

Paper presented at SIEF2017: Ways of Dwelling: Crisis – Craft – Creativity, University of Göttingen, Germany; 26-30 March 2017

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The Simple Life.

House Building, Barter, and Self-Support in the Reality Show Alaskan Bush People

The presentation of appropriate ways of living is generally addressed in reality shows of all kinds. Whether it is *The Super Nanny* and how to raise your child or *The Biggest Loser* and how to improve your health: reality shows reproduce norms and values of the society that they are based upon.

The aspects of thrift and associated lifestyles are most obviously presented in reality shows about house building, renovating, homemaking or financial aid. I will take a television studies approach and look at the aspect of thrift and dwelling in the outdoor reality show Alaskan Bush People to analyze subsequent cultural and social themes.

Key aspects of reality TV

Reality TV in general follows a “claim to ‘the real’” (Holmes/Jermyn 2004: 5), which means portrayed people, their biographies, as well as locations exist in everyday real life outside the filmic universe of the show – or at least one of these criteria does. Most importantly reality TV depicts ordinary people and their ordinary lives and as one result recreates cultural identities.

Most reality shows use documentary-style narratives and aesthetics, such as interview statements, commentaries, dramatizing music, or hand camera shots. However, all reality shows stage and script certain story aspects to produce suspense, crisis, and conflict for entertainment purposes. Therefore, reality shows can be understood as “made-for-TV factuals” (Hill 2005: 49).

Nature and outdoor reality shows

The subgenre of nature or outdoor reality TV comes in two types: First, reality shows, which often use competitive aspects and aim at survival skills, such as *Survivor*, *Naked and Afraid* or *Dual Survival*. Participants are opposed to depriving and/or unfamiliar life situations, and shows usually start with building a temporary dwelling or camp in the remote and wild nature.

The second type are documentary reality and reality soaps. These shows document the everyday life of people who are by their own choice or tradition living in less inhabited, less developed, less modern and so on areas of a country.

Alaska-Themed Reality Shows

American television channels aired more than 15 different reality shows set in the sparsely populated and difficult to access areas of Alaska. Alaskan reality shows often deal with self-sufficiency, survival or document the cultural, social, and legal issues of outsiders. For example, *Alaska State Troopers* shows the difficult work of police officers in the outback.

But in most shows recurring themes are farming in summer, stacking and storing, preparing for winter, and then surviving its rough conditions. *Yukon Men* is about the life of some villagers who are hunting and fishing for a living; *Wild West Alaska* documents a family owning a gun shop in a small town. These shows all follow similar aesthetics and present similar narrative structures and suspense storytelling around the omnipresent theme of thrift. But of course, there is also a MTV party reality show set in Alaska called *Slednecks!*

Alaskan Bush People

Alaskan Bush People is a documentary reality show on Discovery Channel about the Brown family of nine who lives in the wilderness of Chichagof Island. While they hunt for food, cut timber to build a cabin, or sometimes barter their manpower for needed goods, all family members emphasize the advantages of their choice to live under these rough conditions. They are – as Discovery Channel puts it – “unlike any other family in America.”

Analysis I: Thrift and house building in *Alaskan Bush People*

The main narrative of *Alaskan Bush People* is the family's struggle to build a permanent home and their effort to survive apart from the achievements of modern technological civilization. The first season starts with the family home being burnt down, supposedly by the government, and the family setting out for a new start.

House building and creating a home out of what they can afford or use from nature is the fundamental narrative in *Alaskan Bush People*. But as we will see, it is strongly connected to the theme of family solidarity as an appropriate way of living. For my analysis, I will mainly focus on episode 8 and 9 of the second season to exemplify this intertwining of house building and family life.

In the second season, the family finds a place to settle in the woods. Together they start building their new home to be safe from the upcoming winter. They gathered just enough building material that they got through bartering with locals or that they bought with money they saved from doing day work.

Building a house to keep the family safe in winter is concern of father Billy. While they manage to do so as a group, it is attributed to the hard-working men of the family. The mother and the sisters are rather loyal and enduring to the family's life situation, though the daughters of the Brown family sometimes go on hunting trips. This, at first, reflects rather conservative gender roles based on the aspects thrift and dwelling.

