

The New Surrealism: Loft Stories, Reality Television, and Amateur Dream-Censors

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“Reality television” is inspired by a particular fascination with “reality.” The detached way of “narrating” events with its occasional emergence of all-too-human constellations comes closer to that of dreaming than to that of analysis, consumption, or first-degree simulation. In the end, however, reality television adopts the form of an anti-narrative in which conventional narrative and receptive devices have not been overcome in order to create a real aesthetic of dreams, but have been overturned in order to create a strange kind of fiction.

Andrei Tarkovsky once said that no scene would be better acted than the one “acted” by normal people who do not know that they are filmed or taped: “I once taped a casual dialogue. People were talking without knowing they were being recorded. Then I listened to the tape and thought how brilliantly it was ‘written’ and ‘acted.’ The logic of characters’ movements, the feeling the energy—how tangible it all was. How euphoric the voices were how beautiful the voices.”¹ Ingmar Bergman made similar remarks about the perfectly natural character of actions that are not “acted” but “lived” in reality.²

All of us will probably agree that “reality” writes the best scripts. Some things that happen in real life, or at least *the way* they happen, could not have been invented by any scriptwriter. With certain events—reactions, dialogues, constellations of cause-effect relations, etc.—the act of “happening” is so absolute, so immediate, and so unmitigated by intellectual considerations or even artistic ambitions, that it expresses reality “as it is.” We enjoy these rare moments in which something happens just as though it has been “written by life itself” because they seem to express the “uniqueness” of actions as such. In many cases, they express the deeply human character of life which, normally, follows or transgresses rules but sometimes... things just happen.

The fascination with “reality as it is” has preoccupied artists in the domain of visual art as much as writers. The scope of this phenomenon is simply so large, it is impossible even to evoke. The task that these artists set themselves is to transfer from reality to art, not just an atmosphere or a mood, but something even less material. They attempt to capture an

indefinable “existential situation” which expresses a strong sense of “life.” This “life” and its expression are determined neither by a structure nor by symbolic functions, nor are they effective within any specified ideological programme.

Some people think that the art of film or photography has the best chance of capturing “reality as it is” simply because of its “realistic” nature. The theoretician of cinema, Siegfried Kracauer explained that even the most realist painter remains unable to produce a “realistic” scene but will end up “stylizing” reality, be it only through the realism he imposes upon “reality.” Kracauer developed an alternative approach which he called the approach of the *camera-reality*.³ Here reality, when captured by the camera, stays a reality with all its charm and aura (as Benjamin would have put it). Other eminent theoreticians developing similar ideas are Alexandre Astruc, André Bazin, and Amédée Ayfre who elaborate the notion of “*caméra-stylo*.” In a film “recorded” by a *caméra-stylo* there is no evocation of subjective, intimate symbols. No “inner reality” has been “put into” the image by the artist. On the other hand, there is no objective recording of reality either. There is no documentation undertaken from the detached point of view located outside the things filmed.

The subject of the present article is so-called “reality television” as it has existed for about half a decade in the form of various types of “reality shows” on television screens all over the world. I believe that, in principle, these shows are inspired by the same kind of fascination with “reality” that is proper to the above-mentioned artistic projects. That such parallels are not far-fetched is shown by statements by the French director Jean-Jacques Beineix, who sees in the television production *Loft-Story* a renewal of contemporary cinema that has, in his opinion, become too academic. Like André Bazin, who was tempted in the 1960s by television aesthetics, Beineix suggests confronting cinema with the refreshing spontaneity and the directness of the non-actors we encounter in so-called reality shows. The elitist French journal *Cahiers du cinéma* even elected *Loft-Story* the best film of the year 2001.⁴

Though, as some studies show, reality television has never been able to shake off the persistent smell of fiction, reality shows have become extremely popular in many countries.⁵ At first, this interest in “reality” may seem surprising. News reports as well as documentaries provide people with “reality” at increasingly frequent intervals; “reality” seems to be the last thing that is lacking on television. However, newsreel reality is not the kind of reality

that people who watch reality shows seem to desire. The reason must be that conventional media reality appears too much like a hybrid version of fiction produced by politicians and by journalists alike. Being too well calculated, stylized and designed to capture our attention, the *immediacy* with which many events are reported makes them almost “unreal.”

