

Our Day with Jerry Springer
by Davis Schneiderman

Upon arriving at my first tenure-track position, assistant professor of English at a Midwest liberal arts college that would allow me to teach both creative writing and literature, with equal emphasis to each, I immediately began to survey the landscape of my 300-level postmodernism class. Adding a “graphic content” warning to my syllabus, I asked this new class to jump eyes-first into Jean Genet’s *Funeral Rites*, an X-rated romp through wartime Paris with characters engaged in sex fantasies with Hitler, before moving into William S. Burroughs’s *The Wild Boys*, an equally unsettling study of reality films, revolutionary communes, and runaway bodily processes. Bolstered by the works of postmodern theorists ranging from precursor Frederick Nietzsche to post-everything Jean Baudrillard, some students were confused, some appalled, and some energized. Yet all of our discussions—despite my best efforts during our weekly session in a respectable third-floor seminar room—remained completely and utterly “academic.”

Schooled in that 1990s’ belief in the viability of cultural studies, I hoped a completely voluntary outing to the “Jerry Springer Show”—a program renowned for its universal trashiness—would cause the three-orders of simulacra and the cultural logic of late capitalism to lean, in some small way, against the heavy side of that “reality” fulcrum. I didn’t go so far as to show movies such as *The Matrix* to teach the “world” as a relative cultural construction. That seemed like the easy way out, and surprisingly, the students were largely convinced *a priori* of the postmodern condition; they were so excited by it all that we routinely pushed past our designated ending time, lost in rapt academic discussion. *It was too easy.* I began to suspect that

within the recesses of their outward enthusiasm lurked the same sarcastic detachment from postmodernism as postmodernism projected onto everything else.

Then came September 11th.

Discussing a post-attack cover of *The Village Voice*—a postcard of the Twin Towers superimposed perfectly on the Manhattan skyline—several students told me the *only* reality of the attacks for them was that their cell phone calls were temporarily blocked. No one denied that the buildings had collapsed or that people had died; it all just seemed, somehow “fake.” After all, this was Generation X mixed with Generation Y spiked with acute awareness of things like Prozac and post-irony. They *knowingly* swam in endlessly crashing waves of simulation. “God is dead” was *really* old news that Nine Inch Nails *used* to sing about, and I was just some nihilistic charlatan, my snake oil fermenting on the shelf because it couldn’t compete with the high-sugar varieties of pop culture.

I hoped that the field trip would underscore this very postmodern problem of viewing postmodernism as so entirely “constructed” that its critiques proved useless. Sure, it is easy enough for academics to either condemn or condone all cultural studies “texts” (including TV programs *and* wars) as part of the great sucking sound of American culture, but because we couldn’t go to somewhere such as “ground zero” in New York City to convince ourselves of what about the terrorist attack was real, we went to the “Jerry Springer Show” to find out what about our “reality” was not.

Our bus dropped us in front of the NBC Tower in Chicago, local home to the network, the “Jerry Springer Show,” and its kissing cousin, the “Jenny Jones” show. We were soon

pressed into a large audience warm-up room filled with folding chairs, vending machines, and a few TVs. We listened as the talking head announced a bus hijacking in Tennessee that everyone assumed was another terrorist attack. The susurrus of joking, excited voices quieted to a low whisper, as the absurdity of our situation—waiting for a trash culture oracle to wave shiny objects in front of us—became overly apparent. Before long, though, the endless chatter restarted and we were led into the studio...

Given a choice of seating either on or off camera, I chose the former. A giant industrial fan controlled the rear of the stage; rimmed around the tops of the walls, green paint mimicked moldy tarnish on windows that peered into nowhere. I suddenly felt very small, not like a “hip” new professor at all, but more like a victim, trapped in a basement with other bad children not so much younger than myself, waiting for something to happen. And so began the videotape: This edition of Springer’s “Too Hot for TV” endlessly detailed glittery undergarments dropping to the floor, flailing arms and legs smacking the faces of relatives and lovers, holiday turkeys and cranberry sauce flying violently across the set. No matter the image, the shrill voices of Springer’s past guests screamed over the cacophony of every repetitive moment, drowning out our increasingly uncomfortable laughter.

Soon the producer, Todd, laden with headphones and electronic equipment, expounded on the importance of chanting “Jerry! Jerry!,” as well as “reacting” to absolutely everything that would soon happen onstage. It would be our responsibility to scream, to yell, and to follow his lead. If I tell you to jump, Todd seemed to say, you not only ask “how high?” but also continue to bounce up and down until we cut to commercial. Todd enforced the rules of his regime with exaggerated glances and hand gestures, so we practiced our clapping and chanting as Jerry Springer emerged for his warm-up of stale jokes (“I don’t like cocaine; I just like the way it

smells”). After he suggested that his program could provide a respite from the “war on terror,” it seemed clear that Springer saw himself as a counterpoint to the concurrent events in Kabul and Kandahar. He offered his show as valid cultural contributor not because of what it *does*, but because of what it *deliberately* does not.

