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Daniel Klug

Transgressions of Reality. Factualizing the Fiction of Scripted Reality

This paper addresses the ongoing changes and transgressions between factual and fictional aspects within the genre of reality TV. It is related to the research project *Varieties of scripted reality programs in television and on the internet. Comparative analyses of production, product and reception in (german-speaking) Switzerland* which was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (2016–2019). The project combined the analysis of the televisual product, the scripted reality show, with the analysis of its production contexts. I did expert interviews with production staff and analyzed this reconstructive data to analyze the amalgam of fact and fiction in scripted reality shows.

Reality TV

Ever since the first talk shows and court room shows, reality TV is characterized by a self-imposed “claim to the real” (Holmes/Jermyn 2004: 5). No matter if it is a reality show like *Big Brother*, a Docu-Soap like *Wife Swap*, or a coaching format like *The Biggest Loser*: all of these shows claim to present at least some remains of ‘real people’ in their ‘real lives.’ This means, they present snippets from certain people’s life which already took place and will continue to happen once the camera turns off.

However, reality TV’s main purpose is entertainment, which is why reality shows mostly follow predefined scripts to create, recreate and stage “realistic” situations. Moreover, they tend to dramatize the actual event to stage a media reality that is distinctive to television, therefore reality shows can be understood as “made-for-TV-factuals” (Hill 2005: 49).

Scripted Reality

Yet, so-called scripted reality shows are not ‘made-for-TV-factuals’ and at first lack a reasonable ‘claim to the real.’ They do not fulfill any documentary aspect but go beyond the constraints of the reality TV genre as they are in fact entirely fictional – or rather: that is the question.

Scripted Reality shows are based on a fictional script and cast amateur actors relying on their nonfictional performance skills to act out fictionalized versions of everyday scenarios. At the same time, these shows adopt a documentary style of filming and aesthetic modes of presentation of documentary reality TV, for example handheld camera, sequence shots, or interview statements and so on. In this way, scripted reality shows ambiguously oscillate between fact and fiction.

In general, scripted reality shows address two major subjects. First, ‘everyday life and relationships’, that is, people living together and dealing with their everyday struggles in work life and with family issues, for example *Berlin – Tag & Nacht* (which translates into *Berlin – Day & Night*).

A second subject is ‘crime and investigation’ which refers to shows that are more action-centered and deal with the profession of investigating fictional everyday crime issues like fraud, theft or cheating or sometimes just with false suspicions within families or small businesses; one popular example is called *Verdachtsfälle* (which translates into *Cases of Doubt*). However, all scripted reality shows follow the same narrative structure: conflicts are built up quickly, followed by excessive coping and arguing by the characters just to be subsequently solved with a sudden happy end.

The Extent of Scripted Reality

In the last decade, scripted reality rose to be the dominant entertainment genre in German speaking commercial television. In early 2016, there are 24 different scripted reality shows broadcasted every day roughly between 1pm and 8pm. Looking back, for example, in 2014 23.9 percent of the overall program of the TV channel RTL were scripted reality shows, for the channel Sat.1 it was even 25.3 percent (see Krüger 2016).

This demonstrates that German speaking reality TV is shifting towards being almost completely fictional but scripted reality is still assigned to the reality TV genre and therefore linked to factual ‘reality.’ The at first uncertain state of how to define and understand the presented narratives as ‘factual’ or ‘fictional’ is strengthened by equally confusing paratexts. TV guides and TV channels label scripted reality shows as ‘reality lifestyle’, ‘docu soap’ or ‘scripted docu soap’ (see Niemann/Gölz 2015). The only evidence for fictional content given by the shows themselves is a hidden disclaimer in the closing titles that states that “*All acting persons are fictitious*” (“Alle handelnden Personen sind frei erfunden”).

Scientific Approach: Production Studies

The content of the televisual product – that is the show itself – does not seem to provide the necessary criteria to distinctively define such formats as fact or fiction. This calls for an analytical focus on the production contexts of scripted reality shows. This approach provides insights on the production strategies of how to factualize the fictional basis in scripted reality.

