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Confession and identity

Abstract

It seems an appropriate time for confessions. Clinton, in what could be described as an "incremental" confession, has made his admission of "inappropriate" intimate relations with Monica Lewinsky not only a running media event, but also a semantic debate about how far one goes before one is both lying and having sex.

Confession is, at its base, a revelation of the self. It is marking one's boundaries of identity, particularly in how that identity is publicly displayed. Confession also implies that there are hidden elements of the self that are not normally revealed, but that some shift has occurred, some border of the private and public has moved like earthquake-affected tectonic plates, which makes the confession necessary and appropriate. The confession in its appropriateness is all about cultural values and where one is situated within a spectrum of normative etiquette.

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Confession and Identity

- P. David Marshall
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- 1 It seems an appropriate time for confessions. [Clinton](#), in what could be described as an "incremental" confession, has made his admission of "inappropriate" intimate relations with Monica Lewinsky not only a running media event, but also a semantic debate about how far one goes before one is both lying and having sex.
- 2 Confession is, at its base, a revelation of the self. It is marking one's boundaries of identity, particularly in how that identity is publicly displayed. Confession also implies that there are hidden elements of the self that are not normally revealed, but that some shift has occurred, some border of the private and public has moved like earthquake-affected tectonic plates, which makes the confession necessary and appropriate. The confession in its appropriateness is all about cultural values and where one is situated within a spectrum of normative etiquette.
- 3 What is intriguing about confession is that it demands an audience. The [Catholic confessional](#) has been all about revealing oneself to God -- but this revelation is traditionally mediated through the priest. The priest's recommendation of penance serves to alleviate responsibility or at the very least soften the crime through the more relaxed relationship one can have with the [Virgin Mary](#). In [Protestant reformations](#) of the self, the confessional disappears into a cybernetic system of self-control -- in effect, the audience disappears. [Michel Foucault](#)'s reading of the emerging self in the 19th century underlines this transformation of the self: we have internalised the audience of the confession into what we could label -- to extrapolate from Foucault -- a "panoptical conscience".
- 4 Yet this internalisation of the confessional audience has erupted outward -- there is an incredible will to tell and tell things publicly. This seems to have its strongest utterance in American culture where the evangelical Christian movement has developed an ability to make the confession a democratically inspired event. For instance, the audience for [Jimmy Swaggart](#)'s series of confessions is a combination of his congregation and his television audience. The regularising of confession is a feature of talkshows. In the late 1980s, [Dr Ruth Westheimer](#) had an internationally syndicated radio program called [Sexually Speaking](#) which regularly revealed the sexual proclivities of her callers to all listeners. The audience gained access to the range of sexualities of her callers as they publicly confessed their interest from straight to gay sex and various points in between. It was the confessional of the post-[AIDS](#) era, where sex was not so much directly celebrated as placed within the new fears of contact. Dr Ruth's program provided a weekly ritual around the potential weaknesses of the body and the necessity to enjoy sex with care and forethought. For the audience that were the audiovoyeurs and not the callers, the program revealed dangers and threats. The public confessional of talkshows can be a massive technique for social control and feeds into the panoptical conscience.
- 5 Talkshows have continued to proliferate and the basic form of the programs from [Ricki Lake](#) to [Oprah](#) and [Sally Jessy Raphael](#) and no doubt [Roseanne's new entry](#) is the shocking public confessional (see Shattuc). The sheer amount of television talk might make one think that the confession has lost its value, that each person's revelation is somehow lessened because the shock cannot be sustained. Indeed, Jeremy Tamblyn, author of *Confession, Sexuality, Sin and the Subject*, believes that there is nothing left to confess.
- 6 However, the public confession of television talk shows is not simply a democratic secularised version of the Catholic confession. It is a blend of the religious rite with the Freudian [talking cure](#). The self is uncovered through talking through the neuroses to reveal the forms of repression that are in operation in the individual psyche. The talkshow is the generalisation of the desire that revelation is somehow a way to reorganise the self -- a cure. The cure becomes not just an individual therapy, but through the talkshow becomes a representation of the social desire for larger cultural cures (Marshall). Like the psychoanalytical therapy, the talk continues for a very long time, where the sessions become a very enduring series.
- 7 The confession makes great television because it defines the moment where the guard is lowered, where the anonymity of the private self is suddenly revealed. It also becomes the stock material for the Internet. Personal webpages become the location for revealing a new version of the private/public self. What links these public representations of identity through revelation is that they presume an audience. The presumption of an audience is the way that contemporary identity is now more connected

to a clearly identified desire to be notorious. The contemporary self demands outside and anonymous recognition for internal validation -- in other words a television audience or reasonable facsimile. Fame and identity intertwine and the confession becomes the channel through which the individual can make the private self clearly public.

⁸ Since I began the article with the idea that it was an appropriate time for confessions, I thought I would conclude with my own revelation to show how it works. I confess that I have developed a fan-like relationship to the exploits of [Patrick Rafter](#), the recently recrowned US Open tennis champion.

⁹ Why is this a confession? Because my public self is not totally in line with my private self. Knowledge about my interest in tennis is limited: it's there but it is constrained and not easily revealed. But a fan's relationship is also somehow illegitimate for an academic, a cultural critic -- at least with reference to how I present an ideal self outwards. Fandom indicates a beyond-rational affinity, a proxy relationship to activity and agency. One can make an academic claim to fandom as [Henry Jenkins](#) does so convincingly in *Textual Poachers*; nevertheless the presentation of the self as fan weakens the idea that the fan can achieve notoriety for his or her own work and activity. Rafter is actualised fantasy for me bundled with a resignation that I can only achieve the sensation of brilliant tennis and tennis fame through a public figure. My confession imbricates all of the elements of the public and the private. Rafter is a public figure and by association I can live vicariously through his achievements. My confession is also complexly pitched: within the field of cultural studies dealing with the biographical, the construction of subjectivity is an essential and vital practice. I can confess this detail as long as I write this preamble about the role of confession in the construction of contemporary identity.

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