aligned with the bourgeois social code were condemned and associated with embarrassment. For these reasons, the show never depicts the guests and audience on the same physical plane. The elevated physical and social position of the audience relative to the guests permits the punishment of the transgressors and the maintenance of the social order. The similarities between the enforcement of transgressions in theatre and in Springer's show are direct and visually similar. However, the show also represents the subtle and

³⁸ Birmingham.

less direct ways in which Carnival's utopian promise structures society and enforces cultural norms.

Although *The Jerry Springer Show* brings together those who represent and those who reject the grotesque, it does not deliver the utopian promises that Carnival delivers. As you recall, the bodily grotesqueries of feasting and carnival were rejected by the bourgeois and were demoted to products for and by the 'Other'. Stallybrass and white note, "Feasting became separated from performance, spectacle from procession: the grotesque body was fragmented."³⁹ . This was executed through the strengthening of the differences between the bourgeois and 'Other' also reinforced the bourgeoisie's own superiority. The fear of any possible contamination or fusion between the two classes was associated with feelings of hostility towards the lower classes.

The consistent way in which the show exploits guests with physical or mental deformities alludes to the utopian promise that the carnivalesque holds. Many guests on the show transgress bodily norms and other culturally established measures of beauty. Although the physical differences between the guests and audience members are obvious, the show exploits these differences rather than celebrating them. When a severely obese woman named Melinda approaches the stage wearing nothing but her underwear, the audience immediately gasps and yells at her screaming, "Do something fat!"⁴⁰ The attire she wears to the stage causes the audience to objectify her. Jerry then brings a fitness instructor to the stage to force the obese woman to exercise. The instructor belittles the woman and steps on her back while forcing her to

³⁹ Stallybrass and White, 178.

⁴⁰ The Jerry Springer Show: Undressed Uncensored Unleashed!, Volume 1.

exercise. In this example, the extreme physical differences of Melinda are put on display for the audience's amusement, thus causing the audience and the viewer to reject this grotesque image. The guest's objectification by the show cleanses the audience and viewer of any moral guilt because she is no longer seen as a person that can affect the human conscious. The separation of the 'public sphere' facilitates this objectification and rejection.

Freud's studies of the grotesque image demonstrate how the normal social majority objectifies and materializes these images into comic form. "They [the bourgeois] attempt to mediate their terrors by enacting private, made-up carnival. In the absence of social forms they produce their own pastiche and parody in an effort to embody semiotically their distress."⁴¹ Like the individualist framework of the bourgeois, the American social majority also partakes in a similar self-exclusion from the grotesque. The exploitative portrayal of the obese woman serves as a comical parody of the insecurities created by the self-exclusion practices of the social majority. The audience's laughter and objectification of the grotesque guest is a disapproval of the societal 'Other'. There is an assumed societal standard of beauty, and Melinda does not adhere to these standards. As Freud notes, "Their phobic alienation in the bourgeois unconscious...making them once more the object of cathartic laughter."⁴² This comical rejection is the enforcement of those who contradict and threaten the American social norm and its hierarchy. However, this phobia serves entice viewership for the way it simultaneously causes rejection and fascination.

⁴¹ Stallybrass and White, 174.

⁴² Stallybrass and White, 171

The connection between the physical body and the social order creates intrigue for the American social majority because they were always taught to be clean and well mannered. Additionally, bourgeois phobia of the ‘Other’ generates a fascination of what lies within the realm of the ‘Other’. The fear of integration with the ‘Other’ creates a desire in the minds of the social majority. “*Quae negata grata* – what is denied is desired: Augustan satire was the generic form which enabled writers to express and negate the grotesque simultaneously.”⁴³ Like the classic Augustan satire before him, Jerry Springer employs this phobia, as it is integral to the transformation of the public sphere. In turn, the fear draws viewership to the show and allows the social majority to partake in and reject the threatening ‘Other’, thus upholding the separated public sphere.

