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Crocodile Tears? Authenticity in Televisual Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article explores the role of authenticity in televisual teaching and learning based on a case study of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, a documentary series in which celebrities go on a journey to retrace their family tree. Originally broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation, this series has been adapted in eighteen countries, including Australia. The Australian version is produced locally and has been airing on the public channel Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) since 2008. According to its producers, *Who Do You Think You Are?* teaches history and promotes multiculturalism:

We like making a broad range of programs about history and telling our own Australian stories and particularly the multicultural basis of our history [...] A lot of people know the broad Australian stroke, English, British history but they don't really know as much about the migratory history [...] It's a way of saying this is our country now, this is where it came from, here's some stories, which you might not be aware of, and what's happened to people along the way. (Producer 1)

In this article, I examine *Who Do You Think You Are?* as an educational text and I investigate its pedagogy. Starting with the assumption that it aims to teach, my intention is to explain *how* it teaches. In particular, I want to demonstrate that authenticity is a key feature of its pedagogy.

Applied to the televisual text, the term "authentic" refers to the quality of being true or based on facts. In this sense, authenticity implies actuality, accuracy and reliability. Applied to media personae, "authentic" must be understood in its more modern sense of "genuine". From this perspective, to be "authentic" requires displaying "one's inner truths" (McCarthy 242). Based on my textual analysis and reception study, I show that these two forms of authenticity play a crucial role in the pedagogy of *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Signifying Authenticity

One of the pedagogical techniques of *Who Do You Think You Are?* is to persuade viewers that it authentically represents actual events by using some of the codes and conventions of the documentary. According to Michael Renov, the persuasive modality is intrinsic to all documentary forms and it is linked to their truth claim: "the documentary 'truth claim' (which says, at the very least: 'Believe me, I'm of the world') is the baseline for persuasion for all of nonfiction, from propaganda to rock doc" (30).

Who Do You Think You Are? signifies actuality by using some of the codes and conventions of the observational documentary. As Bill Nichols explains, observational documentaries give the impression that they spontaneously and faithfully record actual events as they happen. Nichols compares this mode of documentary to Italian Neorealism: "we look in on life as it is lived. Social actors engage with one another, ignoring the filmmakers" (111). In *Who Do You Think You Are?* the celebrities and other social actors often engage with one another without acknowledging the camera's presence. In those observational scenes, various textual features signify actuality: natural sounds, natural light or shaky hand-held camera, for example, are often used to connote the unprepared recording of reality. This is usually reinforced by the congruence between the duration of the scene and the diegetic time (the duration of the action that is represented).

Furthermore, *Who Do You Think You Are?* emphasises authenticity by showing famous Australians as ordinary people in ordinary settings or doing mundane activities. As one of the SBS programmers pointed out during our interview: "It shows personalities or stars that you can never get to as real people and it makes you realise that those people, actually, they're the same as you and I!" (SBS programmer).

Celebrities are "real" in the sense that they exist in the profilmic world; but in this context showing celebrities "as real people" means showing them as ordinary individuals whom the audience can relate to and identify with. Instead of representing "stars" through their usual manufactured public personae, the program offers glimpses into their real lives and authentic selves, thus giving "backstage access to the famous" (Marwick and boyd 144). In this regard, the series aligns with other media texts, including "celebrity" programs and social networking sites like Twitter, whose appeal lies in the construction of more authentic and intimate presentations of celebrities (Marwick and boyd; Ellcessor; Thomas).

This rhetoric of authenticity is enhanced by the celebrity's genealogical journey, which is depicted both as a quest for historical knowledge and for self-knowledge. Indeed, as its title suggests, the program links ancestry to personal identity. In every episode, the genealogical investigation reveals similarities between the celebrity and their ancestors, thus uncovering personality traits that seem to have been transmitted from generation to generation. Thus, the series does more than simply showing celebrities as ordinary people "stripped of PR artifice and management" (Marwick and boyd 149): by unveiling those transgenerational traits, it discloses innermost aspects of the celebrities' authentic selves—a backstage beyond the backstage.

Who Do You Think You Are? communicates authenticity in these different ways in order to invite viewers' trust. As Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro observe, this is characteristic of most documentaries:

Whereas fiction films may allude to actual events, documentaries usually claim that those events did take place in such and such a way, and that the images and sounds on the screen are accurate and reliable [...] Most documentaries—if not all of them—have something to say about the world and, in one way or another, they want to be trusted by their audience. (Spence and Navarro 13)

Similarly, Nichols writes that as documentary viewers, "we uphold our belief in the authenticity of the historical world represented on screen [...] we assume that documentary sounds and images have the authenticity of evidence" (36). This is supported by Thomas Austin's reception study of documentary films in the United Kingdom, which shows that most viewers expect documentaries to give them "access to the real." According to Austin, these generic expectations about authenticity contribute to the pedagogic authority of documentaries.

