Fred Nadis

Citizen Funt

Surveillance as Cold War Entertainment

A New York City bus station phone operator receives a series of phone calls from an annoying customer. In the first call he asks the operator for the scheduled departures and the length of the trip. In the second call he asks if he will get a seat and if the bus drivers are good. The third call brings further questions: Do the buses ever get lost? Is Spring Valley a nice town? How many stops along the way? Can the driver make a special stop to pick him up at 114th and Broadway? When he calls the fourth time, he asks to speak to another operator. The exasperated operator responds, “I’ve told you all about the buses; do you want to know how often they clean them maybe?” The customer asks again the departure times. Then he asks if the buses have reclining seats.

Throughout the call we hear only the phone operator’s voice, with its New York working-class accent; we sense her general good humor and the caller’s difficulty flustering her, then her rising aggravation balanced by her fellow feeling for the caller, about whom between calls she wonders out loud to a coworker, “Where was he when they passed out the brains?” The caller was the thirty-three-year-old Allen Funt, and the recording was made in 1947 for his radio series The Candid Microphone. In this radio show he explored ways to provoke un rehearsal behavior that would eventually crystallize in the Candid Camera sequences he filmed off and on from the late 1940s until his death in 1999.

In provoking these un rehearsal responses, Funt thought of himself as a researcher, conducting experiments in human nature; in his sketches he dared his victims to act badly and dared his audiences to consider what “acting badly” meant. In the bus station operator sequence, we as listeners come to admire the phone operator. She is polite but nobody’s patsy. By the sequence’s finish, when he asks if he’ll get lost in Spring Valley, she sings
"Take a chance!" Along the way, Funt has tested her character—or, to use a more old-fashioned coinage, her "virtue"—and, with her, the virtues of the working public in Cold War America.

Frequently, Funt's surveillance "victims" would not fare as well as the bus station phone operator. For example, in one sequence for Candid Camera in 1963, Funt filmed a young man in a suit and fedora boarding an elevator crowded with Funt operatives. Before the elevator doors close, the Funt extras turn to the back of the car. The young victim notices this, then casually turns backward. Next the extras slowly turn forward, again the young man, baffled, does the same. They continue to put him through his paces, for example removing and then replacing their hats. The victim mirrors them. While Funt's voiceover commentary stresses the humorous nature of the young man's plight, he serves him up as a "treat" and a warning about conformity.

Concerns about privacy, conformity, decency, and American character were rampant in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when Funt's shows...
emerged on radio and television. This was the age of loyalty oaths, fears of
un-American activities, Communist infiltration, organized crime, and pub-
lic panics over comic books and juvenile delinquency. In 1947, just one year
before Candid Microphone, the Truman administration had established
the national security state apparatus, which included the formation of the
National Security Council and the CIA, as well as an expanded FBI with
authority to run background checks on federal employees. Funt's use of
surveillance for entertainment addressed the public's concerns about threats
to privacy in a time of rampant paranoia. And though Funt's entertainments
quietly probed 1950s Americans for their "good citizenship" qualities,
creating a comic inversion of the HUAC hearings, his critics inevitably
questioned what sort of citizen these shows' creator was as well.

The Apprenticeship of Citizen Funt

Funt was born in Brooklyn in 1914 to immigrant German-Jewish parents.
He graduated from high school at age fifteen and went on to study fine
arts at the Pratt Institute and Cornell University. No introverted artist, he
was feisty and streetwise. To gain respect in his Brooklyn neighborhood,
during his childhood he began boxing, and he continued as a member of
the Cornell Boxing Club; his scrappy appearance and manner later aided
him when he asked outrageous favors and questions of people on camera.
After graduating from Cornell in 1934 with a degree in fine arts, and
recognizing that he was "no Matisse," Funt landed an entry-level job in
advertising in Manhattan and soon found a niche as an "idea man" for
radio shows.

