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# Identity and Scene: Alterity and Authenticity in Taxicab Confessions

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## IDENTITY AND SCENE: ALTERITY AND AUTHENTICITY IN TAXICAB CONFESSIONS

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### Résumé

*Cet article examine la rhétorique visuelle de l'émission de télé-réalité d'HBO Taxicab Confessions New York, New York (2005). En m'appuyant sur l'interprétation rhétorique de Burke de la scène et sur l'approche de Straw de la scène en tant que catégorie pour l'analyse de la culture urbaine, je soutiens que l'intérieur du taxi et les images nocturnes des rues de New York créent une scène d'indétermination, d'intimité et de « réalité », cadrant ainsi l'autoreprésentation des passagers dans un contexte d'« authenticité ». La structure visuelle de l'émission permet de situer les passagers tant à l'extérieur qu'à l'intérieur des normes sociales et de renforcer les notions hégémoniques de race, de genre, et de sexualité. Les passagers sont situés dans une scène qui les positionne à la fois comme excentriques et ordinaires, tandis que le public est doté d'une symbolique autre qui travaille à contenir des normes assouplies, mais non enfreintes, enracinant ainsi la normalité du spectateur.*

### Abstract

*This essay examines the visual rhetoric of HBO's reality TV program Taxicab Confessions, New York, New York (2005). Drawing on Burke's rhetorical understanding of scene and Straw's approach to scene as a category for the analysis of urban culture, I argue that the taxicab interior and nighttime street images of New York City structure a scene of indeterminacy, intimacy, and "reality," thus framing the passengers' self-presentations within a context of "authenticity." The program's visual structure locates passengers simultaneously outside of and within social norms and reinforces hegemonic notions of race, gender, and sexuality. Passengers are situated within a scene that positions them as both eccentric and ordinary, while audiences are provided with a symbolic other that works to contain stretched-but-not-broken norms and thus anchor the normality of the viewer.*

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**T***axicab Confessions: New York, New York* opens like other programs in the *Taxicab Confessions* series, with a frenetic montage of urban nightlife. Viewers are invited into a churning world of both dark and light, a world of hard-shadowed surfaces—streets and buildings glow from flickering neon and spots of red and white light arrayed in high-contrast moving patterns. Images of towering skyscrapers are mixed with the figure of a disheveled man in a thick, tattered overcoat slowly pushing a shopping cart down the sidewalk. Bright yellow taxis whiz by couples dancing, kissing, and touching. Icons of the city such as the arch in Washington Park, the Statue of Liberty, and the New York skyline mark the coordinates of urban night to the rock tempo and distorted guitars of an amped-up version of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” sung in a detached, smoky male voice.

The opening coaxes us to explore a scene already familiar to us. The show offers the excitement and danger of the urban night as a vicarious thrill viewed in the safety of our own homes. By using the iconic theme song from the *The Wizard of Oz*, the opening sequence also promises something new on the other side of the rainbow—a strange land of “Oz,” but with a difference that reassures us there’s no place like home. A theme is set: the familiar with a twist, the quotidian with something new. The normal and bizarre are pushed together to challenge but ultimately reinforce the boundary between domestic safety and urban mysteries. The show constructs what Kenneth Burke in *Permanence and Change* terms “perspective by incongruity:” the randomness of big-city life brings together people and places in unlikely and disconcerting ways, a revealing mix of the expected and unexpected ([See clip 1](#)).

Home Box Office (HBO) premiered *Taxicab Confessions* in 1995 as part of its America Undercover documentary project. The series uses hidden cameras to record conversations between purportedly real passengers and loosely scripted cab drivers (who are show producers, but not clearly identified as such). As with other reality TV programs, the unabashed constructedness of its editing and its obviously

