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Elicited and Exploited Emotions – How Reality TV Demands the Body

Although staging is ever-present in reality TV, this genre is characterized by a claim to the real. The intertwining of fact and fiction creates an in-between status with the need to authenticate represented behavior. One strategy in reality shows is to elicit emotions and their corresponding physical expressions and displays – such as tears or a fearful facial expression.

Based on conversation analysis, this paper uses a multimodal approach to analyze the eliciting of body reactions and the exploiting of the participants' provoked emotions in interactions. Unlike verbal actions and other forms of behavior displayed emotions and immediate bodily reactions are harder to produce. They are regarded as indications of a 'true performance' – as Goffman puts it. Emotions can be understood and used as *contextualization cues* in the representation of a deep physical and mental involvement of a person.

In the following example, the German Reality TV show *Germany's Next Topmodel*, *physical cues* indicating strong emotions are used to point to a deep involvement of the female participants. The show creates borderline situations framed as professional working situations which most likely become a mental challenge or physical problem for the contestants, for example, a catwalk in high altitude or a posing with dangerous animals.

This creates a *dilemma* for the contestants: If they refuse the given task, they will appear as unprofessional. However, if they are willing to take the challenge, they must overcome their physical and mental resistance. This is the primary goal in the staging of *Germany's Next Topmodel*: The contestants are forced into situations in which they must decide to either abandon or prove their self-overcoming.

The success of the contestants and the appeal of the show both highly depend on whether and how the representation of the evoked self-overcoming appears as credible. To achieve this, the proper staging of elicited emotions and corresponding bodily displays is crucial. The question is: *In which way are physical representations elicited, exploited and applied to stage believable images of self-overcoming.* In the following, one successful and one failed attempt is analyzed.

Case Study I: High-altitude Catwalk

The case studies focus on suggested readings of the televisual product, not on production or perception processes, and also on single aspects which are significantly involved in the staging of the overall event. All narratives of self-overcoming in *Germany's Next Topmodel* include a key event of emotional display and types of (verbal) framing of the staged situation, which is otherwise mostly brief and only little meaningful.

In the first example from 2011, contestant Anna-Lena has to perform a catwalk in high altitude framed as a photo shooting. Here, the key event is the bodily displays of fear and the efforts to overcome fear. The key aspects of representation in this sequence are Anna-Lena's attempts and difficulties in fulfilling the task which is made evident in many details drawing on her physical expressions and behavior. When she is in starting position for her walk, her strained face, her heavy breathing and gulping indicate fear. She sways her arms around to regain her motor skills and hesitates to move further. A close-up of her *facial expressions* shifts the focus away from the actual catwalk, to her verbal accounts and to visual proof of her inner fight of mentally wanting but physically not being able to step on the catwalk.

Her concentration on managing the challenge and her effort to start walking – visible in her straight look, her body tension, and minimal forward movements – switch to an immediate abort of the task: She lowers the head, loses her body tension and her concentration. This shows how the self-dynamic constitution of the body counteracts the intended action impulse to start walking. Anna-Lena's initial concentration reverses into resignation.

In general, the visual depictions authenticate the verbal claims. This scene reveals a cluster of symptomatologic expressions. The primary focus is staging Anna-Lena's visible fight against her physical symptoms and emotions between self-control and losing control of

herself. While she stays focused, she tries to suppress her crying and wipes away her tears. Her verbal expressions switch from reasoning with herself into whining, a high-pitched and pressed voice, and heavy breathing as a side effect of physical tension.

In addition, voice-over commentaries function as verbal framings to specify invisible aspects, such as the catwalk height of sixty meters and that Anna-Lena's nerves are raw. Also, this scene alternates between Anna-Lena trying to fulfill her task and other persons who seem to have specific attitudes towards the key event.

The walking coach signals Anna-Lena to start her walk. This refers to the institutional enforcement in this situation because not moving would mean failing and refusing to work. Therefore, Anna-Lena's statements are verbal accounts which explain her previously intangible bodily state. They attribute her apparent failure to perform to a general feasibility she can hardly influence.

