

We will be watching clips from *Jeremy Kyle* and *X Factor* in the seminar and discussing the programme in relation to Cruel TV/humiliation TV.

Audition of William Hung <https://youtu.be/2Qkas9mIMgE> (1.41 mins) and Alexis Cohen audition <http://youtu.be/qYu3PsLmUCw> (3.33 mins)

Extract from Smith, R. H. (2014) *The Joy of Pain, Schadenfreude and the Dark side of Human Nature.* Oxford, Oxford University Press. p.113-115 (page numbers vary as this is from an E-Reader)

'Since its first season in 2020, *American Idol* has been one of the most highly viewed shown on television. There are many reasons for its popularity. Without the opportunity to see talented performers emerge from obscurity and mature over the weeks and to enjoy the guest appearances from musical legends, it would lack the cocktail of ingredients that has made it so popular. But without the balance of viewing the humiliating as well as the uplifting, the extraordinary appeal of the show would diminish.

Humiliation might be one of the worst things to experience. It renders a person's public self in tatters, defective and inferior. People in such situations are like marks who are socially dead... How could it be pleasing to witness such social pain? One explanation may be in the social comparison implications for the viewer... any downward comparison which is partly what another person's humiliation implies, can mix pleasure with sympathy. ..Certainly for most people, watching William Hung performing so poorly on the screen created no danger of experiencing a deflating 'upward comparison' with someone superior to them. On any visible dimension of comparison even the most ordinary viewers would have felt no threat to their own relative judgement of themselves.

On the contrary, most people could conclude that they were better looking, more talented, more self-aware- more cool – than Hung. .. Why aren't the pleasures of feeling superior supplanted by the pain of witnessing humiliation? While Hung performed, viewers saw sequences of the judges' mockery. One judge, Randy Jackson, placed a handkerchief over his face to hide his reaction. Paula Abdul, usually soft-hearted, was unable to suppress her outward amusement; she laughed uncontrollably. The third judge, Simon Cowell, characteristically felt no need to hide his ridicule and soon stopped the performance before Hung had finished the song. 'You can't sing, you can't dance, so what do you want me to say?' Painful for Hung, clearly, but not for many viewers. In fact, the judges' mockery was a large part of the fun. Their reactions seemed irrepressible – a natural response to the performance. Here were three experts clearly enjoying themselves – approving similar pleasure in viewers.

Other features of *Idol* also help promote amusement over empathy. **Auditioners perform voluntarily.** No one forces them to audition. If someone has the naive boldness to think he could be the next American Idol, why should he receive our pity if his performance is embarrassing and receives ridicule? And when contestants become hostile in response to pretty accurate feedback, as many do, they deserve their humiliation all the more. .. the deservingness of a misfortunate is a sure path to creating schadenfreude. The modest and lovable manner of William Hung was atypical of poor performers selected to be aired. Hung's response to Simon Cowell's critique was 'Um, I already gave my best, and i have no regrets at all.' This response, so humble and uncoached was surely one reason why Hung was eventually embraced by viewers and why he enjoyed more than his 15 minutes of fame. Indeed he benefitted financially from his anti-*Idol* persona. More typical was the behaviour of another contestant from the preliminary rounds, Alexis Cohen who delivered a barrage of vulgar expletives and gestures in response to Simon Cowell's critique of her performance. Cameras followed her progress out of the audition room and building as she continued her crude outbursts... it added to the perception of her inferiority and upheld the deservingness of her humiliation.

American Idol is just one example of a prominent theme in reality TV in which humiliation is the marquee ingredient. According to analysis by media scholar Amber Watts, there has been an increase in the number of programmes (such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *America's Next Top Model*, *Jersey Shore*) That use real-life formats to exploit the many ways that people can be humiliated as a lure for pleasing viewers. ...the most popular reality TV shows contained more humiliation than scripted dramas did. ... **humilitainment**.

p.115 'Until the 19th century, stocks and pillories served as a public punishment instead of imprisonment. The convicted were sentenced to stand in public sites, such as village greens, that people frequented. It was common for people to make fun of victims and throw all manner of things at them, from rotten food to dead animals. The pillory was a favourite because the victim's face was immobilised along with his or her hands. Sometimes the ears were nailed to the wood to prevent the face from moving. .. **are some segments of television programme today serving a similar role?** ... The gratifications of humiliation and resulting guilt-free schadenfreude are a potent draw. Deserved humiliation and anticipated schadenfreude seem to be the formula... **The producers of *Predator* (was well as *American Idol* and so many other reality TV shows) know there is a line that they must avoid crossing.** They may test the limits of humiliation, but they surely wish to avoid the change **the schadenfruede is replaced by outrage over the treatment** of these men, a decline in viewing and the withdrawal of advertising dollars.... Is *Predator* a bold, groundbreaking work of investigative television, or ... a theatre of cheap morality, wrapped in an orgy of self-righteousness. You be the judge.'

Questions to think about

1. In relation to Jeremy Kyle <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/clip/141007> (5.40 mins)
<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/clip/118228> (4.55 mins) and from *The X Factor* <https://youtu.be/uwWm0AnzO5k> (5.05 mins)
– are these cruel TV? **Why/Why not (give arguments/reasons and examples from the programme.**

Other questions to help you think about this topic.

2. See how many programmes you can think of where humiliation is part of the pleasure of watching?
3. Do you think that for schadenfreude to exist there needs to be deserved humiliation rather than undeserved humiliation? Give examples from programmes you are familiar with.
4. Do you think we could apply the term humilitainment to contemporary television.
5. Do you think that there is a line that should not be crossed?