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Chapter 7

Tears, Tantrums and Television Performance

This chapter focuses on the contradictory and ontologically confusing aspects of performance in reality television. This kind of television is messy and confusing because it makes quite considerable and often contradictory demands of both performers and audiences. Reality formats require viewers to evaluate the success – tied to the performance skill – of cast members who operate across the epistemological boundaries that would normally allow audiences to distinguish between scripted and unscripted conversations and events.

Furthermore, in a manner that is now very familiar to the television audience, reality programmes feature ‘real people’ who are, at the same time, paid participants (‘cast members’) whose ‘actual’ lives are voluntarily constrained and managed. Most audience members are well aware of the fact that reality formats are intentionally designed to manufacture an apparent intimacy with performers and to generate high levels of drama or jeopardy. Performers who are successful in these contexts therefore commonly offer both fabricated and actual expressions of extreme emotional states. As a consequence, television viewers can experience quite dramatic shifts in their perception and judgment as to the authenticity of performers in different reality show contexts. Performers may be perceived as either genuine or fake (or both) and the audience’s emotional response to them can swerve – in a matter of seconds – from affection and empathy to disbelief and disdain.</UIP>

<IP>Crying and tears, we argue, are endemic to reality television and in this chapter we use examples of these emotional displays to highlight the significant ‘slipperiness’ of television performance. Cultural theories and histories of crying foreground the ambiguity of tears: tears resist coherent interpretation but as they leak from the body, appearing as material evidence of or witness to an internal emotional state, they demand a reaction. Tears are provocative: not only do they leave open frames of performance to question and contestation

but they *invite* speculation. What we wish to capture is how crying and the presence (or, indeed, absence) of tears crystallise key questions for the study of television performance and open up notions of authenticity, judgement, evaluation and the competency of the performer. Our focus, in this chapter, is to explore how reality formats encourage audiences, through the repertoire of tears, to employ different kinds of judgement. We argue that viewers judge the apparent sincerity of the performer (or, in effect, the ‘performance skill’ of the contestant/cast member to appear sincere) and that this is done in the context of an ongoing judgement as to the ethics or intentions of the programme maker (which determines our reading of specific kinds of ‘performance cues’ established within the programme’s narrative). In our own evaluation of the significance of tears, crying and performance, we conclude by demonstrating how, within what is, in effect, a moral economy, television supplies an emotional education, a context in which the recognition and value of sincerity, empathy and compassion may be exposed, debated and contested.</IP>

<IP>If understood as a genuinely unplanned physiological and psychological response to events, tears would seem to offer a clear example of actual emotion and thereby a prompt to the audience to respond to the subject with empathy or pity. For Pansy Duncan they present a ‘somatic vocabulary marked by both authenticity and legibility’ (2011: 180). Yet Duncan is writing in the context of the (relatively) coherent vocabulary of tears within the openly fictional genre of Hollywood melodrama, whereas within the realm of reality television the distinction between fact and fiction is much more blurry, and tears are subject to judgement and evaluation. Too many tears suggest artifice and excess, while crying without tears is often read as the ultimate signifier of inauthenticity. For example, in the summer edition of 2015’s *Celebrity Big Brother* (Channel 5, 2011–), with only a few days to go until the final, veteran television presenter and news anchor Eamonn Holmes enters the house to host a show within the show – a final quiz where the remaining housemates are

subject to the judgements of the audience. Having been voted the most ‘fake’ housemate by the public and accused of engaging in a ‘showmance’, *The X Factor* (ITV, 2004–; Fox 2011–13) alumnus Chloe Jasmine and her on/off screen partner Stevi Ritchie are gently interrogated by Holmes. Leaning over his desk and overtly mediating between the housemate and the viewing public, he states: ‘Chloe Jasmine, we have to work out what the public are seeing as fake between you two and let me just say one word: tears.’ </IP>

<IP>Here Holmes exposes the conflict between a general understanding that ‘crying’ is often a managed performance but where, nonetheless, the perceived absence of ‘real’ tears may also condemn the housemate/performer as inauthentic. Despite the machinations of the production team and the continual, yet often hollow, pleas from contestants caught up in the emotional turmoil that it is ‘just a game’, *Big Brother* is typical of the reality show format that frequently values ‘realness’, ‘honesty’ and ‘sincerity’. Chloe Jasmine’s theatrical response to Holmes acknowledges, therefore, her failure to *perform authenticity* through crying ‘adequately’; she claims: ‘Tears are words that the soul cannot express. I’m sorry it hasn’t been believable but to me it’s been very real.’ </IP>

