

Real Stories

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Abstract

The following study examines the popular television program *Real Stories of the Highway Patrol*. I begin by addressing the relevance of critical media studies in the context of contemporary political discourse. In the next section, I briefly summarize both the content and structure of *Real Stories* before moving on to a close textual analysis of the program. Then, I use critical theory to demonstrate how camera techniques can connote the internal logic of distinct genres, ranging from dramatic spectacle to educational documentary. Finally, I argue that *Real Stories* successfully fuses conventions of news and entertainment, creating a hybrid form that defies categorization, frustrates regulation, and foils attempts to distill the “real” from the story.

A line has been crossed--not just of taste, but of human dignity and decency. It is crossed every time sexual violence is given a catchy tune. When teen suicide is set to an appalling beat. When Hollywood's dream factories turn out nightmares of depravity. You know what I mean. I mean Natural Born Killers. True Romance. Films that revel in mindless violence and loveless sex.

Bob Dole speech on May 31, 1995

A Critical Stance

While stumping for the presidency this past spring, Bob Dole visited Hollywood. He used the opportunity to rail against popular culture’s “nightmares of depravity,” indicting the entertainment industry’s penchant for depicting violence without consequence and sex without commitment (Rich 1). Just months later, Dole called for a boycott of *Money Train*, citing an attack on a subway worker that allegedly mimicked a scene in the film (Scheer 1). It appeared that Dole was proposing a cause and effect relationship between entertainment programs and their viewers. And yet, his endorsement of *True Lies*, an action film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, remains puzzling (1). In spite of its rampant violence, adultery, and racism, Dole included *True Lies* in a list of “family-friendly films”(1). So, while Dole’s rhetorical acts imply that the media has measurable social effects, his discursive strategy appears contradictory and avoids a coherent critical stance. If the entertainment industry is truly as dangerous as he implies, and their messages threaten the moral fabric of America, then why have politicians not taken more concrete steps to regulate the content of the media marketplace?

When evaluating Dole's speech, Susan Douglass argues that "the same man who, in public, urges the mainstream media to treat the audience like citizens instead of consumers, in privacy advances the economic conditions that insure the further degradation of media content" such as reducing funding for PBS (18). Clearly, the gap between Dole's bark and his bite transcends mere political waffling. The social impact of media in the United States is difficult to recognize because it is inextricably linked to the free market economy. Judith Williamson observes that a business typically addresses the consumer as "an individual who feels that he or she is an agent, acting out freely the dictates of a coherent ego"(40). Also, according to Marx, capitalism determines this agent as the sole judge of a commodity's exchange value, regardless of its material function (59). The prevalent free market ideology assumes the autonomy of the consumer and promotes individual choice amongst competing brands. When applied to television, this ideology tends to conflate consumers and citizens, thus positioning the ratings system as a referendum on programming. We vote with our remote, so we get the content we deserve. Or, to put it more plainly, the customer is always right.

Except, of course, when the customer is a minor. Though Dole is quick to decry content deemed offensive by particular constituencies, he stops short of proposing that adults are brainwashed into committing bad behavior. Instead, Dole has joined democrats in supporting the V-Chip, a filtering device that aims to assist parents in curbing violent television content from reaching their children. In order for the gismo to work, Congress has called for broadcast companies to rate their programs according to incidents of violence, sex, and profanity. With each show coded with a rating, the V-Chip would thus enable parents to block all programs of a common rating with the touch of a button. Perhaps Dole and company hope to protect the free market by delegating censorship to mom and dad. Perhaps media regulation begins at home.

And yet, news will not be rated. Which begs the question: how will the V-Chip system distinguish between news and entertainment? As sensational evening magazines and tabloid journalists continue to push the boundaries between information and titillation, the resulting hybrid genres could stymie regulators' best efforts to first categorize, then filter, content. The constitutional implications of such controls over speech are worth noting, although this study does not attempt to address them. Rather, I wish to argue that Dole's frustration, though vague and obtuse, provides an opportunity to form a more critical stance towards the media.