strategic selection of characters do not necessarily detract from its efforts to claim authenticity for itself (Corner; Deery; Andrejevic). Some of the resulting purportedly candid conversations are selected, then developed into segments of a one-hour program based in a particular city. The examination here will focus on *Taxicab Confessions: New York, New York*, released in 2005.<sup>1</sup> The discourse within *Taxicab Confessions* generates claims of authenticity and offers viewers enticing opportunities to explore the boundaries and articulations of space and identity through a television imaginary of stories that incongruously graft the improbable onto the ordinary within the fluid, overdetermined scene of a New York City taxicab. The “real” interactions depicted in *Taxicab Confessions* are carefully constructed and stylized. As is the case with other reality TV programs, the sequences presented to viewers are framed, shot, structured, and edited according to the goals and interests of the program producers (Dovey; Kilborn; Andrejevic and Colby). My analysis presumes no connections to the day-to-day performances of self by the program’s actors (Goffman), much less any possible access to authentic selves behind the depictions. As Rachel Dubrofsky and Antoine Hardy note, “Good RTV participants perform not-performing” (378). Likewise, I approach *Taxicab Confessions: New York, New York* as a media text, examining the scenic contexts of the city and the taxicab for their symbolic function in structuring the possibilities of program.

The particularized *scene* of the taxicab is crucial to the rhetorical work of *Taxicab Confessions*; my analysis draws theoretical insights about scene from Kenneth Burke's dramatism (*Grammar of Motives*; *Rhetoric of Motives*) and recent work by scholars who use scene as a category for the analysis of urban culture (Shank; Straw, "Cultural Scenes"; Straw, "Some Things a Scene Might Be"). The New York taxicab setting, as a scene, shapes the way we make sense of and identify with the program's characters, as Burke's framework (*Grammar of Motives*) implies. The scene in *Taxicab Confessions* resonates with Straw's sketch of scene as an analytical category for urban culture: the program shows a space expressing the "theatricality of the city" with its "effervescence and display" (Straw, "Cultural Scenes" 412).<sup>2</sup> The scene created within the program "produces spectacles out of intense and focused interaction" (Straw, "Some Things a Scene Might Be" 480) and "serves as an incubator of experimentalism and innovation" (Straw, "Some Things a Scene Might Be" 478). Within the program, the scene is a "point of continuity against which shifting configurations of cultural identity become visible" (Straw, "Some Things a Scene Might Be" 482).

Taxicabs are unique social spaces. Fred Davis noted as early as 1959 that taxicabs are located within the context of particular urban spaces yet are simultaneously outside the purview of the usual networks of social relationships and the disciplining function of those networks (160). In *Taxicab Confessions* the taxicabs constitute a liminal space, akin to what Foucault

("Different Spaces") describes as a *heterotopia*: a productive, liminal no-place removed from ordinary scrutiny, expectations, and social rules. The ambiguity of this space is fertile ground for incongruous but symbolically productive juxtapositions.

Burke's perspective by incongruity describes an important way to use language to break free of entrenched social patterns. For Burke, these incongruous juxtapositions are an important tool to imagine new possibilities and open space for social transformation (Goltz). The analysis here develops Burke's idea of perspective by incongruity to show the use of the taxicab as scenic context for the instability of those incongruities and for structuring the identity of the depicted passengers as a symbolically potent and complex "others," themes reinforced by the conventions of reality TV.

### Dramatism and Urban Scene

For Burke, *scene* is part of a pentad of terms (along with *act*, *agent*, *agency*, and *purpose*) that structure the ways we symbolize our experience of the world. That is, when we tell stories about our world—indeed anytime we make sense of our experiences through language—the representations function as drama; Burke (*Grammar of Motives*) offers his five terms as key rhetorical mechanisms that help structure that sense making. Scene defines not just our cultural spaces, but also our discourses about those spaces. Together these five elements reveal the explicit and

implicit explanations or *motives* (in Burke's language) embedded in our symbolic expression. These motives have the capacity, often subtly or even surreptitiously, to transform the ways we understand situations by literally shifting the terms by which imagine them (Payne). While the five terms of Burke's pentad, particularly in their interactions, can be used for textual analysis, my interest here is focused on Burke's use of *scene*.

