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10 Reality TV: The Return of the Fool

The fool is the elephant in the room of celebrity culture. Generally, questions of fame attack put the celebrity and the PR-Media hub into the foreground. The analysis of stargazers brings up the rear. The investigation of the dynamics between ascribed and achieved celebrity, celestoids, PR strategists, media corporations and the audience may reap enormously rich findings. But it is not enough for someone to be a star, or for others to construct, glaze and wax the facade of celebrity, or for still larger numbers to be in thrall to celebrity worship syndrome, narcissistic idealization and hero worship. Celebrity culture also demands an absolute foil, a butt. The star at the pinnacle of the pyramid requires a negative force at the base to legitimate celebrity prestige and sanction levels of economic reward that would otherwise be regarded to be excessive. The star signifies capability, decorum, glamour, intelligence and authority. The fool is an anti-star. He signifies, among other things, incompetence, ineffectuality, indignity and weakness.

The concept of the fool has a long history in folklore, literature and drama among the Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Japanese, Semites and Christians. Most of us are aware of the Shakespearean fool, but in Indian drama there is also a stock comic character, called the *Vidushaka* who is often represented as a hideous dwarf and is the standard accompaniment of the royal hero. The fool is twinned so thoroughly with the concept of the hero as to be reasonably categorized as part of a symbiotic relationship. Regardless of culture and history, human groups appear to need their fools no less than they require leaders.

Nowadays, polite society does not take kindly to the word 'fool'. The inclination to use the term in public, and even in private, carries warning lights that automatically flash social disapproval. There is a touch of hypocrisy in this. While Bernays (1947) makes great play of the requirement to 'engineer consent' by matching 'desirable' leaders with public opinion, and the need to practise eternal vigilance against 'demagogues' and 'authoritarian' figures in democracy, it is perfectly obvious that he regards the public to be fundamentally passive and directionless. Hence the need for the PR industry to provide the 'service' of equipping powerful leaders with the people skills and desirable policies to keep society on the right track. Plainly, it would have been *bad* PR for him to use the word 'fool' with reference to the

public. However, it is there in each iota and syllable of his rationale for PR in modern democracies.

Nowadays, we like to suppose that the word 'fool' is confined to the rhetoric of party politics. A right-winger may call a left-winger a fool in the debating chamber, but we know that the term is not really meant and only used for rhetorical effect. It is part of the rough and tumble of party politics. Elsewhere, to call someone a fool in private nearly always promotes indignation and controversy, while to use the term in public is generally accepted as unwise and even slanderous.

The restraint and inhibition that we feel about using the word fool to describe someone reflects the rise of therapy culture over the last century. The practice of making allowances for the conditions that shape behaviour and the lottery of natural dispositions over which the individual has no control are cardinal principles in this culture. According to this logic, nobody is born a fool. On the contrary, the condition is conceptualized as a matter of genetics, family, society, power, inequality or a combination of the above. To label someone a fool is therefore to confuse the consequences of social, economic and political forces for the causes, hence the reluctance today to apply the term to an individual. It is the context around the behaviour of the individual that is usually regarded to predispose and sustain the qualities of the fool. It is these conditions that dispose an individual to be, so to speak, more 'fool-like'. A characteristic formerly assigned to the person is now piloted into the Himalayan vocabulary of abstract forces and obscure origins.

The practical result of this is that individual is seen as blameless and society is called to book.

But therapy culture is, in some respects, brain-blind. We do not notice, or have forgotten, the unabashed use of the term in celebrity culture. In the fields of sport, film, television, pop music and literature, a star who is an angel one day is brought down to earth as a fool the next. Look at Tiger Woods, Tom Cruise, Sharon Stone or Kanye West. Celebrity is Janus-faced. The frontier, volatile, Wild West qualities of celebrity culture are conducive to the rapid transfer of emotions between strong positive and negative opinions. This transfer of strong reactions and powerful sentiments only occurs when there are no slips, and the contradictions only seem to be 'natural' to us, because the structural relationship between the star and the fool are two sides of the same coin.

