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Master Thesis

Screenwriting for Film and Television

Documentary as entertainment

**What does the current trend of docusoap tell us about the state of
documentary and its relation to television?**

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"When a medium needs an audience, it turns to serials."

Roger Hagedorn

1. Docusoap: A new genre on television

Introduction

During the winter season 1998 there were more than ten documentary serials, most of them docusoaps, on British television. Following the unexpected success of a documentary serial about an animal hospital in 1995, television was suddenly filled with serials showing the inner life of opera houses, airports, driving schools, cruise-ships, villages, hotels and health farms. Many of them were scheduled in prime-time slots, competing against, and sometimes even replacing, popular programmes like the long running soaps *Eastenders* and *The Bill*. The serials were baptised *docusoaps*. The genre has since spread to the European continent, Sweden and Denmark, and, to a lesser extent, Norway.

This thesis sets out to explore this new genre on television, and to see what it tells us about the state of documentary today and its relation to television.

This first chapter offers an initial consideration of the TV- genre docusoap. The following chapters will provide a further exploration of the parameters of the genre. Here I will just go briefly into the characteristics of the genre and discuss where it comes from. I will also define its place in the current landscape of hybrid genres on television, and discuss the development of television that has been preparing the ground for docusoap.

1.1. Several terms, and several hybrid genres

Soap documentary, docusoap or documentary serial. All these terms are used to describe the specific kind of documentary serial that grew so popular and common in the second half of the 1990s. To make the whole thing more confusing, the term "fly-on-the-wall-documentary"

is often used, especially by media when writing about these new tv-series. I will use the term *docusoap* to describe these documentary serials, although the term is problematic because of its negative connotations. As I will discuss more thoroughly in chapter 4, soap opera is by many considered as a "lesser" cultural form, whereas documentary on the contrary is considered a "higher" form. Makers of more "serious" documentary serials, like the Swedish *Sjukhuset* that I discuss in chapter 4, often choose not to use the term docusoap.

At the present time, docusoap can be said to be a genre on its own, and one in very strong development. The docusoaps have been extremely popular in Britain, where their success first started, but there are some signs that their popularity is now decreasing. However, the considerable success of the docusoaps will probably ensure that the format is not totally abandoned, at least in some countries in the following years.

This thesis will look at the phenomenon from Norway, but since relatively few docusoaps have been made in this country, I will also discuss serials from Britain and Sweden. Several of the successful British serials have been shown on Norwegian television, and I will include some of these in my material.

The term docu-soap is widely used in some countries, and is becoming more common here in Norway, but at least in Norway, the definition is not totally clear among scholars, tv-critics or people in general. I will try to establish some criteria, but since this is an area in fast development there will always be new hybrid products that fit the genre only more or less. Before I give a brief outline of this border landscape, I will discuss the origin of the word "docusoap". The construction is obvious: A product that somehow combines documentary and soap opera.¹

Documentary

¹ See chapter 4, p. 58 for the history of the term "soap opera".

Defining *soap* is relatively easy. Defining documentary is more difficult,- volumes have been spent on this. John Grierson is usually credited with being the first to use the word documentary about a film, in his review of Robert Flaherty's *Moana* in 1928². Documentary has since become a term that covers a vast area of film and television production. I find John Corners' relatively broad definition useful:

"Documentary" is the loose and often highly contested label given, internationally, to certain kinds of film and television (and sometimes radio programmes) which reflect and report on the "the real" through the use of recorded images and sounds of actuality. (Corner 1996:2)

Historically, documentary has been a film genre, even if these films, like fiction films, can be shown on television. There is also a whole undergrowth of different sub-genres belonging to the television medium exclusively, ranging from the wildlife programmes (David Attenborough in the jungle) via the investigative, journalistic documentary, to the "video diary", where people are given their own home video camera and asked to shoot their daily lives. Since docusoap is a television genre, I will concentrate on the TV medium in the following, but draw upon the history of documentary *film* where it is relevant for the understanding of docusoap.

John Grierson also offered an important definition of documentary film, when he described it as *the creative treatment of actuality*³. Written in the 1920s, this definition still is at the heart of the debate around documentary: What is actuality, and how creatively can you treat it before it ceases to be documentary and becomes fiction? One aspect of this problem area will be treated in my chapter 3: In discussing the British and the Norwegian version of docusoaps on the driving school concept, I will show how the treatment of the material differs, depending on the level of directorial intervention. A different angle into the problems of representation that Grierson's definition raises will be provided in chapter 4, where the Swedish observational docusoap *Sjukhuset* is discussed.

² See for instance Winston 1995:8.