In the research project, I did twelve qualitative interviews with authors, unit managers, directors, and producers of scripted reality shows and analyzed this reconstructive data to find out about the mixture of fact and fiction in scripted reality shows (see Klug 2016b). So, after some characteristics of the product, I now want to present selected results on analyzing the production on scripted reality shows.

Before the filming starts, the authors write fictional scripts by drawing inspiration from everyday news in print and television media. Therefore, everyday events are used as real life anchor for a fictional dramatization. For example, the investigative show *Schneller als die Polizei erlaubt* (which translates into *Faster than allowed by the police*) uses real surveillance video material by the highway police to show real documented traffic violations as basis for fictional stories. The surveillance videos are edited into the show as if the fictional characters and their seemingly actions would relate to them.

Moreover, the amateur actors play fictional roles that are similar to their real-life attributes, habitus, professions, and to their characteristic looks. Due to this, the amateurs are no longer objects of a reality TV documentation, but they are also not fully acting in a fictional sense.

While filming on set, the script functions as a loose guide for the progression of the overall story. The key element of factualizing is, that the amateur actors are instructed to use their own words and their habitual expressions to act out the dialogues in an emotional way. Overall, displaying emotionality is understood as indicating reality. Therefore the directors need to motivate the amateur actors to get into the spirit of the fictional situation. This means that emotions do not emerge naturally to be documented but are instructed and fictional. This clearly exemplifies the fictional basis of scripted reality and shows the effort that is needed to make people transfer their non-mediated self into a fictionalized scenario. For example, the police show *Auf Streife* does that by creating unpredictable situations for the cast police officers – who are actually off duty. They are confronted with a staged situation that is unknown to them and are instructed to act as if it was their real work life. The idea is a kind of simulation of real life that leads to improvised decisions and actions by the police officers which then should be framed as non-staged reality.

To achieve this, the producers cast real everyday experts of a certain profession, like police officers, to act out the fictional story. That is to give correct and reasonable information through the characters to create presumably authentic events.

Overall, the major benefit in scripted reality productions is the gained control over the pre-planned ‘reality.’ You don’t need to wait to film an intended event because it is scripted and will be acted out. By hiring amateur actors and by letting them freely interpret the scripted dialogues, a factualization of the fiction can be achieved. These and other strategies aim at including nonfictional elements into the underlying fictional script to make the fictional stories should appear more ‘realistic’. Yet, this does not create reality outside of television.

Transgressions of Reality

The transgression of reality in terms of relating to factual, non-mediated, non-staged events within the reality TV genre can be identified in all stages of the production of scripted reality. It even transfers beyond TV and into social media. *Berlin – Tag & Nacht* (*Berlin – Day & Night*), for example, uses the interactive concept of Facebook to expand and to strengthen the presumably factual status of the show. The fictional characters seem to post ‘behind-the-scenes’-information or pictures in addition to the televised stories. Facebook posts in real time entail a merging with the television content, this creates a blurred cross media product that pushes the boundaries of traditional reality TV.

Concluding Thoughts: Scripted Reality in Europe

Finally, scripted reality is not a German phenomenon anymore. The show *Berlin – Tag & Nacht* (*Berlin – Day & Night*) spawned a whole franchise in Europe including, France, Austria, or Hungary (see Klug 2016a). In addition, many European countries developed their own national versions of German scripted reality shows or even created their own formats. Therefore, scripted reality is changing the tradition of factual entertainment in Europe.

As a result, German studies on the perception of scripted reality have proven that kids and young adults misinterpret the fictional contents of scripted reality. For example, 30% of the younger viewers of the show *Familien im Brennpunkt* (*Families in Trouble*) think the events are completely real and documented; 48% think that the events are reenactments of real everyday events and only 22% perceived the shown events as fictional – which is actually correct (see Götz 2012).

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