

2021

## I Don't Want [You] to See That: Resisting Self-Disciplinary Performance in *The Comeback*

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### Recommended Citation

Fujikawa, Sam (2021) "I Don't Want [You] to See That: Resisting Self-Disciplinary Performance in *The Comeback*," *Articulāte*: Vol. 26 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol26/iss1/2>

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Resisting Self-Disciplinary Performance in *The Comeback*

Sam Fujikawa

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## Introduction

In the second season of HBO's *The Comeback*, we follow the tragically comic resurgence of Valerie Cherish, the larger than life, B-list actress whose career is revived upon being cast in a much-hyped about HBO series. Shot and stylized as a documentary, each episode of the show is presented as a collection of raw footage depicting Valerie and her daily life, filled with moments of discomfort and uneasiness attributed to Valerie constantly negotiating what should be a quotidian performance with a hyperawareness of being constantly filmed, constantly watched. The result is both comedic and uncomfortable, since we—as viewers—are given a front row seat in one woman's presentation of self, only being offered the footage that she allows to be recorded. The format of the show offers an interesting display of performance that relies on a raw, unfiltered stream of footage that explicitly demonstrates how self-presentation depends upon performance rather than some idea of inherent character value; the Valerie Cherish we see is constructed purely upon an ever-looming vigilance letting us know that what we see is actually an act.

In my reading of performance within *The Comeback*, I concentrate upon the eighth episode of the show's second season, "Valerie Gets What She Really Wants," which follows Valerie preparing for and attending the Emmys, where she is nominated for supporting actress in a comedy series. I specifically highlight how Valerie performs to fulfill and negotiate between multiple roles with conflicting requirements; additionally, I focus upon how the format and stylization of the episode acts as a rich site to explore and comment upon how performance operates as a disciplinary act in order to present an optimal self. Utilizing Erving Goffman's seminal work on performance and the construction of

the self, I illuminate how the episode portrays methods of performance—particularly Goffman’s concepts of the front, idealization, and concealment—in an especially explicit way that ultimately resists using performance as a maneuver of self-discipline. By applying this theory of performance to *The Comeback*, I display how artifacts of pop culture—such as an episode of television—can bring attention to facets of normalized performance and suggest resistive commentary that is valuable to the broader discourse of communication.

### **Description of Theory**

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman suggests that individual behavior is much more akin to a performer on a stage rather than some innate essence externalized. Applying this metaphor of performance to everyday conduct, Goffman introduces a variety of terms to describe phenomena occurring within individual performances, starting with the “front.” The front refers to “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly function in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (Goffman 13). Thus, the front works as a fixture within performance that sets the stage and develops context for the performer to work with; however, fronts are often pre-established, selected, and maintained in ways that allow a performer to work with social norms and fulfill duties and roles effectively. Within the front are parts categorized as appearance—which function as indicants of the performer’s current social standing—and manner—which function as indicants of a role the performer intends to take on (Goffman 17-18). These stimuli are vital when analyzing performance, as they offer insight into how performers negotiate with existing and upcoming conditions in order to perform in a way that is deemed the most appropriate.

Goffman categorizes efforts within performance to fit societal norms and audience expectations as idealization; consequently, in order to perform in an ideal way, a performer must regularly conceal behavior and actions that do not neatly adhere to an idealized economy of behavior (23). Within the United States, the ideal performances rest upon a collective

privileging of civility, which in turn means that egalitarian performances are often upheld while crass performances are normally discouraged and in effect, concealed (Menand 297). This does not necessarily mean that human performance (therefore, socialized behavior) is inherently deceptive and idealized but instead refers to the social contract that takes place for both performers and audiences who rely on standardized methods of behavior to act as specific functions (Richards 62). However, the negotiation of presentation a performer must endure often is a self-regulatory one that disciplines a performer to behave in a socialized way that may initiate conflict between internalized fancy and external influence (Goffman 26).

Performance enables agency in self-presentation, which additionally acts as modes of governing social situations, assigning and fulfilling roles that are embedded and naturalized into a standardized social schema. Thus, in presenting a self, one relies upon socialized norms to properly project the role they are cast in and effectively fulfill the tasks they are assigned to (Brown 160-163). To perform is to opt into a social site that depends on a complex and constructed structure of various roles and find a way to somehow negotiate the drives of the self while simultaneously maintaining the organized conglomerate of social expectation.