Another approach to the definition of documentary is through the visual. Because it is reflecting and reporting on the real, documentary television also for the most part *looks* different from fiction. Television is full of overt visual styles, and when zapping from channel to channel, we quickly recognise what kind of programme that is being broadcast. There are some signs that immediately tell us if this is a reality or a fiction programme. Among these are the direct and casual look into, and address of, the camera, the handheld camera, or the grainy, underlit shot. These are all signs that help us distinguish reality from fiction. As I will discuss in chapter 4 and 5, the boundaries become more and more blurred, as new hybrid forms emerge. When watching for instance BBC2's fiction serial *Cops*, it might be difficult to decide at first glance whether this is fiction or documentary. This series has most of the visual characteristics of documentary, and also the sound of documentary, with lots of background noise, overlapping speech, and much space given to minor events that are not completely relevant to the main story. Even the narrative is organized in way that is closer to documentary,- i.e. not in the classical dramaturgy of the Hollywood film. I will discuss the search for an authentic look in fiction television and film in my chapter 5.

³ Rotha quoted in Winston 1996:11.

The question of the social purpose of documentary is still of great current interest, another heritage from John Grierson. Grierson prided himself of his pro working-class attitudes and his social responsibility, even though scholars in posterity has questioned his radicalism or even claimed it to be superficial⁴. Even so, the notion that documentary should have a social purpose, a mission, has for many been the foundation of documentary practice. In the investigative and journalistic tv-documentary particularly, the whole purpose of shooting has very often been that the filmmakers want to draw popular attention to some social problem. The lack of this social responsibility has been the core of the criticism towards docusoap, as I will show later in this chapter. The critics claim that docusoap only show things for entertainment purposes, and lacks explanatory or problematising elements. Drawing upon concepts from Hugh O'Donnell (narrative levels in soaps)⁵ and John Ellis (television as working through)⁶, I will in the following chapters also discuss docusoap's ability to say something more critical or analytic about present society.

Soap

The other "parent" of the docusoap is the fictional soap opera. Created in the 1930s in USA, first on radio, it was intended as daytime entertainment for the homeworking housewife. The name "soap" probably came into being because the daytime dramas where made for or by the producers of household supplies , e.g. soap (Gripsrud 1995:215). The soap opera moved to television in the forties, and has since developed both in form and action. Soap has become the most industrialized forms of fiction production on TV, and also one of the staples of television.

⁴ See for instance Winston 1995:35 pp., Macdonald and Cousins 1996:95.

⁵Hugh O'Donnell 1999:21.

⁶John Ellis 2000: 74.

The criteria for defining what is soap opera are widely agreed upon today⁷. These are among the characteristics that are used:

- *A soap is not *a* story, but a structure that allows the telling of many stories and storylines.
- *The soap has a narrative endlessness,- it can, in theory at least, go on forever.
- *Many overlapping and parallel stories.
- *Large number of characters. The *protagonism* is shared.
- *Dialogue and relationships are more important than action/plot.
- *The serial takes place in parallel time to ours. (not historical)

In chapter 2 I will go into these features in greater detail. I will offer a comparative analysis of a fiction soap and a docusoap, that will provide an understanding of what features the new documentary genre has borrowed from soap. Utilising the works of Jostein Gripsrud, Robert C. Allen, Roger Hagedorn and Christine Geraghty, I will discuss what the documentary seeks to achieve when borrowing the soap features.

Hugh O'Donnell adds that for a serial to be called a soap, its production needs to be industrialised to a certain extent. As long as the docusoaps are not made for every day screening, the production will never get as industrialised as that of a fiction soap. But still, they are part of television, in itself an industrialised form, and the sheer amount of docusoaps being made in Britain suggests some industrialisation. *Vets* and *Vets in Practice*, to my knowledge the longest running docusoap, has 40 episodes screened, and more are being made with one of the characters from *Vets*, who in the new serial is among wild animals in Africa. This is a lot for a documentary, but nothing compared to fictional soap.

Serialisation

Docusoap is a genre that *serialises* reality, in a way that is known from fiction serials. Historically, when a maker of a text chooses to serialise it, he does so in order to increase the consumption (Hagedorn in Allen 1995:40). This implies a belief that the development of

⁷ E.g. O'Donnell (1999), Gripsrud (1995 , 1999), Allen (1995).

docusoap is a result of profit hunger only, which might be true. I will explore this belief further in chapter 3 of this thesis, where I will discuss docusoap's role in the scheduling strategies of television.

True serialization - the organization of narrative and narration around the enforced and regular suspension of both textual display and reading activity - produces a very different mode of reader engagement and reader pleasure than we experience with non-serials.

Robert C. Allen, 1995:17

Docusoap is a non-fiction TV-serial presented in the form of a fiction serial. This has consequences for the whole production, from casting via directing and structuring of narrative to audience reception. I will go into these consequences in chapter 2, where the close relationship between docusoap and soap opera will be discussed.

