

Båda parter måste dock vara beredda till uppoffringar. För historikerns del gäller det framför allt att bli uppmärksam på de egna framställningsformerna: vilka gränser de sätter, och vilka av dessa gränser som är väsentliga att upprätthålla. Filmaren, å sin sida, måste förstå att "återgivning av historien i film kräver en medveten omarbetning av de 'naturliga' formerna av filmiskt berättande", för att tala med filmvetaren William Guynn. Utsträcker vi resonemanget även till antropologin hägrar ett brett akademiskt samarbete som förenar samhällsvetenskapliga, humanistiska och konstnärliga perspektiv – och en möjlighet för filmen att ta ett nytt steg i sitt utforskande av den mänskliga tillvaron.

Men vi gör alltjämt klokt i att hålla Kracausers metafor i åtanke. Vad den påminner oss om är att den yttre resan – ut i världen eller in i arkiven – alltid måste motsvaras av en inre, att det praktiska också inbegriper det existentiella. Det är denna aspekt som vi måste framhäva om vi vill ge idén om en vetenskaplig disciplin en relevans som överskrider den i snäv mening vetenskapliga. Till Martin Wiklunds analys av historikern som domare, vittne och advokat vill jag därför foga en sista anmärkning: framför allt måste vi ständigt sätta oss själva i den åtalades ställe. Närhelst vi närmar oss det förflutna får vi aldrig glömma att det lika gärna kunde ha varit vi.

Denna essä är tillägnad Eva-Lena Dahl.

REALITY SUCKS! PRODUCING PASSION FOR THE REAL

Mats Björkin

The 1968 American feature film *A Married Couple* tells the story of the daily life of a white middle class American couple. In "reality" the film is based on 70 hours of footage shot over ten weeks during the summer of 1968, then edited down to 96 minutes. Both film style and production method relies on the observational "fly-on-the-wall" mode of documentary filmmaking of the early 1960s. Still, the filmmaker Allan King emphasised the issue of performance:

One has to be very, very clear. Billy and Antoinette in the film are not Billy and Antoinette Edwards, the couple who exist and live at 323 Rushton Road. They are characters, images on celluloid in a film drama. To say that they are in any other sense true, other than being true to our experience of the world and people we have known and ourselves, is philosophical nonsense. There is no way ninety minutes in a film of Billy and Antoinette can be the same as the actual real life of Billy and Antoinette.¹

As much research on reality television has shown, the important issue is not questions of "truth", "reality", "authenticity" or "performance", issues which documentary research of the last two decades has already questioned, deconstructed and, sometimes, demolished, but rather what this "passion for the real" ac-

1. Alan Rosenthal, "A Married Couple", in Alan Rosenthal, ed., *The New Documentary in Action: A Casebook in Film Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 32, quoted in Zoë Druick, "A Married Couple: Reality TV's progenitor turns 40", *FlowTV*, vol. 11, no. 6, 2010, <http://flowtv.org/?p=4705>.

tually embodies.² On the one hand reality television may grant access to “ordinary” people’s lives, way of behaviour and speech. On the other hand reality television puts emphasis on everyday performance as well as how “today’s reality television naturalizes rather than questions the Social Darwinism of competitive capitalism and the governmentalized social context of neoliberalism that it exposes”.³ Or, combined, what Mark Andrejevic describes as “the work of being watched, a form of production wherein consumers are invited to sell access to their personal lives in a way not dissimilar to that in which they sell their labour power.”⁴

Appropriating reality television as a model, or illustration, of blurred boundaries between fiction and non-fiction on a representational level, has consequences on the production level. Performing the “work of being watched” is of course also to be exposed to concerns of privacy, surveillance and control. But a metaphorical use of reality television does more than just discuss if there is a difference between fiction and non-fiction or if we live in a surveillance society. It necessarily invokes questions of work. The lure of reality television, as well as the passion for the real, is based on what has been called the “referential illusion”, the idea that telling a story is a rearrangement of a world in front of the camera. Undeniably this is close to the traditional definition of documentary narration; but it also invokes an interesting difference of both aesthetic and ethic relevance.

If narration is the only way in which we can access any other “world”, for example in front of a camera, concepts like “authenticity” and “performance”, so prevalent in discussions of reality television, becomes secondary to the modes of narration. This however

does not imply that both fiction and non-fiction is interchangeable, or that everything is fiction. As David Bordwell argues,

*a fiction film is narrated through and through. Not just camera positions but also the arrangement of figures in space, not just cutting but also the movements executed by the actors, and not just zoom shots but also lines of dialogue – everything, including the solid environment and behaviours we detect, is produced by the film’s narration. That’s all we have to go on; we have no independent access to the world portrayed on the screen.*⁵

Although the most restricting production “bible”, in the legal documents of a reality television format, may regulate camera positions, cutting pace, camera framing, it can never control the arrangement of figures in space, actors’ movements or dialogue.⁶ If we leave questions of professional actors vs. “real people” behind, modes of work, labour relations and political economy becomes more important to discuss for itself and as conditions for authenticity and performance.