In Burke's analysis, scene is "a blanket term for the concept of background or setting *in general*, a name for *any* situation in which acts or agents are placed" (Burke, *Grammar of Motives* xvi, original emphasis). Scene can encompass sweeping categories such as "society... Environment... Historical epochs, cultural movements and social institutions" as well as "specific localizations" or "particular places, [and] of situations" (Burke, *Grammar of Motives* 12). What is crucial for Burke is that scene is significant for what it *does*, the way that it structures meaning in its interaction with actions, people, processes, and purposes. We understand a person walking city streets differently from the ways in which we understand the same person walking in the woods. Burke describes the interaction between these terms as *ratios*.<sup>3</sup> For example, in explaining the scene-act ratio (*scene* shaping the way we understand an action taking place within in its context), Burke observes, "the scene is a fit container for the act, expressing in fixed properties the same quality that the action expresses in terms of development" (Burke, *Grammar of Motives* 3). Moreover, "Scene is to act as implicit is to explicit... One could deduce the quality

of the action from the quality of the setting” (Burke, *Grammar of Motives* 7).

The pentad is not attempting to produce an ontology; Burke does not make claims about a pentadic structure for the reality of the world. The pentad instead identifies coordinates by which we describe and understand situations. Thus for Burke, scene is not a preexisting or quantifiable aspect of, for example, a city, but rather a manifestation of the dramatic structure of our sense making.<sup>4</sup> Scene is a characteristic of the way in which we look. When we look at a situation as meaningful, we identify, describe, and performatively constitute it for ourselves according to the coordinates of drama.<sup>5</sup> From a Burkean perspective, identifying an urban scene is a kind of pattern recognition—an application of cultural knowledge with special attention to one of the key dramatic coordinates by which humans use symbols to make sense of things. In this approach, the scene of the New York City taxicab in *Taxicab Confessions, New York, New York* helps define and shape the contours of the events, characters, and other meaningful elements that are presented to the audience.

Straw observes that “scene designates particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribed them” (“Cultural Scenes” 411). In this sense, the term scene tends to locate cultural activity in a *place*, but often ambiguously so. Straw notes the difficulty of, for example, locating “the Montréal Anglophone poetry scene on a map” (Straw, “Cultural Scenes” 412). Nonetheless, for Straw scene involves proximity; it

brings together, effects transformations, and shapes behavior, experiences of time and the visibilities of cultural life (Straw, “Some Things a Scene Might Be” 477). Straw’s conception, in tandem with Burke’s, allows us to think of scene as a dynamic mechanism of connection, structuring possibilities for innovation at the intersection of cultural meaning and identity. That is, scene structures meanings: it *locates* us, with that location *doing work* to help define who people are, what they do, how they do it, and why they do it (Burke’s *agent, act, agency, and purpose*).

### Incongruous Identities: Gargoyles and Piety

On first look at *Taxicab Confessions, New York, New York*, the catalogue of passenger identities (mixed-race couples, transgendered people, foreigners, etc.), the explicit sexual behavior of the passengers, and their ribald conversation might bring to mind Bakhtin’s description of carnival, an occasion of fleshly transgression and ludic overturning of the status quo. Yet *Taxicab Confessions* plays out the eccentricities of those it documents more subtly. Passengers are not grotesques; they mimic patterns of dominant discourses about sexuality, relationships, and identities with an earnestness that defies easy disregard. The passenger conversations selected for airing on *Taxicab Confessions* might be better understood as what Burke (*Permanence and Change*) calls “gargoyles”; they bring together seemingly incompatible, even impossible characteristics. They are a “merging [of] things which common sense had divided and dividing [of] things

which common sense had merged” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 113). In *Taxicab Confessions*, familiar themes evoke a web of interlocking and interacting symbols; for example “romantic love” is deployed in ways that simultaneously *relies* on those clusters of symbols *and* breaks them apart. Indeed, we see a transgendered woman and cis-male couple express traditional beliefs in monogamous, heterosexual marriage and gender roles; the male partner describes his desire for a partner who looks like a “real” woman, yet readily describes himself and his partner as a gay couple. Traditional and unconventional come together in a representation made all the more compelling for its claim to authenticity flowing from its scene: a taxicab.

