

ScANDALIOUS sEcREts PeRfORMING quEEr ON the

by Naughty[ly] Gierman

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Cet article évalue le spectacle de Jerry Springer qui a envahi les structures établies de l'hétéronormalité. D'après l'opinion d'une féministe lesbienne, l'auteure assure qu'une performance sur le lesbianisme de Springer peut être une forme de résistance et une stratégie subversive.

I have a confession. I enjoy watching the *Jerry Springer Show*. I first encountered it last year while I was trying to study. Looking for distraction, I wandered into the room where my friends were watching the show. I pretended to be shocked that they were watching such garbage and resolved to study harder. However, the next day, home alone, I armed myself with the remote (for quick turn off in case someone walked in) and sat down on the couch for an hour of self-indulgence and pleasure. Soon this became a daily practice; I became obsessed with the *Jerry Springer Show*. Never before had I seen so many

expressions of queerness on mainstream television. Instead of the usual reinforcement of heterosexuality, the conventional nuclear family, of sex only between married couples for procreation in the missionary position, Jerry showcased, non-monogamy, infidelity, spouse-hatred, straight people admitting their homosexual tendencies, and queers of various persuasions airing their sex lives to the entire world. Night after night I turned to Jerry and was rarely disappointed with scenes of normative behavior; instead, I was met with such scenes as:

"Honey I'm a prostitute."

"Bizarre one night stands."

"Scandalous confessions."

"I may look a man, but I am really a woman."

"My transsexual lover is leaving me for my lesbian sister."

I introduced the wonders of *Jerry* to my Feminist Cultural Theory class and got mixed responses. Some of the women in my class were hostile while others admitted to watching the show behind locked doors. The response led me to examine why some queer feminists and millions of television viewers might welcome the invasion of daily queer performances into their homes; specifically, the value that the show has in intruding on the established structures of heteronormativity. The show presents these effects through the display of the grotesque body, which as Mikhail Bakhtin and Mary Russo suggest, disrupts the hierarchy of society. I argue that the presentation of performances of queerness on *The Jerry Springer Show* can be a form of resist-

ance, and a strategy of subversion. He enacts these forces by, making a public mockery of the moral framework of heteronormativity: marriage, monogamy, sexual prudery, the nuclear family, and enforced heterosexuality. These effects are no mere accident or simple amusement. In fact, Springer himself articulates in an interview with *TV Guide*, "I will be known as the guy who brought down western civilization."

This charge—the destruction of all that the Euro-North American mainstream holds dear—is often leveled at lesbians, gays, and the queer culture they assert. Queer, as a definition and as a concept is always subject to mutability. Queer as a category and as a name is useful because it rejects the minority impulse of tolerance and representation by implying a more thorough rebuke and intentional resistance to regimes of the normal. Originally an appropriation of a term used against lesbians, it now acknowledges the terror and destructiveness of homophobia, removes the need to define clear-cut gender lines or definitive definitions of varied and various sexualities. As Michael Warner shows, its "aggressive" generalization simultaneously denotes fear and pleasure (xxvi). Queering a text like Springer then involves more than simply pointing out potentially gay or lesbian characters, themes, or activities; it involves revealing the signs of heteronormativity and proceeding further to find exciting alternatives.

Heterosexuality does not inevitably lead to heteronormativity. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner explain,

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ReVEaled

JERRY SPRINGER Show

understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged ... heteronormativity is thus a concept distinct from heterosexuality. One of the most conspicuous differences is that it has no parallel, unlike heterosexuality, which organizes homosexuality, as its opposite. (355)

Heteronormativity, through such processes and ideologies as traditional family values and the morality lessons of the Christian Right, has implications on how both queer and heterosexual people live their lives. Heterosexuals are enjoined to get married, but to remain virginal until they do. Sex is defined primarily in terms of coitus and must never be talked about in public (especially not in front of the children!). Queer people are warned to be quiet about their lives, to stay locked in the closet or face the consequences, both in private at home and in public at work. On mainstream television, queer lifestyles are almost invisible. On the rare occasion when they are represented, they are reproductions of what mainstream culture thinks they should be like; non-sexual, non-political, fashionable fakes. Well, of course some queers are fashionable fakes, but as Larry Gross explains, such images often lead to,

well meaning approaches that plead for tolerance by representing gays as no different from heterosexuals, a 'liberal' strategy that dictates complete asexuality. (152)