<IP>The term ‘crocodile tears’ refers to the insincere expression of sorrow: ‘It stems from the ancient belief that crocodiles, in order to lure their prey, would weep. The unsuspecting prey would come close, only to be caught and rapidly devoured, again with a show of tears’ (Dent 2009: 66).¹ While crocodiles are thought to weep while they eat, a result of the physiological structures of their breathing, humans are largely understood to be the only species to cry as an emotional response. In Tom Lutz’s historical study of ‘cultures of tears’ he acknowledges that there are a ‘great variety of kinds and causes’ of crying (1999: 21). Yet one of the ‘perennial strands of the cultural history of crying’ is the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ tears, and where ‘those that are not “genuine” have been held in contempt’ (1999: 31).² These are the tears of the crocodile – artificial, manipulative,

dangerous even – a ‘breach of not just etiquette but of ethics’ (1999: 21) and running counter to a twentieth-century belief in the ‘naturalness of tears’ (1999: 33). Tears, then, operate across a strangely porous dividing line – between what seems to be natural (and authentic) and that which may also be perfectly and wickedly faked (and therefore deceptive). For Annette Hill, this tension is exhibited in the ‘twin issues of performance and authenticity [which] frames discussion about the authenticity of visual evidence in popular factual television’ (2005a: 449).</IP>

<IP>Scholarship on reality television has often emphasised the role of judgement as at the heart of the audience’s engagement with the genre. Hill’s work, for instance, considers how audiences are ‘engaged in the critical viewing of the attitudes and behaviour of ordinary people in the programs, and the ideas and practices of the producers’ (2005a: 453). Citing John Ellis, she argues that ‘audiences of reality programming are involved in exactly the type of debates about cultural and social values that critics note are missing from the programmes themselves: ‘on the radio, in the press, in everyday conversation, people argue the toss over “are these people typical?” and “are these our values?”’ (2005b: 9). Challenging conservative fears regarding the blurring of reality and fiction, Helen Piper has also argued that reality formats such as *Wife Swap* (Channel 4, 2003–09) should not be read

<EXT>so much as an infiltration of ‘real life’ by drama and performance, but a desire to dramatize, to actively compose and engage in sense-making narratives about the ‘real lives’ of ourselves and others, and to apply narrative moral logic to an artificially sequestered and unaccountable private space. (2004: 286)</EXT>

<UIP>The relationship between private lives and public discourse is revealed in Piper’s account of the opposition between normality and difference constructed in *Wife Swap* and how it offers, reiterating Ellis and Hill, the audience a way of ‘re-moralising’ life decisions.³</UIP>

<IP>Tears, crying and the ethical implications of both, we argue, are central to this moral economy. As visible evidence they offer a distinctive materiality to performance within reality formats since their presence or absence help establish the terms of the judgement used by audiences, through which they evaluate the skill, integrity and appeal of particular individuals. Whether as part of the ‘performing’ or the ‘authentic’ self, tears invite interpretation and speculation. The multiple meaning of tears allows them to operate in many different ways: as expressions of pain, joy, grief, mirth, anger, frustration, triumph or pity. They often ‘resist interpretation’ while ‘demand[ing] a reaction’ (Lutz 1999: 19). As a form of communication, Lutz argues, ‘the meaning of tears is rarely pure and never simple and thus no simple translation of the language of tears is ever possible’ (1999: 25).</IP>

<IP>In her study, *Having a Good Cry*, Robyn Warhol outlines several different historical understandings of crying. Firstly there is an ‘expressive’ model, in which tears are read as an ‘outward sign of internal emotional states’, and secondly a ‘performative’ one, whereby the body’s affective response brings ‘into being the emotional states they betoken’ (2003: 15). Analytical models of naturalistic modes of performance in fictional film and television would seem to draw upon the first understanding as they seek out the ways in which the body of the performer is able to express the internal state of the character. In this context, tears are central to the body’s communicative repertoire. These ‘drop[s] of limpid fluid secreted by the lachrymal glands’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*) are seen to offer material evidence for performer and audience of the relationship between internal state and external sign, and the presence of emotion. Balancing precariously on the line between internal and external and notions of surface and depth (we speak of crying, for example, as welling up), tears and crying prompt a kind of ontological uncertainty between ‘real’ expression and what we understand as ‘faked’ performance.</IP>