### Heterotopia as Scene: Making Room for Identity

Within the presumed anonymity and transience of the in-between time and space of the taxicab—a space resonant with Foucault’s description of heterotopias (“Different Spaces”)—the taxi drivers invite passengers to perform themselves afresh, unfettered by the immediate disciplinary force of ordinary, quotidian discourses. Foucault describes heterotopias as a no-places without the usual social rules. A heterotopia is “located outside or beyond the conventional moral orders of society—spaces that obey their own rules, but through their very otherness reproduce the dominant sense of ‘normality’” (Jansson 305). That is, heterotopias are an “outside” space that can accommodate the *difference* necessary to constitute the not-different or *normal*. Indeed, for Foucault,



normalizing regimes of social control *produce* their transgression, with the disciplining force of panoptic social visibility necessitating its alternative (*Discipline and Punish*).

Heterotopias, then, “symbolically mark not only the boundaries of a society, but its values and beliefs as well” (Hetherington 49). Heterotopias are spaces capable of opening a “collective experience of otherness,” with a potential for “diffusing new forms of urban collective life” that are “potentially emancipating” (Stavrvides 174). Thus, in *Taxicab Confessions* within the taxicab a space is opened which allows experimentation and innovation; a transgressive improvisation of the self can take place within the anonymity of the taxicab and the decontextualization it enacts. The program’s hidden cameras survey a space ordinarily remarkable for its lack of surveillance. The opportunity for passengers to step beyond themselves, that is, to “be themselves” outside the surveying control of their usual social contexts, positions the cabdriver (and audience) as a spectator of diverse urban selves. Authenticity is born, ironically, in the passenger’s ability to *not be* these selves defined during their everyday lives. Scene shapes both the characters, and our relationship to them, by affecting a kind of “deceleration” (Straw, “Some Things a Scene Might Be” 481) or pause in the demands of the character’s usual social world and performance of self. For the characters, “who I am” can float in brackets, with the resulting “self” seemingly freed from those constraints.

*Taxicab Confessions* successfully evokes two sets of dynamics rooted in the spectatorship of both cabdrivers and viewers and in the transitory heterotopia of the roaming taxicab: the promise of the *authentic* transgression and of an experience of the accessible yet profoundly *other* that confirms the viewers’ own selves within a now expanded normality. Within this space, under the watch of a driver the passengers presume they will never see again, *Taxicab Confessions* promises to reveal the authentic other. The result is a depiction of people who are constructed as hybrids, *both* comfortingly normal and disconcertingly other.

For Burke, bringing together the incompatible is valuable for its ability to break apart, or at least reconfigure, the constellations of symbols linked together into unified wholes—what he terms “pieties.” A piety refers to a “complex interpretive network” (*Permanence and Change* 75). They are clusters of symbols that fit together through a “sense of what goes with what” (74). Burke’s pieties, as they bring together more and more symbols, acquire a kind of gravity, a drive for coherence and order within a symbolic universe. Pieties describe the symbolic systems by which we order our relationship to the world and stave off symbolic chaos. That which insinuates itself into a piety, yet does not fit, reveals the cracks in our symbol systems, ultimately inviting a more tentative, generous, and innovative sense of what might go with what. At the level of identity, these impious fissures can open a more flexible and diverse field of possibility. Yet if such symbols are to be powerful, they must seem possible. *Taxicab Confessions*, *New York, New York* carefully

structures the identities of the passengers it portrays as “authentic.”<sup>6</sup>