Here, in the Christian world, perhaps there is some echo of the religious campaign against idolatry. Fame (not notoriety) inspires automatic respect, extravagant devotion and massive economic reward. So the questions about the worth of these social relationships and the talent and accomplishments of the celebrity become insistent. No sooner does someone acquire fame, than the public and media take steps to establish that celebrity worship is bogus and expose the idol as a charlatan.

The figure of the fool, then, is an essential part of the facade of celebrity. It can no more be discarded than the face of the celebrity can be ignored.

The fool and reality TV

But lately, there is another, arguably more interesting and revealing application of the fool in celebrity culture. Makeover shows, confessional talk-show formats, docusoaps, talent contests and other genres of reality TV explicitly label ordinary people as talentless, brainless, buffoons and morons. By implication the presenters and the audience are judicious and right-thinking. TV makeover shows label the ordinary people who participate as persons of bad taste and what might be called, lifestyle bafflement. The ordinary people who appear in these shows are depicted as grossly unable to live well. They are uneducated about effective impression management, sensorily dull about questions of appearance and domestic design. In one word, they are *uncool*.

That is why the TV presenters on these shows have licence to throw out the wardrobe, change the hairstyle, transform body posture, bin the lipstick, ditch the shoes, trash and rebuild the wallpaper and furniture. It is no exaggeration to propose that these shows present the ordinary people that appear in them as failed citizens. They are portrayed as being unable to negotiate even the most elementary presentational rules necessary for achieving social impact – hence, the need for a complete ‘makeover’.

The *Big Brother*, *Idol* and *Got Talent* franchises turn the predicament of the fool into a melodramatic set piece of the format. Think of the initial *Got Talent* appearances of Paul Potts and Susan Boyle. They were presentations designed to produce a calculated effect in the audience. The aim was to portray the performers as fish out of water. Dressed unsympathetically, plain-featured, perspiring and awkward in gait, the first impression they created was of ill-placed, naïve, impudent, no-hopers – until they began to sing. Then their voices made a silk purse out of a sow’s ear and turned their stage presence into reality TV sensations. This was no accident. Potts and Boyle were *positioned* to confound para-social expectations.

Their appearance before the camera was not naturalistic, but ritually staged.

The stock-in-trade of reality TV is the celetoad. Most of the ordinary people that it elevates into the public eye do not achieve durable fame. In terms of the conventions of para-social communication Potts and Boyle were set up to provoke reactions of disbelief and scepticism in the audience. They lacked the camera aplomb and conversational ease of seasoned performers. Stage lighting and camera panning stressed their ordinary demeanour, reinforcing audience expectations that these apparently unimpressive amateurs were about to make fools of themselves.

But their abilities and accomplishments have made them achieved celebrities. Each of them has a successful recording and international touring career. For the audience, one of the pleasures of this form of reality TV is the overturning of expectations, what the Victorians and Edwardians called the collapse of stout party.

Potts and Boyle are bona-fide achieved celebrities. However, occasionally, reality TV produces celetoids who possess durability. This seems like a contradiction. After all, the essence of the celetoid is to be here today and gone tomorrow. The reason for this is that their abilities are negligible and their accomplishments are not amenable to career development. The essence of achieved celebrity is possessing talents and accomplishments that have a career. In contrast, celetoids typically have nothing going for them except their cocky impudence. Additionally, they are dependent upon single platform outputs, like the *Big Brother*, *Idol*, *X Factor* or *Got Talent* shows. This means that when celetoids switch to another platform, such as a rival show, the stage or some other form of public performance, they cannot get beyond the hurdle of their initial public image as merely impudent performers so that, gradually, public interest fades away.

There is nothing surprising in this. The short life of the celetoid is a precondition of most reality TV formats. As Graeme Turner observes, much reality TV is driven by 'the exposure, humiliation and shaming of its contestants' (Turner, 2010: 37). The blatant focus on controversy and embarrassment is, of course, intended to ramp up ratings. The content of shows like *Wife Swap*, *How To Look Good Naked* and *The Apprentice* is often sensitive and offers private disclosures. The para-social conversational setting encourages disclosure and can act as the basis for developing loyal sympathies between the celetoid and the audience.