Therefore, the implied audience (Barker and Austin) of *Who Do You Think You Are?* must trust that it authentically represents actual events and individuals and they must perceive it as an accurate and reliable source of knowledge about the historical world in order to "attain a meaningful encounter" (48) with it. The implied audience in no way predicts actual audiences' responses (which I will examine in the remainder of this article) but it is an important aspect of the program's pedagogy: for the text to be read as a "history lesson" (Nichols 39) viewers must be persuaded by the program's rhetoric of authenticity.

Perceiving Authenticity

My reception study confirms that in order to learn, viewers must be persuaded by this rhetoric of authenticity, which promises "information and knowledge, insight and awareness" (Nichols 40). This is illustrated by the responses of five viewers who participated in a screening and focus group discussion. Arya, Marnie, Junior, Lec and Krista all say that they have learnt from *Who Do You Think You Are?* either at home or from the episode that was screened before our discussion. They all agree that the program teaches about history, multiculturalism and other aspects that were not predicted by the producers (such as human nature, relationships and social issues). More importantly, these viewers learn from the program because they trust that it authentically represents actual events and because they perceive the personae as "natural", "relaxed" and "being themselves" and their emotions as "genuine":

Krista: It felt genuine to me.
Lec: Me also [...]
Marnie: I felt like he seemed more natural, even with the interpreter there, talking with his aunty. He seemed more himself, he was more emotional [...]
Arya: I don't think that they're acting. To go outside of this session, I mean, I've seen the show before and I think it is really genuine.

As Austin notes, what matters from the viewers' perspective is not "the critically scrutinised indexical guarantee of documentary, but rather a less well defined and nebulous sense of qualities such as the 'humanity', 'honesty', 'sincerity'."

This does not mean that viewers naively believe that the text gives a transparent, unmediated access to the truth (Austin). Trust (or in Austin's words "willing abandonment") can be combined with scepticism (Buckingham; Ang; Liebes and Katz). Marnie, for example, oscillates between these two modalities of response:

Marnie: If something seems quite artificial, it stands out, you start thinking about well, why did they do that? But while they're just sitting down, having a conversation, there's not anything really that you have to think about. Obviously all those transition shots, sitting on the rock, opening a letter in the square, they also have, you know, the violins playing and everything. Everything builds to feel a bit more contrived, whereas when they're having the conversation, I wasn't aware of the music. Maybe I was listening to what they were saying more. But I think you sort of engage a bit more in listening to what they're saying when they're having a conversation. Whereas the filling, you're not really thinking about his emotions so much as...why is he wearing that shirt?

Interestingly, the scenes that Marnie perceives as authentic and that she engages with are the "conversations" scenes, which use the codes and conventions of the observational documentary. The scenes that she views with scepticism are the more dramatised sequences, which do not use the codes and conventions of the observational documentary. Marnie is the only viewer in my focus groups who clearly oscillates between trust and scepticism. She is also the most ambivalent about what she has learnt and about the quality of the knowledge that she gains from *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Authenticity and Emotional Responses

Because they believe that the personae and emotions in the program are genuine, these viewers are emotionally engaged. As the producers explain, learning from *Who Do You Think You Are?* is not a purely cognitive process but is fundamentally an emotional and empathetic experience:

There are lots of programs on television where you can learn about history. I think what's so powerful about this show is because it has a very strong emotional arc [...] You can learn a lot of dates, and you can pass a test, just on knowing the year that the Blue Mountains were first crossed or the Magna Carta was signed. But what *Who Do You Think You Are?* does is that it takes you on a journey where you get to really *feel* the experiences of those people who were fighting the battle or climbing the mast. (Producer 2)

The producers invite viewer empathy in two ways: they design the program so that viewers are encouraged to share the emotions of people who lived in the past; and they design it so that viewers are encouraged to share the emotions of the celebrities who participate in the program. This is illustrated by the participants' responses to one scene in which the actor Don Hany sees an old photograph of his pregnant mother:

Lec: I was touched! I was like "aw!"
 Ms Goldblum: I didn't buy it.
 Krista: You didn't feel like that, Lec?
 Lec: Not at all! Like, yeah, I got a bit touched.
 Junior: Yeah. And those looked like genuine tears, they weren't crocodile tears.
 Ms Goldblum: I didn't think so. There was a [sniffing], pause, pose, camera moment.
 Junior: I had a little moment...
 Krista: Aw!
 Interviewer: You had a moment?
 Junior: Yeah, there was a little moment there.
 Ms Goldblum: Got a little teary?
 Junior: When he's looking at the photos, yeah. Because I think everyone's done that, gone back and looked through old photos, you know what that feeling is.

As this discussion suggests, authenticity is a crucial aspect of the program's pedagogy, not only because the viewers must trust it in order to learn from it, but also because it facilitates empathy and emotional engagement.