In lieu of assigning media texts reductive labels of good or bad, chaste or profane, a critical stance would seek to reveal how media constructions of pleasure and identity offer maps of social terrain for consumption by the viewer (Steinman). Douglas Kellner argues that a critical stance could also expose the media's ability to both facilitate and destroy the democratic process, a phenomena that should concern all politicians (4). Critical engagement with the media can thus provide frameworks through which a dissatisfied viewer, such as Dole, might imagine alternative ways of seeing media culture that transcend simple cause and effect and avoid privileging pleasure at the cost of maintaining a critical stance. To that end, I will conduct a textual analysis of *Real Stories of the Highway Patrol*, a television program that transcends the discrete categories of the V-Chip through its mix of formal conventions that blur the boundaries between real information and dramatic stories.

The Text

Real Stories of the Highway Patrol is a half hour television program based on the exploits of highway patrol officers throughout the United States. Launched into syndication by Genesis Entertainment in May of 1993, *Real Stories* was included in 162 markets with 90 percent coverage by July of 1994, a summer that witnessed the passage of a major federal crime bill which favored building more prisons and hiring more police officers over more progressive forms of prevention (Broadcasting and Cable, August). Fox, the largest network that carries *Real Stories*, schedules the program in prime-time or late-night slots, often next to *Cops* and *America's Most Wanted*. I viewed two episodes during November of 1995, and consequently any generalizations I make about the program's format and/or content cannot account for previous variations.

Summary

The opening sequence of *Real Stories* gives a preview of the show, which is followed by a rapid-fire montage that weaves together half-second images of police cars, officers drawing their weapons, suspects resisting arrest, and, finally, a slamming prison door. Driving this montage is a pulsing hip-hop single, mixed with sounds of cars, sirens, explosions and gunshots. The show is hosted by Maury Hannigan, Commissioner of the California Highway Patrol, who introduces each story and provides the viewer with background information. Each episode consists of three stories. The first two have been edited from footage, shot live at the scene, of a highway patrol officer enforcing the law. The preview and montage motifs bracket commercial breaks and advertise the third story

which combines dramatic re-enactment with documentary style interviews. The program concludes with the Commissioner directly addressing the audience with a safety tip.

The Spectacle of Dramatic Narrative

Through editing and camera technique, *Real Stories* connotes the classic narrative structure of fictional programs. The program's reliance on a masculine and heroic protagonist is announced by the opening song's refrain "I'm the Man." The only recurring character on the series, Commissioner Hannigan, introduces the show from behind a desk in his office and addresses the camera directly. The program then cuts to a hand-held camera that looks "over the shoulder" of a highway patrol officer who guides the viewer into situations of varying degrees of danger. A semiotic analysis of form and content is useful here. According to Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation, the camera angle hails the viewer as in league with the officers and thus orients him or her as being on the right side of the law (Williamson 40, 50). *Real Stories* will not be told through an omniscient narrator, but rather through the first person testimony of the lead officer. Though subtle, this framing amounts to a subjective point of view that maps unfamiliar terrain and suggests a prescribed path towards finding meaning and pleasure.

With both the relative positions of the main characters and the viewing audience clearly established, *Real Stories* moves into a stream-lined chronological narrative that ignores ellipses and avoids complex issues of legal process in favor of an action-packed visual sequence. The suspect never looks at, or verbally addresses, the viewer and the camera operator is hidden, thus preserving the world of the story and the protagonist's unique perspective. Resolution of the conflict is followed by a brief epilogue that concurs with the procedural and instinctual decisions of the officer. This structure of determining the hero, preserving the diegesis, introducing conflict, and granting satisfying resolution refers to a system of dramatic narratives consumed for entertainment.

