Rear Window Ethics: Domestic Privacy versus Public Responsibility in the Evolution of Voyeurism

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VOYEURISM. WHAT DOES that word mean to you? As you attempt to pin down its definition, I am sure certain images dance through your mind: a shadowy figure spying through a keyhole, a pervert with mirrors fastened to his shoes, that jerk in the locker room with a camera phone. But have you ever caught yourself watching someone? If so, does that mean you are a voyeur? Where do we draw the line of morality? As we grow older, our parents teach us that it is impolite to stare, and yet sometimes even our own government instructs us to keep a watchful eye on our neighbors. There is no denying that we all watch each other from time to time, but is this sort of behavior on the rise? If so, what does this mean about our society?

If you look "voyeurism" up in the dictionary, you will find something that reads like this: one who seeks sexual stimulation by visual means. Consider what effect the removal of one word from that definition makes. If we cross out the word "sexual," then it reads: one who seeks stimulation by visual means. This new description seems appropriate for most of America. After all, we have been going to the movies for nearly a century now and have been glued to our televisions since the 1950s, not to mention all the visual media we are exposed to on the internet everyday. Some psychiatrists use another word to label our appeal to visual media—scopophilia. Scopophilia essentially means to derive pleasure from looking. Freud associated scopophilia with objectifying others

with a controlling and curious gaze. In an extreme case, this gaze can become fixated into a perversion, producing voyeurs who can only gain sexual satisfaction from watching an objectified other (Mulvey, 587). Yet what about those of us who are fixated on visual media, but are not sexually stimulated? Are we all voyeurs?

If you take a look at what is on television lately, you may have a hard time answering that question. "Reality" programming has been steadily rising since the 1980s until practically exploding in the year 2000. These days it seems that "reality" shows far out number any other brand of entertainment. Does this phenomenonal proclivity towards fly-on-the-wall programming mean that we are becoming more voyeuristic, more subversive, more sexual? Or, have we simply become more comfortable making our previously private feelings more public? In his book, *Voyeur Nation*, Clay Calvert tackles these and many more issues concerning the increasing popularity of "reality" TV and the proliferation of voyeurism itself. Calvert opens his book by expanding upon the definition of voyeurism and its relation to television programming by creating the term "mediated voyeurism." This term describes the consumption of programming and images utilizing scenarios that expose "apparently real and unguarded lives" for the purpose of entertainment or information that come with the expense of another's privacy (2). Keep in mind this privacy can be taken unknowingly or, as in most cases, be given up freely. In Calvert's opinion, traditional definitions of voyeurism do not apply to the simulated voyeurism offered by "reality" TV. While he admits that some of our mediated voyeurism carries sexual overtones, he argues that the majority of what should be considered mediated voyeurism is nonsexual (50). In an effort to better clarify both the dimensions of mediated voyeurism and the variety of "reality"-based programming, as well as other media sources, Calvert next proceeds to assign four categories of mediated voyeurism: video vérité voyeurism, which conveys allegedly unmanipulated realism; reconstruction voyeurism, which consists of reenact-

ments and dramatizations of real events; tell-all/show all voyeurism, which includes both television newsmagazines and talk shows; and sexual voyeurism, which contains pornographic voyeuristic content. These four categories provide us with a better understanding of how the definition and use of the term "voyeurism" has evolved since its creation.

While Calvert illustrates the scope of nonsexual voyeurism, he does not deny the increasing amount of voyeuristic media or the deviant connotation that continues to follow the term. So, if America is becoming more voyeuristic, then how does this reflect on our morals and ethics? In Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, Jimmy Stewart's character asks a similar question of his girlfriend Lisa, played by Grace Kelly: "I wonder if it's ethical to watch a man with binoculars and a long-focus lens? Do you suppose it's ethical even if you prove that he didn't commit a crime?" In response, Grace Kelly coolly delivers the line "I'm not much on rear window ethics." Since the film lays no claim to reality, it does not fit into Calvert's definition of mediated voyeurism. However, voyeurism is the focus of the film, which thereby connects it to the evolution of the term in our society. Therefore I will assign the viewing of such works with the title fictional voyeurism.