### Structuring Identity

A space of intimacy and indeterminacy is opened within the taxicabs, heightening the program’s sense of reality and framing a passenger’s presentation of self within a context of authenticity. One way the producers achieve this space of intimacy and possibility is through the confessional tone of the program. The “interview” segments of *Taxicab Confessions* have a very intimate, unguarded tone. The passengers construct, reveal, and verify a particular identity or true self that is authenticated in the intimacy and discursive force of the confessional act (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 59-62). *Confessing* makes the internal self observable and is commonplace in reality TV, with much of the genre working as a kind of theatre of identity (Andrejevic; Dubrofsky, “Therapeutics of the Self: Surveillance in the Service of the Therapeutic”; Ouellette and Hay). In *Taxicab Confessions*, passengers’ conversations are filled with personal details and apparently unrestrained self-revelation. The program’s title alludes to religious confession as does the physical space and dynamics of the taxicab setting. The secluded privacy of a confessional is suggested by the spatial relations of the cab; there is no confessional screen per se, yet the driver “hearing the confession” is both in intimate proximity to the one(s) confessing and separated by a physical barrier. Moreover, as in the case of religious confession, potential inhibition

of the confession, through the shame evoked via observation, is averted by positioning the confessor and confessee outside of each another's immediate gaze. Visual scrutiny is placed outside the passenger's awareness, yet the other (the driver, and ultimately the viewer) is positioned for surveillance. Pecora suggests that previous cultural aversion to surveillance has been replaced by its popular embrace. Surveillance, he suggests, is the assurance of a watchful, protective authority and its function as a means of establishing the substantiality of the self socially. Pecora notes that surveillance (and one might add its corollary, self-revelation/confession) has become "a sublime object of desire...less a regulative authority...than a populist path to self-affirmation and a ready-made source of insight into current group behavior" (348).

Further, the selves that are presented in *Taxicab Confessions* help to open an audience viewing position structured by commonplace categories of cultural subordination. The passengers depicted in the program represent life situations that are aligned with categories of social marginalization or transgression (LGBTQ identities, public sexual expression, status as foreigners, and so forth), and the passengers recount stories of being abused by others because of gender identity, sexual openness, body size, race, or immigration status. Each passenger is in some way marked as other, and thus viewers are offered a range of possible categories by which they can structure themselves in relationship to the highlighted otherness of an observed not-me (Kaplan 41).

A dual process is at work here. On the one hand people who are marked as different become humanized in the revelation of personal (and personalizing) details and, perhaps for some viewers, social norms are expanded to encompass a broader range of behavior and people. On the other hand, the expansion of the boundaries of social behavior structure for most viewers a more certain position at the center of those norms: the further my distance from the boundaries, the more normal I am. The invisible coordinates of hegemonic privilege are stabilized through the visibility of the other.

The dynamics of authenticity and alterity functioning in *Taxicab Confessions* are sustained by this special sense of scene created by the New York taxicab. The cab is "a space of assembly" (Straw, "Some Things a Scene Might Be" 478), not only bringing together random passengers and drivers (and viewers), but also collecting together the diverse complexities and possibilities of the city. The taxicab is a traveling intersection point within the interstices of the urban environment making possible multiple lines of connection, yet all the while remaining separate, a heterotopia. As Kevin Hetherington notes, "The important point to remember when considering heterotopia is not the spaces themselves but what they perform in relation to other sites" (49). Foucault ("Different Spaces") distinguishes these real places from utopias, which are idealized and ultimately impossible. Heterotopias, on the other hand, are not only possible, but they are identifiable places marked by a unique openness of possibility.

The *Taxicab Confession* heterotopia, then, regardless of the city, can be an in-between, a transition between here and there, a no-place that in its very spatial uncertainty seems to allow a fleeting glimpse of another in-between: the gap between self and other. In such space, the gap can become a bridge verifying what it connects, articulating the self to a very different, even improbable other with a promise of authentic self-discovery lying latent. That is, the chaos of the other who defies social order can be both thrilling to the observer and reassuring in her or his distance, as a radically not-me still contained within stretched but intact norms. The radically other can still highlight both the profound variations of normality and the validity of the norms. The taxicab here makes this recognition possible through the fecundity of its signification, a rich open space of "cultural brokering" (Straw, "Cultural Scenes" 418).