For example, the diagnosis of Jade Goody's cancer was broadcast live on the Indian version of *Celebrity Big Brother* (*Big Boss*). The development of her condition defined the structure of subsequent para-social conversations that surrounded her until her death. The durability of her fame was extended as the audience dutifully followed the ravages of her illness, which was relayed in regular television broadcasts, much as parents of siblings would follow and support the illness of a child. The para-social conversation into what was, when all is said and done, a life and death issue, was presented as an extension of the para-social care and support network, rather than an intrusion. That is the media audience assumed the role of semi-invisible carers, ministering to the stricken star. Superficially, this can be read as the triumph of para-social democracy in which remoteness and distance are erased, as the audience pulls up their chairs to sit at the deathbed of the star. Conversely, and perhaps more accurately, it can be interpreted as a form of emotional labour engaged in by the moribund celebrity that ultimately benefits broadcasting channels to boost ratings. That is this form of private disclosure is

more properly seen as a type of para-social exploitation rather than a 'conversation'. The conventional language of exploitation and the theory of surplus value are more relevant in explaining this state of affairs than fancy talk about the media-enhanced extension of democracy. The celestoid does not select which programmes to appear in or how to edit recorded interviews, documents of illness and the like. This is the remit of the TV production company, which also ultimately stands to gain the maximum financial benefit from the televised proceedings.

This is not the place to go into the question of the social functions of the reality TV genre (but see Andrejevic, 2004; Hartley, 2008; Hill, 2008). The point that needs to be made here is that the colonization of reality TV formats in programming schedules produced the conditions in which some ordinary people attain more durable types of fame. This requires the concept of the celestoid to be modified.

Jade Goody in *Big Brother* and William Hung in *American Idol* have been recognized and publicly rewarded for their lack of talent. To date, Goody is Britain's greatest reality TV star. Her stupidity was legendary. She was reported to believe that a ferret was a bird, Pistachio painted the Mona Lisa, Rio de Janeiro is a person and Saddam Hussein was a boxer. She was not adept at singing, dancing, acting or comedy. Yet she dominated British reality TV news and was a major figure in popular culture for seven years from her first appearance on the *Big Brother* show, until her untimely death from cervical cancer in 2009. As Stuart Jeffries (2009) wrote in his obituary of her, 'she had no perceptible skills and was ordinary looking, but still thrived in showbusiness.'

Turning to the United States, William Hung's (2004) infamous audition for *American Idol* displayed chronic self-delusion and ludicrous ineptitude. His performance of Ricky Martin's *She Bangs* was so dire that it prompted Simon Cowell to remark, 'You can't sing, you can't dance, so what do you want me to say?' Yet far from disappearing without trace, Hung marched on to develop a cult following. He has a dedicated Web fan site, a record deal that produced three albums between 2004 and 2005 and has pursued a successful career in TV chat shows, commercials and movies.

The success of Goody, Hung and others requires the revision of the concept of celestoid. In particular, it is necessary to make a distinction between short-life and long-life celestoids. A short-life celestoid is the familiar one- or three-minute wonder. It is a person with no perceptible talents or disciplined accomplishments, who has celebrity for short, concentrated periods of time and then ceases to be famous. A long-life celestoid is also devoid of perceptible talents and disciplined accomplishments. Despite this, they achieve durable or semi-durable fame. Goody and Hung are no Susan Boyle or Paul Potts. They are not distinctive for anything except their impudent ordinariness. It is correctly described as impudent because,

despite having no recognizable talent or disciplined accomplishment, they act as if they have an entitlement to airtime and the media lens.

This raises a separate question and that is: why should impudent ordinariness be a sufficient basis for accumulating fame today?