Then there is another reason. The mediated reality shown on television news programs reaches our minds in a state of attentiveness and tension that is very different from the one we are submitted to when we perceive situations that are “written by life.” A good way to describe the difference between both ways of perceiving “reality” is to say that it comes close to the difference between the perception of images in waking life on the one hand, and in dreams on the other. The detached view, with which we perceive “reality” with its occasional emergence of all-too-human constellations, comes closer to that of dreaming than to that of analysis, consumption, or first-degree stimulation. Kracauer insisted on the necessity, in visual art, of following certain images “in a dreamy manner” (*nachträumen* in German). If we really want to appreciate the “reality” in a photo or a film still, we need to abandon our overly focussed, stimulated and interested view of reality. Only then do we discover that some images contain a truth that simply “flashes,” and that does not need to be sought out or analyzed. In this sense, reality can convey a kind of “realness.”

Most people’s brains are today saturated with synthetic, compact, and stylized images as well as with well-calculated narratives relating all sorts of reality or non-reality. All this might at best stimulate people’s imagination or it might even indirectly teach them to use more critical approaches towards all these images and narratives. I am not saying that the flood of images delivered by contemporary media necessarily makes people dull. The problem I am trying to pinpoint lies elsewhere.

Reality shows are a good case in point to clarify a particular phenomenon. Overwhelmed by a flood of images and information, people desire a more detached view than the one offered by newsreels or conventional fiction. To put it most simply: They want to watch images in a way that permits them to dream whilst watching. They want to develop a view towards images and stories that is not captured by immediate interests, basic instincts or manipulated stimulations, but that simply allows them to watch and think. That makes it possible to find a sense in the story or the images without being violently forced into a certain—semantic, political, or symbolic—direction.

My point obviously strongly diverges from those theories insisting that reality shows are popular because people want an “immediate” contact with reality. The contrary is true. No one can deny that the media are no longer as mediating as they used to be. Be it the Twin Towers or the Iraq War—reality can hardly be *more* immediate. And it is rather the immediacy that has become bothersome.

People thus watch reality shows because they desire *distance* from reality. In these shows reality deploys itself much more like in real life which means in the first place: most of it is utterly boring. But this very aspect gives you time to let your thoughts wander and ponder on certain flashing moments that caught your attention without feeling obliged to think this or that. The paradox lies in the fact that only through this distanced, wandering look, an immediate sense of reality is permitted to flash up from time to time.

Apart from this, the desire to dream whilst watching is not new. Long before reality shows existed, a phenomenon already existed that can be seen as an immediate response to the described desire for detachment: the *television drama in sequels* gives us a unique chance to relax whilst watching. No wonder that this scheme has become popular also in cinema (*Terminator* I, II, III, IV, etc.). When watching the sequels, we do not expect anything spectacular to happen, knowing perfectly well that number IV and V cannot be as good as number I. We simply want to observe the life of those people that we have become familiar with. Continued stories adopt the rhythm of life simply in that they continue indefinitely. This means that we can *live* in the sequels without really *following* the story. We have enough time to half-imagine and to half-dream what the story *could* have been. And all this is almost like in real life.

Everybody will agree that the perfect reproduction of life on television would be a *continuing* programme managing, just like life, to *write itself all alone*, that is, without the help of an author. The fact that a story may be “written” without the help of an author no longer shocks us anyway. We concluded a long time ago that the existence of an author does not say much about the authenticity of a story. Authors of fiction have to a considerable degree become fictitious themselves, for who still believes that the 10th sequel of a novel has been written by the author himself and not by one of the thousands of ghostwriters that seem to people the globalized world of the publishing business?

