
DIRECTIONS:

1. Use the space in the right side to type your thoughts as you read OR use the insert comment feature (CTRL + ALT + M).

At a minimum, your notes **must** answer BOTH of the following questions for EACH of the 16 paragraphs below:

In one complete, clear sentence using entirely your own words and phrasing,

- What does this paragraph SAY?

In one complete, clear sentence using entirely your own words and phrasing,

- What does this paragraph DO and how do you know?

2. As you read, look up ALL words you do not know to help you decide what each paragraph is saying.



Drama is the Cure for Gossip:

Television's Turn to Theatricality in a Time
of Media Transition

(EXCERPT)

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MY NOTES:

Theatricality as a plot element and narrative device is appearing with some frequency on prime-time television. On a number of contemporary TV dramas and comedies, including *Gossip Girl*, *Mad Men*, and *Glee*, characters repeatedly put on performances that closely resemble stage and street theatre. They spontaneously dance in burlesque shows, play-act using made-up identities in public, sing solo and in choruses onstage, and declaim their innermost secrets to strangers via intense monologues in stylized settings.

Not only do TV characters engage in theatrical performance regularly, but when they perform, they also transform themselves. That is, prime-time television programs of the past few years have been rife with instances of individuals achieving self-realization ("finding themselves") through acting, singing, and/or dancing in front of audiences – not just for television audiences at home, who watch their antics from a distance, but for audiences who exist within the narratives of the show and who are the performers' immediate witnesses. In other words, these (fictional) people consciously make spectacles of themselves in the eyes of others, and by exposing themselves in this way, they realize and reveal core truths about themselves.

Why has it recently become a priority for U.S. television to depict the existence of a "true" self, which is, for the most part, hidden or concealed (sometimes even from the characters themselves), a self that is then exposed through theatrical performance? What motivates present-day television producers and writers to populate their fictions with scenarios in which stage- and street theatre enable individuals to find out and/or display who they "really are"?

A significant reason for TV's interest in theatrical performance is the rise of Internet gossip culture. Because the World Wide Web now allows independent users collectively to build, and destroy, individuals' reputations, the postmodern crisis of identity, the question, "Who am I?" that is so problematic in a fluid, mobile, and constantly shifting society, has become largely a crisis of network technology: originators and disseminators of the information and rumors that help or harm specific people's reputations can be anonymous and so remote from those they discuss that "Who am I?" becomes a question whose answer is not entirely, or even mostly, within the individual's control. Rather, individual identity is constructed in, and by, the network. Television's present turn to theatricality offers media consumers the fantasy that they have a chance of finding out who they really

READ THIS: At a minimum, your notes **must** answer BOTH of the following questions for EACH of the 16 paragraphs: In your own words, what does this paragraph SAY? What does this paragraph DO and how do you know?

Example: 1. This paragraph says that television shows are starting to resemble plays and other kinds of live performances. The paragraph introduces one of the article's main ideas and offers as proof several television shows which include singing and dancing.

2. Continue for each of the remaining 15 paragraphs...

are, that, indeed, there is a true, authentic self that remains somewhat stable beneath all their permutations and adaptations and that live dramatic performance (the operational opposite of networked technologies, which, by and large, render users anonymous and interactions untraceable) can offer them an opportunity to connect with this authentic self. In a time when Web-based social media define who we are by constructing (and potentially destroying) our reputations and public personas, television attempts to reassure us that we each have a “real self” that we can access and communicate to others by engaging in dramatic performance. In television narratives today, drama is the cure for gossip.

THEATRICALITY AS SELF-DISCOVERY IN GOSSIP GIRL...

The CW series *Gossip Girl* (2007–2012) concerns a specific sliver of high society, a group of super-rich youths in Manhattan’s Upper East Side (U.E.S), who plot and scheme with and against one another as they struggle with issues of family, friendship, sex, school success, and social standing. In a plot device that recurs in each episode, the title character, Gossip Girl, an anonymous blogger who operates as a clearinghouse for all the rumors that swirl around the UES crowd, posts blog entries and sends out mobile device “blasts” that make public the characters’ secrets and expose any falsehoods they have constructed. Despite all of the money and power wielded by Gossip Girl’s privileged characters, therefore, gossip is the most important currency in their world: the UES teens who artfully deceive adults and peers alike in order to further their own interests can be brought low instantly by a Gossip Girl blast; they can also ruin one another by sending Gossip Girl some insider information.

Viewers are asked to identify with the UESers who are the series’ main focus, and what we learn, episode after episode, is that they are not reducible to their intrigues. The gossip that circulates about them does not tell the complete story of any of them. *Gossip Girl* illustrates a predicament increasingly common today: people who have online reputations find that, while Internet rumors circulated about them tell some portion of the truth, it is never the whole truth. Celebrities are closely analysed on various Hollywood Web sites (TMZ.com, justjared.buzznet.com, People.com, or EW.com, among others), university instructors are reviewed on RateMyProfessors.com and various review sites, and managers at all levels are ranked in a wide range of employment-related Internet forums. While readers of the gossip posted on these sites have a sense that they are privy to many facts about the people discussed, they do not really know them. A superfluity of online rumors can coalesce around almost anyone, with the result that all of us need to be watchful custodians of our reputations. If we do not craft our online personae carefully, we

risk allowing Internet gossip to define “who we are.”