The jurors emphasize Anna-Lena's possible failure in an alliance-like communication and offer only little help by directly telling her that she 'can quit' if she 'wants to'. This is crucial because the jurors interpret her struggle as her not wanting to do the walk opposing her constant explaining that she wants to but is not able to walk. This staging strategy attributes her visible struggle to her lack of willpower instead of to the refusal of her physical body. The facial expressions of the other contestants mirror Anna-Lena's emotions though their advice is framing this challenge as easy and a potential failure as humiliating. Together these comments illustrate that this scene is about Anna-Lena overcoming her fear and not, for example, exercising a walk as a model. After mastering the challenge, Anna-Lena labels the previous staging of her struggle in her statements as 'being scared' and uses key interpretations, such as 'being blocked', and 'legs refused to walk'. This indicates the momentum of the physical body and not to a mental motivational issue.

The televisual staging uses point-of-view-shots and close-ups on Anna-Lena's face, feet and legs to highlight the momentum of the body. The acousmatic sound of her whining makes her struggle ever-present. The use of slow motion when she stops her first attempt and when she overcomes her fear marks these moments as the key aspects of the scene. This scene also uses a typical montage of visual events and verbal comments. For example, close-ups focus articulated body parts, such as 'legs' to create audiovisual references.

All in all, this example shows how the physical body opposes its 'owner' and withdraws from any intended control, especially in moments of suspected failure. The actual challenge is not the walk itself, but for the contestant to regain control of her body and to overcome her fear. The staging of this scene illustrates *that and how* bodily expressions are used to verify mediated events.

Case Study II: Balloon

However, the second example from 2014 shows that this staging does not always work out. Here, the physical reactions and thus the basis for verifying a loss of control and self-overcoming are only weakly pronounced. A similar staging strategy is pursued but does not unfold. The key elements here are contestant Steffi's continuous verbal emphases of her fear of heights, as well as the juror's comments on her alleged fear.

Before the balloon challenge, Steffi's statements about her fear function to create a certain expectation. Afterward, her statements reframe and confirm her overcoming of fear, however, they appear only little emotional. Throughout the challenge, Steffi verbalizes her unwillingness to fulfill the given task, her concern of failing, and her fear of a possible fall. But there are almost no recognizable body reactions that would match this extreme situation: No heavy breathing, no tearful voice, no facial expressions, no shiver or shock.

Therefore, no threatening loss of control can be identified, also no increase or climax. Steffi's attempts to re-oppose this challenge appear half-hearted and the danger of having to quit seems very small. Visual evidence can be found in her calm attitude and her relaxed and laughing face in contrast to her verbal expressions of fear: the preparing of a situation of anxiety did not work.

Also, there are verbal relativizations and inconsistencies: Steffi does not resist the challenge and as soon as she is up in the air, her fear seems to have vanished: she laughs and immediately begins to pose. There is hardly any transition from initial anxiety to fulfilling the task. Furthermore, when Heidi Klum instructs Steffi 'to feel good and be funny' and to throw her wig, Steffi immediately starts to scream and to wildly move around: She overachieves her task. This rough shifting from fear to cheerfulness appears arbitrary and too simple. There is at no point any struggle with oneself to support the suspected anxiety.

This creates a channel discrepancy of given information, in particular, when Steffi reflects on how she resolved the task: Fear is verbally claimed, however, hardly verified through the body. This example shows that such situations imply only little authenticity if the overall layout is not covered through anticipated physical reactions and emotions. As a result, the suspected anxiety of the contestants primarily appears as a construct of the televisual staging.

Conclusion

These two examples demonstrate that reality TV counts on bodily reactions to authenticate its representations. This is mainly done by recreating the same controllable staged situations which will elicit physical reactions and emotions that in turn are hard to control for the contestants. Provoking difficult-to-control reactions, such as fear, serves to portray the given task, in our example high-altitude walking and posing, as a possible failure.

The only reasonable solution is for the contestants to overcome their fear. In this situational framework, the staging itself produces what it presents as the problem in the situation. It resembles a heroic story: The narrative becomes more significant the bigger the challenge is and the bigger the effort to overcome it. These both depend on the intensity and the quality of physical reactions.

Despite different initial situations and new developments, the televisual staging always uses similar ways of visualizing, such as close-ups of the face to display the emotional state, acousmatic sounds to ensure physicality or parallel montages of reaction shots. Then, bodily reactions or actual overcoming which are less tangible can be supported either by these ways of visualizing, by on- and off-comments, or in post-production by using music to emphasize and dramatize certain scenes.