The set and stage of *The Jerry Springer Show* is, in fact, a small social sphere. Like the polarized bourgeois structure of theatre, the show’s social order has clearly defined cultural lines that differentiate guests from audience members and audience members from the host. At the same time, the show is reminiscent of Carnival in the way that it profits from the illusion that it is a democratic forum that allows the voices of the ‘Other’ to be heard. Thus, the aforementioned technique, seen in *The Jerry Springer Show*, of popularizing while simultaneously polarizing cultural norms through public sites of assembly is strikingly reminiscent of the ways in which the bourgeois executed the transformation of the public sphere through sites of assembly. However, the separation and subsequent rise in popularity of the coffee house was unlike that of the theatre or Carnival. Similar to *The Jerry Springer Show*, the coffee house is a blend of both the direct and indirect ways that theatre and Carnival negotiate togetherness and exclusivity.

⁴³ Stallybrass and White, 106

The basis for the importance of the coffee house in 17th and 18th century English culture was the way in which the site of assembly was both inclusive and exclusive at the same time. Stallybrass and White note that the coffee house was “a combination of a ‘democratic’ accessibility with a cleansed discursive environment, a new realignment of the male public body and status.”⁴⁴ It represented a new hybrid site of assembly that combined democratic ideals without the presence of the unruly demands of the body. Unlike the tavern, the coffee house represented a bourgeois-like intellectual forum that welcomed all classes. However, a posted list of rules in each coffee house, that prohibited actions like swearing, card playing, and heretical language,⁴⁵ upheld the importance of the regulation of manners and morals. In the end, the two classes merged into a unified site of assembly, but were still separated by the rules that shaped and enforced the borders of the social order.

Springer plays on the similar hybrid characteristics of the coffee house. The show welcomes those from all classes to participate in an open forum of discussion. However, those who transgress the rules created by social norms are portrayed in a negative light. Like the coffee house, the fusion of the social order within this site of assembly does not necessarily permit the complete merger of the social order. The show plays on these characteristics to draw an audience. The threat that arises from the joining of these classes is eventually relieved through the persistence of rules and order. These rules and their enforcement shape the hidden techniques that create perspective within the show. These coded identifications, then, serve to maintain the social order.

⁴⁴ Stallybrass and White, 95.

⁴⁵ Stallybrass and White, 95.

Sites of assembly like the theatre, carnival, and the coffee house were maintained through the politics of transgression. Like the transformed sites of assembly, *The Jerry Springer Show* is a sort of false carnival that maintains hierarchies through the punishment of those who transgress the social order. The success of the show is aided by the counterfeit way in which it markets itself as a chaotic social sphere without any control. One viewer mentions, "I only watch to see the weirdos and the fights."⁴⁶ Emotional outbreaks of violence are one of the trademark features of *The Jerry Springer Show*. A scorned lover fighting for the one they cherish is one of the purest and most realistic forms of emotional expression. Also, fighting within the show causes an air of chaos where nobody is in control. The show then comes across as a realistic depiction of human emotion and an environment where social hierarchies are destabilized through chaos. However, fighting is just another way in which the show gains popularity and maintains the social order.

On the surface, the portrayal of fighting serves as a display of undeterred human emotion. Upon further examination, the regular acts of aggression on the show are products of the freakishness of the guest. Unlike the American social majority, the guest is not familiarized with accepted forms of civilized behavior. Birmingham points out that, "These programs consistently seek to portray, and even encourage the guests to become complacent in such portrayals because the values of the dominant class will only be maintained as long as there exists an 'Other' whose disgusting presence reaffirms why we are the way we are."⁴⁷ The 'Other' serves only as a

⁴⁶ Kitman, Marvin, *Jerry Springer 'an appalling diversion'*, Entertainment, CNN.com, 29 June 1998, 30 Nov. 2010, < <http://articles.cnn.com/>>.

