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Tyra Banks

THE MEDICAL CONFESSION IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TALK SHOW

by Marisa Lenay Carter

On an episode of the Tyra Banks Show, *Teens in the Sex Trade*, international model Tyra Banks interviews an eighteen-year-old porn star. The episode introduces Sasha Grey with excerpts from her pornography: short clips of Grey wearing lingerie, preparing to go on set, and approaching the camera in a come-hither fashion. Proclaiming indignantly that Grey has done over eighty pornography films since turning eighteen, Banks equates her work to the “sex trade,” a connotation to human trafficking and ultimately sex without consent. Although Banks presents her intentions to be of genuine concern for Grey’s well-being, Michel Foucault’s theory of sexual discourse in the *History of Sexuality* can expose the power dynamic between the explicit and implicit of the talk show. Foucault asserts that procedures of confession and scientific discursivity have created a sexual discourse that has intertwined power and pleasure which overlap, seek out, and underpin one another. This is done through a clinical codification of the inducement to speak, the claim of a general and diffuse causality, the principle of latency, method of interpretation, and the medicalization of the effects of confession. Although Grey self-assuredly explains that her career is “sex positive,” a healthy and progressive approach to sexuality, Tyra Banks abuses the five techniques of the medical confession, seeking an ultimate causality in her actions.

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Teens in the Sex Trade could be interpreted as an effort to repress open sexuality, as the content of the program focuses on fixing Grey. However, the form of the show defies what Foucault calls the “repressive hypothesis.” Foucault explains that while it is possible that attitudes concerning sex have been repressive throughout the last three centuries and have changed only minimally since the seventeenth century, conversation about sex has increased as sexual discourse has intertwined with power mechanisms. In seventeenth century Western Europe, the bourgeois society grew rampantly, seeking power and place in political discussions. Bourgeois morality insisted that sex was a shameful waste if sexual acts didn't aim to produce children or support the heterosexual marriage unit. As a result, the bourgeoisie gained ideological power over discourse concerning sex even though its efforts initially aimed for repression and silence. Foucault explains that such an exercise of power created “an institutional incitement to speak out it [sex], and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (1503). People were forced to be constantly aware and in control of their sexuality, talking about its role in all aspects of life.

While the bourgeois refined language by restricting when sex should occur, the Counter Reformation transformed sex into a strictly confessional discourse. As the Catholic Church heavily enforced confession, the idea of sexual sin was prescribed spoken words and was subsequently turned through the “endless mill of speech.” It is not to say that confession suddenly became a priority for the church but that sexual sins became the most immediate and dangerous threats to an individual's wellbeing and community. Foucault explains:

An imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse. Insofar as possible, nothing was meant to elude this dictum, even if the words it employed are to be carefully neutralized. (1504)

Though the church pressed for censorship and control, it ultimately created a stronger incentive to talk. The desire to speak up about sex became a pleasurable act whether through confession, gossip, or hearing about another's sinful behavior.

For Foucault, language and knowledge are closely linked to power. In the eighteenth century, techniques to control sex were transformed into subjects of public concern rather than that of the church alone; talk about sex no longer depended on religious principles but on political rationale. Birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet, and habitation developed as ‘interests’ both for political agendas and public health. If the public’s bodies could be controlled, then the community would be safer and stronger. Foucault explains:

It was essential that the state know what was happening with its citizens’ sex, and the use they made of it, but also that each individual be capable of controlling the use he made of it. Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settle upon it. (1508)

Sex became a threat to the order of a strong society and demanded public acknowledgment: a community confession. Public institutions sought to control sex by means of physical constraints as well. Foucault explains that while schools in the eighteenth century silenced the discussion of sex, the space for classes, shape of the tables, planning of the recreation lessons, and distribution of the dormitories all created an incitement to talk about it. Rules to monitor bedtime and sleep periods, for example, may have prevented contact between students but it implicitly imposed a discourse of appropriate and inappropriate behavior; one must sleep when instructed, and alone (1508–1510). Repression and sex became an unquestionable binary. If sex existed, it needed to be controlled otherwise it posed a threat to public health, religion, and ultimately to the order of a potentially great society.