Alfred Hitchcock was an intricate and creative force behind the thriller genre, while his films commented on the society in which they premiered. Among Hitchcock's prevailing themes were sex, violence, fear, authority, politics, voyeurism, and the domestic sphere. It is these last two categories that take center stage in one of Hitchcock's best-known and well-regarded films, *Rear Window*. When L. B. Jeffries, a professional photographer played by Stewart, is injured on assignment, he becomes wheelchair bound in his Greenwich Village apartment. Lacking any other source of entertainment, he begins to spy on his neighbors across the courtyard. In an interview with François Truffaut, Hitchcock commented on the voyeuristic quality of Stewart's character. "Sure, he's a snooper, but aren't we all?" Hitchcock continued, "no one turns away and says, 'it's none of my business.'

They could pull down their blinds, but they never do; they stand there and look out" (qtd. in Truffaut, 160).

Rear Window premiered in 1954, and while some critics regarded it as promoting Peeping-Thomism, the act was simultaneously becoming institutionalized by our government. It was an age of fear and suspicion. The cold war was in effect, and the enemy was suspected to be lurking around every corner. Even our neighbors were to be watched for subversive, possibly communist behavior. In the film, "Jeff's voyeuristic practices are rooted in the establishment of a national-security apparatus that legitimated the use of the camera for intruding on the privacy of others" (Corber, 100). Citizens were, in effect, given a license to spy. What *Rear Window* provided was a model for exploring these issues of public safety in surveillance for the common good versus our personal rights of privacy. "From *Rear Window* on, film artists had a model for exploring the psychic costs of the newly felt need for eternal vigilance" (White, 123).

Today, we live in a post 9/11 world that is not so different than 1950s America. Once again we live in a climate of fear, as we are instructed to report any and all behaviors that may be deemed subversive or possibly terroristic. As terror alerts continue to rise and fall in a seemingly arbitrary manner, we cannot help but wonder just how safe we really are. Public opinion is divided as to whether such measures as the Patriot Act are helping to keep our country safe or encroaching upon our civil liberties. According to U. S. Attorney General, John Ashcroft, "the Patriot Act has equipped law enforcement with critical investigative tools that are helping us win the war on terror." In an article written for *New York Times Upfront*, Ashcroft outlines the act's three primary actions: to close "gaping holes in our ability to investigate terrorists," to update "our antiterrorism laws to meet the challenges of new technology, and new threats," and to allow "different agencies—at the federal, state, and local level—to share information and work together to fight terrorism as a team." However Democratic Senator of Wisconsin Russell Feingold

argues "The Patriot Act gives the government too much power to get information on law-abiding Americans." In his rebuttal, also submitted to *New York Times Upfront*, Feingold warns us that "as long as the government says that the information is sought for an international terrorism or counterintelligence investigation," the federal government can now gain access to our "highly personal information" such as: medical and financial records, magazine subscriptions, library accounts, and Internet activity. The Patriot Act, in effect, allows our government to spy on whomever they deem fit. In any given society there will always be a balance between safety and freedom. When we feel unsafe, we are more likely to relinquish certain freedoms. However, if we sanction our government to keep such a pervasive eye, then are we not also promoting a certain level of voyeurism?

While some lay blame for the spread of voyeuristic tendencies upon our government, others remain adamant that technology is at fault. "Give a man a video camera and see his voyeuristic instincts bloom" (Sardar). Nearly each and every one of us is tapped into the information super highway where voyeuristic websites are on the rise. In his book, *Invasion of Privacy*, former intelligence officer, Louis Mizell Jr., reports "More than 20,000 women, men, and children are unknowingly taped every day in situations where the expectation and the right to privacy should be guaranteed" (qtd. in Calvert, 201). Much of this footage finds its way onto the World Wide Web. However this cybernetic, voyeuristic eye points both ways. "Every Web site we visit, every store we browse in, every magazine we skim [on the internet] creates electronic footprints that increasingly can be traced back to us" (Rosen, 7). In other words, even voyeuristic web surfers are being watched in a not so unvoyeuristic fashion. The most current hot topic concerning voyeuristic technology is the highly desired camera phone, which can quickly and easily download to the web. This amazing technology has worked for both virtue and vice. Camera phones have not only contributed to voyeuristic web sites, but have also assisted in the