### **Application of Theory**

Any fan of *The Comeback* knows that Valerie Cherish—expertly portrayed by *Friends* alumna Lisa Kudrow and endearingly referred to as “Val”—is constantly negotiating with the documentation of her idealized “everyday” life as well as the unfavorable (though still documented) moments in her life. A common trope of the character is to directly look into the camera and offer direct commentary within scene, a widely understood faux pas within the sphere of documentary and reality filmmaking. Instead of utilizing the standard voice-over narrations and cutaway testimonials, *The Comeback* depends upon Val constantly breaking scenes of “real” life in order to directly address the crew, cameras, and, subsequently, the audience. By breaking this fourth wall, Val’s performance comes across as almost tongue-in-cheek; aware of the fabricated conditions and narratives of such documentation,

she lets the viewer in on the fact that she *knows* that this performance is for a camera and that she is acting in a way that she dignifies as respectable within this frame.

In “Valerie Gets What She Really Wants,” we see this hyperaware method of performance early on when Val discusses the entertainment industry to the camera while walking around a Hollywood party. Speaking to no one save for the camera, she posits, “You realize, you know, that despite the box office and glamor, Hollywood really is just a small company town, and you’re on the team... that’s a good end point Jane [her director].” Utilizing an egalitarian manner that is eloquent and optimistic, Val makes a statement of grandeur, takes a beat, then immediately tells her director how she should edit and use this footage and statement. She’s assuming the role of an idealistic Hollywood insider, offering a glimpse at what lies beneath the sheen of the entertainment industry and appearing to truly understand it as quotidian and familial in nature. It’s a small moment, but one that succinctly displays the sort of meta style of performance that Valerie Cherish clutches to when going about her day; with a camera crew always close behind, she employs narration as a way to take control of her appearance and manner, almost always playing a role that comes off as naively clueless to what her depiction actually suggests. Val’s behavior here exhibits her tendency to romanticize reality, a tendency that parallels a phenomenon that Brooke Erin Duffy qualifies as the “Instagram filter.” Commenting on the editing of self that social media has actualized, Duffy points to how this site of personal projection has created a culture that favors idealized performances over messy depictions of real conditions (2). Thus, Valerie’s coordinated and calculated performance is representative of this social media age, perhaps even offering a resistive view of this self-regulatory performance. By performing this editing in real time rather than behind a screen, we see how out of touch such acts of faux idealization truly are, prompting us to question a culture that privileges this self-regulatory facet within performance.

Val’s specific performance of career—almost always attempting a sense of idealism (which is often comically conservative in nature) and overdramatically displaying every

moment of negotiation when unideal conditions present themselves—is rich with cues to offer viewers regarding performance within a surveilling culture. Since her performance is constantly productive, as her life has been reified as commercialized content, Valerie becomes a hyperbolized example of how one negotiates between a performance of idealized career and conflicting aspects of personal life. This tension of performance, between idealization and concealment, often operates within “Valerie Gets What She Really Wants” in order to create humor; the show is written as a fictional reality and leans upon the tropes of reality television and documentary to generate moments of absurdity for Valerie to perform in. This comedic tension is perhaps best demonstrated when Valerie faces a crisis the morning of the Emmys: with *Entertainment Tonight* and her documentary at her home to film the big day, disaster strikes. Mickey, Valerie’s hairstylist, has gotten a bloody nose as a side-effect of his cancer treatment and is forced to back out of attending the show. Responding to this personal matter, Jane (the documentary’s director) suggests that Val send the *ET* crew home in the name of Mickey’s privacy. Val, aware of the competition for content Jane is in with the competing crew, declines to do so and asks Jane, “Can your agenda be any louder?” Valerie’s insistence on keeping the crew suggests her acceptance that messy moments may be caught on camera and that this loss of privacy is a price to pay in return for public attention; she opts against the choice to conceal an intimate moment of her friend’s health in order to perform as an ideal object for public consumption. However, just moments later a pipe from the toilet bursts and floods her garage and driveway with gray water. With a tremendous amount of fecal matter inhabiting her driveway and two crews of cameras there to capture it, Val reconsiders Jane’s original suggestion and declares that she thinks she will send away *ET*. The scene reveals a public renegotiation of performance and action on behalf of Valerie; under relatively normal conditions that do not fare poorly on her (like Mickey’s nosebleed), she remains collected and allows for public documentation, but as soon as conditions turned against her, she caves and chooses to opt out of performing for the camera, concealing a particularly messy moment of her life. With a

disgusting amount of poop entering the front she must perform in, the chances of maintaining an ideal performance of a dignified actress on her way to the Emmys practically vanish, so Val opts to perform privately, with the cameras off and the stream of content cut short.