<IP>A clear example of this confusion emerges in season six (episode eight) of the reality format and modelling competition *America's Next Top Model* (UPN, 2003–06; The CW, 2006–15; VH1, 2016–). In this sequence, the models are being set up for a photoshoot in which menthol sticks are used to provoke tears – so the audience are witness to a physiological prompt employed to fabricate distress. As the models submit to the clearly irritating treatment, with several ‘crying’ and wincing in pain throughout the shoot, one model, Nnenna, breaks down: it seems, as Tyra Banks (their mentor and host) suggests, that ‘fake’ tears have provoked ‘real’ crying. At first it might seem as if the audience is being cued here to respond with sympathy to Nnenna. Previously, the episode has built up to this moment of release as earlier scenes have foregrounded Nnenna’s struggle with her relationship outside of the competition via the confessional features of the series format – phone calls back home, ‘backstage’ interviews and voice-overs and a ‘girls’ talk’ with supermodel Janice Dickinson on the competing demands of work and family. However, for a long-term audience who are familiar with its format, the response is likely to be more complicated. Knowing that the series will be dependent on creating jeopardy and emotional responses from its cast, the audience will be anticipating displays of extreme and dramatic antics from the models. This means that they may be as confused as Tyra is as to where, during Nnenna’s crying, one form of tears begins (fake/‘performative’) and the other ends (actual/‘expressive’). In this sequence the performative and the expressive merge, or at least overlap, leaving the host and the audience uncertain about how they should respond (Figure 7.1).</IP>

<FIG>

<FIGNO>Figure 7.1</FIGNO> <FIGCAP>*America's Next Top Model* (UPN, 2003–06; The CW, 2006–15; VH1, 2016).</FIGCAP>

</FIG>

<IP>In this episode's 'challenge' the models' brief is to make crying artful and beautiful – trails of mascaraed tears running down cheeks, brows lightly furrowed and eyes full of feeling. Within the framework of the photoshoot, their task is to communicate a depth of feeling within the photographs: to think sad, without losing the light, framing, composure or composition. The performance skill required from the models is somehow to communicate authentic emotion and, potentially, to do so by drawing on personal and genuine unhappy experiences and emotions. While doing this they are also required to manage their bodies and expression so that their crying is appreciated as beautiful, rather than an embarrassing and possibly snotty mess of bodily fluids. In addition, the sequence acts almost as a meta-critical reflection on the hypocritical aspects of the programme and the industry the models are seeking to enter, since the competition, and the demands of the industry, insist that the models must also cultivate, manage and perform a persona that is necessarily contradictory and inconsistent – models are asked to be driven, ambitious, humble, respectful, resilient, sincere, charismatic and submissive (Figure 7.2).</IP>

<FIG>

<FINO>Figure 7.2</FIGNO> <FIGCAP>*America's Next Top Model* (UPN, 2003–06; The CW, 2006–15; VH1, 2016–).</FIGCAP>

</FIG>

<IP>In this instance, the 'cathartic' value of Nnenna's tears is insisted upon by Tyra and Nnenna herself, and this bout of crying is seen to allow her to get it out of her system so she can move on with the competition with renewed ambition and self-discipline.⁴ Here then, Nnenna's tears are not simply about self-expression and a cue for the audience to sympathise with her as a character but an overt opportunity for Nnenna as a competitor within a fabricated format to 'get back in the game'. Employing a Foucauldian lens, Duncan's study

of the film melodrama reminds us that the solicitation and regulation of tears forms part of a gendered disciplinary culture within which, other scholars have argued, reality television has established a central role. As Wood, Skeggs and Thumin remark, the modes of judgement the format invites 're-routes and re-embeds classed and gendered [and racial] distinctions through a conservative ethics of individualization and self-improvement' (2009: 140).</IP>