As sex within the heterosexual marriage unit is seen as moral and under control, this paradigm claims exclusive rights to discourse on sexuality and does not need to be questioned. *Teens in the Sex Trade* focuses on Grey as an unwedded, barely-legal young woman even though she willingly works in pornography and is a public advocate for sex positive movements. The production exhibits her sexuality as disordered and hazardous. As host of the show, Banks possesses the power in the interrogator/confessor binary by crafting intrusive questions to retrieve what she believes to be most relevant in Grey’s sex life. She is the concerned ‘doctor’ who serves as the speaking portal of sexually controlling ideology.

Through a clinical codification of the inducement to speak, Banks combines the confession with examination:

BANKS: I know some of the things you did. Tell me about the fifty year old co-star on the set of a movie.

GREY: Oh see that was the first scene I did.

BANKS: The very first scene you did?

GREY: Yeah, my first scene. And um...

BANKS: He was fifty years old?

GREY: Yes. He might be a couple years older than that, yeah.

BANKS: And you were only 18? (2012)

Banks begins the clinical codification by inducing a confession and demanding to control the conversational floor by affirming she already knows what Grey “did.” Foucault explains that the medical confession requires a recollection of memories to reinscribe the procedure, chalking it up to a “scientifically acceptable observation” (102). By confirming the co-star’s age, Banks enforces the exacting questionnaire. For Banks and the audience, the age difference between Grey and her co-star makes the sexual encounter intolerable, especially because Grey was hardly old enough to do pornography at the time. Foucault explains that “educators and doctors [have] combated children’s

onanism like an epidemic that needed to be eradicated” (1516). Similarly, on the show, Grey’s behavior is treated as though she is too young to make decisions for her own body. Banks already knows Grey’s responses, but she offers the questions so that the crowd and television viewers may respond in shock. Grey is treated like an impulsive child in need of guidance to discontinue her sexual inclinations. If Grey were married to the co-star, for example, their sexual relations would not be pertinent to the show.

Banks moves on to abuse the postulate of a general and diffuse causality. By emphasizing abnormality in Grey’s actions, Banks portrays the porn star as deformed and shocking. In one part of the show Grey tells Banks about her first pornography film. She recalls asking her co-star if he would like to punch her in the stomach. The show proceeds:

BANKS: And so you asked him to punch you in your stomach? And so he punched you in your stomach?

GREY: No. He didn’t do it.

BANKS: But you wanted it?

GREY: Yes. (2012)

The discourse of sexuality requires a permanent cause for all desires, which is why Banks interrupts and clarifies that Grey actually desired to be punched in the stomach. Consequently, Grey’s sexuality is portrayed as though it were a disorder. Foucault explains that the power mechanisms of discourse that focused on this “alien strain” of sexuality were made into “a principle of classification and intelligibility, established as a *raison d’être* and a natural order of disorder” (1518). Discourse channeled toward disordered sexuality does not aim for suppression but rather aims to give it a logical, observable, and perpetual reality. On this premise, disordered sexuality can be easily controlled or condemned.

Foucault’s principle of latency intrinsic to sexuality and his method of interpretation also explain that a confession must be extracted from the confessor. It cannot be offered freely (1518). On *Teens in the Sex Trade*, Banks finds it

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nearly impossible that Grey sincerely enjoys being a porn star. Banks alludes to medical research to create her own diagnosis by explaining that a majority of porn stars have been sexually abused. However, even after Grey insists that she has not been sexually abused, Banks proceeds to ask, “So, this is just something that you just want to do?” (2012). Banks is astonished by the possibility that an individual could enjoy the type of sex that Grey enjoys. There must be a reason. As Foucault explains, “since sexuality was a medical and medicalizable object, one had to try and detect it—as a lesion, a dysfunction, or a symptom— in the depths of the organism, or on the surface of the skin, or among all the signs of behavior” (1518). In this case, sexual abuse is given as the ultimate reason for Grey’s actions.

Banks fulfills a peculiar role as interrogator. Her questions create a pleasure in power, a double impetus. The camera frame occasionally turns to the crowd and focuses on expressions of disgust and disapproval often accompanied by whispering. The psychiatric investigation, pedagogical report, and family controls have thus transformed the power of the questionnaire and gaze onto the twenty-first century talk show. The pleasures of interrogation, questioning,

monitoring, watching, spying, and searching, and the pleasures of having to evade this power, flee from it, or fool it, have intertwined into a binary of pleasure and power that constantly reinforce each other. The crowd gazes at the spectacle in the same way Banks gazes at Grey: judging, searching, and questioning the ultimate reason for her desires.