Using theatrical performance as a plot device, *Gossip Girl* dramatizes the conundrum of how to establish who one “really is” in a gossip-saturated society. In fact, the characters never successfully combat *Gossip Girl*’s rumour mill or win the right to define their public reputations, but their consolation is that, through the show’s narrative, they can at least discover their true selves for their own sakes. On the one hand, the main characters on the show are constantly engaged in performance: their machinations typically involve a great deal of artful dissembling. On the other hand, these planned performances generally end in disappointment or crisis, as *Gossip Girl*, drawing on the surveillance of anonymous tipsters who track every movement of the UESers, uncovers all of their ploys. But the main characters also put on different kinds of performances, which are wholly improvised and through which they surprise even themselves.

The most prominent examples of improvised drama leading to a character’s self-discovery involve Blair Waldorf, who is equal parts heroine and villainess in the *Gossip Girl* universe. Blair, the queen bee who reigns over the social scene of her elite private high school, strives for excellence in all of her activities and plans out in great detail most of her life’s major events. Her own deflowering is no exception. In the series’ early episodes, Blair sets up several scenarios that she thinks will encourage her long-time boyfriend, Nathaniel (Nate) Archibald, to finally seduce her, but Nate (who is secretly in love with Blair’s best friend) balks at each of these carefully orchestrated productions and leaves Blair untouched.

In episode “Victor, Victrola,” Blair finally accepts that Nate does not love her and breaks up with him. Her first stop after the break-up is the burlesque club Victrola, owned by Nate’s best friend, the debauched and rakish Chuck Bass. There, on a dare from Chuck, Blair takes the stage along-side the scantily clad burlesque dancers and spontaneously performs with them. She sways seductively to the music as she strips down to her slip. “Who is that girl?” a waiter asks Chuck, gesturing at Blair on the stage, who is earning cheers and catcalls from the mesmerized club-goers. “I have no idea,” Chuck replies, a look of awe on his face, as he stands and raises his champagne glass in a toast to Blair.

Later that night, Blair loses her virginity to Chuck in the back seat of his limousine. Blair’s “first time” is completely unplanned (unlike all of the “first times” she tried to coordinate with Nate). That she should choose Chuck as her partner and that he should desire her comes as a great surprise to both of them. What Blair’s impromptu performance on the Victrola stage has revealed to both is herself, the core of personality, which is far more daring,

sensual, and risk-taking than her rigid, carefully controlled facade would suggest. Until the moment that Blair literally and metaphorically strips off her outer covering, Chuck “has no idea” who she is. Chuck falls hard for the Blair who suddenly reveals herself to him, and the night in the limousine is the start of a tumultuous affair that continues to be Gossip Girl’s central love story into the show’s third season. When Blair performs spontaneously on Victrola’s stage, she finds not only her true self but also her true love.

Blair also finds her innermost self via performance in other episodes. In “Bad News Blair,” for instance, Blair’s mother, a famous fashion designer, fires Blair as the model for her new collection’s ad campaign and attempts to replace her with her best friend, Serena. In retaliation for Blair’s mother’s cruelty, Blair and Serena abscond with the clothing collection and wear the stolen dresses in the streets of New York City, taking photos of each other in dramatic poses. In effect, the teen girls stage their own impromptu fashion shoot, mugging for the camera and using exaggerated expressions and gestures that draw the stares of passers-by. Their parody of a fashion shoot, performed in front of bewildered onlookers, can be regarded as street theatre. Blair, who in previous episodes is shown to suffer greatly from her mother’s inattention and disapproval, realizes through acting-out in public that she is capable of shrugging off her mother’s harsh judgements. She discovers that she is her own person, independent of her mother and willing to oppose her if necessary.

INTERNET GOSSIP CULTURE

Why does contemporary TV so frequently... show characters discovering who they “really are” through performing live in front of audiences?

One possible reason is television’s desire to respond to the Internet, which is regarded in some corners of the television industry as a formidable threat to TV as it competes for media consumers’ attention and advertisers’ dollars. Recent research indicates that increasing use of the Internet has not, in fact, decreased television viewing (Nielsen), and television and the Internet do converge at points: TV fans participate in fan communities online; increasingly, TV viewers watch TV at the same time as they surf the Web; many people watch television content on Websites such as Hulu and Fancast; and most TV networks produce Internet-specific content, such as supplementary “webisodes” or interviews with actors and writers of popular shows. Nevertheless, even as the TV industry strives to expand its consumer base and revenue through the Internet, television and the Internet are undeniably rivals on at least one level: for five decades (from the 1950s through the 1990s), television was what Philip Auslander calls “the cultural dominant”

(xii), and since the millennium, it has appeared increasingly likely that the Internet will supplant TV in that role. At present, Auslander states, "[T]here is an ongoing, unresolved struggle for dominance among television, telecommunications, and the Internet. The principal players behind each of these would like nothing better than to be your primary source of news, entertainment, art, conversation, and other forms of engagement with the world" (xii). The television industry may partner with the Internet in many ways, but it also struggles to prove that TV offers media audiences benefits that the Internet does not and that TV will continue to be relevant to mass society even if the Internet displaces it as the cultural dominant.

In light of this rivalrous, or at least complex, relationship between contemporary TV and the Internet, we can interpret television's persistent equation of theatricality with self-authentication as a serious critique of Internet culture.