### Authenticity and Hidden Camera

The self-identities of the passengers in *Taxicab Confessions* are further constructed as putatively authentic by the indexicality of both the hidden-video and reality TV genres through a variety of techniques that foreground authenticity and add weight to the program's symbolic force and appeal.<sup>7</sup>

The series' reliance on the hidden camera is central to this framing. The implication is that since the cameras are hidden, there is no self-conscious adjustment of self-presentation. The passengers are thereby presented



as speaking freely. In this way, the surveillance in *Taxicab Confessions* works different from that of other reality TV programs, which must work to counteract the presumption of performance that visible cameras imply.<sup>8</sup> Twice in the program—after the first conversation and again as the program ends—the viewer observes the driver explaining to passengers that the ride has been recorded, revealing the presence of hidden cameras and asking the passenger to sign releases. The viewer is reassured that the passenger was unaware of the recording through watching the surprised passengers sort through a variety of emotions in response to the revelation, always ending (in the tape that makes it to air) with the decision to embrace the verification of self bestowed by televised surveillance (Pecora 348). In the socially instantiated visuality of media, the other and viewer can seemingly share perspectives because we share an “eye” via the camera and an “ear” through the audio track. The fluid and undependable perspectivalism of embodiment and individuated subjectivity becomes verifiable and authentic in its repeatability and persistence, a more solid anchor to the real than discredited narratives or truth.

Several other techniques are used to accentuate the authenticity of *Taxicab Confessions*. There is a transparency to the editing of the interview segments; the use of jump cuts lends a degree of reflexivity, which functions rhetorically to mark authenticity. The passengers’ revelation of deeply personal and intimate details also suggests authenticity and reality. Furthermore, the montages *between* the interviews

evoke a feel of street credibility. That is to say, *scene* in *Taxicab Confessions, New York, New York* is multileveled: the general urban context of nighttime New York City with its associations of connection, authenticity, transgression, and transformation mix together with a taxicab heterotopia and the conventions of reality TV to structure the program’s portrayals as authentic and relatable yet transgressive and other.

### Alterity and Identity

The otherness of the passengers in *Taxicab Confessions* is highlighted in several ways. Scene rhetorically structures a reality frame for nonfiction film and television by locating and stabilizing a program’s ultimate scene as the shared world of common experience (Schoen). But in *Taxicab Confessions*, the taxicab itself is not-city—a kind of neutral, liminal space of anonymity that suggests detachment and objectivity and invites confession. The taxicab rides are presented in black and white, further distinguishing the space within the cab as embedded within the colour of the city but separate from it.

Crucially, for all its heterotopian abstraction, the *scene* of the taxicab nonetheless remains a physically concrete and particular *place*, shaping the embodied reality of those it is depicting. While the drivers, who are also producers, work to build rapport with passengers, the rhetoric of the program distinguishes drivers from passengers in several ways. The drivers remain in a seat separate from the passengers, in

control, asking questions and remaining personally uninvolved; there is no self-disclosure from the drivers. The barrier of the seat distinctly separates the front and back, emphasizing disconnection. The cabdrivers are relaxed yet alert, conveying a mix of personal detachment and curiosity. The drivers query the passengers and react to them, sometimes seeming to agree or take the side of the passenger (perhaps as a way of probing); yet the facial expressions of the cabdrivers often suggest amusement or bemusement, marking the passengers as the observed and evaluated other. While the passengers confess their selves, they confess *to* cabdrivers who enact an observational, *objective* authority. The unmarked whiteness of the cabdrivers in *Taxicab Confessions: New York, New York* works together with their indifferent personas and unselfconscious performances to align them rhetorically with cultural tropes about objectivity.<sup>9</sup>

