

The opportunity “Framing Britney Spears” missed

by Sonny Bunch

- 1 “Framing Britney Spears,” the new documentary about the iconic pop star from the *New York Times* on FX and Hulu, is a competent recap of the “Oops!...I Did it Again” singer’s life and struggles. But in the absence of access to Spears’s inner circle, the filmmakers can’t tell us much that’s new about Spears. And they missed an opportunity to take advantage of, and tell a story about, the people who were willing to talk to them: the superfans who have turned Spears and her conservatorship into a cause. These obsessives and their search for meaning in Spears’s social media posts are a fascinating example of the lengths to which we will go to find order in a world that seems chaotic and mysterious.
- 2 The program ably educates us about the flaws in California’s conservatorship laws. And it has no difficulty demonstrating the evils of the paparazzi. But, formally, this has all the pizzazz of a VH1¹⁾ special with the additional gloss of the *New York Times*’s brand. And if you’re unaware of Spears’s mistreatment by the public, that’s a personal choice; “South Park” ably covered society’s abuse of Spears 13 years ago.
- 3 The truly new story is the devotees with which “Framing Britney Spears” opens and closes, some of whom are so intensely attached to Spears that they attend her conservatorship hearings with placards pronouncing their love and support. Like all fandoms, the people who love Spears find personal meaning in their enthusiasm, whether crediting her with being the person “who made it okay to struggle” with mental health or who “gave me permission to be myself growing up as a gay boy in suburban Virginia.” And for some, Spears isn’t merely 13. Her Instagram account – an intimate glimpse into her life free of the paparazzi’s filter that strenuously avoids mentioning the conservatorship – is a sacred text potentially full of hidden truths.
- 4 Babs Gray and Tess Barker, who host the podcast “Britney’s Gram,” are perfect examples of this mentality. “We started noticing more and more these very cryptic things she would post, like a hole cut out in a wall, and the caption is ‘There’s always a way out,’” Gray says. “And it was just like, what is this? It almost seems kinda dark.” The podcasters pore over Spears’s missives like philosopher Leo Strauss combing through the writings of Torah scholar Maimonides to find hidden truths, analyzing what



it means when she uses a smiley emoticon – that is, “:)” – rather than a smiley emoji.

- 5 “If you think that Britney is calling out for help, you’ll find a reason in those videos that’s proof that she’s calling out for help,” says VJ Dave Holmes, who probably has more in-person experience with Spears as an unknowable cipher than anyone in the documentary, working as he did at MTV from 1998 to 2002. “Everyone’s interpretation of what Britney is putting forth is something that they are bringing to those Instagram videos.”
- 6 A more interesting documentary might have used this as a jumping-off point to chronicle how interpreting Spears gives meaning and order to a generation desperate for both. As Holmes suggests, and as is made clear by the diverse cadre of misfits who believe she helped them “be themselves” growing up, Spears acts as a blank slate of sorts that people can project themselves onto. Instagram’s focus on imagery rather than text encourages a sort of Rorschach effect: The people who follow Spears there see what they want to see, allowing fans 16.
- 7 During this part of the program, I couldn’t help but wonder what documentarian Rodney Ascher – whose “Room 237” and “A Glitch in the Matrix” focus, respectively, on people who are obsessed with “The Shining” and people who believe we are living in a computer simulation – might have done with the same material. In “Room 237,” he shows how an ambiguous piece of art becomes a touchstone for people’s own obsessions: Some see “The Shining” as a metaphor for the genocide of Native Americans while others believe it to be about repressed sexuality. And “A Glitch in the Matrix” shows how people unable to connect to the world ease their troubled minds by embracing the idea, popularized by novelist Philip K. Dick and 1999 blockbuster “The Matrix,” that we all live in a simulation – to occasionally disastrous results.
- 8 We live in an age of Internet-driven obsessions. Whether it’s QAnon’s gamified rabbit hole of conspiracy theories, those whose adventures on Reddit have convinced them that we live in a simulation or Britney Spears superfans thinking she’s sending coded messages via Instagram, many of us are using the Internet to fill that religion-sized hole in our chests.
- 9 And now if you’ll excuse me, I’m off to scan the latest news about the Snyder Cut of “Justice League.” That hole isn’t going to fill itself.

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note 1 VH1 = an American basic cable television network with a focus on music personalities and celebrities