The structure of the fool

The answer to the question lies in the power of broadcasting channels and the web of para-social relationships created by the media. Before we look at this in more detail, it is important to say a little about the character of the fool as a social type. For in positioning short- and long-life celetoids before the contemporary public, the PR-Media hub unwittingly draws upon character types that have a much longer social and literary history.

As long as there have been records of human groups there are references to fools (Welsford, 1935; Klapp, 1949; Shuttleworth, 1998). The Greek historian Xenophon describes the antics of Philip, who was a gatecrasher at the dinner party of Callias and engaged in horseplay with Socrates. Philip is remembered for providing diversion, parody and comic relief from weighty philosophical table talk. The fool appears in literary works by Athenaeus, Plautus and Lucian. He – and, in the overwhelming majority of recorded cases, the fool is a man – was a staple at the courts of Philip and Alexander the Great.

With the fall of Rome, the fool seems to vanish from the pages of history and literature, only to return in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance at the courts of the rising class of Italian despots. The fame of buffoons like Popolo d'Ancona, Ribbi, Dolcibene, Gonella, Fra Mariano, Hans Clawert, Goring and Finit has come down to us in the writings of Sacchetti, Aretine, Humphrey, Kruger and Weldon. The court fool was an institutional feature of fourteenth and fifteenth-century courts in England. Martinetto de Vasconia fatuo played at the court of Edward I. Edward II kept a fool called Robert whose pay features as a standard item in the Wardrobe accounts, suggesting that he was a staple of court culture. Some fools were provided for in old age. The French monarchs Charles le Sage, Charles VI and Louis XII also had a fondness for fools. The names and deeds of their court jesters Piculf, Grant-Jehan, Haincelin Coq Coquinet and Jehan le Fol have come down to us through history.

From early times the distinction between 'natural' and 'artificial' fools seems to have been common. The former were men and women of obvious, and in some cases, severe mental and physical handicaps. Their defects, ungainliness, simplicity of character and physical deformities placed them outside of ordinary society. They occupied a place in which normal civil rules did not apply.

In contrast, artificial fools employed absurdity, innocence, naivety and ribaldry in their manner and are more properly described as recognized players, buffoons and jesters. They turned human shortcomings and the folly of mankind into an art form and sought to entertain for the purposes of instruction and diversion.

In both cases, the court awarded licence to the sayings and doings of the fool that were not granted to others. Court life revolved around jockeying for recognition and currying favour from those of superior rank. It was often a social cauldron of intrigue.

In these circumstances, the fool was the naïve voice of home truths. He exposed the gross human failings of court life and acted as a reminder that pomp and circumstance was part of the mystique of power. The fool occupied the bottom rung of the social hierarchy. In occupying this position he is beyond Good and Evil, or pretends to be. He absents himself from the race to be honoured and celebrated and paradoxically, by refusing – or not knowing how – to play the rules of the game, he turns himself into an object of note and even veneration. Although not directly involved in production, government or warfare, he was appreciated and valued. He was a mascot in battle and a life-charm in everyday relations.

Natural fools were commonly held to possess special powers and to have the gift to ward off evil. The court of Dadkeri-Assi, a Pharaoh of the Fifth Dynasty, included a legendary pygmy, one Danga, purchased in the Puanit region located on the mysterious, semi-explored borders of Egyptian society. Danga was plucked, so to speak, from the mists of Egyptian consciousness. He appears to have been respected by the court for mystical and even supernatural intimations. Upon this basis, his utterances, dances and diversions were granted not merely tolerance but privilege.

Dwarves, simpletons, halfwits and other physical and mental abnormal types were common at the court of the Ptolemies and Roman Empire. In Rome they were known as 'fatui', 'moriones' and 'stulti'. They were greatly prized, and commanded high prices at market. They were seen as links between the known world and the World of the Unknown.