To some extent, the concept of the “reality show” has been born from these psycho-aesthetic considerations. I am ready to add without cynicism that things would be perfectly acceptable and would even present a major

achievement for visual culture of the new century if they had remained there. The entire project could have resulted in representations of everyday reality that Tarkovsky thought of (and that perhaps Beineix still thinks of), in which dialogues are “truer” than anything that can be written by a scriptwriter. It could have resulted in Rohmer-style films in which speech is more charming than any speech performed by real actors: sincere and intense without being obtrusive. In a word, it could have produced a reality not engineered or acted but simply *presented*.

That the project has degenerated is the fault of the producers as much as of the public. The most urgent question is, of course, if eleven young people shut in a loft do represent a “reality” of any kind. The situation is to a large extent *created* and there it comes already dangerously close to a piece of fiction. Further, even though there is no author in the conventional sense of the word, *authority* has not been left entirely in the hands of the protagonists who are supposed to play their real lives. The public is urged to “eliminate” one candidate after the other and thus indirectly “writes” the plot of the story. Reality television is therefore a kind of inverted fiction: while in conventional fiction *one* author writes for a large public, here a public tells those people who are supposed to be the authors of their actions in which direction the story should develop.

Also the public’s attitude shows that people react more to a piece of fiction than to “real life.” The public extensively engages in psychologizing approaches and analyzes almost everything. It is unnecessary to point out that this amateur psychology does not reveal much about “reality” but rather removes it from us by creating an immense illusion about its own analytical capacities. One cannot grasp a truth about reality simply by looking at the behavior of people.

The gap between the dreamlike experience providing the possibility of relishing in spontaneous and marvelously non-acted behavior and the fictionalized events called reality shows could hardly be larger. Kracauer’s camera-reality or Astruc’s *caméra-stylo* are dreamlike realities that are simply watched. Astruc attempted to grasp “any kind of reality.” Reality television, on the other hand, suggests a utopian social reality in the form of a hyperfiction. To some extent, this narrative called “reality show” is still developing by itself; but at the same time it can constantly be analyzed, controlled, and altered according to the lucid analysis of the spectators.⁵

Reality television represents exactly the model that Freud must have dreamt of when developing his method of psychoanalysis: to be able not only to analyze a dream at the very moment it is dreamt, but to actually interfere

in the dream by adopting the role of an external dream-censor.

One might add that the only other time that such a model has been evoked in the history of visual arts is in surrealism. Very similar to the approach described above, surrealism consciously imitated the structures of reality, altering them until they became more “interesting.” This is just like in a reality show program where an artistic amateur psychoanalyst engages in the creation of dreams. While the spectator plays at being a psychiatrist and the protagonists actively shape the narrative according to public demand, television reality becomes a kind of surreality: a synthetically produced non-reality that is lacking the realness that we encounter in real life as well as in dreams.

Astruc’s strategy of the *caméra-stylo* was especially directed against surrealist cinema (as much as it was directed against conventional documentaries); Tarkovsky aggressively turned against any kind of Freudianism as well as surrealism. Reality television (like surrealism at its time) attempts to be a dream, but adopts the form of an anti-narrative in which conventional narrative and receptive devices have not been overcome in order to create a real aesthetic of dreams, but have been *overturned* in order to create a strange kind of fiction.

Notes

¹ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), p. 65.

² “Three little children go out for a walk together – two little girls aged four, with a little boy of two. They take a skipping rope with them. They put it round the neck of the two-year-old and tie the ends to couple of trees – just high enough for the boy to have to stand on tiptoe. And walk away. And we don’t know what it is that causes these two to agree to do such a thing. (...) There has been a whole series of such events. Unmotivated cruelty is something which never ceases to fascinate me; and I would like very much to know the reason for it.” From: Stig Bjorkman et al.: *Bergman om Bergman* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1970), p. 40.

³ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theorie des Films* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 62.

⁴ *Cahiers du cinéma* 2001.

⁵ In France there have been, since 2001, four “reality” programs. *Loft Story* (derived from the Dutch *Big Brother*); *The Adventures of Koh-Lanta* (15 candidates try to survive on an island); *Pop Stars* (five girls try to become professional singers); *Star Academy* (similar principle, derived from the Dutch *Starmaker*).

⁶ The constant interference of exhibitionism and voyeurism (which do not exist in dreams either) are a result of this ambiguity.

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