Distrust and Cynicism

In contrast, the viewers who do not learn from *Who Do You Think You Are?* perceive the program as contrived and the celebrity's emotions as inauthentic:

Wolfgang: I don't think they taught me much that I didn't already know in regards to history.
 Naomi: Yeah, me neither [...] I kind of look at these shows and think it's a bit contrived [...]
 Wolfgang: I hate all that. They're constructing a show purely for money, that's all bullshit. That annoys me [...]
 Ms Goldblum: But for me the show is just about, I don't know, they try to find something to be sentimental and it's not. Like, they try to force it [...] I didn't buy it [...]

Because they are aware of the constructed nature of the program and because they perceive it as contrived, these viewers do not engage emotionally with the content:

Naomi: When I see someone on this show looking at photos, I find it really difficult to stop thinking he's got a camera on his face.
 Wolfgang: Yeah.
 Naomi: He's looking at photos, and that's a beautiful moment, but there's a camera right there, looking at him, and I can't help but think that when I see those things [...] There are other people in the room that we don't see and there's a camera that's pointing at him [...]

This intellectual distance is sometimes expressed through mockery and laughter (Buckingham). Because they distrust the program and make fun of it, Wolfgang and Ms Goldblum (who were not in the same focus group) are both described as "cynics":

Ms Goldblum: He gets all teary and I think oh he's an actor he's just putting that shit on, trying to make it look interesting. Whereas if it were just a normal person, I'd find it more believable. But I think the whole premise of the show is they take famous people, like actors and all those people in the spotlight, I think because they put on good shows. I would be more interested in someone who wasn't famous. I'd find it more genuine.
 Junior: You are such a cynic! [...]

Wolfgang: And look, maybe I'm a big cynic about this, and that's why I haven't watched it. But it's this emotionally padded, scripted, prompted kind of thing, which makes it more palatable for people to watch.

Unlike most participants, who identify the program as "educational" and "documentary", Wolfgang classifies it as pure entertainment. His cynicism and scepticism can be linked to his generic labelling of the program as "reality TV":

Wolfgang: I don't watch commercial TV, I can't stand it. And it's for that reason. It's all contrived. It's all based on selling something as opposed to looking into this guy's family and history and perhaps learning something from it. Like, it's entertainment, it's not educational [...] It's a reality TV sort of thing, I just got no interest in it really.

As Annette Hill shows in her reception study of the reality game program *Big Brother*, most viewers are cynical about the authenticity of reality television. Despite the generic label of "reality", most interpret reality programs as inauthentic. Indeed, as John Corner points out, reality television is characterised by display and performance, even though it adopts some of the codes and conventions of the documentary.

Hill's research also reveals that viewers often look for moments of authenticity within the unreal context of reality television: "the 'game' is to find the 'truth' in the spectacle/performance environment" (337). Interestingly, this describes Naomi and Wolfgang's attitude towards *Who Do You Think You Are?*:

Naomi: The conversation with his mum seemed a bit more relaxed, maybe. Or a bit more...I don't know, I kind of look at these shows and think it's a bit contrived. Whereas that seemed a bit more natural [...]
Wolfgang: Often he's just sitting there and I suppose those are filling shots. But I found that when he was chatting to his aunty and seeing the photos that he hadn't seen before, when he was a child, he was tearing up [...] That's probably the one time I didn't notice, like, didn't think about the cameras because I found it quite powerful, when he was tearing up, that was a kind of an emotional moment.

According to Austin, viewers' discourses about authenticity in relation to documentaries and reality television serve as markers of cultural distinction:

Often underpinning expressions of the appeal of 'the real', the use of a discourse of authenticity frequently revealed taste markers and a set of cultural distinctions deployed by these cinemagoers, notably between the veracity and 'honesty' of *Etre et Avoir* [a French documentary] and the contrasting 'fakery' and 'inauthenticity' of reality television.

Describing documentaries as authentic and educational and reality television as fake entertainment can be a way for some (middle-class) viewers to assert their socio-cultural status. By performing as the sceptical and cynical viewer and criticising lower cultural forms, research participants distinguish themselves from the imagined mass of unsophisticated and uneducated (working class?) viewers (Buckingham; Austin).

Conclusion

Some scholars suggest that viewers learn when they compare what they watch on television to their own experiences or when they identify with television characters or personae (Noble and Noble; Tulloch and Lupton; Tulloch and Moran; Buckingham and Bragg). My study contributes to this field of inquiry by showing that viewers learn when they perceive televisual content as authentic and as a reliable source of knowledge. More importantly, the results reveal how some televisual texts *signify* authenticity to invite trust and learning. This study raises questions about the role of trust and authenticity in televisual learning and it would be fruitful to pursue further research to determine whether these findings apply to genres that are not factual. Examining the production, textual features and reception of fictional programs to understand how they convey authenticity and how this sense of truthfulness influences viewers' learning would be useful to draw more general conclusions about televisual pedagogy, and perhaps more broadly about the role of trust and authenticity in education.

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