In the Christian and Muslim worlds there are long-standing associations between the fool, prophecy and clairvoyance. Ibn Khaldoun, in his book *The Muqaddimah*, grants the mad with powers from the Unseen. He explains the reason for these in the weak integration between the body and soul in the mad. In not being fully formed, the mad are less able to defend themselves from the unscrupulous interference of non-human powers. Unseen forces find it easier to possess the mad and speak in their tongues (Khaldoun, 1989).

In Muslim society such people were frequently employed to adjudicate between disputants. The Arabs believed in supernatural beings called *djinn*, who were

believed to reside in secret places and possess the spirit of human beings endowing them with supernatural knowledge. They fell into various categories of potency; the *shair* (the poet prophet), the *kahin* (the soothsayer) and the *arraḥ* (a lesser diviner). For many centuries Muslim literature recounted stories and verses about Buhlul al-Madḡnun (Buhlul the Madman or Buhlul the 'Djinn Inspirer') who resided at the court of Harun ar-Rashid. He is portrayed as a comic hero blessed with such bountiful insight and pious divination that he was proclaimed to be saintly.

Later, in the Renaissance, the artificial fool becomes dominant. His deliberate interruption of decorum and taking liberties with precedent and rank became appreciated as arts. The fool is revered for courageously revealing the emptiness of procedure, the affectation of posturing, the vanity of pretence and the tragedy of the human condition. By virtue of departing from the rules of normal group life, appearing in a bedraggled state and speaking in an unselfconscious way, the fool occupies a space beyond the law. An interesting inversion in the status of the fool occurs at this time.

In pre-Renaissance society, the fool possesses low status and is the butt of many indignities. To be called a fool is to suffer disgrace. The fool has no responsibilities and no honoured function. His sole value is to be the naïve spokesman of misrule. In this capacity, nature or the *djinn* has equipped him to speak from the world beyond the fringes of Reason.

With the Renaissance, the status of the court fool changes. He becomes the accomplished liberty taker and ready scapegoat. He acts as the knowing catalyst of the management of emotions in court society, allowing aggression and laughter to be expressed. The fool continues to occupy a lowly social status. But his art in highlighting the common lot of mankind is recognized and savoured.

Must we impute sadistic motives to the co-option of natural and artificial fools into court society? Perhaps there was an element of taunting and ridiculing the misshapen, ugly, lamebrained and deformed. But there is more to it than that.

The purpose of the fool was to constantly remind the powerful that fame is arbitrary and influence capricious. The fool reminds the high and mighty of the low, bawdy, common world. In doing so, he offers the important lesson that social order is fragile. Power can be removed at once. The man of fame and decorum can be plunged into the moronic abyss in a trice.

Egyptian, Roman, Indian, Medieval and Renaissance society did not seek to escape from social and economic realities. Rather they imported them into the court. There was a reason for tolerating the fool. Licensed derision and abuse exposed the pretence of status. The airs and graces of the rich and powerful were brought down to earth because no one was so respected as to avoid the tongue of the buffoon. Fools were tolerated parasites at the courts and the rich family

homes of Western European society because they provided constant reminders of the contingent nature of the society of the powerful.

Modern men and women find it hard to comprehend why the rich and powerful condoned the ridicule of the fool and even valued rebuffs, insults and scorn at his hand. They cannot understand why the acid tongue of the fool was protected and revered. The main reason for this is that, in spite of all of their anxieties and worries that speak to the contrary, modern men and women are largely insulated from the world of slavery, famine and the carnage of battle. Many of us go through life without ever seeing a captive, a person suffering from incurable pain or even a dead person. Yet, in the court society that tolerated the fool, these experiences were seldom exceptional.

The fool provided a bridge between two worlds. On one hand, he was thought to conduct the judgement of deities and the insights of the spirit world into the world of court society. As we have noted, the Arabs believed that the *djinn* possessed the fool and used him to communicate with ordinary mortals. Just as importantly, the fool symbolizes caprice and waywardness. He bespeaks the *natural* world and therefore provides a contrast with the cultured, manicured relations of court society.