<IP>In line with this observation, in an infamous judging and elimination from cycle four of *America's Next Top Model*, Tiffany Richardson, a young African American woman, fails to perform the appropriate levels of tears and emotion when she is ejected alongside another contestant from the competition. While her peer, Rebecca, breaks down into floods of tears, Tiffany smiles and makes light of the situation. Tyra praises Rebecca for her suitable response ('Rebecca, I admire your emotion right now. It shows to me that this was something that's very important to you'), then admonishes Tiffany for not taking the situation seriously. Tiffany immediately interrupts 'Looks can be deceiving', she says: 'I'm hurt. ... I can't change it, Tyra. ... I'm sick of crying about stuff that I cannot change. I'm sick of being disappointed.' Tiffany's failure to quietly submit to her mentor's lecture and her refusal to conform to a narrative of self-improvement through self-determination unleashes Tyra's wrath in what has now become a notorious and uncharacteristic display of anger – 'I was rooting for you!' she screams at the young woman, 'We were all rooting for you!'
</IP>

<IP>In essence, Tyra's tantrum reverses the emotional conventions of the format. The inadequate display of emotion (real or faked) from her fellow performer causes Tyra's own mask to slip and the 'authentic' self of the normally 'caring' host is instead revealed. In other contexts this revelation might damage the standing of the presenter, yet reality television is based around the cultivation of transformation and the logic of the reveal. Tyra's anger, eyes glaring, brow contorted and flame-red hair shaking, epitomises those

<EXT>raw and spontaneous outbursts of emotion, what Laura Grindstaff (2002) refers to in relation to the talk show as the money shot: those moments when there is an eruption of anger, a breakdown of tears or a poignant moment of self-revelation. (Wood, Skeggs and Thumin 2009: 139)</EXT>

<UIP>In this respect, the possibly accidental revelation that Tyra may not actually be the saintly ‘sister’ figure she appears to be is not a problem, since the audience is far more invested in the speculation, contestation, judgement and evaluation of such moments. When one of the ‘main viewing pleasures lies in detecting the moments of ontological integrity when people are not “acting for the cameras” but are apparently “being true to themselves”’ (ibid.), Tyra’s outburst simply provides the audience with the ‘raw’ material that the reality show promises.⁵ Tears are similarly meant to offer readable and material instances during which the performer’s self-control breaks down and the real self can be glimpsed; for example, the infamous tears of hard-nosed news anchor Jeremy Paxman in family history format *Who Do You Think You Are?* (BBC, 2004–) purportedly reveal an unexpected emotional openness. Yet the ambiguity of tears – scripted and unscripted, beautiful or gross, actual or faked – makes them open to question, however rampant they may be within television’s wider ‘commercialization of feeling’ (ibid.).</UIP>

<IP>Perhaps the most significant text in television’s culture of tears has been the singing competition *The X Factor* (ITV, 2004–; Fox, 2011–13). The format deploys this commercialisation of feeling through a variety of familiar ways, manipulating emotion both narratively (the infamous sob stories) and formally (the long pauses and percussive heartbeats of the soundtrack). In a controversial moment from the 2011 US version of the show, 13-year-old contestant Rachel Crow stands in the bottom two with fellow competitor Marcus Canty. Not wishing to personally end the dreams of either of the hopefuls, lachrymose judge and former pop starlet Nicole Scherzinger, after a lengthy period of indecision, decides to

take the vote to ‘deadlock’ (in the result of a tie the television audience vote determines which act gets sent home). ‘Performing’ distress, while the shouts and alliances of the studio audience can be heard in the background, she dabs at her eyes with a tissue, holds her hand to her brow and clutches at her heart: a series of gestures not unfamiliar from a theatrical repertoire of melodrama. Rachel, praised elsewhere for the ‘maturity’ of her voice and performance, continues in this mode and offers the judge her advice: ‘Please don’t cry, it’s OK. I’m good with anything.’ ‘Performing’ resilience, the cracks in her voice both belie her emotional state but also signal her control. As host Steve Jones explains the rules to the audience at home he is flanked by the two hopefuls. The studio audience chanting her name, Rachel sighs and smiles sweetly while Marcus nervously twitches on the spot. Cutting between the three shot and close-ups of the contestants, the grammar of the scene, familiar from a range of formats, emphasises suspense and builds towards the ‘money shot’, in Grindstaff’s terms. The reveal – that Rachel has actually come last in the public vote – eventually comes, and given the clear preferences of the studio audience it is entirely unexpected by the young girl and apparently by the judges. When her name is called, her eyes widen in surprise and as Jones congratulates Marcus, Rachel falls to her knees, sobbing loudly and wildly – her chest heaving and husky wail drowning out the host’s attempts to get on with the show. Head judge Simon Cowell rushes to the stage and Rachel jumps up to embrace him before her mother also hurries on to comfort her. We cut between the action on the stage and the hysteria which has now also consumed Nicole Scherzinger who weeps into her hands as she is consoled by fellow judge, Paula Abdul. As the studio director cuts into a close up of Rachel and her mother among the huddle of ‘concerned’ judges and producers we hear and see the daughter seek reassurance from her mother: ‘You promised mommy! You promise it’s OK?’ Yet despite the intensity of the scene, as her mother cups Rachel’s face in her palms, no clear tears are visible.</IP>