Drafted during World War II, Funt continued his show business ap-
prenticeship in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, where he produced radio shows
and fund-raising events for war bonds. In Behind the Dog Tag: The Show
That Makes GI Wishes Come True, Funt would field GIs' bizarre wishes,
for example, "to go swimming in bees," and find a way to grant them.
He also created a radio show that fielded GI complaints called The Gripe
Booth. According to Funt, GIs tended to become tongue-tied when the
red light flashed on for recordings, so he began to record them earlier, in
secret, while casually bantering, to get better and more candid commu-
nication from his subjects. This was a breakthrough for him. According to his
1994 memoir, "As soon as I was discharged from the army and returned
to New York, I tried to create a radio show using hidden microphones. ... I wanted to create a program that would simply record the beauty of everyday conversation ... pure eavesdropping” (Funt with Reed 26).

The results, made with a wire recorder in diners and other public venues, frequently consisted of weak banter and background noise that tended to be unfit for his radio show *Candid Microphone*. Occasionally the hidden microphone would pick up gems, such as when two handicapped veterans in a veteran’s hospital talked about how difficult it was to deal with the public’s inquiries about their disabilities. Too often, though, there was not enough drama in these secret recordings. Funt claims that he finally hit on the proper formula while hiding a microphone in a dentist’s office. A customer interrupted him, and in a fit of inspiration, Funt began to examine her mouth, then told her that she didn’t have any wisdom teeth at all, which led to a heated exchange on tape. With this improvisation, Funt left behind the role of silent eavesdropper and took on the role of dramatic provocateur.

His further exploration of his gimmick gained for *Candid Microphone* popular acclaim and a following that included numerous New York intellectuals. The sociologist David Riesman, for example, in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) cited a *Candid Microphone* sequence as evidence that consumerism had led to the emergence of an “other-directed” personality anxious to smile and please (121). In addition to being reviewed in the New York dailies, Funt and his innovative shows were the subject of articles in *Life*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*; he also became the model for the roguish television producer Golk, who revels in shouting, “You’re on camera!” to his media con-game dupes in Richard Stern’s energetic novel *Golk* (1960).

Braced by this early appreciation, Funt continued his experiments, pranks, and improvisations and helped define himself as a new sort of “auteur.” A publicity photo from the late 1940s shows Funt in his office, tie loose, arms crossed, and one leg up on a chair as he gazes bleary-eyed past three workers with earphones who are splicing wire recordings. Like a jazz album photograph showing musicians and producers in a relaxed studio, this portrait suggested a certain insouciance and world-weariness in Funt and his young staff. His wired-up, technically capable portrayal announced a new sort of artist at work: a practical joker, sociologist, and confidence man. Like the swindler Rinehart in Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, who prowls the streets of Harlem impersonating a preacher
and a pimp, Funt—who also published his first memoir in 1952—could
"be" anybody—dentist, grocer, butcher, hot dog vendor, driving instructor,
wrestler, annoying presence on a street corner, even HUAC investigator.
And he was able to evoke melodic inspirations from his "instrument"—the
anonymous people he referred to, alternately, as "subjects" and "victims."
He was no Matisse, but a new kind of artist primed for the age of radio
and television.

A year after his radio debut, Funt took his format to television. The
show pleased audiences even though it did not fit preexisting genres or
broadcasters' notions of television's strengths as a medium. In 1948, when
Candid Camera first aired, television was in its infancy; many believed that
the small screen with its poor image quality was best for live events, which
offered a feeling of immediacy and connection. Hollywood-made telefilms
such as detective series were suspect. One critic argued that such artificial
shows "break the link between human and human. The viewer loses his
sense of being a partner and instead becomes a spectator" (Boddy 81).
Much of the early television programming was live, whether talk shows,
quiz shows, variety shows, or live dramas and staged spectacles that
drew from the New York City theater talent pool.

Funt blended curiously into this mix of live programming. He began
on a local ABC broadcast with Ken Roberts as his cohort, Philip Morris
as the show's sponsor, and plenty of shots of Roberts and Funt puffing
on their sponsor's cigarettes. To meet television's demands for immediacy,
Funt gave off-the-cuff introductions to his films and ongoing commentary
or banter with his cohort during the live broadcast. In so doing he solved
the problem of maintaining immediacy and a sense of intimacy with live
audiences. In the 1960s, when Candid Camera became a national success
on CBS, Funt relied on the same format, working with a string of urbane
partners that included the acid, witty talk show host Arthur Godfrey, and
later the more self-effacing Doris Day, Kirby and Bess Myerson, a former
Miss America.