⁴⁷ Birmingham.

spectacle with which the dominant classes use as an example of what should be denied in order to maintain the distinct boundaries of the social hierarchy. Ellie Hawkins, a viewer from Richmond Hill, New York notes, “Watching people trash themselves is an appalling diversion.”⁴⁸ The acts of violence within the show are in fact diversions. They represent what the social norm should never be, thus bolstering the already existent social division between the social majority and the ‘Other’.

Epstein and Steinberg note that the portrayals of violence and incompetence by the guests create a list of values that are used to uphold and consolidate the majority into a “pact of inequality.”⁴⁹ During the Restoration period in England rationality was a key feature that separated the bourgeois from the other social classes. “The suppression of the physical body became the very sign of rationality, wit and judgment.”⁵⁰ Thus any form of behavior not accepted by the ruling bourgeois was deemed rejected or unacknowledged. Bakhtin’s study of the grotesque notes that rejected behaviors like exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness are classic characteristics of the grotesque style.⁵¹ However, these attributes of the grotesque, which manifest themselves in the confrontational segments within the show, seem to blur the network controlled setting of the show and allow the guests to invade upon each other’s space. In the end, this is just an illusion projected by the show itself.

⁴⁸ Kitman.

⁴⁹ Epstein and Steinberg.

⁵⁰ Stallybrass and White, 105.

⁵¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, Translated by Helene Iswolsky (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 303.

The purpose of displaying confrontational segments in the show is to uphold the acceptable forms of behavior of the American social norm. Recall that the immorality that the oppositional is defined by is based on the values that represent the dominant culture. The presentation of non-conforming behaviors like violence and crude language is rejected as socially dangerous. In turn, this maintenance creates a sense of national unity. Deviant behavior is necessary for societal cohesion because a common bond is born through united outrage. Violence within the show strengthens the “pact of inequality” and further solidifies the other’s disconnected role in the American social order. The feelings of national unity and class cohesion produced by violent segments within the show are upheld and enforced through the punishment of those who transgress the social order.

Punishment, in the form of verbal abuse by the audience or Jerry himself, serves not as a reprisal, but as a defense against moral infractions. We return once more to *The Jerry Springer Show* to find Dreama, a conventionally dressed woman who is upset that her husband is cheating on her. Dreama is an emotional wreck, as another woman named Tabby has ruined the sanctity of her marriage. When Tabby enters the stage, wearing very promiscuous clothing, the audience rants, “Hit the whore!”⁵² After a brief physical altercation between the two women, the audience chimes in again and chants, “Trailer park trash!” When the second transgressor, Richard, enters the stage, he is immediately met with hostility from the audience members. This causes Richard to rip his shirt off and attempt to attack the scornful audience. This example proves that violations of the traditional heteronormative social code are met with disgust.

⁵² The Jerry Springer Show: Undressed Uncensored Unleashed!, Volume 1.

The audience members are the most obvious and emotionally charged protectors of the moral code. Verbal abuse of transgressors serves to reinforce boundaries. Bakhtin notes, “We feel a moral satisfaction, since sharp criticism and mockery have dealt a blow to these vices.”⁵³ In the end, the fear of scrutiny from the moral majority forces guests like Tabby and Richard to submit to the law of social order. In turn, the audience finds pleasure and peace of mind through criticizing the guest. The frequency of fighting within the show does not serve to normalize deviant behavior, but to give the audience situations in which they can enforce accepted social behaviors. Thus, the entertainment that arises from these confrontational sequences blurs fact from fiction and instills the illusion of chaos within the show. As you will soon find out, everyone in the micro-social structure of *The Jerry Springer Show* does his or her part to create this illusion and enforce the social order.

Each participant of the show works in conjunction with the other to enforce the existing social order. Collectively they create and facilitate the scenes of violence within the show that are used as points of differentiation between the audience and guest that, in turn, creates the sense of national unity within the ruling social majority. Beginning with the guest themselves, they serve as points of scrutiny for the audience members and viewers at home. Since the guests are the transgressors, the audience’s response to their actions either confirms or rejects traditional standards of conduct.⁵⁴ As previously mentioned, the audience provides verbal or physical cues to the guests that serves to uphold the traditional moral standards attributed to the dominant

⁵³ Bakhtin, 306.