The visual montage that introduces each *Real Stories* episode features officers responding with force when they encounter suspects and thus promises the spectacle of violent confrontation. Also, while the content of the narrative effectively codes the officers as "us" and the suspects as "them" through its dependence on Hannigan and the lead officer for guidance, the positioning of the camera is not "merely a part of the apparatus for conveying a message," but also turns out to be a "message in itself" (Williamson 18-19). For instance, looking over the shoulder of the *suspect* instead of the officer would have complicated the program's formulaic resolution of good triumphing over evil, as well as

the satisfying resolution of justice being served by the slamming of the prison door. Williamson describes this process of gleaning meaning from a text as “an interpretation along given channels” (71). In this case, empathy with the accused is all but prevented by the position of the camera. Thus, in addition to the interactions of the characters within the program, the *perspective* from which the narrative spectacle is recorded also constructs an ideological path for the viewer’s creation of meaning. The officers’ actions are framed as correct and inevitable and therefore beyond reproach. *Real Stories*, then, through the construction of a narrative arc, provides a subjective promotion, rather than interrogation, of the most dramatic, and often violent, law enforcement techniques.

The Realism of Educational Documentary

And yet, despite its narrative conventions and dramatic spectacle, *Real Stories* also incorporates documentary techniques that connote a factual portrayal of the Highway Patrol. For example, the program’s use of a hand-held camera refers to the conventions of direct cinema, a documentary style that gained prominence in the 1960’s and 70’s. Direct cinema sought to capture reality under difficult conditions with minimal interference from the camera operator, so, unlike a scripted film, direct cinema limited the viewer’s perspective of the action. In *Real Stories*, the camera peers out of a car, over a fence, and into the windows of a private residence, both evoking the legacy of direct cinema and referring to the more contemporary hidden camera technique of investigative news reports. Ferdinand de Saussure, explains that signifiers achieve value or meaning in “a system of equating things of different orders”(166). Thus, the shaky camera movements and obstructed views in *Real Stories* derive their factual connotation through differentiation in a referent system where smooth and omniscient cinematography signifies scripted fiction.

But *Real Stories* does not just *look* real, it relies on the testimony of *real* people. Highway patrol officers appear on camera in a controlled environment with a lower third that serves to both identify their name and confirm their expertise through rank and title. The officers are dressed in full uniform and look just off camera to an unnamed interviewer. The framing refers to a formalized system of news reports, historical documentaries, and other programs that purport to educate the viewer about actual events. And Commissioner Hannigan’s safety tip at the end of *Real Stories* suggests that the information presented in the show not only represents the real world of the highway patrol, but also provides accurate data that will improve the viewer’s understanding of crime and highway safety. In *Real Stories*, educational documentary camera techniques

and expert testimony work together to construct a map for unfamiliar terrain that connotes the delivery of accurate information.

The Content of the Form

The final segment in *Real Stories* is titled “Under Investigation” and describes a current case of the highway patrol that remains unsolved. Hannigan introduces the segment which is then narrated by the show’s voice-over talent. The murder victim is portrayed in documentary form through home movies and photographs that support “talking head” interviews with her friends and the investigating officers. The discovery of the body is depicted through a dramatic re-enactment rendered visually distinct through a strobe effect on the camera. However, this superficial division is soon blurred by the inclusion of the actual participants *inside* the strobed re-enactments. *Real Stories* also employs actual police photos as visual evidence that the re-enactments are grounded in fact. Finally, the re-enactments combine the hand-held camera technique of educational documentary with camera angles that position the point of view *in front* of the officer rather than over the shoulder. Thus, in a stunning contradiction of genres, the stylistic restrictions of direct cinema are fused with the omniscient and pre-positioned camera of dramatic narrative.