During the 1960s, as a response to criticism of so called “naïve” documentarism, and as a political remodelling of 1920s avant-garde, a more self-reflexive mode of documentaries helped creating a new form of truth-claim. The core of the argument was that if the audience not only were facing a story but at the same time a disclosure of how that story is constructed, it should help making the story more reliable and trustworthy. In Carl Plantinga’s words:

*A reflexive film is one that does more than simply represent its subject – it also examines its own methods and the perspective of its producer(s).*⁷

2. For a comprehensive introduction to documentary film research, see Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong, eds, *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill, 2008).

3. Driuck.

4. Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of being Watched* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2004), 6.

5. David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York & London: Routledge, 2008), 110.

6. Albert Moran with Justin Malbon, *Understanding the Global TV Format* (Bristol: Intellect, 2006), 60.

7. Carl R. Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 214.

This mode of production has been the most prestigious form of art film production the last couple of decades, and in documentary contexts been considered the most “true” films. Plantinga presents some arguments against the (political) value of privileging reflexivity in documentary discourses. Non-fiction films have never been un-manipulated representations of reality because they both record and interpret reality. Thereby the distinction between recording and “creative” is a false contradiction since “techniques such as editing, music etc, are not fictional, but *filmic* techniques that can be used in both fiction and nonfiction films.”⁸ Adding to this, all films are in some sense always reflexive. The idea of the “suspension of disbelief”, that is, the idea of the spectator being so involved, and so identifying him/herself with the story that s/he conflates the film with reality, is a theoretical construction which in fact very rarely comes through and only works momentarily.⁹ It also creates a false distinction between an “active” viewer of reflexive film and a “passive” viewer of realistic films:

*The claim [from ideological formalism] is that realist documentaries have negative ideological effects, whereas politically reflexive documentaries encourage self-consciousness and educate the audience. [...] Such claims not only fail to distinguish between spectators on the basis of level of education or critical acumen, but they underestimate the degree to which most spectators are critical of what they see. If most spectators are dupes and simpletons, the need for reflexivity may exist (but never as panacea). If most are critical of what they see, reflexivity is less important. In either case, one could argue that media education is more vital than reflexivity as a strategy for encouraging critical viewing among spectators. The savvy spectator does not require reflexivity to achieve a critical perspective.*¹⁰

8. Ibid., 215.

9. Ibid., 215.

10. Ibid., 217.

Yet another argument is that it is impossible to be fully reflexive. Every aspect of the production cannot be reflected upon, so we still have to face selection, exclusion and subjective choices. All aspects of the conditions of production might not even be known or understood by the producer. Not to mention that a reflexive act can also be a lie.¹¹

A practical solution has been to create personal, subjective documentaries, implicitly arguing that if I am telling my story, including some self-referential and reflexive moments, the viewer is supposed to understand that this is not an “objective truth”, but a “subjective truth”. By being presented in a self-reflexive, self-referential way it is more likely more “true” than traditional realist documentaries or fiction.¹² But the self-referential (or *poetic* in Roman Jakobson’s words) mode of communication (or speech), for example represented by mediated expression of individuals through art or blogs, as

*performance of the self is just as coded, ‘theatrical’ and ‘artistic’ in everyday life as it is in fine art; that subjectivity links power and aesthetics in performance; and that there is an open channel of mutual influence among these different hierarchical levels of the overall cultural network (manifested for instance in ‘gossip’ media and celebrity culture, where the attention accorded to celebrities like Paris and Britney is focused on their personal lives, which for others constitute the condition of ordinariness).*¹³

The production of ordinariness, which combines the private lives of celebrities with the public lives of “ordinary” people in reality television, has become a key

11. Ibid, 217f.

12. For a thorough analysis on subjective documentaries, see Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

13. John Hartley, “Uses of YouTube – Digital Literacy and the Growth of Knowledge”, in Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, eds, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 137.

feature within reality programming. In contrast, stories told by “makers” usually presents a situation which is anything but ordinary. John Caldwell, in his analysis of Hollywood film and television production cultures, describes different modes of stories about production:

*War stories [conflicts] and against-all-odds [perseverance] allegories give to storytellers an earned mystique of technical mastery that is crucial for those who function as mentors in the industry's stratified labor cast system. These “narrative of authority” cultivate character through celebrations of work, suffering, and survival. A second set of trade narratives – the “genesis myths” – function less as celebrations of work (suffering at the production task and vocational survival) than as celebrations of an originating moment and artistic pedigree. Whereas survival at work establishes value in the first genre, acts of anointment or mentoring establish value in the second. In some ways, genesis myths function as the glue intended to create social cohesion in a work or trade group.*¹⁴