Selling his show to local networks, while also working on industrial
films and producing phonograph recordings of his radio material, Funt
soon became a wealthy man. In 1951 he purchased a large estate on the
Hudson River that he and his wife Evelyn dubbed White Gates. There
they took to living in high style with their three children, as the original
ten-acre purchase spread out into a hundred acres. Funt struck a jaunty
style, commuting to work in a phone-equipped white Thunderbird, relying
on a tape recorder to capture his inspirations, pleased to get comments on his show from a toll collector every Monday morning.

Candid Methods

When Funt gained prominence in the 1950s and 1960s, he offered interviewers a standard account of Candid Camera's five basic categories: (1) pure observation of the ordinary; (2) wish fulfillment; (3) human frailties; (4) the small crisis; (5) the exposé of tricks of the trade (Martin 93–94). Funt insisted that he could spend hours admiring the different ways in which people smoked, ate spaghetti, or descended staircases. The "pure observation" that he had attempted in early Candid Microphone segments by recording in diners and veterans' hospitals had by the 1960s become compendiums of simple events set to music, whether a montage of numerous bowlers bowling, babies' crying set to opera music, or stylish traffic cops at work directing the flow of traffic in time with a jazz score.

The category of "wish fulfillment" involved the viewer's identifying with Funt, the provocateur, as he played out a transgressive or risqué fantasy, attempting, for example, to pick up girls in Central Park, or to order a set lunch special at a diner and repeatedly ask the irritated waiter to make substitutions ("Vegetable soup, I don't like vegetable soup. Can I change the soup for some fruit salad?"). In another wish fulfillment fantasy he would nonchalantly hand a cab driver a fifty- or hundred-dollar bill and wait for the cabbie to complain he couldn't change it.

"Human frailties," in his formula, meant exposing an individual's vanity, greed, or weakness in the face of social pressure. His camera would catch people primping in front of a mirror, for example, or getting increasingly agitated as he asked for favor after favor. He would use difficult words in an improper context and prompt absurd responses from subjects who didn't know the word's meaning but wouldn't admit it, as when he asked, "Did you know that elevator is retroactive?" or, "Who do you think is the most superfluous actress acting today?"

His exposés of tricks of the trade, which aligned his shows with crusading journalism, included candid tapes he made of trickery in the loan industry and on used car sales lots. In one such sequence he talked with a professional wrestler about how he could fix a fight and was assured that 99 percent of all fights were fixed, and those that weren't were "no good"
because they bored audiences. Such exposés could also benefit businesses, as when he created sales training films that highlighted bad salesmanship.

The heart of his show, however, was in the small crisis. His creation of these small crises anticipated the work that the social psychologist Leon Festinger in the late 1950s termed cognitive dissonance. Much of this research could be traced to postwar funding related to understanding shifts in public opinion and concerns about conformity and totalitarianism. Such communications research examined how subjects handled the unexpected—if what is going on is baffling, or contradicts a person’s received wisdom, ethics, or common sense, how does she or he resolve the situation? How do people manage to reduce the dissonance and related anxiety? The majority of Funt’s sequences fit this category, which in his hands, involved people handling the minicrisis of the practical joke. How do people in telephone booths respond, for example, when an elephant comes and blocks their exit?

For this category of research, Funt, like a silent comedy director, often highlighted people’s reactions to machines that went haywire. In linking comedy and automation, Funt was following a long tradition. Writing in an era of increased industrial regimentation, the early-twentieth-century French philosopher Henri Bergson argued that “the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” (75). Bergson called laughter the corrective for such rigidity. Funt produced his work in a new era of social regimentation, and his audience’s laughter “corrected” revealed behavior patterns.

In one Candid Camera sequence, we see an office worker at first amused, and then flustered around in dismay as a mimeograph machine begins to spew out sheet after sheet of paper. In a more elaborate setup, a new cook in a bakery is positioned at a conveyer belt to put whipped cream on cakes. The cakes come at such a fast pace. The worker is a morose little fellow who responds in much the same way as a Harry Langdon or Charlie Chaplin might. He finally can only scoop the cakes up and place them higher up the conveyer line, knowing they soon will return. Further exploring the grammar of slapstick, Funt hired Buster Keaton to imitate an accident-prone customer at a diner and record the results.