But it also foregrounds the subtle theme of family and solidarity. The Brown's self-chosen and appropriate way of life refers to broader social themes like community, freedom, self-support and autonomy within a modern and technological society. The Browns do not just build their own house from scratch, they are building their home where they belong as a family – or as they call themselves: as a wolf pack.

Analysis II: Dwelling and family life in *Alaskan Bush People*

Therefore, the narrative of building a home directly leads to the subject of living together as a family and especially of staying together to support each other. The family members arrange themselves in their new home. They barely have beds, no furniture, no heating and no running water. But again, solidarity and support are the key features in achieving their appropriate

way of living as a family. Everyone emphasizes the comfort of their house, such as the parents and the girls having their own private space.

Therefore, in *Alaskan Bush People*, house building functions as a symbol for family and as a manifestation for a successful autonomous lifestyle. And this narrative continues: The brothers start constructing a wood-heating stove, a water system, an outhouse, and by the end of season 2 each brother starts building his individual home within their land that they call Browntown.

The Appropriate Way of Life in Alaskan Bush People

Based on building a house and settling in the wilderness, *Alaskan Bush People* primarily presents social values instead of monetary values as the appropriate way of life in modern society. Having to save money and to work hard for basic needs is binding the family together, even beyond a reasonable time to move out of your parents' house. Thrift, barter, and self-support are accepted as reasonable parts of a self-chosen and indisputable lifestyle.

Any contact with people or civilization is presented as an issue. They are not welcome in the local bar, they have trouble finding easy jobs, and when mother Ami desperately needs dental treatment, everyone expresses concerns towards doctors. In contrast, nature is presented as a friendly and rich environment that easily provides food to survive. The family has no troubles with hunting, fishing, or berry-picking. Their knowledge of construction and farming is not questioned and even unexpected events, like early snow while finishing the house, are no reason for any setbacks.

From a media sociology perspective, these overall themes serve to contrast *Alaskan Bush People* from other family-centered reality shows, such as *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* or the *Real Housewives*-franchise. Both of them focus on wealthy, luxurious, and jet set lifestyle of the rich and the famous. However, the presentation of appropriate ways of life is what all shows have in common.

Furthermore, *Alaskan Bush People* addresses general moral and ethical principles of society such as: respect “mother nature” and its animals; or free yourself from the burdens and obligations of possession and consumption. I do not want to go further into possible political and religious views and concepts but I think this is an interesting aspect that can be further discussed.

The 'reality' of reality TV in Alaskan Bush People

So, if we look at the characteristics of reality TV, *Alaskan Bush People* uses thrift and dwelling as a dramatizing background to produce an entertaining reality show about a family who achieved a happy life sealed off from modern society. To create dramatic and authentic effects, every step they take towards their life goal is confronted with crisis.

But this leads to another general issue towards reality TV: From the beginning of the show, the family's life in the wilderness has led to questioning the authenticity of the events surrounding *Alaskan Bush People*. Many sources suspect the show to be fake, meaning the Browns did not build their home on their own, they do not live off of hunting, fishing and self-built inventions, or they do not live in the wilderness at all and the production company pays for all costs. Even though there is no final evidence, possible fictional stories and made-up adventures would contrast the inherent social values of the show. The appropriate and successful way of life, as it is presented, then appears as unrealistic, questionable or simply as a lie.

An analysis of the televisual product allows to look at the narrative structures, the aesthetics, and the representations of reality. However, the discussion of the 'reality' of reality shows requires a combination with production studies. This approach is challenging, because reality TV productions are like highly gated communities – I experienced this while doing research on the production of so-called scripted reality shows, a fictionalized version of reality TV.

Reality TV remodels existing social structures and presents them in an entertaining, yet dramatized and maybe not fully realistic way. But I would argue, that the question of reality or fake does not change the portrayal of appropriate life in *Alaskan Bush People*.

The show uses the general concepts of staging 'reality' in reality TV: These are: Personalization – the show tells the personal life story of the Brown family; Emotionalization – everyday life situations are presented as existential drama; Intimization – we get to see and hear every personal detail of the family life; Stereotypization – everyone in the Brown family has their fixed role and characteristics; and Dramatization – the production uses musical and visual elements to intensify everyday events.

References

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