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The latest delusion of grandeur a product of TV-obsessed culture

Joe Ferullo | Sep. 17, 2013 NCR Today

Having television cameras follow your every move may be the highest form of affirmation our society can offer -- if you believe what schizophrenics seem to be telling the mental health profession.

A fascinating article in *The New Yorker* [1] by Andrew Marantz discusses a new disorder identified by experts: "The Truman Show Delusion." According to a study by McGill University, people suffering under this delusion believe they are "being filmed and that the films are being broadcast for the entertainment of others."

The *New Yorker* report focuses on Joel Gold, a psychiatrist formerly with New York's Bellvue Hospital, who has become a leading voice in discovering this delusion. Starting in the early 2000s, Gold noticed several young educated men who all exhibited similar symptoms. One claimed friends and family were actors folowing a script; another worked on the production crew of a reality show until he came to believe the show actually centered on him.

Beyond identifying the delusion, Gold also insists something deeper is going on.

"All productions of the mind have meaning," he told *The New Yorker*'s Marantz. But what could the meaning be here?

Marantz notes that schizophrenics suffer from delusions of grandeur -- no one suffers under the delusion he or she is a green-grocer, for example. Those delusions differ from culture to culture and, Marantz says, can tell us something about what a society values or fears. In Christian countries, the deluded often claim to be prophets; in Muslim nations, they rarely do. The CIA was a main focus of the deluded mind during the Cold War; now that hardy happens at all.

The Truman Show Delusion, it seems, is another signal that fame has assumed an outsized importance in our society -- not the fame that comes from accomplishment, which has always been valued, but the fame that comes simply from having a camera trained on your face: Honey Boo-Boo, members of the "Duck Dynasty" family, every single Kardashian.

It's something I've seen with my career in television, from news to talk shows. It had long confounded me: Why would perfectly normal people rush to go on a national broadcast to bear their souls about personal tragedy?

Then I realized that the act of being on television was a catharsis, a validation. Whatever I have gone through -- losing my home in a fire, losing a loved one to a crime -- must have a greater meaning if cameras want to record it and transmit it across the continent. (This was a peculiarly American response to trials and tribulations -- immigrants and new citizens I sought to interview routinely shook their heads in shock, making it clear it would be unseemly to do such a thing at such a time.)

This delusion has simply picked up that cultural vibe and taken it to an irrational (but, unfortunately, not ridiculous) extreme. Decades ago, people affirmed their self-worth by believing Soviet satellites tracked their

every move and only tin-foil hats could protect them from the laser beams.

Today, the cathode ray has replaced the laser beam. Affirmation comes from insisting you are fascinating enough, valuable enough, to have cameras trained on you everywhere, all the time. Even in your sleep, you speak volumes.

Maybe someday, American delusions of grandeur will involve people believing they are doctors or engineers or craftsmen or women: Things society truly values and needs. Maybe someday.

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[1] http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/16/130916fa_fact_marantz