In another sequence, Funt set up a trampoline store and focused his camera on hired secretaries as a client would come in, begin testing a
trampoline, bounce higher and higher, then crash through the ceiling and disappear. One nonchalant secretary, who has seen it all, simply sits there puffing on her cigarette, refusing to offer a response.

Other crisis sequences offered sharp social commentary. A classic example involves Funt summoning a locksmith to his office to open the locks holding his secretary chained to her desk so she can take a short lunch break. Although outraged and concerned for her well-being, the locksmith ultimately only urges Funt at least to rubber-coat the chains. When Funt asks, "Is there a rubber-coated chain they use for this purpose?" the locksmith weakly replies, "No one uses it for this purpose here. . . . Out West maybe" (McEvoy 116).

His networks wanted broad humor, but Funt stressed in interviews his concerns about conformity and weakness in the face of authority. Here he was in step with the sociologists and intellectuals of the era then dissecting the psychology of mass culture and dynamics of totalitarianism. Funt's concern was quite overt in the sequence from 1963 in which the young man in the fedora boards an elevator crowded with Funt operatives. Funt brought out the same message with a lighter tone when he placed a sign saying "Please step only on the black squares" in a shoe repair store with a checkerboard tiled floor. We then see victims of all ages politely hopping and skipping across the square tiles, eager to please.

In addition to its basic formula of manufacturing an absurd yet often telling crisis and documenting the shifting reactions of the subjects, Candid Camera relied on the dramatic epiphany of what Funt dubbed "the reveal"—that is, the moment when the crisis has peaked and the subject is informed he or she is being filmed. In the reveal all the building tension of the scene is resolved and dissonance evaporates. Men and women might hide their faces while overcome with emotion, burst out laughing, hug Funt, or, in one woman's case, pull him down onto a bed and roll around with him. The reveal ultimately became the show's trademark, as exemplified by the show's peppy theme song, which ended with "Smile, You're on Candid Camera."

**Hidden Microphones and Documentary Ethics**

Funt's show appealed to broadcasters because it was inexpensive; it appealed to audiences because it was amusing; and it appealed to intellectuals because it was a curious hybrid—taking up the documentary cause that had
been supremely important in the 1930s and 1940s, while also paralleling the work of postwar sociologists, psychologists, and documentarians. Yet his shows were also open to charges that he was exploiting his humble subjects for the amusement of a middle-class audience.

Similar complaints had plagued earlier efforts at “artful surveillance” with hidden cameras; for example, in the late nineteenth century, the portable “detective” camera was introduced, making new, quick, candid photographs possible. Some of these cameras were built into bowler hats, cravats, walking sticks, and picnic baskets. Middle-class subjects spluttered over the photographs taken of them without consent. Members of the working class or “exotic” groups have traditionally been more appropriate subjects—or victims—of documentary studies. The crusading journalist Jacob Riis used his camera to invade slum life and depict sordid scenes in sweatshops, tenement alleys, police lodging quarters, and cheap saloons to build support for his reform agenda. Likewise, documentary classics such as Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North (1922) reinvented the lives of the Inuit as exotic, premodern others.

Funt confirmed his preference for humble subjects in a 1960 interview in the New Yorker, stating, “The lower the class, the more comfortable I am.” His interviewer stressed that Funt, with his Brooklyn accent and Stanley Kowalski persona, was able to make “humble subjects feel right at home, and thus softens them up for lines of questioning that in the mouths of less earthily gifted interrogators might cause suspicion, resentment, or, worst of all, silence” (Flagler 73). Funt also admitted to cruelty at times, noting that it was intrinsic to humor. In an early interview he commented, “If you want to know what holds the man together... you apply a real jolt and see where the cracks appear” (Flagler 74).

Funt, however, also believed his shows had “uplift.” His first LP record anthology from the Candid Microphone series included Funt’s introduction in which he made a case for his democratic realism, or “candid portraits in sound,” carting himself as a latter-day Walt Whitman, eager to celebrate democracy. He noted: “These are the plain everyday kind of people you never see in the headlines or in the movies or on the stage; authors create copies of them; history counts them and sorts them and finally lumps them all together. They have no single name except as Americans and their voice is not remembered except as a chorus. They make themselves heard here as individuals... unposed, unrehearsed, and completely off-guard.”

