

Scandals

[VIEW ALL ENTRIES](#)

By *Laura Kipnis*



It's only when a great scandal breaks after a protracted dry spell that you realize how much delight other people's transgressions provide the community and how monotonous things get when everyone plays by the rules. Life had been a bit sluggish on the scandal front this summer compared with last (who can forget lovelorn Gov. Mark Sanford's **transcendently excruciating press conference** last June on the subject of his "dear friend" from Argentina?), so when the first of Mel Gibson's **secretly**

recorded rants surfaced in mid-July, scandal junkies everywhere perked up. Microphone-studded earrings! A personality publically disintegrating, a career in ruins! His agent dropped him; an upcoming movie project hit the skids; the blogosphere lit up like a petroleum fire. All of which *almost* offset the crushing disappointment when the usually voluble Illinoisan, Rod Blagojevich, chose not to testify at his corruption trial, an event many of us had been keenly awaiting. For once he keeps his mouth shut? Why *now*?

After all, culture needs scandal: It's a social purification ritual, a necessary feature of the system, with the socially noncompliant branded and expelled, allowing the system to reassert itself and flex its muscle. Stay in line ... *or else*. Scandal has crucial functions to perform: If communities are enclaves of shared norms, then scandals are what consolidate a community. They organize our hatreds. The media may whip things up for motives of its own, but it's our proprieties that have to be breeched, and we care about these breeches deeply. Especially we who play by the rules: Ours is the glee of bitter conformists.

Advertisement

Speaking of cleansing rituals, the conjunction of Mel's rants and the summer's other disaster story, the BP oil spill, was also particularly fortuitous, prompting one editorial cartoonist to yoke the two under the caption: "Toxic leaks that continue to spew harsh contaminants." What a perfect description of the scandal enterprise generally, which more often than not features alarming amounts of unconsciousness sluicing into the public arena.

Freud had a thing or two to say on the subject of leaky personalities, once remarking, "No mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore." His point is that humans can't seem to help spilling unwitting clues all over the place about the mess of embarrassing conflicts and desires lodged within. Notice how viscous he makes the whole thing sound: Self-betrayal doesn't trickle or drip or bleed, it oozes, mucous-like (or worse). The viscosity of the substance in question will interest anyone who's ever struggled to quash some delinquent libidinal urge; presumably this would be everyone. The problem is that

we're all leaky vessels, which is both distressing and an excellent starting point for an examination of scandal, or, more specifically, some people's proclivity for getting into them, and everyone else's nasty merriment in watching them do it.

Typical scandals involve sex, money, ambition, cheating—in short, someone wants *more* of something than they're socially entitled to. Thus does scandal lure its quarry: intemperate appetites, bad self-management, a zeal for power—scandal's playground, all. But the *sine qua non* of scandal is, of course, the expose—something previously secret and preferably shameful has to be made public, preferably inadvertently. Note that both the Gibson and Blago scandals featured hidden recording devices: Yes, the digital age *is* scandal's new best friend. The microphones keep getting smaller, the modes of transmission faster, the scandal venues hungrier and more numerous. These days every misstep can be beamed to cell phones and computer screens around the globe in a matter of seconds, and you don't even have to be a celebrity—on a slow news day, anyone's **mortifying misdeed** will do.

Needless to say, lust has always been the *locus classicus* of scandal, given that funny way it has of occluding rational thought, especially when it comes to risk-assessment. Refreshingly, neither the Gibson nor Blago cases were about sex. Instead, the icky foible on display in both instances, as a perusal of the relevant transcripts will reveal, was what we might call the *grievance*. Both these men seemed beset by an overwhelming and incapacitating sense of injury, one that overrode every other consideration and obliterated all caution. They weren't being *respected*; insufficient *gratitude* was coming their way; they were being used, abused, disregarded. *They* were the injured parties.

If you spend any time contemplating the conditions of contemporary scandal, you quickly notice that many of the most notorious recent cases involve someone simply unable to get beyond some blow to the ego, or incapable of negotiating ordinary emotional disappointments. One of my own favorite scandals of the last few years was the one starring **Lisa Nowak**, the astronaut who drove 950 miles (possibly in diapers, though that was later **disputed**) to pepper-spray her former boyfriend's new girlfriend in the Orlando airport parking lot—someone propelled into life-wrecking, career-destroying emotional freefall by something as routine as romantic loss.

But what's more intriguing than the human personality at its least coherent? The rest of us get to play amateur psychoanalysts, dissecting their motives from a comfortable perch, throwing around phrases like "pathological narcissism" as though we ourselves were immune from such tendencies. Among the pleasures of hashing over the latest grisly personal fiasco to hit the headlines is the pleasant sense of inoculation from such self-authored disasters, the warm glow of superiority and imperviousness conferred by other people's life-shattering stupidity.

And here we come to the crux of the matter. Scandals aren't just something other people get themselves embroiled in while the rest of us go about our business. *We all* have crucial roles to play. Scandal requires an audience: Not just any audience, but one that gets a little jolt from scenes of transgression and punishment. You might even call it an unspoken sadomasochistic pact: Scandalizers act out their tangled psychodramas on the public stage in flamboyant and provocative ways, perhaps even soliciting social punishment (however oblivious they may be to the fact that that's what they're up to), and the rest of us willingly deliver it—"Take that, you miscreant"—like rock-hurling villagers, abuzz with malicious glee at someone else's social demise. They're the big uncontrollable public ids, and we're the collective superego, eager to disavow the distant inner rumblings of any similar capacities for inchoateness and self-injury. Since who doesn't have at least a few?

If other people's downfalls weren't as perversely gratifying as they are, if dancing on the grave of someone's shattered life and reputation weren't so entertaining, if some other emotion prevailed—empathy or identification in lieu of contempt and superiority—this would bode very badly for the continuation of scandal. So it's lucky from scandal's point of view that our attention to these scenarios is so rapt and that other people's downfalls *are* as perversely gratifying as they are. If we were less fizzed up on fantasies of our own rectitude and superior common sense, what then?

Obviously, scandal's continued health depends on a public willing to deliver the requisite quotient of shame when transgression necessitates it. That's our role: to keep hurling those stones and make them sting.

*Like **Slate** on **Facebook**. Follow us on **Twitter**.*