⁵⁴ Mark Elizabeth Grabe, “Maintaining the moral order: a functional analysis of “The Jerry Springer Show”,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no.3 (2010): 311-328.

social class. The show permits structured opportunities for the audience to respond with cheers or boos to the situations of scrutiny. Like the Roman mob in the coliseum, the audience acts in judgment of those fighting on stage. The Roman mob's chanting of "Live, live, live!" is easily translatable to the audience's chanting of "Jerry, Jerry, Jerry!" Yet audience is only the extension of the host, the Caesar that possesses ultimate control.

The host is the father figure of the audience who facilitates the interactions between the guest and audience. The show attempts to portray Jerry as an objective bystander of the action at hand. However, he is not just a non-biased mediator. He is responsible for expressing a specific wisdom that is always aligned with the beliefs of the social norm. With sarcastic comments, suggestive mannerisms, and advice that align with the dominant social norms, Springer sheds any image of objectivity. In fact, even Jerry's hair and clothing are representative of the ideals of the middle-class majority and his role is to uphold those standards. One author confirms this argument when he writes, "Most of the time, Springer, 53, witnesses these violent outbursts from the relative safety of his raucous studio audience, dispensing leading questions and very obvious pearls of wisdom: "If a man tells another man to kick a pregnant woman in the stomach so she'll lose the baby, he's not a good father." ”⁵⁵ Albeit a sarcastic comment, the above quote comically indicates that Jerry Springer possesses the power in the show's social order.

Since the host is a representative of the network, and the network is charged with maintaining the social order, he is able to intervene to preserve the integrity of the hierarchal structure. Nowhere is his power of intervention more present than in the palm of his hands.

⁵⁵ Bianculli.

Springer is in control of the microphone, a phallic contraption that is emblematic of masculinity and power. The microphone gives voice to those who have none and overpowers those who attempt to challenge its authority. Springer's most influential usage of the microphone comes at the end of every episode. In the final minutes of each show, Jerry places himself on the side of the stage. In a statement of egalitarianism, he sits amongst the guests. He then thanks everyone involved in the show for a great episode and gives a piece of advice relative to the theme of that specific show. For example, at the end of a show featuring themes of infidelity and polygamy, Jerry implores, "What is pleasurable or intense is not necessarily good."⁵⁶ What is important to note here is that the authority given to Jerry Springer in the show is used to promote the cohesion of the ruling social majority. Statements such as this call for a specific understanding of morality, or rather a morality that is accordance with the social norm.

At the end of every episode, Jerry's final word concludes with the same statement, "Until next time, take care of yourselves and each other."⁵⁷ To the untrained eye, this statement is a sincere gesture directed towards everyone in the audience, on stage, and at home. After further analysis, one can conclude that Jerry's this example is emblematic of Springer's attempt to maintain societal cohesion. With his eyes directed into the camera's gaze, Jerry is, in fact, asking the viewers to take care of themselves and themselves only. Leave the oppositional sphere to fend for themselves, as it is Jerry's job to uphold the standards of the social order.

⁵⁶ The Jerry Springer Show, Season 14, Episode 914.

⁵⁷ The Jerry Springer Show, Season 14, Episode 914.

Finally, we come to the role of the security guards. They are the most obvious forms of maintenance of the social order. They are responsible for controlling the violent confrontations between the guests and audience and the guests themselves. Their actions are always in response to the physical threats on stage. The security guard's role is key because, in controlling the violence on stage, they perpetuate the illusion of chaos. "[Bouncers] provide the opportunity for violent physical aggression in a context where the protagonists [guests] know that they will not be able to do too much damage to each other."⁵⁸ In other words, they allow the guests to let go, as they know that in the end the bouncers will not allow the loss of control. This factor is key in forming unity through differentiation. However, there we are forgetting one very important tool that the bouncers frequently utilize for controlling the confrontational segments on the show, the ever-present sound of the bell.