apprehension of criminals. Sam Gedeon, a shopkeeper in Gothenburg, Sweden, managed to snap a quick pic of a young man who had just robbed his store. He then printed the picture for the local police, and the suspect was picked up within half an hour. Gedeon's picture was even used as evidence to convict the man in court ("Spies").

A camera is also used to bring a criminal to justice in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. However, no pictures are ever actually taken. Photographer, L. B. Jeffries, only utilizes his telephoto lens to get a closer look at the shady mis-dealings of his neighbor, Lars Thorwald, who Jeff suspects has murdered his wife. We, the audience, are free to spy along with Jeff on his other neighbors as well, fulfilling our own fictional voyeurism. In the various windows across the courtyard, we see a multitude of stories: an alluring dancer, nicknamed Miss Torso, who is overwhelmed with potential suitors; a childless couple who dote on their small, yippy dog; another woman, known to Jeff as Miss Lonelyhearts, who has candlelight dinners for one; and a struggling musician who strings together the film's soundtrack. These neighbors are caricatures and amalgamations of all of our neighbors. Who among us has not occasionally noticed them from out our own windows—taking out the trash, washing their cars, or even having an argument? One almost cannot help but incidentally watch our neighbors from time to time, but does this act necessarily derive from some sexual compulsion? Secondly, when is it appropriate to watch and when is it not?

In the case of watching a film such as *Rear Window*, critics have pointed out that the "conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world." So, while viewers are taking part in fictional voyeurism, they are made to feel as if the experience is real. In order to comment further on the appeal and psychological effects of watching television and film, feminist scholar Laura Mulvey references Lacan's mirror stage theory in her article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." "When a child recognizes its own image in a mirror is crucial

for the construction of the ego" (Mulvey, 588). This mirror moment predates language for a child and assists with its recognition with other people. As we grow older we continue to identify with the people we see on TV and film screens just as we did with our own reflections as toddlers. This is unfortunate in Mulvey's opinion, because these idealized personas are constructed with an agenda behind them, such as the objectification of women. However, regardless of visual media, Lacan tells us that we will never find the ideal ego that we first glimpsed in our mirrors as infants.

So does our compulsion to watch others, either in reality or on the silver screen, stem from our own internal needs to better understand ourselves? Is this same compulsion responsible for America's seemingly bottomless appetite for "reality" TV? After all, "real" TV stars "allow us to connect directly with them because they are us—people who are separated from us by nothing more than the break of getting on the air" (Gabler). Whereas actors only offer us fictitious and idealized personas, which Lacan has already professed we will never become. In the pursuit of self-identity and public awareness during a time of uncertainty, many Americans are looking to the media for answers. While CNN and our local news keep us updated on possible terrorist threats, "reality" TV provides us with a seemingly real gauge for acceptable public and private behavior. "Much of our social reality today . . . is generated through mass-mediated content, such as television shows and motion pictures, rather than direct, first-hand experience with people, places, and practices" (Calvert, 22).

Now let us explore the term "reality" TV. Just how real is it? By this point, readers may have noticed my use of quotations in relation to the term "reality" television. These quotations are in place because reality TV is a contradiction in terms. In his article "The Rise of the Voyeur," Ziauddin Sardar argues that we are led to believe that in the production of "reality" TV "the entire panoply for making programs was supposedly swept away. Banality was born with a great deal