Another way the alterity of the passengers is highlighted is through the selection of videotape for airing. The program’s producers choose which videotaped cab rides will be included in the final program, and which will not. The passengers chosen to be included in the program are those with unusual life circumstances or transgressive characteristics, which locate them as other by appealing to sexist, racist, and heterosexist cultural presumptions. Yet again, these implicate the bodies of the passengers and physical locations and interactions within the cab. For example, two passengers featured in the *Taxicab Confessions: New York, New York* program include “a little white guy and big black woman” who have just met (I use the terms for race and body size

used by the passengers themselves, see [video clip 2](#)). The two discuss their erotic attraction for each other and express that attraction physically as they talk with the driver and each other, as the text verbally and visually invokes commonplace social conventions about race, gender, and body size. While the couple's discourse emphasizes racial and body size difference, their conversation features romantic clichés as they speak, and even sing, about their sexual attraction. The couple's eroticization of difference *becomes* subsumed and transformed into a celebration of expanded heteronormativity. Nonetheless, the conventionally normal man, un-marked as other because of his gender, whiteness, or body size (Andrejevic and Colby; Dubrofsky and Hardy), becomes marked as other through his desire for and relationship with an inappropriate woman. The two passengers represent a double transgression of both racial and erotic boundaries, which helps structure the *scene* of the cab as edgy, without presenting any real threat to twenty-first century North American conventions.

Other passengers from the program include two Irish men who discuss their relationships with women in a way that highlights their differences relative to mainstream American culture. Their otherness is emphasized in their accents, word choices, the culturally dissonant behaviors they describe, and their own self-analysis: the two discuss the repeated breakdown of relationships one of them experiences when he brings the women he is dating to Ireland to meet his mother. They describe an off-putting cultural dissonance for the women, followed by a break-up of

the relationship. The program also includes a man and a transgender woman who discuss their relationship and attraction to one another—again with the dynamic of the normative man erotically drawn to the socially forbidden other.

The images used between segments also highlight otherness. The city and its nightlife establish a scene of experimentation, excess, and transgression. For example, one bar scene features several lingering shots of an Asian woman swimming on display behind the glass of an aquarium surrounded by fish. She is defined as other in several ways: racially, in her dress and display behind glass as object rather than person, in the radical alterity of her underwater environment, and through the glass that separates her from others in the bar. Gender is an important signal for otherness in *Taxicab Confessions, New York, New York*. Although one of the cab drivers/observers is a woman and all the passengers are in some way marked as other, passengers identifying as women carry these markers most strongly. *Taxicab Confessions: New York, New York*, even in its ostensible transgressions, relies on and reinforces the patterns of dominance and subordination that underwrite conventional notions of race, gender, and sexuality. ([See clip 3](#))

## Conclusion

The taxicab *scene* in *Taxicab Confessions, New York, New York* accrues meaning in its interaction with specific characters, methods, actions, and reasons—the five terms of Burke's pentad. Because the cab is a scene of transience, located beyond the surveillance of social expectations, it shapes our understanding of the *characters* we see as free and authentic, which is further enhanced by the commonplace associations we are invited to make with the images of urban street life. The program locates us in a zone of transgression (the taxi) within another zone of transgression (urban nightlife).

Yet the *scene* of the taxicab is also shaped by what Burke would identify as *agency* (the method by which actions unfold). Through the cabdrivers' questions about identity, sexuality, and personal relationships, the passengers are coaxed to express themselves as selves and dwell on non-typical aspects of their character. The personal, intimate questions asked by the drivers help emphasize the confessional structure and anonymity of the cab, and space is made for the passengers to be "free" and "authentic."

The *action* of the taxicab also marks it as a scene. Yet the taxicab is also a meta-scene, further overdetermined by the multiple urban scenes it actively connects, in which one can enter the dispersed cultural riches of the city. These dimensions of the taxicab *scene* are highlighted not just by the passengers but also by the driver-interviewers. The drivers are presented as

contemporary *flâneurs*, channeling the audiences' curiosities about diversity and inviting us into the last coordinate of Burke's dramatism, the varied *purposes* that unfold in the dramas of the passengers' performances of self.

While *scene* is the pivot point for the other dimensions of the drama as it unfolds in the program, it is also reinforced by the program's reality TV genre and its documentary-style conventions. Even as the scene of the taxicab is structured as a meta-place or heterotopia, we are simultaneously located in the *real* world of a *real* city with *real* places. Furthermore, the characters, even in their difference, are also recognizable within the terms of the real world.

