

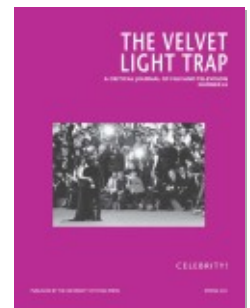


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Tom Cruise, the “Couch Incident,” and the Limits of Public Elation

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Why are the details of Tom Cruise’s “couch incident” on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on 23 May 2005 still so fresh that the incident seemed to have happened only yesterday? Well, it *did* happen yesterday, and it keeps happening, thanks to YouTube and other online media resources that have captured, recirculated, and remixed the scene, yielding such notable manifestations as the “Tom Cruise Kills Oprah” video, which accentuates the incident’s outrageousness by looping the segment of the “interview” in which Cruise grasps Oprah by both hands and matching it to the visually animated shock of an electric charge. It is the visual iterability of the scene itself that has secured its iconic status and brought it into such sharp focus in the foreground of other images and scenes, on-screen and off-, that continue to shape the composite persona of this immensely popular star. Sure, Russell Crowe and Mel Gibson may have had their newsworthy manic moments around this same time, but no one was there to film Crowe throwing that telephone at an employee of the Mercer Hotel or to capture the anti-Semitic tirade that Gibson launched at one of the Malibu officers assisting in his DUI arrest. The online reproduction of the police report was just a weak substitute for the “real” thing.

“I’ve never seen you like this,” exclaimed the bewildered and almost speechless Oprah during the incident, her shock and disbelief offering a suitable response as a witness to what might be described as a most inappropriate use of televisual talk show space. Unless you play it as Joaquin Phoenix did on *Late Night with David Letterman*, proper interviewee behavior involves responding to questions posed by your host while maintaining relative positions conducive to polite verbal interchange; it is only during a sanctioned and prearranged “performance” (singing a song, dancing a

dance) that reconfigurations of spatial relations between host and guest are permitted. While Cruise’s kneeling, jumping, and bouncing may not have been entirely out of character (acrobatics have been among the actor’s demonstrated skills since the early days of *The Outsiders*, *Risky Business*, and *Cocktail*), in this case this “character” seemed to be appearing in the wrong scene or even in the wrong film.

While the ready accessibility for play and replay of this very strange scene has contributed to its iconic status in media culture, the incident reveals just as much about contemporary audiences’ expectations regarding the construction of a consistent—and consistently engaging—star persona across a career that, in Cruise’s case, has now spanned almost thirty years. For audiences to sustain interest in a star over such a long term, the promise of the revelation of some form of essential “truth” must be offered and sustained to them within the set of texts that Richard Dyer has identified as collectively shaping the star persona (film, publicity, promotion, criticism). Actors with career spans abruptly foreshortened by early, tragic death can often engage this quest for truth on almost infinitely sustainable terms, since there always remains that question of what might have been, of how the star might have developed, if only the tragedy had been averted. The reminder of a star’s susceptibility to death is also the ultimate sign of a vulnerability that keeps audiences emotionally connected to his or her career. Stars with longer-term careers often face the problem of how to balance the expectation of consistency of character with the demand that they also develop and “grow.” I have described this development elsewhere as a process of either a star’s emergence (the sustained sense that a “truth” of his or her persona is always unfolding before us) or redemption (the anticipation of a future revelation that will make sense of a star’s past).



Figure 1. Tom Cruise's incident on Oprah's couch (Harpo Productions, 2005).

In this context, while the couch-jumping incident still seems uncanny and strange, it also highlights what has by now become a very familiar component of Cruise's star persona—a consistent lack of vulnerability, both on-screen and off-. In his acting career this lack has been essential to the figure of the invincible all-American hero that he has perfected since the 1980s, and it has most often served him well on-screen; however, as an actor in his late forties with more than thirty acting performances, the consistency of this invulnerability can also make him appear “underdeveloped,” static, and incapable of ever emerging or redeeming himself as anything else or more. The invulnerability has been yet more pronounced in his life off-screen. Even aside from the more abrasive manifestations in recent years (his assessment of Brooke Shields, his heated discussion with Matt Lauer), Cruise's demonstrations of unwavering “strength” have shaped themselves as triumphs over adversity and the heroic surmounting of obstacles—he's a player who doesn't do “defensive” well.

“Now that public apology has become a standard phase in stars' careers,” writes Caryn James in the *New York Times*, “there really is no such thing as bad publicity, just opportunities for redemption and more publicity” (24). Cruise, however, is unaccustomed to offering public concessions or apologies, and unlike Mel Gibson, the intention of whose public confession seemed purgative after the DUI incident, Cruise's persona does not appear to demand or to accommodate redemption. Even during the follow-up interview at his Colorado home in 2008 Cruise not only stopped short of apologizing for the “incident” but also refrained from formulating any sensible explanation of it.

Considering the couch incident further, perhaps it *does* seem ludicrous to expect a star to apologize for an effusive and largely nonverbal outpouring of affection for the new love of his life, except perhaps to the extent that he might have scuffed the furniture in the process. As was evident in the case of Howard Dean, however, such expressions of elation are not as a rule well received by contemporary audiences, and unless they are momentary and well timed, they can easily feed suspicions of mental instability. Confession is a much more acceptable mode of emotional excess, given that the confessor gives his or her audience respect and offers the sympathetically engaging role of listener or witness. While we are always invited to be happy for a star who experiences success or triumph or expresses love for someone, a star's intense public display of elation never really gives an audience much to do (except clap); indeed, it even goes so far as to deny the audience any response that might sustain or strengthen the star-fan relationship. Elation becomes, then, a form of endpoint, a destination in itself, and no longer a process of “getting there.”

Works Cited

Caryn James, “No Such Thing as Bad Publicity?” *New York Times*, 24 Dec. 2006, sec. 2: 24.