When the show calls for an act of violence, they call upon the bell for its starting and stopping point. Much like a boxing match, the sound of the bell signals the beginning and end of each physical altercation. This element is the key indicator of the way in which physical altercations in the show demonstrate maintenance of the social order. Even though the violence in the show appears to promote the destruction of traditional moral norms, the bell makes these fights overtly predictable. The bell in *The Jerry Springer Show* is highly correlative to the bell used in the experiments of famous psychologist Ivan Pavlov. "By pairing a conditioned stimulus (a bell) with an unconditioned stimulus (food), a dog would begin to salivate (response) when the

⁵⁸ Lunt and Stenner, 67.

bell was rung without presenting the food.”⁵⁹ The theory makes the assumption that the dog’s salivation to the tone is based upon the dogs’ experience. In other words, the powers of the bell in controlling the actions of the guest are directly dependent on the marginalized experience of the ‘Other’. The guest’s experience is defined by his or her inability to adhere to the bodily norms defined by the ruling social majority. Thus, their subordinated societal role permits their ability to respond to the bell. The show then uses the bell as a sort of social control over the degraded ‘Other’. Like the dog, the guest is conditioned to fight upon hearing the bell. It demonstrates the way in which the guest is subservient to the wishes of the ruling social majority. This is another tool of social maintenance within the confrontational sequences in the show that helps create the ‘participatory illusion’, which in turn aids in popularizing the show. In order for the illusion of chaos in the show to operate correctly, one must shift gears and analyze how the themes of show permit these confrontational sequences.

Some scholars note that the themes of *The Jerry Springer Show* make a public mockery of the accepted moral framework. These themes contradict traditional forms of heterosexuality like “marriage, monogamy, sexual prudery, the nuclear family, and enforced heterosexuality.”⁶⁰ Certainly, one can argue that guests like Brian, who as we recall is the cross-dressing man unable to let go of his unusual hobby, are products of the failures of heterosexual culture and that Springer exposes these shortcomings on television. Are the themes of the show a strategy of subversion or are they promoting the reinforcement of dominant moral values? I argue that

⁵⁹ “Ivan Pavlov-Stimulus Response”,

<<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/history/pavlov.html>>

⁶⁰ Gierman.

themes that deal with societal issues like marriage and sexuality serve to enforce the moral code and maintain the social order. The presentation of unconventional topics allows the guest the display their emotions, which creates the perception that the guest is bringing the private to the public stage. In turn, the themes give certain realism to the show, which permits the illusion of a democratic expression of human emotion. However, we must recall that the guest is a constructed mechanism created by the show itself. Therefore, the themes that they discuss must also aid in their construction.

Themes provide dialogue for the public debate of morality. Unconventional themes appear to threaten societal limits, but, through policing and debate, these borders are protected and maintained. Each theme has two sides: one representing the social norm and the other representing the opposition to that norm. In turn, this assumes a moral code for society. Grabe notes, “A moral code prescribes the principles and rules of conduct for member of a society, unifying them on the basis of a shared value system. As a part of the social fabric, morality inspires order in social life, securing the perpetuity of social systems.”⁶¹ Since the unconventional themes of the show evoke the creation of two polar sides, critics can make their claims to the authenticity of the show as a forum for oppositional culture. Note that when topics such as racism and polygamy are discussed, the audience meets those who are not in accordance with the social majority’s stance on those themes with anger and disgust. One can infer, then, that the themes within the show measure the violation of morality at hand. The themes of the

⁶¹ Grabe, 313.

show expose the moral code of society and allow for the confrontational sequences that display the punishment of those who transgress it.