Any visual dissonance triggered by the schizophrenic cinematography in *Real Stories* is all but obscured by the frenetic editing techniques. But even if we allow that the viewer recognizes the conflicting genres and their associated ideologies, Jhally and Lewis warn us that the mere awareness of contradictions “does not immunize us from believing them” or developing illogical political opinions (17). Hence, the pleasurable consumption of a media text that makes factual claims can guide the viewer towards concrete conclusions steeped in the myth of dramatic narrative. For example, in Enlightened Racism, Jhally and Lewis demonstrate how some audiences apply the success of a fictionalized African-American family on *The Cosby Show* to policy debates over affirmative action (30). I wish to argue that *Real Stories* functions in a similar way by offering the viewer maps to negotiate the unfamiliar terrain of law enforcement. But, in a critical difference, *The Cosby Show* makes no explicit claim to be real and thus uses a sitcom format to evoke reality while *Real Stories* employs contradictory camera techniques to render disparate genres interchangeable. This constant process of transaction between news and entertainment positions the viewer as both law-abiding citizen looking over the shoulder of the lead officer and as consumer gaining pleasure from the dramatic spectacle of law enforcement. Judith Williamson has described this phenomena as “the content of the form”(17).

Conclusions

In this study, I have shown how *Real Stories of the Highway Patrol* can be simultaneously consumed as both entertainment for pleasure and information to map unfamiliar terrain. The viewer may experience greater access to the world of the Highway Patrol, but only along prescribed ideological channels. This interpretation is shaped by narrative camera techniques that position the viewer as dependent on the protagonist, and documentary conventions that provide aesthetic support for the program's factual claims. The end result is a hybrid television genre that evades discrete categorization.

Real Stories is but one example of the burgeoning reality television market, also known as "edutainment." This new hybrid genre could pose problems for the V-Chip, since the mechanism requires a ratings system that can distinguish news from entertainment. The V-Chip will not filter news, nor should it. As a representative democracy, we rely on an independent fourth estate to check and balance the three branches of government. But how can we program the V-Chip to recognize news, when the visual conventions of news, and even its claims of objectivity, are converging with narrative forms? How do we classify a program that tells "real stories," but from only one perspective? How are we to treat sports and violent cartoons? These questions, and other dilemmas triggered by the advent of the V-Chip, are important indicators of the current media landscape, but their answers fall beyond the scope of this paper.

This brings us back to Dole's confrontation with the entertainment industry's "nightmares of depravity." Though Dole may be sincere, his public chastisement lacks a coherent critical stance and fails to address the vast infrastructure of the sprawling media industrial complex. A more productive approach might seek to expose how the media's "depravity" is inextricably linked to a free-market economy that privileges the autonomy of the individual consumer. It is telling to note that, in addition to news, the V-Chip will also avoid filtering commercials. So perhaps the question is not what defines news, but rather what drives it: advertisers or the public interest?

For all of Dole's moralizing about content, he remains steadfast in his defense of centralized ownership, held largely unaccountable to any elected representative, much less the average citizen (Douglass 18). In fact, the V-Chip is only a small provision of a

sweeping bipartisan effort to deregulate the telecommunications industry, furthering both concentration of corporate media power and restriction of public access to the airwaves (Nader 1). And yet, major news divisions failed to report the story, prompting Project Censored to name the telecommunications debate on Capitol Hill as 1995's most censored story of the year (Jensen 1). Given that their parent companies stand to profit from further deregulation, the networks' apparent conflict of interest is disturbing, to say the least. When taking a wider view, any political attacks on media content, and even the V-Chip itself, appear to address only the symptoms of media consolidation while congressional legislation threatens to magnify the disease to epidemic proportions.

It doesn't have to be this way. According to the Communications Act of 1934, television airways are public property, leased free of charge to commercial broadcasters providing they serve "the public interest, convenience, and necessity." This social contract, though left largely undefined over the years, provides an important precedent for the industry's impending conversion from analog to digital television. The public spectrum required for the conversion, valued from \$20 to \$70 Billion, could leverage a wide variety of initiatives geared towards serving the public interest (Schreibman 1). From generating diverse content through public access television to educating of the viewing public through media literacy programs, our elected representatives could work towards creating a public square for the 21st Century that serves the interest of citizens, not just consumers. Until then, neither Bob Dole, nor the V-Chip, will help us distinguish the *True Lies* from the *True Stories*.



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