Welsford submits that the fool is essential in court society because he acts as an agent of shame release:

The Fool is an unabashed glutton and coward and knave, he is – as we say – a *natural*; we laugh at him and enjoy a pleasant sense of superiority; he looks at us oddly and we suspect that he is our *alter ego*; he winks at us and we are delighted at the discovery that we are also gluttons and cowards and knaves. The rogue has freed us from shame. (Welsford, 1935: 318)

The notion of managing shame by using another seems abhorrent to us today. Where it occurs, we seek help and recommend counselling. But in court society aggression, shame and impatience are managed by courtiers. Individuals who previously gained the ear of the monarch by virtue of their capacities as warriors or producers of wealth, gradually became valued for their tact, intelligence and point of view.

The fool was the lowest rank of courtier. His value lay in his apparent lack of guile or tact. By calling a spade a spade and not speaking in the tongues of preferment, the fool imparted unmarinated wisdom, home truths, untainted by the artificiality of court protocol and political intrigue. In the case of the artificial fool this contribution was largely symbolic. Yet having someone in court playing the part of the fool suited the need of the monarch to remind himself and his often devious, higher courtiers, to stay grounded. The luxury of keeping the fool at court was a means of

monarchical and aristocratic self-assertion. It conspicuously displayed the wealth, power and confidence of high rank. For as a warrior or a source of economic wealth the fool was plainly useless. But as a bar to contrast with the afflatus and pomp of courtiers and as a link with the Unseen World and the world and the people, the Fool was invaluable.

The fool in the court of reality TV

Reality and talent TV shows like *Queer Eye*, *What Not To Wear*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Ambush Makeover*, *The Apprentice*, *Big Brother*, and the *Pop Idol*, *X Factor* and *Got Talent* franchises, are one of the few areas left in public life where treating an individual as a fool is regarded as entirely legitimate. It is even justified as a responsibility to correct the imprudence of the performer for venturing to go on to the show in the first place and the sorry state of the media in validating the audition and the broadcast. When the dress, grooming, deportment and manners of an ordinary person are ridiculed in the makeover show format, or the *Pop Idol* or *Got Talent* judges lambast a performer, or the audience votes off an unimpressive contestant on *Got Talent*, the panel are mocking the flaws of individuals and stridently expressing their inner sense of worth. *Reality* and *talent* TV figures like Jade Goody and William Hung became famous both nationally and internationally for their ineptitude and impudence. The public did not stint at decrying bad taste, foolishness and vulgarity in Jade Goody, until news of her cancer broke and she was transformed from a dim-witted *Big Brother* virago into an innocent victim.

The structure of these shows is based in rituals of judgement, punishment and reward. The responses of the panel are not just about judging, but also about social ordering. That is, they directly and tacitly position players in a hierarchy of IQ and moral worth. So allowances are made for performances from players who are labelled as having low IQ and a naive self-image. In the *X Factor/Pop Idol/Got Talent* franchises the panel is constituted as a sort of mini-court. They are not quite monarchs, but their prominence in the media affords them authority to make sweeping judgements that are, in career terms, life and death. The facework of the four individuals clearly evinces a variety of emotions from joy to anger and social reactions from approval to indignation. They do not simply communicate with the contestants, they impart sentiments through para-social conversations with the audience at home. Sometimes the panel acts as a team, conferring their collective assessment of the virtues of this or that act. However, as individuals they also employ techniques of jockeying, sparring, gamesmanship and playing to the gallery. They convey unspoken support to some contestants and Pontius-Pilate-like disdain

for others. The panel operates like a court, registering the visible performance and hidden intents of contestants, indicating preferences and staging indignation for vote-getting.

Just as the leadership of the monarch is judged by the court and ultimately the people, so the airtime practices of the panel of the judges are evaluated by the media and the audience watching at home. The judges can be criticized for their arrogance and insensitivity. When she was a judge on *American Idol* (2006–9) Paula Abdul generally cultivated a compassionate, sympathetic response to contestants that was widely interpreted as a reaction to the blunt manner of Simon Cowell. Similar frictions were reported on *The X Factor* in 2009 between ‘hardliners’ Simon Cowell and Cheryl Cole on one side and the more restrained, sympathetic style of Louis Walsh and Dannii Minogue on the other. As in court society where the actions of the court were ultimately judged by the people, so the conduct of the TV panel is subject to the metrics of rating wars and popular opinion.