of high purpose and portentous self-congratulation from the broadcasters." Producers of some "reality" shows, such as *Survivor* or *The Real World*, would have their audiences believe that their programs simply record the lives of real people. Clay Calvert would label such a program as video vérité voyeurism (5). While it's true that most "real" TV participants are not professional actors, they are expertly selected by a number of producers who know exactly what type of person they are looking for. Then pieces of their lives are professionally edited, like any other fictional program, in order to create a cohesive narrative that can better sustain an audience's interests. It is my belief that the majority of America does not see these similarities between what is labeled "real" and what is considered fiction. The key difference between "reality" TV and its fictional counterpart is a lack of well-paid writers and actors. When you compare the budget for a sitcom such as the extremely popular *Friends*, with its "reality" TV counterpart, you will find the differences to be staggering. Before the *Friends* cast retired at the end of their 2004 season, the six principal actors were making a reported million dollars each per episode. While on *Survivor*, contestants lied, cheated, and reduced themselves to the lowest common denominator in the hopes of being the last contender for the one million dollar prize.

Sardar feels that while TV executives may claim that shows like *Big Brother* could bring us together in a discussion around the water-cooler, these shows actually further alienate us from each other by the implication that behind closed doors we all have shifty and interesting dealings. He believes that "reality"-based television creates a dehumanizing effect, which reduces its subjects to commodities. Nonetheless, is it possible that we could learn valuable and positive information about ourselves from a "reality"-based program? What Sardar may chalk up to narcissism, others may consider self-actualization by utilizing others for the study of the self and how we fit into a community. Could a show such as VH1's *The Surreal Life* be therapeutic in any way? In an attempt to bet-

ter understand the media, I found myself captivated by a *Surreal Life* marathon. For those of you unfamiliar with the series, it is essentially like *The Real World* only populated by celebrities whose fame is in decline. During its second season, the series starred: Vanilla Ice, Eric Estrada, Tammy Fay Baker, porn star Ron Jeremy, ex-*Baywatch* beauty Traci Bingham, and Trishelle Canatella who had also appeared on *The Real World*. I was truly entertained by this oddball assortment of celebrities, and surprised by the bonds that some of them seemed to make. At the beginning of the show Rob Van Winkle, better known as Vanilla Ice, was extremely bitter about his former fame and his public perception. He even spray painted over the Andy Warhol-inspired images of his former self that had been painted on one wall of their house. However by the end of the series, housemates Eric Estrada and Tammy Fay Baker helped Rob to mellow out. In the final episode Van Winkle was even counseling Trishelle on how to deal with her own public perception. Even Rob's self-destructive graffiti evolved into the slogan "be yourself," which was the theme of a children's play that the housemates were asked to perform. Now, did I learn anything about myself from watching this show? Not really, but regardless of my skepticism towards the value of "reality" TV, I think Rob Van Winkle did. The experience appeared to be akin to group therapy for him and a few of the other housemates. So, could watching a show such as *The Surreal Life* provide a sort of catharsis for viewers? Sure, and movies like *Rear Window* can too. Are we deviants for watching them? Of course not. They volunteered to be watched. However if a viewer does have trouble differentiating between "real" TV and traditional works of fiction, then will that viewer become desensitized to the act of watching others in a more voyeuristic fashion? Does "reality" TV promote voyeurism?

In his article, "Behind the Curtain of TV Voyeurism," Neal Gabler writes that it is the subversive qualities of voyeurism that lend to its appeal, and that "reality" television allows us to be "moral outlaws." He also references Freud with the

statement, "To watch unobserved is to appropriate lives and assert oneself over them." Robert Thompson, head of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University disagrees with Gabler. He states "that a voyeuristic tendency is deep in the human heart, and that there were cavemen peeking into the caves of others thousands of years ago" ("Reality TV"). While I can agree that some level of our interests in television and film have somewhat voyeuristic roots in our psyches, I think that labeling us "moral outlaws" is a bit heavy-handed. I would be more apt to agree with Thompson's caveman theory. Our eyes are naturally drawn to living things. We cannot help but be interested in the lives around us, whether those lives are fictional, real, or somewhere in between as in the case of "reality" TV. Film and other media have, of course, utilized this draw to life.

