



Critiquing Oprah Mania

I must admit: Oprah's TV show has made me cry. The tears were elicited by watching a very moving scene. On that particular episode, a girl who was a huge fan of a talented musical artist was selected from the audience, and surprised with an appearance by that musical artist (who proceeded to serenade her with one of his hit songs). Needless to say, it was making a young girl's dream come true. This was very touching. It was a pleasure to witness so much joy brought to a fellow human being. I derived immense satisfaction from beholding such a poignant moment...and found myself being genuinely grateful that Oprah's producers had orchestrated the interlude for millions to witness.

Though no wiser, I was in a good mood for the rest of the day.

However, in this midst of this cheaply acquired intoxication, stepping back, I realized that perhaps there was something more going on than what appeared on the surface of things. Had the world been made a slightly better place because of this event? Transient satisfactions are, after all, transient. I wondered, even as I was utterly captivated, what the point of it ultimately was.

Pulling on heart-strings is something certain people do quite well—and make a lot of money doing it. Nicolas Sparks, for example, is a maestro at making people cry—doing so by concocting emotionally-throttling situations in his magnificently cheesy love stories. He consequently sells mountains of books and movie rights. Does this make him a great artist (a literally master)...or merely a savvy heart-string-puller? Are those like Sparks and Winfrey providing a public service? Or are they catering to our primal desire to be amused, moved, and manipulated?

There is little doubt that Oprah Winfrey embodies the zeitgeist of contemporary pop culture. She stages events in a provocative and enthralling way—providing millions with passive-minded entertainment for which they're much obliged. She is an impresario of idle amusements, playing emotional jujitsu with her audience. So one is naturally compelled to ask: Who is this super-rich super-celebrity? Some simple observations indicate what the answer may be...



Oprah's magazine is illustrative: "I will not only name the magazine after myself, but the subtitle will remind you that it is named after me: **O: The Oprah Magazine**. It's mine, I own it, it belongs to me, and it's—ultimately—all about me. And just for good measure, I will put a photo-shopped picture of MYSELF on the cover of EVERY SINGLE ISSUE." (Apparently, Oprah has no problem with tacky.)

One can't help but wonder: What kind of person would do this? One need not go out on a limb to recognize that Miss Winfrey's magazine is the epitome of self-serving, self-involved, self-absorbed, self-worshiping self-promotion. It is narcissism embodied in a periodical. And it sells like hot-cakes.

Oprah expects everyone to care about Oprah. At the onset of 2011, for example, she expected everyone to be on the edge of their seats wondering about her "big secret" that would be revealed at the appointed time. It turned out to be the banal fact that she had a half-sister (about whom she hadn't previously known). One is tempted to respond to this: "Who cares?" Such information was utterly irrelevant to the rest of the world—yet was portrayed as some profound revelation about which we were ALL supposed to care...thus feeding into the tabloid-obsessed culture off of which Oprah thrives.

Assessing the mountains of evidence, year after year, it is difficult not to arrive at the following conclusions: Oprah cares about one person: Oprah. Oprah cares about one thing: Oprah's image. Oprah's bottom line: making as much money as possible for Oprah. "And I will do this by championing every charlatan I can find. I will regularly peddle pulp trash to the target audience. I will use my program as a vehicle to promote hacks that I personally fancy. My audience, after all, is comprised of people who will eagerly eat it all up...because they fawn over me and hang on every word I say."

Is this putting words in Oprah's mouth? Indeed. An attempt to imbue her magnificent deeds with narration (rather than depend on her own lofty lip service) is long overdue. Oprah is, after all, her own theatrical device—and she profits handily off of stage-managed spectacles designed to elicit oo's and aah's...and even tears. We LOVE to say "wow" and we love to cry. And that's why so many are enamored with Oprah. Oprah. Oprah.

Predictably, the daytime talk show diva has raked in oodles of money by doing what she does with an uncanny savvy. Perhaps she could start a production company, and rake in even more cash! (But what to call it? Let's be clever and name it "Oprah")



backwards.Brilliant.)It may be a red flag that Oprah’s empire is called, with tongue in cheek, “Oprah’s Empire”.Do genuine humanitarians strive to create empires for themselves?