<IP>What can we make of this moment? We have shared this scene on numerous occasions with colleagues and students and it nearly always prompts a deeply ambivalent response. We are also aware that in describing the scene our own choice of language will guide the empathies and judgements of the reader; for example, when we suggest that Rachel smiles ‘sweetly’ others may feel that it is more appropriate to say ‘smugly’. Ambivalence might be generated by the cynicism engineered by a familiarity with those ‘predictable patterns of feeling’ (Warhol 2003: xvii) constructed by the programme, and as we have suggested, and studies of reality television audiences have illuminated, viewers’ responses often bounce between trust and suspicion (Hill 2005a: 459) and their ‘sympathies and pleasures are invoked simultaneously alongside derisions and judgments’ (Wood, Skeggs and Thumin 2009: 136). The multiple and simultaneous responses to this scene are also bound up with cultural constructions of and ethics surrounding the fact that here the contestant is a child performer: there is *Schadenfreude* at work in the precocious child humbled by her defeat,⁶ but the spectacle is also troubling as a 13-year-old girl is ‘humiliated’ on a public stage. Based on our perception and interpretation of her grief but the apparent absence of tears, judgements arise relating both to her failure to ‘perform authenticity’ and condemnation of the producers’ exploitation of a child participant.</IP>

<IP>Rachel Crow’s elimination offers yet another example of the ‘money shot’, the viral moment, the instant when the mask falls away. Here is the child finally acting like one – we could alternatively recognise Rachel’s exhibition as a genuine tantrum, uncivilised rage, or the horrifying destruction of innocence, or does it simply peel back to reveal yet another layer of performance? The spectacular ‘failure’ of Rachel here demonstrates the layered frames of performance required by the talent format, and the complex set of skills required by performers as they must manage the often conflicting demands of such formats as both talent competitions *and* popularity contests. By becoming television personalities, reality show

performers are required to inhabit key values of authenticity, sincerity and sociability (Bonner 2011). Yet the notion of an emotional ‘reveal’ promised by *The X Factor* and other reality formats is predicated on the problematic belief in an ‘authentic core self’ that could be revealed. However, in our ambivalent response we actually demonstrate the impossibility of identifying this core self with any certainty or extrapolating the ‘authentic’ inner self from a ‘performed’ exterior, however ‘real’ the situation attempts to become. Perhaps the tension here is less between performance and authenticity than the performance of scripted and unscripted (or improvised) emotion. We might question whether, within the context of the emergence and popularity of forms of scripted or structured reality television (*The Hills* (MTV, 2006–10); *The Only Way is Essex* (ITV2, 2010–); *Made in Chelsea* (E4, 2011–)), unscripted emotion has become harder to spot and the ‘reality’ in ‘reality shows’ is less and less likely to convince. The distinctions between ‘backstage’ and ‘frontstage’, to employ Erving Goffman’s influential terms (1969), have become increasingly indivisible in these soap operas structured around the lives of their participants and, like tears, reality television performance is increasingly hard to anatomise.</IP>