These moments of disconnect within performances of reality not only portray how Valerie attempts to maintain an ideal façade of career but also how *The Comeback* utilizes reality television tropes to its advantage. In her analysis of British reality programming, Faye Woods notes that a “foregrounding of artifice—combined with [a] program’s knowing tone and awkward performances—can encourage a mocking audience position that pokes fun at... inarticulate excess” (206). Thus, these performances within reality television in tandem with a skillful edit can ultimately sway an audience to hold specific sentiments and opinions regarding the methods of performance that they are witnessing. Seeing Valerie go through hoops as a means to come off as an elegant and dignified actress doesn’t solidify her status as this ideal image but rather destabilizes any audience belief in the performance she is providing. Her efforts to conceal and idealize, all self-disciplinary and restrictive, are in a sense fruitless, as they encourage an audience to laugh at her inability to be what she so desperately wants to be, wants to have.

The most notable display of performance within this episode, however, occurs near its end, as Valerie is forced to decide whether to stay at the ceremony to accept the biggest award of her life or to visit Mickey at the hospital after receiving word from her disgruntled husband (who has declined to attend the ceremony with Valerie) that her friend has collapsed. Eventually choosing to go to the hospital, the choice marks a stylistic shift in how Valerie’s world is presented. Gone is that claustrophobic documentary-style footage, and upon leaving the theater, we finally get to see Valerie no longer performing for the camera. Stylized more similarly to a standard single-camera television show, *The Comeback* now offers viewers a chance to see Valerie—in a moment of direct opposition to the role her career necessitates—navigate the world on her own, without a crew to follow her or a camera to trace her movement. After disciplining

her behavior for so long to create an appearance of a dedicated and hard-working actress, Valerie finally allows personal obligations to trump professional. Her performance no longer is aware of the surveilling camera, so she performs purely to fulfill the responsibility of seeing her beloved Mickey and making sure he's okay.

Because of reality television's encouragement of suspecting emotional performances as facsimiles (Ellis 110), *The Comeback's* abandonment of that stylization to depict Valerie in a moment of emotional distress allows the program to finally let viewers in on who she really is, behind the camera, without the crew to surround her. We see that she truly cares about Mickey, that despite the series often suggesting that she cares about show business and her career more than anything else in the world, Valerie will even forego an ideal performance at the Emmy Awards in order to perform as a caring, compassionate friend. By creating such an explicit dichotomy in portrayal between her performance in front of the cameras and behind them, the series points to an often-disregarded component of how we all negotiate performance and the construction of self: performance is full of choices and allows for agency to resist societal pressures. By going against the advice of both Jane and her PR manager, whose careers rely entirely upon her own, Val suggests a method of resisting an economy of delusional performance ideals, ultimately allowing viewers an opportunity to reflect upon their own performances and priorities as a result. And in the end, by disregarding the methods of performance that constricted her and left her personal life in disarray, Valerie ultimately gets exactly what she wants: her friend, her husband, and an Emmy Award, which she accepts in the hospital room, thanking "the two most important men in [her] life."

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the world to be a stage with an entire population of performers becomes especially useful in the application of artifacts within a surveilling culture that privileges formats like reality television and documentary. By analyzing the complex methods of performance within a show such as *The Comeback* (which utilizes a "reality" presentation in a fictionalized

storyline), it becomes clear that popular culture is aware of the phenomenon of performance and utilize it as both a comedic and resistive tool to cause affect upon consumers. As we get a glimpse at how the character Valerie Cherish negotiates between a multitude of demands within her performance, an overwhelming sense of her self-disciplining practices rises to the surface, showing how external factors create real effects on how she chooses to perform as herself. However, when *The Comeback* allows Val to finally be free of the camera's grip, viewers are presented with a performance that resists the external structures that demand (or that she assumes demand) a particular performance from her. True agency in choosing how to present herself—outside of the universal audience that a camera permits—lets Valerie finally perform with a sense of duty that focuses primarily on a function of care instead of the demands of a critical entertainment industry. Her performance acts as a call for understanding and evaluating performance in everyday life, as a method to refocus performance in an optimistic way that privileges internal hierarchies over external. Leaving the cameras, the globalized audience, the career demands behind, Valerie finally is able to let viewers into her world in her own terms both literally and figuratively. While the switch in style literally presents Valerie in a new light, a new front, her performance finally feels genuine and reflective of what she really truly cares about. It's revelatory and reminds us how we do not have to let supposedly required aspects of our self-construction distract us from overcoming difficulties that no longer feel possible in such a demanding economy of our performances.

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