A notorious example is the sitcom *Ellen*, and especially the episode which involved the main character coming out as a lesbian to fictional friends and family and the actor who played her, Ellen DeGeneres, coming out to viewers. The televised "coming out" mirrored DeGeneres's own coming out in real life. When *Ellen* (and Ellen) came out on national television, I was overjoyed. However, the pleasure soon faded. After a few episodes, I could not relate to this white, high-income lesbian, who was almost completely non-sexual. *Ellen* was agonizingly normal, which in itself is not problematic, but she was the only queer figure on mainstream TV. Other sitcoms have followed suit, introducing us to good-looking, high-income, queer characters, like the handsome and rich lawyer Will on *Will and Grace* (who is incidentally played by a self-identified heterosexual). All of these shows are touted as a political victory for lesbianism, and yes they are a starting place, but they are not enough; they do not adequately represent queer lifestyles, or challenge gender roles and heteronormativity.

That is why *Jerry Springer* is such a refreshing change from *Ellen* and *Will* and their heteronormative sisters and brothers. *Jerry's* guests are not glamorous or fashionable. They are primarily presented as working class, a lot of white trash, and many combine their class and occupational marginalization as sex workers. *Jerry's* guests are not "normal"; their behavior is rude, vulgar, and very sexual. They flaunt and perform their sexuality without any shame, exposing their body parts, making out, introducing their multiple partners,

and dressing in fetish gear. By announcing the public failings of heteronormativity and heterosexual culture worldwide, Springer puts a kink in the organization of heterosexuality. Berlant and Warner explain that:

Community is imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling, and kinship ... a whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality ... the (heterosexual) sex act shielded by the zone of privacy is the effectual nimbus that heterosexual culture protects and from which it abstracts its model of ethics.... (359)

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in queer sex. And the viewers are accepting the invitation. *Springer* is one of the top ten most watched shows in America; and seven million viewers from all over the world are tuning in every day (Springer).

Springer himself does not react to these public heterosexual failings and queer flaunting with shock. In fact, he hardly ever questions his guests. He does not subject them to therapists or experts on the show, instead, he allows their performances to unfold and individuals to express themselves. His openness differs from the melodramatic and therapeutic talk shows that proliferate on television. *Oprah*, *Sally*, and *Jenny Jones*, usually incorporate an expert opinion, prescriptions from the visiting therapist or the host's own home spun wisdom. The advice given is usually quite common place and often passive aggressively condescending. The trauma or confusion must be resolved within the hour of the television program; the marriage is saved, former enemies become best friends, the lesbian either realizes she's really straight, or accepts her obvious deviance. As Berlant and Warner point out, these therapeutic talk shows do not,

blame the ideologies and institutions of heterosexuality... the talk show hosts are newly astonished to find that people who are committed to hetero intimacy are nevertheless unhappy. (361)

The *Jerry Springer Show* show, in contrast, allows an open stage for queer performances, without trying to solve their non-monogamy, messy identities, or sexual perversities.

The demand to be on the *Jerry Springer Show* is quite high. The guests are comprised of many diverse individuals, whether a heterosexual dominatrix, an MTF transsexual person, a flamboyant drag queen, a male trucker who prefers wearing women's panties, or a man who is cheating on his wife with his stuffed Panda bear. No other locales on mainstream television are saturated

with so much queerness (Oprah would never let these folks on her show). Almost all of Jerry's guests talk about their sex in detail. The privacy and intimacy that molds and shapes heteronormative society is thrown out the window. For these reasons, there have been many criticisms of the show. Liberal gay/lesbian critics could argue that such wild behavior reinforces stereotypes of queers as perverse and/or promiscuous. Criticism of public performances of queer identities at pride parades have often led organizers to enforce strict codes of behaviour and dress in order to give a "palatable" impression to the conservative public. In Montreal's 1992 Pride Parade, organizers asked that,

there was to be no cross-dressing, no exposure of buttocks, no displays deemed too "vulgar" or "erotic," and no flags.... As if the outlawing of extravagant fashion weren't enough, it was suggested that the preferred attire of parade participants be blue jeans and a white T-shirt. (Namaste qtd. Bell and Valentine 14).