<IP>The art historian James Elkins similarly suggests in his book, *Pictures and Tears*, that despite the physical materiality of tears: ‘There is no way to tell honest tears from deceptive tears, and there is no way to anatomize a tear, and tell which part is which.’ (2001 20) Elkins also suggests that ‘crying is so common it might mean nothing, or just about anything’ (2001: 19).⁷ Yet he still wishes to assert, as we do, that ‘crying’ means *something* however murky its origin, and however suspicious our response may be to the appearance and authenticity of the tears that fall. Our interrogation of the meaning of tears and the performance of crying in reality formats is both compelled and complicated by our belief that across contemporary television – in news, documentaries, award ceremonies and charity telethons as well as in ‘serious’ drama – people seem to cry *all the time*. Tears on television

are no longer confined to the beauty pageant, Oscars ceremony, or soap opera. The pervasiveness of instances of crying on television underlines Elkins' concept that tears represent 'nothing, or just about anything'.</IP>

<IP>So what is the value of our attempts to untangle the meaning of tears within these modes of television performance? To repeat Lutz's argument, tears may often resist interpretation but they demand a reaction, whether that is snorts of derision, 'studied inattention' or 'gestures of comfort or sympathy' (1999: 21). As such, tears are an evocative and provocative part of the communicative realm of television. Despite their murkiness, Elkins suggests that 'tears do one thing that separates them forever from the inarticulate parts of our inner life: they leak from our eyes, and run down our cheeks. They show, without room for doubt that something has happened. They are witnesses' (2001: 29). On television – and perhaps in everyday life – tears also serve to make others witness to another's unhappiness or joy and ask for a response. Even when we cry alone, the production of tears, the materiality of its wetness, your snotty nose and damp tissues, points to the fact that while crying is one of the ways we make ourselves visible to ourselves, tears would also seem to be produced always 'as if' others could see us. In a sense, then, television and tears similarly defer to an implied, wider audience even when that audience isn't watching.</IP>

<IP>In their sociality, tears and crying could play a key part in the potential of television to inform our reading of performance within what Lauren Berlant has called the 'intimate public sphere' (1997: 4). This potential is reliant on television's broadcasting capacity, its continuing domesticity and its pervasive presence, its familiarity, its accessibility and its ordinariness, as well as its didactic and pedagogical role. Tears and crying, we would suggest, are where and how performance on television supplies an emotional education, a context in which judgements about how we recognise and value sincerity, empathy and compassion can be exposed, debated and contested.</IP>

<IP>What is important for our argument is not that the crying seems justified, well performed, moving or authentic. It is more that tears provide evidence of the ultimately inarticulate and embodied nature of each individual's distress, anger or joy and that crying both on and before the television screen is a ubiquitous, everyday occurrence. The very unreliability, the open-endedness, the 'nothing and anything-ness' of tears means that they reveal that something cannot be said but there is still 'something' that is being expressed.</IP>

<IP>So? That's all very well, but isn't it dangerous to mix emotion with politics and civic society? Couldn't we use this argument to defend the increasingly toxic combination of emotion in politics that is seemingly exemplified by the Twitter tantrums of the 45th US president? Well, one answer would be that it is precisely the success of emotional responses and the way in which the rhetoric of the far right is legitimated via emotion that means we have to take crying seriously. And in wanting to validate the revelation, the performance and evidence of emotion in public life – in fact something that Berlant herself is ambivalent about – we can rely on the insights of other television scholars such as Misha Kavka (2008) and Kristyn Gorton (2009) as well as philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum. Indeed Nussbaum suggests in rather grandiose terms that: 'Walt Whitman was correct, I think, in his suggestion that there is a "public poetry" about the emotions that can be made the basis for the public culture of a pluralistic democracy.' (2003: 402–03)</IP>

<IP>What we are suggesting is not simply that it is nice to have a 'good cry', or that it is good for news anchors, politicians and reality show performers to surprise us with their emotional competence and openness. It is rather that such displays offer us opportunities to exercise judgement about why people cry and to experience its contagious qualities: it is about recognising and acknowledging emotion as routine and as ubiquitous. Crucially, it demonstrates that emotion as an embodied, conscious and irrational relay system informs not

just our ‘private lives’ but our public selves. Just as importantly, this should not be about ‘dealing’, therapeutically or in a Foucauldian (disciplinary) sense ‘with’ our own or others’ emotional responses, akin perhaps to the concept of ‘finding closure’ or reinforcing the cathartic model of tears, but rather allowing for the fact that tears and crying are always open to question. As Elkins claims – ‘tears are not like clues in a murder mystery, where everything is revealed at the end’ (2005: 28).</IP>