However, before I let "real" TV off the hook of morality, let us consider a darker side of the medium. While talk shows are not traditionally labeled as "reality" television, they do share some similarities. For example, some of them often spotlight the lives of regular folks. Clay Calvert sorts these programs under the category tell-all/show-all voyeurism (8). Daytime talk shows like *Donahue* and *Oprah* first arrived on the airwaves in the 1970s. They were intended to be educative and therapeutic, but as time passed into the 1980s and 90s a new breed of talk show was born. Shows like *Jerry Springer, The Jenny Jones Show*, and a multitude far too many to count have since come and gone. Everyone with a lurid tale to tell began seeking their 15 minutes of fame, and talk show hosts were all to eager to oblige. In response, Sardar comments that "We have returned with a vengeance to Roman circuses." In his aforementioned article, Sardar cites an episode of *Jerry Springer* entitled, "Secret Mistresses Confronted." The guests on this particular installment were Nancy Campbell-Panitz and her ex-husband, Ralf. While Nancy thought she was asked to the show to reconcile with her ex-husband, Ralf instead told her in front of millions of viewers that he had remarried. The violence that ensued with

Nancy's reaction did not end in front of the cameras. It ended with her subsequent bludgeoning and death along with Ralf's surrender to the police. Who is to blame for Nancy's death? Should we blame the media for creating this tell-all/show-all voyeurism? Or, should we blame our own voyeuristic needs for fueling the ratings for such shows? Voyeurism alone did not murder Nancy Campbell-Panitz. Responsibility lies not only in the hands of her husband, but also partially on the shoulders of those who chose to exploit our natural appeal to the lives of others by giving him such a horrible venue and approach for discussing his personal affairs. While voyeuristic/exhibitionist tendencies may have led Ralf to the studio, it was ultimately his decision to kill his wife.

The lasting appeal of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* is a testament to our natural curiosity into the lives of those around us. It not only explores the taboo of voyeurism, but it also questions a neighborly responsibility. Film critics have often described the windows across the courtyard from Jeff's apartment as a metaphysical myriad of movie screens, displaying alternative life choices that both he and Lisa could make for themselves. For the sake of my argument, let us instead consider them to be different channels on Jeff's picture-in-picture television. Jeff is metaphorically participating in what Calvert defines as mediated voyeurism, as he watches a variety of what looks much like today's "reality"-based programming. As Jeff "channel surfs," he cannot help but watch the sexy allure of Miss Torso as she fends off numerous suitors, just like *The Bachelorette*. He also checks out the *Springer*-esque confrontation, when the childless couple finds their yippy dog murdered in the courtyard and the Mrs. hurls blame at all of their neighbors. But most importantly, Jeff keeps a wary eye on Lars Thorwald in the apartment directly across from him. When the bed-ridden Mrs. Thorwald suddenly goes missing, Jeff's interests are extremely piqued. His journalistic instincts tell him that something is just not right. Boredom alone does not keep him glued to the window. He becomes obsessed; he must know if Lars Thorwald murdered

his wife. This "channel" most closely reflects a program such as *America's Most Wanted*, which debuted on Fox in February of 1988. With its use of reenacted crimes, this program falls under Calvert's categorization of reconstruction voyeurism (7). Only four days after the premiere of *America's Most Wanted*, David James Roberts, one of the FBI's ten most wanted fugitives, was arrested in New York City as a direct result of a viewer's tip. Roberts had escaped from an Indiana State Prison and was running from five life sentences for four murders, arson, kidnapping, and two counts of rape. Partial responsibility for this dangerous man's capture belongs to mediated voyeurism.

It would seem that our voyeuristic instincts are not all bad. If it is within our power to make a bad situation better, then do we not have a responsibility to those around us? Would we not want the same help in return? I think that the most difficult hurdle to overcome would be the ability to determine exactly when one should intrude on a private situation. Just the other day, I was driving through my own neighborhood and witnessed a woman in front of what I assumed to be her house. She was carrying a small child to her car, and the little girl was pummeling her shoulders with her tiny fists. The girl looked far from desperate, but a little upset. I drove past not thinking twice, assuming the child was throwing an ordinary temper tantrum. As I drove on, I began to wonder. Could there have been abuse involved? Was the woman carrying the child definitely her mother? Trusting my first instinct, I left my questions rhetorical and committed no more time to the issue. Perhaps Jeff would have done the same in *Rear Window* if he were not held captive in his wheelchair, and no one would have even noticed that Mrs. Thorwald had mysteriously disappeared.