The show does not blame the dominant culture for the oppression of the ‘Other’s’ role in contemporary American society. Their punishment of the transgressors is displayed as a form of upholding basic standards. Where the themes threaten to debase morals and tastefulness, the audience and viewer is portrayed as those responsible for establishing the normative boundaries. Birmingham notes, “Talk shows are able to cast viewers in the role of voyeurs to reinforce the viewer’s feelings of superiority and belief in the system that has made them superior.”⁶² This truth is most evident in the disclaimer displayed before the start of every show. “The Jerry Springer Show may contain adult themes or strong language. Parents are cautioned that this show may not be suitable for children.”⁶³ The warning forces the viewer to consent to the material he or she is about to encounter. The viewer is then relieved of any responsibility for the societal condition of the guest and consumes the images on screen without any remorse. In the end, the illusion of the show as an oppositional product, coupled with the lack of guilt on the dominant class’s part creates an uninterrupted cyclical process of maintaining the social order. Every weekday, viewers are drawn to *The Jerry Springer Show* by the false threat of the destruction of the social order. However, their anxieties are relieved when they realize, without any guilt, that the oppositional sphere is unable to destroy the borders of the social order.

In the most basic terms, *The Jerry Springer Show*’s popularity and long-winded success is due to the ways in which it serves as a false Carnival. Gierman notes that, “By blurring the

⁶² Birmingham.

⁶³ The Jerry Springer Show, Season 14, Episode 914.

boundaries between the public and private and inviting viewers to participate, at least vicariously...the show undermines the culture of compulsive and compulsory heterosexuality.”⁶⁴ It is the show’s ability to portray itself as an oppositional product that brings the private lives of ordinary people into the public spectrum. In this way, it promotes viewership in two distinct ways. The first is through the threat of the acceptance of the ‘Other’ into the social norm. In turn, this controversial factor brings an audience to the show. The second is the way in which this threat is relieved through the promotion and enforcement of the ideals of the social norm. In the end, the show promotes the values of the social majority and invites the audience and viewership to participate in its defense. The show’s popularity is based around a balanced relationship that introduces anxiety and offers relief.

The coded techniques of camera work and structured conversation allude to the ways in which the show creates perspective. The threat of the destabilization of the moral framework is negated through these techniques. In this way, the show appears to be an objective and democratic forum that allows the voices of the ‘Other’ to threaten the social norm. However, this is a facade that has been proven to expose the way in which the show is motivated not by undermining the social majority, but by profit. The show’s success is based upon ratings, and the competitive nature of the daytime television genre forced *The Jerry Springer Show* to find ratings by evolving into a controversial show. Dickson confirms this truth when she notes, “Profit is the bottom line for commercial television. And as long as the like of [Howard] Stern

⁶⁴ Gierman

and Springer can deliver and audience to advertisers, broadcasters have little incentive to take the moral high ground.”⁶⁵

The show’s ability to shape perspective and create the illusion that it is a threatening and controversial product is dependent upon the framework that there is a hierarchical social order. In order to force viewers to identify with a particular side or ideology, there must be another side that is rejected. Through analyzing the similarities between *The Jerry Springer Show* and the theatre, Carnival, and coffee house, we find that it is through the punishment of those of transgress the identified social norm that the show can create a threat and dispose of it simultaneously. Cultural hegemony is upheld by the self-exclusionary practices of the ruling social majority. In this way, the ‘Other’ is portrayed in a negative light and is unable to escape from its subordinated societal role. The politics of transgression enforce hegemonic discourse and create a cyclical process that enforces the boundaries of the social norm. The maintenance of the social order brings relief to the phobic moral majority and, in turn, produces viewership for the show. *The Jerry Springer Show* has succeeded for nearly 20 years because of the way in which it positions itself within the American social framework. As long as the show invites the participation of both the freak and the societal norm, there seems to be no end for the show in sight. Until then, as Jerry Springer would say, “Take care of yourself, and each other.”

⁶⁵ Dickson.

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