Telling stories about production, either in interviews or talk shows, or included in self-reflexive works, are thus cultural performances with different functions and objectives. Interestingly, both reality television, particularly talk shows and docusoaps, and production narratives are thus often based on conflict, either as a way of structuring non-professional actors or as “war stories” of production. Still, there are some differences. As Laura Grindstaff argues in her study of reality television production:

[Emotional labor], while not unique to talk shows or reality shows, is nevertheless an outcome of working with “real” people rather than professional celebrities. Incorporating ordinary people into entertainment television

14. John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 47.

*places enormous pressure on producers to simultaneously cultivate individual performers and to create/control the performative context – that is, to erect the conditions of possibility for maximizing emotional expressiveness.*¹⁵

The ordinariness of the non-professional performers in talk shows and reality shows is often, from a (male middle-class intellectual) critical perspective described as a form of freak show.¹⁶ From the performers' point-of-view there are of course many reasons for participating, but if the “work of being watched” is better than ordinary work (or absence of work), it is not surprising that some people choose to capitalise on their own (special) ordinariness. From the production point-of-view the emotional labour of reality television participants becomes a way of capitalising on exposing its own production through the participants emotional labour. Thereby, reality television, rather than self-reflexive art, is closer to revealing the mechanisms of art or media production, by on the one hand having to be open with the complexity of the production process, and on the other hand relying on the audience experience of fiction dramas and “real” celebrity culture.

The flip side is of course the danger of exploitation, considering the class and gender aspects of reality television participation. Laura Grindstaff concludes her analysis by stressing the “gendered implications”:

for women are often linked, in the media and in the everyday lived reality, both to discourses of personal experience and “private” life, and to discourses of objectification by a putatively male gaze [...]. Ultimately, in my view the problem with this sort of critique [of reality programming as an obsession “with minutes details of the self”] is that it places the burden of social analysis on

15. Laura Grindstaff, “Self-Serve Celebrity: The Production of Ordinariness and Ordinariness of Production in Reality Television”, in Vicky Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John Thornton Caldwell, eds, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 80.

16. Jon Dovey, *Freak Show: First Person Media and Factual Television* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

*the characters and storylines, rather than the how and why of their production.*¹⁷

The problem is, referring back to Plantinga's analysis, that the production itself never will be able to completely disclose the "how" and the "why" of its own production mode, independent of the more or less fictional and codified narratives of the interests of everyone who tells their own stories.

Both film and television production, particularly in Hollywood, has always been a mix of illusion and reality. The Hollywood narrative (realistic) tradition is on the one hand based on the viewer's psychological experience of everyday situations, but on the other hand it always deals with fictional stories with fictional characters in fictional worlds. At the same time, Hollywood has always been depended upon gossip media and celebrity culture for marketing purposes and as a way of engaging (with) the viewers.¹⁸ With the television medium this balance between reality and illusion tipped over in favour of reality. Reality television has benefited from the trustworthiness of the television medium itself. As John Hartley argues:

*Popular aesthetics, as opposed to artistic taste, was always an art-science interface. The idea that truth could be revealed by technological means, rather than shaping artistic vision that too often turned out to be manipulative, was inherent in the popularity of the aestheticization of science itself, via photos from outer space, wildlife documentaries on TV, or the entire dinosaur industry. The human condition, previously the domain of literature, painting, and the pursuit of "beauty" became a province of science. Beauty was found in truth, not imagination.*¹⁹

17. Grindstaff, 84.

18. See for example David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) and Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979).

19. John Hartley, *Television Truths* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 252.

Hartley's conclusion is far from Slavoj Žižek's distinction between a 19th century belief in the utopian and the 20th century "passion for the real", or "the thing itself".²⁰

*People trusted truth more than they did art. They were right. And universities need to pursue this destiny, not pine for traditional "critical" (i.e. gentlemanly) values. Creativity and innovation, arts and sciences, knowledge and business, truth and imagination: they all need to get together, to modify each other's genes, and multiply.*²¹

Any "passion for the real", that is, trust in the arts, is bound to fail. The detached self-reflexivity of traditional self-reflexive documentaries is so evidently manipulative. The emotional labour of reality television performers may be more "true", and the production may reveal more of itself, but to the price of a new form of labour exploitation. Hartley's call for a getting together of technology and artistic vision (or popular media and art) is certainly a nice idea. But, what unites the experience of both self-reflexive art and reality television is that both production forms will have to meet in the "work of being watched", a fact which brings us right back to square one and the question of who is watching who.

If self-reflexive art tries to "learn" from reality television, or takes Hartley's call for "get together" too literally, there will arise a need for similar questions regarding surveillance, labour exploitation, women being traditionally linked to private and subjective spheres, etc. Adding to this, is the question of whether the history of movie going and television viewing has not in fact taught us that the audience might find more truth in fiction, than in fact about fiction or fact about reality?

20. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), 5.

21. Hartley, *Television Truths*, 252.