Todd encouraged us to chant “pregnant whore”—repeatedly—every time one of the show’s four expectant mothers unloaded her particular secret. One young woman in my group appeared to chant with supercharged glee, screaming noticeably louder than Todd’s hand signals demanded. Even the reticent members of my group thrust their arms into the air. On the stage, an African American woman told her boyfriend that her unborn baby’s father was really a white transvestite. As the transvestite almost came to blows with an audience heckler, I wondered if our guerrilla analysis mission had turned the students into post-millennium Patty Hearsts. That is, until I realized that my hands were also thrown high into the air, that I was screaming and laughing, that I was fixated on the floating overhead camera that always seemed to turn its eye *on me*. As my voice immediately became hoarse with shame (hadn’t I spent years in academia combating this sort of thing?), Todd gave me a sly smile, followed by a slight upward wave of his hand.

I decided that my only response could be to silently lip-synch the chants of “Jerry! Jerry!” and “pregnant whore,” but I was interrupted from this hasty plan by a pregnant stripper wending through the crowd. Clearly, my decision to seat us on-camera became precipitous as the stripper quickly snaked from the floor to the lap of one of my students. They yelled obscenities at each other while the entire audience screamed and hollered as if attending a cockfight. I made ineffectual movements of discomfort as the stripper flashed her breasts in what seemed like slow motion, and I felt my heart plummet down into the vibrating floor. How had everything gotten

out of control so quickly, so completely, I wondered—“mouthing” my lines in a completely ineffectual protest?

I had only wanted to bring the students out of the classroom comfort zone and into the experience of the screen; I had only wanted to test our ability to know for certain what was “fake.” But now we were complicit, I realized, as four of my students questioned the guests. One student’s query about sexually transmitted diseases received chants of “Go to Oprah,” while the more standard-issue insults drew hoots and applause. After Jerry’s “Final Thought” bled into an agonizing forty seconds of clapping, I told the student who had gotten the surprise peep show that he did *not* have to sign the release form Todd would soon wave at him—a form that I was half convinced would spell the end of my short teaching career. He gave me a perfectly exaggerated look: why would he not want to be on television?

Our return to the northern suburbs was much quieter than our morning descent; we joked briefly about the Springer spectacle, and then became quiet, each of us lost in the realization, perhaps, that what distinguished reality from performance was not so much our ability to critically analyze, but our distance from the event under inspection. A colleague later asked me what possible relevance the field trip could have to an English class. I went through my standard explanation of how cultural studies issues relate to what we think of as “texts,” highlighting the media’s effect on cultural perception—but I couldn’t forget that I was defending an event at which I had shouted slurs at pregnant women.

Sure, Springer was a setup, part of a cynical regime of flippant popular culture, but within ten minutes of arrival at the set, we could no longer remain “above it all.” The “simulation” of Springer became “real” for us—and we were thrown into confusion about not only this, but

everything. Would we go back to our cozy classroom and continue hypothesizing that the world was full of specters and simulations?

No one in the group expected *such* a radical jolt out of our comfort zones. We spoke about the experience like addicts in a twelve-step program; we wrote about the program on our online bulletinboard. The “Jerry Springer Show” had killed the class’s ability to jump head-first into a “text,” but we were only pantomiming an autopsy. Instead of questioning the validity of postmodernism from a postmodern position, the class seemed to question the ability of postmodernism to keep them safe from what they thought could be their “essential” selves—screaming and clapping audience members. Our ultimate response began with one student’s idea to produce a “Po-Mo Talk Show” as the final class project arguing that, our experience, both enlightening and shameful, begged for a sort of public, Robert Downey Jr.-style detoxification. We would recreate the conditions of our madness in hopes of finding a cure.

The students orchestrated two skits: a patient of Sigmund Freud would “cheat” on him with radical thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; an Oprah-like book-of-the-month club would be interrupted by a group of Burroughs’s “wild boys.” We fretted for weeks until the night of our performance, staging and re-staging our own talk show experience. The class, once masters of ironic distance, slowly deconstructed the conditions of the “Jerry Springer Show” that has elicited their frenzied participation. Finally, *our* audience of college students watched in rapt attention as we deliberately burped and gurgled our way through an hour of parody, videotape, and group chants—lip-synching not a single word.

In the meantime, our episode of Springer ran. To my great surprise, the entire program was *not* focused on the obedient performance of our group, and not once could we be seen

chanting “pregnant whore.” The focal point of our entire semester experience became something else in the projection, and while we still puzzled over our own complicity in allowing the spectacle to proceed, we understood how easy our academic shields could turn us into a phalanx of riot police. Separation from the critical moment allowed us a perspective from which to become “ourselves” again—as well a vantage point from which to see “ourselves” as illusory. Our proximity to the event gave it life, but our distance from its projection forced it back into that *mélange* of white noise that my students seemed to perceive, even before taking my class, on a genetic level. The post-Springer difference, however, is that we could no longer re-combine with such abandon. We journeyed into the television screen as the audience, but we came out as the actors—which made us realize, that perhaps, in all of our confident analyses, we had been acting all along.