



Emily Wheeler // Wellness sells us our own optimised self. ‘Optimisation of self’ is the opening mission statement coming from Gwyneth Paltrow at the start of each episode of ‘The Goop Lab.’ The promise of *The Goop Lab*, which Netflix describes as a documentary series, is that it will show us how to get there. It is shot with an Instagram aesthetic—the pastels, the plants, the careful smattering of bold, hyper-saturated contrasts.

The format of each *Goop Lab* episode is as follows: Gwyneth Paltrow and Elise Loehnen, Goop’s Chief Content officer, sit on a pastel pink sofa, and two guests sit opposite and are interviewed. Gwyneth Paltrow and Elise Loehnen are credulous, and do not make for compelling scientific interviewers. These exchanges are interspersed by Goop employees having field trips to try mushroom tea, say, or a visit to a psychic medium.

What is troubling about *The Goop Lab* is that there is a high degree of vulnerability on show. Others have commented on the privilege and self-indulgence which makes up the whole hinterland of Goop Lab. But privilege and self-indulgence are not incompatible with genuine distress, and there is plenty of that also. There is the woman with severe PTSD following the birth of her daughter; there is the woman clearly still suffering intense emotional distress following the death of her father by suicide; there is the woman who lived with her dance coaches as a child while her parents went through a ‘traumatic’ divorce. Gwyneth Paltrow speaks of her own emotional pain following an emergency caesarean. All of these women, and it is predominantly the women and their trauma which are so exhibited, no doubt hope and believe that by sharing their stories and exposing themselves in this way they are helping and informing others. Perhaps they are. But it smacks of the reality TV ploy of using vulnerability as entertainment (though perhaps they’d argue it was information).

Amongst the reality-TV calculated mental and emotional vulnerability there are some particularly jarring and eyebrow-raising treatments of bodies. The energy healers for a start seem very preoccupied with the sacrum—cue a series of shots of female bottoms and bodies being

manipulated by male hands like marionettes. It looks staged, and there is very minimal attention paid to the sceptical, male software engineer who has gone along for the field trip. You wonder if his energy field wasn't quite cooperative enough to make the cut. Then, in the episode 'Cold Comfort,' we are introduced to the 'Wim Hoff Method.' It is apparently in obedience to the 'method' that a group of beautiful, thin women do yoga in their bikinis in the snow. Wim Hof himself is in shorts and a T shirt. As for jumping into a lake where the water temperature is 7 degrees Celsius—this goes against all current health and safety advice. I will state some of the potential harmful consequences of this here (they didn't really go into it in 'Cold Comfort'): jumping into water that cold can induce cold shock response, an inhalation of cold water, and drowning or cardiac arrest. What is also not mentioned in *The Goop Lab* is the probability that Wim Hof has a particular genetic advantage when it comes to withstanding cold exposure – including a high proportion of brown adipose tissue, or brown fat, that generates heat through non-shivering thermogenesis. Throughout all of the 'scientific' discussion the word 'placebo' is barely, if ever, uttered.

Once we get onto energy healing, we have entered into Nonsense Land. If the Goop grasp of biology is shaky, the grasp on physics is truly lost. We are introduced to chiropractor John Amaral, who also goes by the title 'energy healer.' Amaral shares his interpretation of the 'double slit' experiment (through which the wave-like and particle-like properties of atoms can be observed): that consciousness can alter matter. First, that's not what the double slit experiment demonstrates. What it does demonstrate is that there is a phenomenon in quantum mechanics where measuring a system changes the state of that system, such that atoms behave differently depending on whether we are detecting them or not. For an explanation of this phenomenon, I think I will look to someone who at least has a physics degree—not John Amaral. Second, the notion that consciousness can alter matter is actually a fairly mundane one. Just this morning, after all, I boiled some water with my consciousness (with the kindly assistance of my hands and a kettle). Finally, this experiment has nothing to do with 'energy fields' of the human body. These remain vague and undefined, and later on in the same episode Amaral tells us, 'you can't measure this stuff.' Convenient.

'The Pleasure is Ours' with Betty Dodson, a sex educator, is the episode that leaves me with the most mixed feelings. This is the episode that has met with the least resistance, and I can see why: there is a straightforward show-and-tell format, and Betty Dodson, much like Gwyneth Paltrow, is her own best advertisement. Her enthusiasm and complete absence of squeamishness is welcome. It is almost charming to discover that Gwyneth Paltrow of all people apparently didn't know the difference between a vagina and vulva (makes one wonder about that infamous candle). This episode, perhaps unexpectedly, is the one that feels the least intrusive on anyone's suffering.

But in *The Goop Lab* there is always a product. It may be a particular diet, a workshop, or energy healing sessions, but it will appear by the time the credits roll. 'The Pleasure is Ours' was no exception. Having been lulled by the no-nonsense Betty into the assumption that the only product on offer here was self-knowledge (and that we can get for free), the introduction of Dodson's barbell and her masturbation workshops left me wondering whether Goop's guests could have

sold me the clothes off my own back. This may be the prettiest infomercial you've ever seen, but do not doubt that that is what it is.

The Goop Lab encapsulates big-business, aspirational, wellness. And it has its moments. I find myself smiling with them when they are joking around and laughing at themselves. They do this quite often—an exchange that particularly raised a giggle was one in which Paltrow and Loehnen agree that Loehnen is 'goopier' even than 'GP.' It gives airtime to subjects that warrant it—I think this is why the episode featuring Betty Dodson has been received comparatively well. I admit, I was hoping to find *The Goop Lab* entertaining, even if I didn't expect to find much information there. But, between the pseudoscience and the almost voyeuristic treatment of people's emotions and distress, it makes for uncomfortable viewing. I'm just really hoping there isn't a Series 2.

Featured Image: Scene from *The Goop Lab*'s episode "Are You Intuit?" (2020), IMDb.