So constructed, the parade was to be a proper political maneuver. Flamboyant or disgraceful queers were discouraged from attending, or pressured to mold their identities into a neat and tidy presentable packages, lest other Canadians find out after all that "we are *not* just like you." The queer nation's demands for inclusion of SM communities, trans-communities, queer straight-people, and other perverts and deviants, were silenced or made invisible.

The opinions of the organizers of the 1992 Montreal pride parade are not so different from those of television critics in mainstream publications. Who denounce the *Jerry Springer Show* as:

... A world gone mad, a world beyond shock, a world swirling in a moral void. (Gabler M3).

... a forum for trashy people to act trashy, exhibiting their bad manners, hard hearts, and filthy family laundry before millions of viewers. (Jarvis 7)

... a standard for all sorts of people to flaunt not just their physical oddities, but their vulgarity, or sinfulness as well. (Anderson 97)

Apart from their classism and homophobia, these writers raise the theme of the freak, the grotesque, and the oddity, something that is rarely seen and should remain hidden so as not to offend "normal" citizens. As Mary Russo explains in her study of the grotesque body in history:

The Classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek; it is identified with the "high" or official culture ... the grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official 'low' culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation. (8)

Mikhail Bakhtin explains that "exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style" (303). The queer body has become a site of the grotesque, a site of fear, hatred, comedy, the absurd or the carnivalesque. Bakhtin explains that the grotesque body in carnival creates, "a temporary suspension of all hierarchical distinctions and barriers among men [sic] and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life." He goes on to state that communication that would not normally occur in official discourse becomes possible, and speech etiquette that requires patterns of deterrence and authority is relaxed between individuals (Bakhtin 18). The *Jerry Springer Show*, as carnival, exhibits the queer body exaggerated. Is this mode of

excessiveness and exaggerated public performance on the *Springer* useful as a form of resistance? Mary Russo explains:

The extreme difficulty of producing lasting social change does not diminish the usefulness of these symbolic models of transgression, and the histories of the subaltern and counter-productive cultural activity are never as neatly closed as the structural model might suggest. (58)

Nothing on *Springer* is neatly closed. *Springer* blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal, and the private and the public. I would argue that the more these boundaries become troubled the more the performativity is pronounced, this allows, "...in liminal states ... the temporary loss of boundaries to redefine social frames" (Russo 58).

Most criticisms of the *Jerry Springer Show* revolve around its seditious elements and undesirable guests, disrupting the order of normalcy in western culture. *Springer* makes queer culture hyper-visible, allowing those who are silenced in other areas of life, a chance to perform. This especially rings true for those expressing desires and identities that veer away from the norm. When making queries into why these images seem to disturb, or signal a threat to conservative regimes, I wonder if Jerry Springer is correct when he states that he might bring down "western civilization." We will have to wait and see. I believe it would be incorrect to categorize the activities on the *Jerry Springer Show* as sub-cultural phenomena. Perhaps if we look hard enough we will recognize the other public performances of queer in our neighborhoods, in our families, in ourselves and in the lives of our politicians (does anyone remember Clinton, Tripp, or Margaret Trudeau?). What might happen if we expressed our queer desires? Why do we want to believe that "normal"

is normal? The questions are limitless, and so are the possibilities.

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CHERYL DOBINSON

Long After

I remember the night we almost kissed,
in the women's washroom of a restaurant
in a suburban Ottawa mall

Waiting in line, both gently drunk,
you leaned close in the tight space,
hand pressed against the cool tile wall above my shoulder,
not quite touching, breath and eyes meeting,
you said you would miss me.
I was leaving the place we had fled to together.

Then you shifted forward, ever so slightly, into the kiss you
never took,
which waited for you on my lips
long after that moment.

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