The Tyra Show also illuminates how the medical confession appears to be a healing experience in which the doctor figure is interested in both diagnosing and fixing the subject. As Foucault explains, both the obtainment and the effects of the confession were “recodified as therapeutic operations” (103). Thus, the medical confession not only reinforces the ideology that sex is an erratic and unstable pathological field, but also that only an authorized and all-knowing ‘doctor’ may extract meaning out of the confession.

Of course, such an extraction requires rapport between doctor and patient. Banks attempts to establish rapport:

BANKS: ...So it's not so much that, that, that, I'm sitting here judging you for what you do, it's more of the reason why you're doing it. Do you understand that there's a difference of... Everybody has a choice [voice inflects]. You're eighteen years old. Pornography is legal. You're not going to go to jail for what you do.

GREY: Exactly.

BANKS: But there's still a reason why everyone does everything, why anyone makes any choice that they make in their life. And that's why you're here. (2012)

SEX POSITIVITY IS AN IDEOLOGICAL MOVEMENT THAT EMPHASIZES THAT SEX EXCEEDS MERE REPRODUCTIVE PURPOSES.

By first acknowledging the legality of pornography and assuring she is not judgmental, Banks attempts to create an empathetic and seemingly rational bond with Grey. Grey, however, lacks agency in the interrogation process and is interrupted even when speaking in agreement. Banks goes on to insist that there is a perpetual reason, a *raison d'être*, “why everyone does everything.” It is the supposed reason “why” Grey is the confessor, patient, and wrongdoer of the Tyra Show rather than the doctor, host, and interrogator.

Although Grey possesses little authority in the conversational floor of the Tyra Show, she manages to offer an alternative and progressive sexual discourse. After refuting Banks' diagnosis, Grey explains that pornography is enjoyable merely because it provides freedom to experience sexual pleasure in a safe environment. She says, “it's self-exploration, first hand, and I'm getting to do it in a sex positive way” (Tyra Banks Show 2012). Sex positivity is an ideological movement that emphasizes that sex exceeds mere reproductive purposes. Participants in the movement consider sex to be appropriate within the limits of informed consent and safety. The Foundation for Sex Positive Culture explains that such “uses,” in and outside the exclusivity of the heterosexual marriage, include “creating personal pleasure, bonding interpersonal relationships, promoting spiritual

growth, and enhancing emotional and physical health” (2012). Although the heterosexual marriage unit is not threatened by the movement, sex positive discourse cannot immediately replace the medical confession which has already been ideologically institutionalized by medicine, psychiatry, and language.

I do not wish to evaluate Banks' intentions for hosting the *Teens in the Sex Trade* episode. Rather, I wish to expose the adaption of the medical confession in the twenty-first century talk show. Banks not only reflects but also reinforces the power and pleasure dynamic of the institutionalized medical confession. Furthermore, she abuses all the variables in Foucault's theory on sexual discourse, including the clinical codification of the inducement to speak, the claim of a general and diffuse causality, the principle of latency, method of interpretation, and the medicalization of confession. Foucault also asserts that the “repressive hypothesis” concerning the content of conversations in the seventeenth-century may translate to the contemporary age, however, it is increasingly evident that there is a great deal of discussion about sex. Even if the content of the Tyra Show seeks sexual repression, there is an undeniable circulation of discourse concerning sexual behavior. The program discourse not only produces power for the interviewer but also reveals a pleasure in controlling the interviewee. As Foucault claims, “never have there existed more centers of power; never more attention manifested and verbalized; never more circular contacts and linkages; never more sites where the intensity of pleasures and the persistency of power catch hold” (1521).



EDITOR'S NOTE

Although the interviewee (Sasha Grey) expresses that she genuinely enjoys working in pornography, recent research shows that thousands of women, girls, and boys are coerced to work in pornography and prostitution each year. We encourage readers to consider all sides of this global issue and to engage in their own research about modern day slavery and the sex trafficking industry.

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