<IP>This understanding of the value of tears and emotion brings us back to early assessments of television as a ‘cultural forum’ (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983), and here we draw upon one final example of television tears taken from the hit Channel 4 series *Gogglebox* (2013–). In each weekly instalment the viewer at home is invited to go behind closed doors into living rooms across the country to watch carefully selected kinship groups watch and respond to highlights of the past seven days of television. The conceit of *Gogglebox* is arguably the rehearsal or performance of the democratic promise of television in a broadcast era and the dream of its continued vitality.</IP>

<IP>In the sequence in question the *Gogglebox* families are watching an episode of another Channel 4 show, *Educating Yorkshire* (2013), a fixed-rig reality series documenting a year in the life of a state comprehensive school in West Yorkshire. The episode in question focuses on a student, Musharaf, who is preparing for his English GCSE oral exam with dedicated teacher Mr Burton. Musharaf’s preparation is complicated by the fact that he has a severe stammer. We do not have the space here to offer a fuller account of this remarkable episode but, instead, we wish to consider the emotional relay system set in motion by the series and its reiteration through *Gogglebox*. In the final assembly for the school leavers, Musharaf, the boy who had been bullied and didn’t have a voice, takes to the stage to deliver a warm and self-deprecating speech. His fluid delivery, aided by speech therapy techniques of tapping and listening to music on headphones, and his heartfelt gratitude to the teaching

staff has much of the graduating class and faculty in tears and was widely celebrated after its broadcast as ‘moving the nation’. Screened for the *Gogglebox* families, this tearful consensus is reinforced. With some initially expressing intolerance for Musharaf’s stammer, his triumphant speech and shots of fellow male students openly crying are intercut with close-ups of the *Gogglebox* cast’s reactions: watery eyes, lumps in throats, wide smiles and fingers wiping away tears. As the school assembly applauds, so do the families at home.</IP>

<IP>Unlike our earlier examples, there is nothing particularly unusual or ambiguous about this story or these tears. The tale of a young man overcoming adversity is carefully constructed to generate (legitimate) feelings of joy and triumph and the audience at home responds to this pattern of feeling. But *Gogglebox* inserts a mirrored lens into this relay and sets up a series of reflections that emphasises points of commonality and minimises disruption. For the *Gogglebox* cast, recognition and empathy is found in a variety of reflections and identifications offered by *Educating Yorkshire*: a school girl is shocked to see Musharaf studying the same poem she read in class that day; a retired teacher responds to the value of the profession; a British Asian family celebrates the emotional openness of the young British Asian lads in the assembly hall. There is the sense in which the cast’s own, often unspoken, histories are carefully revealed as underpinning their tearful reactions. However, closing down the range of responses to (just) tears opens up judgement on the manipulation of emotion as the programme makers explicitly direct the spectacular display of tears through an emotive musical score and multiple close-ups of the crying cast. This is less about the skill of the performers to convince as to their sincerity than to establish the frame of the performance and to allow for the articulation of specific cues. Crying, in this instance, is utilised to emphasise consensus rather than contestation across both the *Gogglebox* cast and by implication the audience at home, watching others watching television.</IP>

<IP>In a long and influential discussion of emotion in a legal context, Susan Bandes recognises emotion as an inevitable and even beneficial element of judgement.⁸ But she also warns that we need to be aware that empathy – which we would suggest is a channelling or rationalising of our own emotional response to others’ distress – is not neutral and it may often be conservative:</IP>

<EXT>In order to bridge disparate types of experience, so as to facilitate empathy across a broader range of contexts, it is often necessary to emphasize commonalities, and to downplay perspectives that are not shared. This may effectively serve to perpetuate, rather than challenge, the status quo (1996: 375).</EXT>