In his writings Funt argued that he was after something bigger than...
just cheap laughs or cruel fun. What he did was a combination of art and science. Funt, like any artist working in a realist mode, wanted to capture real life. One of his goals was to make “a photograph of the way a man spends his entire working day—every public minute of it. This may not be great entertainment, but it certainly should have a place in the time capsule of this civilization” (Funt 20:5). He added that his crews had already photographed one man traveling from “place to place” using seven different hidden cameras and seven crews. Trying to break completely free of the Candid Camera gimmick, in 1963 he developed the short-lived television show Pictures of People. He and his staff used three mobile television studios that traveled the country, inviting people to present themselves as they liked, completely aware that they were being recorded. The program did not last the year.

Like the highbrow cinema verité filmmakers who followed, Funt reveled in the poetics of everyday life captured on film. Yet his idea of realism was more directly drawn from the terms of the 1950s debate about television’s strengths. Trying to achieve the more immediate, direct sense of the real that suited television, Funt’s sketches often deflated classic Hollywood moments. He would, for instance, hop into a taxi and order the driver to “follow that cab,” and he inevitably was turned down; one cabbie remarked, “How do I know where he’s going?” Another driver said, “I don’t do nothing like that, Mister. I just take you to places, not after other cabs.” In 1962 Funt hired William Saroyan to script the ways that a customer in a carpeting store would react when told that an anonymous client had made all his payments for him. Funt noted that in his actual takes, no customer nobly refused being let off the hook.

The Case against Citizen Funt

A provocateur onscreen and off, instead of trying to shake the label of “voyeur,” Funt proudly titled his early autobiography Eavesdropper at Large (1952). He also explored what it might mean to be a public voyeur, one who rejects the legitimate boundaries of the private sphere during the cold war. Announcements of the end of privacy were endemic in the 1950s and 1960s. Books such as Vance Packard’s The Hidden Persuaders (1957) reported on how the advertising industry manipulated an audience’s emotions. Packard followed this book with The Naked Society (1964),

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which detailed various invasions of privacy, whereas the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) underscored the right to privacy when a couple sued for the right to receive birth control materials through the mail.

Funt intentionally gave his footage the feeling of a wiretap or surveillance film. He insisted on a stripped-down aesthetic for his show, as apparently only one camera recorded a scene to give the audience a surveillance-camera perspective. Sequences were concluded and connected with lap dissolves that showed Venetian blinds closing on a scene, blacking it out and opening to the next. The audience, like the host, was a Peeping Tom, engaged in fun that paralleled government surveillance and censorship. When people swore on the radio or screen, Funt’s people would dub in a woman’s voice sweetly saying, “Censored.”

Continuing to explore the realms of realism and secrecy, Funt took his *Candid Camera* to various European countries and then to the Soviet Union in 1960 and managed to smuggle candid films made in Moscow—which Soviet authorities had apparently “fogged”—out from behind the Iron Curtain, including tried-and-true bits in which Funt or an operative reads a newspaper over someone’s shoulder or a pretty young woman asks passersby to help carry a suitcase filled with concrete. They also filmed observational footage of, for example, Russian families posing for snapshots in front of a cannon. Funt insisted that he was on a “subversive mission—I wanted to show that the Soviets were actually human beings” (Funt with Reed 134). The promptings for Funt’s U.S.S.R. mission were similar to the simple humanism of Edward Steichen’s 1955 touring show, *The Family of Man*, a compilation of photographs from artists worldwide that showed daily life around the globe and stressed universal, shared values and the necessity of institutions such as the United Nations to underwrite cold war tensions.

In line with this humanistic *Family of Man* approach, the mainstream press frequently portrayed Funt as a connoisseur of the “little guy” whose show, if at times “impudent,” was ultimately harmless, often hilarious, and even instructive. Yet, perhaps because of his canny abilities, Funt became the target of some very literate critics, housed largely at the *New Yorker*, who saw themselves as the true defenders of the “little guy” whom Funt exploited.