Oprah, like Donald Trump, is a person who has managed to make herself—not into a great human being—but into a **BRAND**.Indeed, she is nothing more than a brand—to be slapped on various things in order to sell them to the target audience.Miss Winfrey will offer viewers touching stories and even some quite moving moments—involving “ordinary people” like you and me.How wonderful.But in the end, a name-brand is precisely what she is; that is all she is.The rest is stagecraft—theatrics that uses us ordinary people as a means to an end.She merely wants us to play along.

Miss Winfrey has essentially made a career out of being a vacuous-ness monger: vacuous verbiage, vacuous ideas, vacuous material, and vacuous themes...ad nauseum, ad infinitum.She specializes in promulgating some of the most inane things in our culture—and does so via a cult of personality.In the end, it’s all cosmetics with little to show inside.It’s not that the emperor has no clothes; it’s that the clothes have no emperor.It is **glamorous** vacuous-ness that she offers...which gives it an appeal.

It’s insipid, but it’s AMUSING.

It’s vapid, but it SELLS.

It’s ultimately pointless, but no matter: We love it ‘cause it’s Oprah.

Upon further scrutiny, though, we find that Oprah is shameless in hawking whatever quackery she thinks the audience will enjoy.“It’s bullshit, but they’ll eat it up.Anything for ratings!” I can hear her say to her production staff: “The Secret”? Check. “The Purpose Drive Life”? Check.Deepak Chopra’s endless New Age hogwash? Check. After all, Oprah is—ultimately—a businessman: someone who runs a BUSINESS, not a public service.Why **wouldn’t** she use her clout to push whatever she sees fit?

Some people revere Miss Winfrey simply because she’s managed to amass such a colossal fortune.Is this really the measure of a human’s greatness?For some people, apparently, business accumen is the ultimate barometer for human excellence.According to this gestalt, merit is proportional to financial success. This preening talkshow diva is revered, in other words, for making obscene amounts of money for herself...with a token gesture here and there, along with way, so as to



imbue herself with the stigma of a “philanthropist”. But shall we measure someone by how much wealth and power they’ve managed to accumulate for themselves, or how they USE that wealth and power?

“But she IS a philanthropist!” her fans will insist. Really? A half-assed effort to start a girls’ school in Africa? (A school that failed miserably, she neglects to mention since its ignominious demise...due to incompetence.) Using an episode of her show to give audience members free cars? Bringing certain people together with other people whom they’d like to meet? What marvelous PR!

I’m not impressed. Snazzy publicity is not philanthropy. Hallmark moments are precious, but they do not improve the world. They are fleeting—rigged to hold us for the duration of the next commercial break. These token gestures were little more than PR stunts, designed to give a little extra gloss to the carefully-honed image she so covets. The result of all this, though, is that Oprah helped fuel the current American obsession with celebrity (as well as our chronic preoccupation with choreographed voyeurism and stage-managed histrionics).

I sometimes speculate that I could do more for the world with a million dollars than Oprah has done with over a billion. Perhaps I’m mistaken. Either way, Oprah continues to help bona fide charlatans make boatloads of money off of America’s most credulous—even as she promotes things of dubious merit for her own gratification. This is not to say that Oprah is a bad person. Perhaps she means well. I’m inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt, and attribute her less-than-respectable track record of product-endorsements to myopia and narcissism (rather than to hubris and avarice). I have no doubt: There is no malice with Oprah, only well-garbed emptiness.

Over the years, we’ve learned: If Oprah recommends it, it’s almost certainly garbage. A brief survey of her C.V. reveals an embarrassing track record. She is the reigning queen of spiritual self-help hokum; the schmaltzier and more mawkish the better. Nobody milks overwrought, maudlin spectacle with more pinache than Oprah. In addition, she loves horrible poetry (Maya Angelou, whose oratorical skills are nothing short of abysmal). She romanticizes superficiality (tabloid gossip, cosmetics, fashion, banal melodrama). And she has nothing but adoration for the glaringly inauthentic. (For a few years, one could always identify the books that one should almost certainly skip, because they were conveniently flagged with an “Oprah’s Book Club” sticker.)