<UIP>The question that our example from *Gogglebox* asks is whether the consensus that emerges around tears dampens the differences between Musharaf, the cast members and the viewing audience, and in doing so obscures aspects of the programme that we might otherwise wish to challenge: its dependence on the ideology of the family (or kinship) and on a constructed hegemony of emotion which all but insists that there can be only one acceptable response to the tears we see on screen. In this instance, in which real adversity appears to have been overcome and which speaks (cleverly, deliberately or coincidentally) to a range of different kinds of experience, this exhibition of contagious crying would seem to be benign. Yet if the same narrative and emotional manipulation is used for other purposes we may feel less comfortable. Equally, we might ask whether the shared crying is really enough: as hinted at by the cast’s initial response and made evident in the narration, Musharaf was continually bullied and excluded by his fellow pupils (some of whom are presumably those we see crying at the assembly). Are their tears now really enough? The ambiguity of tears again makes us question whether the tears are ‘real’ or, perhaps, sufficient – is the emotional outpouring that we witness provoked by sympathy or shame, or is it simply the result of embarrassment and peer pressure? Wherever they spring from, the appearance of tears here usefully shuts down

any further interrogation or exposure to the intolerance and bullying experienced by Musharaf, and while the story makes him (and his dedicated teacher) the ‘heroes’ of his story, in doing so it conveniently occludes the guilt of his peers for failing to tolerate and support his difference in the first place.⁹

Crying and tears as aspects of performance are, we have suggested, both mundane and marvellous. As material evidence, tears appear as visible cues for television audiences who then make quite complex and often contradictory interpretations of instances of crying that are increasingly commonplace across a host of television genres. While we have focused here on the ‘performance’ of tears in reality formats and argued that crying is perhaps one of the most significant yet murky skills of the reality show performer, the mystery of tears means that even when their meaning is continually negotiated and contested they retain the power to move us. By making an exhibition of themselves, reality show performers expose an ontological and epistemological instability that – we would argue – speaks directly to our current conception of self. In fact, it is through the productive incoherence of tears that we might further claim that television, in its ordinariness, continued sociality and communicative promiscuity, provides an unequalled platform to explore the messiness of contemporary subjectivity.

Notes

¹ While animals can and do cry, the cause is predominantly understood to be physiological.

Both Tom Lutz (1999) and Michael Trimble (2012) open their studies of crying by emphasising that the phenomenon, as an emotional response, is unique to humans.

² For Robyn Warhol, in her study of crying, effeminacy and the narrative forms of popular culture, this division presents itself as a ‘sincere and authentic emotional experience’ versus the ‘false sentimentalism and affectation’ of mass, popular and feminised culture (2003: 11).

³ Wood, Skeggs and Thumin usefully link reality television’s ‘playing out of moral dramas’ within traditions of earlier (feminine) forms of television, specifically the soap opera and the domestic sitcom (2009: 136–37)

⁴ Warhol writes that ‘this theory of “catharsis” has been taken in the twentieth century to mean that audience members’ bodies or psyches contain a given quantity of pity and of fear, and that the experience of weeping at a tragedy constitutes the “proper purgation”, the healthy and controlled venting or draining of these emotions’ (2003: 15–16).

⁵ We might also draw a specific link here with a desire for immediacy and the phenomenon of ‘corpsing’ (where the frame of performance is broken by the laughter of the performer). As Karen Lury has previously argued, ‘corpsing engenders a moment where the television performer reveals his or herself as truly live, uncontrolled and expressive [...] it is this process of revealing that the audience almost greedily looks for, or hopes for, in much of television. For it suggests that form of direct communication, the existence of a real bond between performer and viewer, which television seems to promise, yet which it can rarely deliver’ (1995: 127).

⁶ See Skeggs and Wood for discussion of *Schadenfreude* as an audience response to reality television (2012: 160–62).

⁷ As an art historian, Elkins is interested in trying to discover when, how and why people cry at paintings, based on over 400 letters he received. He recalls how, at first, the bewildering array of responses (and the general disdain he had for his topic from his fellow art historians) made him doubt his project.

⁸ Banes' essay discusses the significance of the inclusion of emotive victim impact statements in capital murder cases. She argues that 'Emotion and cognition, to the extent that they are separable, act in concert to shape our perceptions and reactions. But more than that, much of the scholarship posits that it is not only impossible but also undesirable to factor emotion out of the reasoning process: by this account, emotion leads to a truer perception and, ultimately, to better (more accurate, more moral, more just) decisions' (1996: 368).

⁹ It is notable that the episode of *Gogglebox* falls back into intolerance in a moment of bathos that concludes the sequence: gay couple (later friends) from Brighton Chris and Stephen remark, 'It ain't often I have a little tear [...] mind you, you wouldn't want him to read you a bednight story would you?! It'd take all bloody night!'

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