The *New Yorker’s* Philip Hamburger, one of Funt’s most savage
critics, writing in 1937, made “hypocrisy” Funt’s prime sin. Hamburger began by arguing that Funt had “succeeded, I think, in reducing the art, the purpose and the ethic of the ‘documentary’ idea to the level of the obscene.” Comparing Funt’s efforts to the earlier work of the documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty, which he insisted showed respect for the dignity of his subjects, Hamburger berated Funt for being a tempter who was “sadistic, poisonous, anti-human, and sneaky” (73).

Two and a half years later another New Yorker writer, John Lardner, joined the attack. Far from being the “benevolent student” of his species that Funt passed himself off as, the producer was actually a “torturer” who had fewer scruples than a government wiretapper. In his lengthy diatribe, Lardner painted a diabolic portrait of Funt along the lines of Melville’s sinister Confidence Man. He described one sketch in which Funt placed a twenty-dollar bill in a revolving door and another in which Funt put twenty-dollar bills in the pockets of suits in a tailor shop, then commented that these twenty-dollar deposits were “the standard wages of temptation on The Candid Camera.” Lardner concluded his critique by voicing the wish that Funt leave alone the “man on the street” and instead apply “his great gift for aggressiveness to men in public life, beginning at the top” (60).

Golking Funt

The novelist Richard Stern explored such a possibility in his short novel Golg (1960). Stern, a fan of Funt’s programs, recalled “laughing so hard at one [showing] that I fell into the aisle of an Iowa City theater” (One Person 392). In his rise and fall narrative, Stern homed in on Funt’s ambitious, streetwise characteristics while shaping his Funt character, Golg, into a mythic trickster and father figure. Stern’s depiction oscillates between Golg as a jaded, manipulative monster and Golg as a tough populist genius. The book extols a Golg who skewers highbrows with his street tactics, who taps the natural artistry of his subjects, and who projects a democratic presence, so that his becomes “the world’s own voice.”

At the novel’s pivot, Golg, rated with fame and useless power, decides to leave entertainment behind and to expose the corrupt and powerful. Golg announces, “We’re going to be the education of the audience. Not the blackboard-and-seats kind, but demonstrators, dramatizers, the portayers of corruption, connivance, of the tone and temper of the world they live
in and don't understand" (101). Although Golk knows he cannot hope to last with such strategies, he prefers a "noble stint, a clean job." Then follow three "golkes" of Washington insiders and lobbyists. Soon after, the network forces Golk off the show, after which his underlings take over and quickly run the program into oblivion. Golk, with his chameleon knack, heads out West and then fades behind the scenes to become a stagehand in Hollywood.

In his own life Funt made some dramatic changes but avoided Golk's flameout. In 1964 Funt divorced his first wife and married his secretary from Candid Camera, Marilyn Ina Lair. Funt left behind the town-and-country style and became a zany urbanite in a ten-room apartment that one breathless journalist insisted had a "muttiness in every room." The kitchen, for example, included two ovens, two stoves, two refrigerators (one just for his wife's "No-Cal"), and two freezers as insurance against the time when "things break down."

The second marriage survived a plane hijacking to Cuba in February 1969 (many of Funt's fellow passengers thought it was only a Candid Camera trick in bad taste) but only briefly survived a second disaster, Funt's discovery in 1972 that his accountant had embezzled more than $1 million since 1961. Several years later Funt divorced his second wife, who later wrote two books on the problems a wife faced in a celebrity marriage, the first, from 1979, titled Are You Anybody?

After his business and personal upsets, Funt, like Golk before him, finally moved West. He claimed Los Angeles was not a city for him—though he had made a career of turning ordinary people into media beings, he disliked the lack of authenticity of Los Angeles. It was, he said, a place "where everyone looks and acts like a movie extra. They dress in costumes, speak in no particular accent, and seem to be starring in a movie that is running in their heads." (Funt with Reed 176). He settled instead on a 1,200-acre parcel of real estate in Big Sur and began turning it into a working ranch that included a small outbuilding for Native American art.

What Do You Say to a Naked Formula?

