



Guest Column / Morgane Richer La Flèche

Cringe With Me: The False Freedom of Humiliation

One of the early scenes in Martin Scorsese's documentary *Public Speaking* is of author and social commentator Fran Lebowitz addressing a crowd during a Q&A session. Lebowitz, visibly amused by her provocation, tells the crowd that young people today are suffering from a false sense of greatness. On aspiring writers, she says: "Too many people are writing books, period. There are too many books, the books are terrible, and this is because you have been taught to have self-esteem." Her punchline receives the raucous applause of people being found out.

I was reminded of Lebowitz's diagnosis of my generation by a recent article in *The Globe and Mail*. In "Pathetic and proud," Eric Andrew-Gee delivers a compelling portrait of what he calls "competitive abjection," or the phenomenon of publicly debasing oneself online, whether as private individuals on social media or as auteurs of hit shows on HBO. Andrew-Gee's article is a thorough chronicle of the wide range of catalysts for this behaviour, from solitary evenings with leftover takeout to humiliating sexual encounters.

Faced with failure or simply banality, we anticipate the punch of public perception and eagerly display our loserdom in tweets and posts that marry self-consciousness and irony. We share our small humiliations with derisive aplomb, simultaneously daring judgment and welcoming connection. We sigh with relief when our friends answer "same!" and we relax knowing we are not alone in our lameness. Insofar as it signals that what we are doing is always worth sharing, the phenomenon might be

dismissed as yet another example of navel-gazing by what has been derided as a particularly self-centered generation. The self-awareness inherent in the exercise complicates that explanation, however, and co-opting platforms dedicated to covert self-congratulation—what has become known as the "humble brag"—is undoubtedly a kind of subversion.

Yet the willingness to turn even our darker moments of shame into comedy for general consumption suggests a deeper discomfort in being alone with ourselves. In her 1961 essay "On Self-Respect," Joan Didion emphasized the essentially private nature of that elusive quality. Self-respect, she argued, "has nothing to do with the face of things, but concerns instead a separate peace, a private reconciliation." It's the solidity that comes with quiet acceptance of your mistakes and your hand in creating them; it's what the French mean when they say *elle s'assume*.

Crucially, self-respect has the power "to give us back to ourselves," to free us from continuously playing to the perceptions of others. Self-respect means accountability, but it's also a way out of falseness. Didion saw the tie between self-respect and true vulnerability: people with self-respect are willing to commit, even when they know they might not come out looking good. That kind of sincerity seems antithetical to an ironic mockery of the self.

My distrust of competitive abjection is even greater inside the realm of art. Television shows like *Girls* and

Broad City feature young women whose incompetence is meant as an honest rebuttal to the burdensome expectations of adulthood. While I am sympathetic to the idea that admitting one's failure to meet standards can be liberating—particularly if the standards are antiquated or unfair—I am skeptical of the usefulness of these portrayals.

Granting women the agency to humiliate themselves on screen is only empowering if there exist, just as prominently in the public imagination, representations of women whose power makes the reverse seem surprising. I'm too hungry for better heroines to find women's degradation refreshing, however self-inflicted it may be. Moreover, there's a disturbing end-of-history passivity to the phenomenon, a tacit submission to inadequate ideals without the energy to fully reject and replace them. Turning yourself into a joke is a poor substitute for self-actualization.

Perhaps ritual debasement is what you get when our cultural appetite for authenticity—seen elsewhere in the success of politicians who eschew accepted rhetoric—confronts the fundamentally performative medium of social media. Much of our lives will be mundane; it makes sense that we would want to share it anyway, if only to have witnesses to our existence. With a little more self-respect, we wouldn't need the cover of derision, either. **P**

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