Some institutions such as Childhelp USA persuade the public to do just the opposite. Its early efforts led to the raising of public awareness, as they effectively lobbied to pass laws that encouraged the reporting of suspected child abuse and even made it mandatory for such professionals as teach-

ers and doctors (*Child Help*). Their latest public service announcements urge us to be on the lookout for child abuse. These PSAs exhibit a citizen much like ourselves watching a child with one of his or her parents in rather ambiguous situations where there may or may not be abuse taking place. For example, in one of the ads a little girl gets on an elevator with her father. She exchanges a few bashful looks with the woman already aboard and then departs. The parent in each of these ads has "child-abuser" written on his or her shirt, and each ad ends with a voice-over saying, "if only it were this easy to spot child abuse." I cannot help but wonder how many people desperately wanting to be a hero will falsely accuse their neighbors of abuse. Certainly, child abuse must be stopped. However, I question the effectiveness of these confusing public service announcements. The line between personal privacy and social responsibility is very fine. In the case of *Rear Window*, Jeff's suspicions are validated and a murderer is apprehended. However, as we amateur sleuths monitor our own neighborhoods, we would do well to remember the same warning given to him by Detective Tom Doyle: "That's a secret, private world you're looking into out there. People do a lot of things in private they couldn't possibly explain in public."

While we all have a right to our own privacy, there should be no shame in admitting that we people watch from time to time. "Voyeurism" is too narrow a term with too ugly a connotation to describe the full range of our natural curiosities. Whether we condemn it or accept it, there is no denying that voyeurism is an inescapable component of our society. While we utilize it in the name of national security with such measures as the Patriot Act, we also fault it for our own deviant subculture. Even though scholars such as Clay Calvert have taken steps to broaden our understanding of the media's use of voyeurism, its public perception remains negative. Films like *Rear Window* and "reality"-based television have been created out of our own appetite for voyeurism. Analyzing the popularity of this media can help us further understand our

own instinctual desires, both altruistic and deviant. However, we must remember that whether this media purports to be "real" or fictional, it can act as both mindless entertainment or as parable. As we consume our media, we must be stalwart in our critical-thinking skills. We must recognize when "reality" is in actuality simple entertainment. Similarly, we must use these same critical skills to determine when what we see out our own windows is something worth further surveillance. The responsibility lies on each of our shoulders.

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SETH M. BLAZER explores the steadily blurring line between acceptable public gaze and private space. Using Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* as his jumping-off point, Blazer discusses the new "reality"-based television programs and other ways the boundaries we had thought were clear have become rather indistinct. Having just finished his masters in English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Blazer has begun doctoral studies at the University of Florida. This is his first academic publication. He has published two short stories in an war anthology from Saddletramp Press in comic-book format, and has been working on a novel and screenplays.

PAUL F. JOHNSON notes the rise of corporatism in many areas of life today, not least in the delivery of health care. Among recent developments are hospital ethics committees charged with deliberating on difficult, sometimes technical as well as emotional issues relating to treatment or prolongation of life itself. Johnson suggests that the writings of Jürgen Habermas provide a way forward, particularly as communication becomes more crucial to the process as "our expectations as patients, the vocational aspirations of practitioners, [and] the place of medical care in our thinking about our society as a just and humane environment" are conceived in what Habermas views as "lifeworld" terms. Further, "to an ever-increasing extent our management of the problems of health care requires us to think in the terms of social systems." Associate Professor of Philosophy at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin, Johnson has served on the Ethics Committee at Bellin Health Systems in Green Bay and has taught the course on Medical Ethics at St. Norbert since 2000. He has published essays relating philosophers as diverse as Plato, Kant, and Nietzsche, to the moral issues of our times.

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