Of course frictions and tensions between the judges make for good television. They are controversial and provide a spike in social impact, which is an asset in the ratings wars. The inter-judge conflicts and social skills with contestants are part of the para-social conversations that the judges conduct with the invisible audience. The purpose is to influence the standpoints of other members of the panel, mould public opinion and, more concretely, the circumjacent media and audience of voters. By stimulating and building loyal enthusiasms, the judges try to sway other members of the panel and the audience. Para-social manipulation is consistent with the principles of mass psychology followed by Bernays and the PR-Media hub:

Men do not need to be actually gathered together in a public meeting ... to be subject to the influences of mass psychology. Because man is by nature gregarious he feels himself to be a member of a herd, even when he is alone in his room with the curtains drawn. His mind retains the patterns which have been stamped on it by the group influences. (Bernays, 1928: 73)

The job of the judges in reality/talent TV shows is to gauge these patterns and seek to exploit and develop them in winning over members of the panel and the audience. This involves directly pandering to the repressed impulses of the group mind. When Simon Cowell launched into William Hung in the *American Idol* (2004) audition, he was articulating negative emotions that members of the audience screen out from ordinary public life. If we call someone ugly, incompetent and talentless in everyday life, we incite the popular reaction that we are being insulting and acting like a bully. If the same thing happens on the *Got Talent*, *X Factor* or *Apprentice* shows it is passed off as plain speaking.

The impact of the judges is enhanced by arousing emotions and making reactions that are disguised or adulterated in everyday life. To quote Bernays again:

Men are very largely actuated by motives which they conceal from themselves ... It is evident that the successful propagandist must understand the true motives and must not be content to accept the reasons which men give for what they do. (Bernays, 1928: 75)

Just as subconscious motives are attributed to the audience with respect to their susceptibility to the lead of the judges, it is easy to detect the hand of the subconscious in media representations of the fool in reality/talent shows. The fool is not given a chance to excel. The producers of the show already know he has no real talents, accomplishments or skills. The fool is strategically positioned to earth the repressed popular reactions and prejudices expressed in the mob judgements of the studio. He allows us to feel better about ourselves and bathe in the belief that society is going to the dogs by permitting the media to make the *Pop Idol*/*Got Talent*/*X Factor* and *Big Brother* franchises prosper. His clumsy ineptitude makes us feel a little bit superior and his celebrity confirms this because, paradoxically, it demonstrates the privileged nature of achievement famine. You and I may not be celebrities. In this sense we are located in a (relative) state of achievement famine. But would we really wish to behave like William Hung or Jade Goody or subject ourselves to the barrage of media interrogation, in order to acquire fame?

The return of the fool is therefore a function of the supply side of celebrity culture.

Yet it echoes premodern demands for cosmic certainty and social order, in which the highest rung in society is built upon the lowest rung. We are made from these premodern histories. The spread of cultural literacy has not freed us from them. The religious beliefs and rituals that consecrated them in the past survive in our own day as pseudo-religious beliefs and degenerated rituals. The fool belongs to this category.

The media gives a platform for ordinary people that it positions as fools in reality and talent TV shows. The purpose is to win ratings wars by generating publicity. The fool on the media stage is condemned, rebuked and humiliated in ways that would be censured or prohibited in ordinary life. The fool is there to both confirm the democratic impulse behind reality TV and to promote the lie to the adage that anyone can make it. True, some fools prosper in reality and talent TV genres. They become long-life celetoids, but their careers are fatefully constrained by the label that they wear around their neck. The essence of the natural fool is not to develop but to remain the permanent, misshapen naïf. They are not 'anybodies', they are fools. They are ritually defined and culturally confined. This is the immovable straitjacket of their celebrity existence.