To avoid Golk's flameout, Funt had nowhere to go creatively but to introduce his formulas into different media. One such realm was business consulting; from the 1950s he created many industrial films and filmstrips
relying on Candid Camera formulas. A second realm was academia: Funt made several film compilations and produced textbooks for introductory psychology courses based on Candid Camera sequences and even taught psychology in Carmel. He also entered a third realm, that of risqué entertainment, with the X-rated film What Do You Say to a Naked Lady? (1970). Distributors paired it with the X-rated Last Tango in Paris and, at the height of the sexual revolution, it became a financial success.

Turning to sex as a topic was a reasonable extension of Candid Camera’s mixture of practical jokes, Peeping Tom tactics, and boundary exploring. In addition to candid interviews with people about their ideas regarding sex, sexual experiences, and beliefs, What Do You Say largely involved surveillance footage of male subjects’ encounters with naked female models who held, as fig leaves, purses containing hidden microphones. In the footage we see these men ogle pretty nude women, try to ignore them, gallantly offer to cover them, pursue them with wolfish stares, or break out in laughter after the naked lady has left the scene. The film’s peppy title song, now pure kitsch, kept the proceedings light. As an example of the new sexual permissiveness of the 1960s, the film has not aged well. It distorted the usual Candid Camera formula, since the wrong people were being “stripped”—not Funt’s ordinary people, but fetching operatives. Nevertheless, Funt later produced nearly forty half-hour shows for the Playboy Channel that “poked fun at the way people react to nudity and sex.”

Funt went on to make the feature film Money Talks (1972), an uneasy mix of gags and social commentary about money, livelihood, and poverty. A third feature, Smile When You Say I Do (1973), centered on the theme of marriage and was prompted by his own difficulties in his second marriage. Overall, the restraints of television network sponsorship—and the social restraints of pre-1960s culture—tended to evoke better work than the relative freedom of his finally realized film experiments.

Though Funt produced only Candid Camera specials after the 1967 cancellation of the regular series, in 1998 his oldest son, Peter Funt, long involved in Candid Camera, began producing the program again for CBS. But the never-ending show, continuously in reruns somewhere in the world, had inevitably suffered aesthetically. Even Funt, before his death in 1999, said his show looked “quaint” by modern television standards.

The latest incarnation of Candid Camera, of course, is surrounded by
its progeny: the many reality television shows that borrow Funf's strategies of low-cost production, constant surveillance, voiceover, and editing to tweak real life into entertainment. “Meet Joe Schmo” (2003), for example, featured a young man who auditioned to be on a Survivor-style reality show but was not told that he would be the only “genuine” cast member. Everyone else was working from a script to set him up. In this show, then, the several-minute surveillance observation of Candid Camera was stretched into a season-long experiment in dissonance. The series ended, inevitably, with the filmed reveal.

Such tweaking no longer raises the same outcry it once did—even serious documentary filmmakers, who long ago distanced themselves from Candid Camera and its secret-camera tactics, often admit that their works are, in the filmmaker Frederick Wiseman's words, “reality fictions.” At his best, Funf, with his tricks and reveals, circled the problem of making his show both real and entertaining, but he found it insoluble. Candid Camera's success remained, perhaps, in its uneasy blend. Turning surveillance to artistic ends evoked moral ambiguities as well as fascination. Was Funf's camera eye cruel or humane? Were Funf's subjects exploited or ennobled? Were they caving in to authority, being good sports, or both? Was his empathy an illusion, or was Funf, like the fictional Gork, despite his crudities, a genuine artist with a social vision?

A product of the quiet liberalism of the 1950s, Candid Camera was made at a time when boundary-probing entertainment still was expected to have uplift. If the many loyalty committees of the era wished to be arbiters of good citizenship, the moderate left also wished to have its say. In their documentary work, folklorists, sociologists, and cinema verité filmmakers sought to expose both the nobility and the folly in the lives of their subjects. Like the era's psychologists, documentarians also explored the social pressures that people faced. Candid Camera, with a theme song that noted that "When You Least Expect It, You're Elected," consistently surveyed the American scene, while probing ideas of good citizenship and threatened democracy.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. See Gunning for a discussion of the rise of the hidden camera at the turn of the twentieth century.
2. Nelson, for example, argues that during the cold war, confessional poetry emerged at the same time as concerns about invasion of privacy.

Works Cited