

Daytime television talk shows are a significant part of American pop culture and are the subject of this paper. I will be analyzing the genre in terms of sociological concepts introduced in class. This genre includes many shows; the ones focused on here include The Jerry Springer Show and The Doctor Phil show. The Springer show was a popular TV talk show, airing for 27 seasons from September 1991 until July 2018; the Doctor Phil Show began airing in September 2002 and is still on the air and running strong. The Springer show has a well-known reputation as "trash TV," the host embraced topics in a satirical way, beginning each episode by introducing the program "as the worst TV show of all time" (Gale 2019). Dr. Phil is known as America's Therapist, and on his show, guests come on to share their health or relationship issues and solicit guidance and possibly therapeutic support from Dr. Phil.

Much of the research on these daytime talk shows focuses on the content or the participants, or audience orientation. Peck has suggested that talk shows are therapeutic discourse. These talk shows focus on issues that are hidden, bringing them front and center to be resolved. In essence, these shows make private matters public, giving attention to often overlooked people. The hosts, like Jerry Springer, play a major role in the conflicts and much of the "audience's enjoyment of the show is based on the viewers parasocial relationship with the host" (Rubin, Haridakis and Eyal, 2003). Whether The Jerry Springer Show is therapeutic is questionable, however it provides entertainment to the masses.

The Springer show specialized in shock and awe, with guests coming on to share their stories, or find out the truth of their situations. Most of the time guests aired their dirty laundry in a very public manner, some might say embarrassing themselves, and more often than not brawling with each other.

The show had security that would step in and stop the fights before they got out of hand. All the while the audience was enjoying the freakshow. It is hard to comprehend why so many individuals would want to come on the show, but they did (Lunt and Stenner, 2005).

The Springer show was a part of pop culture. The show's participants could be seen as individuals who exhibit qualities that are associated with **low culture**; scantily dressed and incapable of bodily or emotional restraint. These were individuals, who presented as less educated, who thought nothing of airing dirty laundry in a public sphere. More often than not their language skills were poor or incorporated slang and cursing (Lunt and Stenner, 2005).

The money shot was the key to a talk show's success. "**The money shot**", is a phrase coined by Laura Grindstaff, sociologist and author of *The Money Shot: Trash, Class and the Making of TV Talk Shows*. The term is used to describe what is happening on the Jerry Springer Show. It is the point where the pay-off occurs; the guests lose control and express emotions, ranging from rage, sorrow, anger to joy. There is cursing and fighting and security to break it up. This is the Jerry Springer "**Money Shot**." (Grindstaff, 2002). Every episode is designed to bring the guests and audience at home to this point, and the producers and staff have the formula down pat.

Which members of society are drawn to watching talk shows like the Jerry Springer Show? What is the appeal? Charles Oliver, in his paper *Freak Parade: daytime talk shows are a contemporary carnival*, likens the genre of talk shows, to 19th century carnivals that traveled the United States providing entertainment, featuring the perverse. The sideshows included, the bearded lady, the tattooed man, Siamese twins, as well as the 'hoochie coochie' dancers, all were popular attractions. Carnivals catered to the dark side of man, providing entertainment that was freakish. Carnivals offered a safe way for people to temporarily escape their everyday lives, dip their toe into the perverse, it was exciting. The ultimate

appeal of the Carnival is that afterwards one could return home safe and sound. The new gateway to the Carnival Freak show is the conflict based daytime talk show, of which there have been many (Oliver, 1995). The Jerry Springer Show fits the bill, thriving on sleaze, the uncultured, and the dangerous. In one episode the topic was strippers and their disapproving family members. Of course, the strippers demonstrate their profession for all to see, while their loving family members look on, creating turmoil and providing that sleaze the viewers want. (Oliver, 1995).