*Taxicab Confessions, New York, New York* invites viewers into an experience of contrasts: a mundane cab ride set against the thrill of urban nightlife; people who seem socially acceptable but are not; a place that is somewhere but nowhere; reality and entertainment; self and other. These incongruities are pushed together and incompatible elements are fused, spitting out sparks—the thrill of transgression. The audience gets to be a part of this seeming chaos—Burke's symbolic “impiety” (*Permanence and Change*)—We can stand as rebels against the status quo from a comfortable recliner. We can feel the itchy burn of pleasurable discomfort as the horizon of the normal is stretched, and then move on to the next program all the more securely located a little closer to the centre of social

acceptability with cultural structures of domination and subordination preserved.

The authenticity or “reality” of reality TV techniques and genre used in *Taxicab Confessions* adds further weight to the symbolic work of identity positioning and reality building, as viewers encounter the thrill of urban diversity, but with its chaos managed, separated and contained. Gargoyles are deployed but reconfigured as devices structuring a hidden stability. The show provides viewers with a vivid reassurance of a stable normality and evokes the chaotic borders of exoticized urbanity—a fun ride that nevertheless maintains dominant order.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *Taxicab Confessions: New York, New York Part 2* was released in January of 2007. The promotional website for the program [<http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/taxicab10/synopsis.html>, accessed 9/21/2007] describes the new episode in terms that indicate the continued function of transgressive authenticity and alterity that mark this series: "Among the people we meet: a French exotic dancer and her Latino squeeze; a young pimp and his three-man entourage; a pair of 20-something women who've bonded through breakups; an EMT worker who had a tough night at the office; four women out on a bachelorette-party mission; a male 'slut'; a man who says he lived, hunted and had sex among the Bushmen in Africa for six years; and a transsexual hooker looking for love with a penis, but no testicles."

<sup>2</sup> While both Straw's notion of scene and Foucault's discussion of heterotopia are explicitly spatial, they also work symbolically. Thus, both approaches to heterotopia are useful for making sense of media depictions of space and relate to Burke's approach to scene.

<sup>3</sup> While the permutations of the various ratios of Burke's pentad (scene-act, act-agent, etc.) are complex and often interesting, my focus here is not a full pentadic analysis, but rather to borrow the notion that *scene* is important for the rhetorical *work* that it does—its relational structuring of meaning—and to offer a few examples that help put this notion in dialogue with the work of Straw and other scholars.

<sup>4</sup> Burke distinguishes between *motion* and *action*. For Burke ("(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action"), motion describes the mechanistic, physical movements of things, and action designates motion in its relationship to human meaning making.

<sup>5</sup> See Wess' discussion of "the overlap between Burke and [J.L.] Austin" (115-117).

<sup>6</sup> Note that authenticity is at play more than truth, which becomes literally *inconsequential* in the not-space of the taxicab. Pecora argues that both truth and authenticity have become less important to life within contemporary society, and *verification* has become central (348). I suggest that verification has indeed become a primary concern, but is better understood as a technology of *authentication*.

<sup>7</sup> Fetveit discusses the function of indexicality in positioning documentary and reality TV in relation to authenticity by focusing on surfaces and verbal-visual congruence rather than deeper meanings. I suggest that while indexicality is productive for exploring documentary and reality TV, it need not be set in opposition to symbolic function.

<sup>8</sup> Reality TV programs must often rely on other kinds of verifications of *authenticity* such as behavioral consistency, behavior that conforms to the person's self as expressed in direct-to-camera confession, and so forth (Dubrofsky, *The Surveillance of Women on Reality Television: Watching the Bachelor and the Bachelorette*; Andrejevic; Andrejevic and Colby; Dubrofsky and Hardy; Corner; Hill; Ouellette and Hay; Deery; Mast).

<sup>9</sup> See Dubrofsky and Hardy and Andrejevic and Colby for a discussion of the contours of race in reality TV and the role of whiteness in structuring "an erasure of explicit markers of race, class and background" (Dubrofsky and Hardy 378).