Is this an overly harsh indictment? Perhaps. But it's the provisional judgment I've made based on what I've seen, heard and read. (I'm open to being proven wrong.) I wonder if Oprah might try to sue me for such candid criticism. I realize that it's considered heresy to say things that make powerful people look bad—especially considering celebrity is based primarily on having the right kind of image. (Perhaps I'll be safe if nobody pays attention to this essay.) Yet...then I see her go to India, and demonstrate how aloof and ignorant (and glaringly un-interested in education) she truly is when she scoffs at Hindus using their hands to eat (which is, actually, a GREAT idea; indeed, WE are the weird ones, with our metal tools). In moments like that, we might note that Oprah should stick to her day-job: interviewing celebrities and confecting melodrama.

Either way, I'm glad I had the opportunity to watch Oprah's producers bring joy to this "regular, everyday, ordinary" girl during that touching episode. In fact, I'm tempted to watch it again! I REALLY enjoyed it. The allure of such an event is almost irresistible to us "ordinary" people afflicted with romantic dreams. For this "dreams can come true" optimism, all these things Oprah does seem so...wonderful. After all, it could happen to you too!

POSTSCRIPT:

Miss Winfrey specializes in hawking the seductive prospect of "dreams can come true", film at 11. However, in the grand scheme of things, I must wonder: All to what end? This woman, it seems, is little other than an enticing gimmick. She is a performer who's certainly mastered the art of providing cheap, low-brow entertainment—a surefire way to make a buck in an intellectually impoverished culture. Some may say that this is all just innocuous fun—so why hem and haw? But as anodyne as such cheap satisfactions may seem, these things have also proven to have deleterious effects on the weal of our society. If I want to be moved, perhaps I should bring about my own touching moments—moments of ME bringing joy to others...rather than deriving such satisfaction vicariously.

By indulging in the voyeurism of passive entertainment, I accomplish nothing.

None of this is to say that Oprah's show / magazine is all bad. The point here isn't to caricature something that is—inevitably—complex. Some of the programming surely aims to do some good. Certain episodes deal with a range of important topics—from sexual abuse, animal abuse, gay rights, managing one's finances, health topics (Dr.

Phil, Dr. Oz), and so on. Spreading awareness of such things is eminently valuable, and should always be encouraged. Hats off to Miss Winfrey insofar as she's managed to effect positive change in such areas.

Fighting racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination / dysfunction is a noble endeavor—an admirable way for any public figure to leverage his/her clout. But here's the problem: It's a good start—but it's ONLY a start. The Oprah approach seems to foster the following habit: Being impacted by a show...then simply moving on with one's day. In other words, the format lends itself to “gee wiz, gosh golly” moments in between commercial breaks...only for the vast majority of the audience to simply go back to what they were doing before they turned their television on. Real awareness-spreading, it seems, entails a far more involved process—a fact that's obfuscated by a provocative TV episode.

Two salient questions to pose: What is Oprah really doing with her power and money when the cameras aren't rolling? (Follow the money.) One might wonder: Where's the follow-through? After all, the proof's in the pudding, not in the lip service. Is Oprah's offering really the best way to instigate critical thinking in the masses? Does she catalyze intellectual curiosity in her fan-base?

A small part of me—the adolescent part—sees the appeal of Oprah's puerile antics. Like most cult leaders, Miss Winfrey's message to her audience is simple and enticing: “I can make your dreams come true. Maybe YOU will be next!” Each time we see a staged wish-granting event, the message is: “This too could someday be you. Just stay tuned. In the meantime, keep listening to what I say.”

The verdict as it stands: If you want to help make the world a better place, Oprah will probably not play a role in the endeavor. Meanwhile: Want to waste your time reading pulp trash? Buy a book Oprah recommends. Want to lower your IQ by a point? Watch an episode of her show. Want to lower your IQ by two points? Subscribe to her magazine. Want to allow your brain to completely atrophy? Tune in to her new network—brilliantly named “OWN”. (Presumably, this cryptic acronym stands for something amazingly profound. Someday, we may decode its inner meaning. WHO owns OWN?) In the meantime, the rest of us will pursue erudition on our own terms, thank you very much.