The Dr. Phil show, also a popular daytime talk show, takes a different approach, focusing on helping guests deal with issues that can range from broken familial relationships to unhealthy habits, mental health issues, to previous traumas that the guest cannot be free of. This show attempts to bring help to guests and by extension to educate the masses that watch. Dr. Phil's therapy style "seems to be a DIY (Do It Yourself) therapy, a combination of self-help and behavioral therapy" (Martinez et al., 2011). Dr. Phil is the host and also an expert, who periodically brings other experts on to the show.

Another way Dr. Phil separates himself and his show from shows like Jerry Springer's is by presenting guests who are socially normal members of society, who are just dealing with issues that are troubling, and could happen to any of us. He makes sure the audience knows these guests are typical, and are good people (Martinez, et al., 2011). Dr. Phil wants his audience to know that his guests represent the general public and that anyone who watches could be a guest on his show. Dr. Phil has tapped into the public mindset, and his **pop culture** fame has provided him a platform to speak to millions of people every day. He not only has a hit talk show but has published many self-help books on a myriad of topics, all aimed at **mass consumption** for all. Consumers should be critical consumers of the messages that he provides (Martinez et al., 2011). This is not to say that Dr. Phil's messages are bad, but that members of society have

the final say as to what he or she listens to; we have to be educated consumers in accepting the messaging he sends.

There is an interesting analysis presented in a paper called, "Dr. Phil, Medical Theaters, Freak Shows, and Talking Couches", by Jack Richardson and Jennifer Eisenhauer. This paper explores more recent ways that newer shows, such as The Dr. Phil Show, are a shift and represent the new version of the Freak Show culture that was so popular with shows like Jerry Springer's. Society's fascination with physical freak shows has been replaced with interest in mental health disabilities. The authors dub the show the **talking stage** as it melds the discourse of the freak show with elements of psychoanalysis and theater. The show may be doing more harm than good as its design tends to highlight some of the stereotypical traits of a particular mental health issue, leaving the audience with conclusions about a particular mental health issue that are not actually typical. (Richardson and Eisenhauer, 2014). The information presented by Dr. Phil, leaves the audience to absorb and accept or discount what they observe. This brings to mind the concept of **Media Literacy**, which can be defined as the ability to access, analyze and evaluate media. Having media literacy helps us to better understand the sometimes-complex messaging that is received. Dr. Phil is providing information to his broad reaching audience that may be, for the sake of entertainment, skewed to highlight the more shocking symptoms or issues leaving impressions about mental health or behaviors that may not be complete.

The concept of **culture** has a broad definition. Culture has shared meaning; it is produced in families, schools, churches, and the entertainment industry. The **mass media** floods our televisions and lives with stories about the human experience and each story, or episode, includes a set of claims about what the world means. The **mass media** is referred to as "the **culture industry**,

because it is capitalism's mechanism for producing art as a commodity" (Kidd, 2019).

When we think about the genre of TV talk shows, we are honing in on **commercial culture**. The shows are produced in a society with a large middle-class identification, which also includes those who are very wealthy or poor. These talk shows are produced in one place and watched all over the country. **Commercial culture** separates the production of the show from the consumption of the show. Wendy Griswold has created a visual aid, called **the cultural diamond**, showing the creator(producer) and the receiver (audience) on horizontal points of a diamond, with the social world and cultural object on the vertical points of the diamond. As audiences watch these shows, they are drawing facts and making conclusions. They may internalize what is being shared, be it from Dr. Phil, Jerry Springer, or other hosts. The **culture industry** generates a wide array of social meaning through the components of the cultural diamond in their shows (Kidd, 2019).

Sociology provides us with powerful theories and methodologies to analyze and interpret what we observe about our world. Analysis of the daytime talk show genre, a big part of our culture, offers the opportunity to apply these concepts and discover what we notice. In this paper we see that the concept of 'class' gets mixed up in the context of daytime talk shows. We learn that **Media Literacy** is required when watching these shows. We note that commercial culture is very powerful and that the capitalist goal of profits affects the show and its use of guests, to reach its '**Money Shot**' every time. We learn that this type of entertainment can also provide a release for the audience and a chance to experience a bit of perversion or danger and then have the safety of returning to the safety of their 'normal' lives.

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