There are several kinds of seriality, and these kinds also blend and mix. Writers in the English language can very practically distinguish between a *series* and a *serial*, - the soap is a serial, whereas for instance sitcoms are series. Roughly, the difference can be described like this:

Series:

- *Each episode has its own story.
- *The characters are stable, they don't change much.
- *The episodes can be watched in any order at all.

Serial:

- *Narratives continue over the episodes without breaks.
- *The characters can change over time.
- *The episodes must be seen chronologically.

The third category of serials on TV can be termed the *mini-serial* (= Norwegian "føljetong", Gripsrud 1995:215), where *one* story is told over a limited number of episodes. This is the typical format of a TV-serial based upon a novel (Hagedorn in Allen 1995:40).

However, in the age of hybridisation, these categories borrow from each other. Nowadays, a combination of the features of serials and series is the most common. This is the case in many of popular series at the present time: *NYPD Blue*, *Chicago Hope*, *L.A. Law*, the British *Heartbeat* and sitcoms such as *Friends* and *Ally Mc Beal*. The American serials in particular combine the seriality of soap with one "resolved" story in each episode, and several also include elements from other genres like sitcom (Ellis 2000:124). In these series, there is usually a main story for each episode, sometimes continuing over two episodes. In addition there are several other more or less endless storylines that continue across the episodes. Knowledge about these storylines gives extra pleasure for the faithful spectator, who will then understand more about the characters (Allen 1995:20). This knowledge is however not necessary for understanding the main, episode-restricted story.

A serial, especially a soap that is broadcast every day, tends to get more devoted viewers than a series. To my knowledge, no docusoap has ever been broadcast every day of a week. They are usually once-a-week-programmes. One reason might be practical: Docusoaps usually have a very high shooting ratio. The amount of recorded material is often 20 times that which is finally screened, in some cases even more. Presuming a simultaneous broadcast, the editing job would be difficult to get done in 24 hours if there were to be an half hour episode screened every day.

1.2. Characteristics of docusoap

The product that is the result of the hybridisation of the above mentioned features, is then the docusoap. It borrows characteristics from both documentary and soap, but can also be said to have several characteristics of its own. In a British context, John Ellis (2000:12) establishes that docusoap: "*follows well-defined characters within an institution (a hotel, a store or shopping centre, a health farm or a veterinary surgery), or taking them through a commonplace ordeal like a driving test.*" Perhaps as important, docusoap insists on

"engaging characters and its attention to the minutiae and subtle distinctions of everyday life".

Docusoap can thus be said to be a documentary serial about more or less ordinary people going about their more or less ordinary business.

Almost all docusoaps have a narrator that explains what's going on, and usually does this in an entertaining way. A docusoap could be made without the narrator, but the overwhelming majority has one. In Britain, the narrator is very often a celebrated actor, like Andrew Sachs, who is the narrator of *Hotel Adelphi*.⁸

Most docusoaps, at least the British ones, are made in a light and humourous mood. The mood seldom feels serious, even if the event that is filmed can be serious enough in itself.

Most docusoaps last for eight or ten episodes, but many are continued over more than one season, e.g *Vets*, *Stripperkongens piger*. Similar to soap operas, the different concepts of docusoaps are often exported, and re-shot in another country for a domestic audience there.

The border landscape

The confusion about the use of the term seems to be mostly a problem of drawing limits towards other genres. Perhaps because the genre is relatively new in Norway, there are, even among media scientists, different understandings of which TV-programmes can be termed docusoap. The neighbouring programmes can be several, for instance the genre that Bill Nichols terms "reality TV" (Nichols 1994:43), which is the same as John Corners's "emergency services" genre (Corner 1996:183). These programmes are very popular in the USA, but are marginal in, for instance, Norway. Then there is the bulk of programmes that fit into what John Corner terms "the game frame" (all involving a large element of gaming),

⁸ Hardly incidentally, to television audiences Sachs is probably best known as the Barcelonian waiter Manuel in *Fawlty towers*.

and those that John Ellis terms "leisure TV". This genre includes all kinds of programmes related to leisure activities. In Britain, an example is the "remake"-concept, where somebody's house or garden is being remade in the absence of the owners (Ellis 2000:111).

The last years have seen a large growth in the number of programmes that are in one way or another built over some kind of filmed reality, and this is the reason why, by some, these hybrid forms are termed docusoap. However, John Corner now offers a distinction that I find useful. In his written work up to 1996 he did not acknowledge docusoap's importance, but in a recent lecture in Bergen, Norway, he distinguished between what he called the 3 new waves of documentary TV in Britain:

1. Reality TV. This is accidents and emergency, programmes of the type that follow police or fire brigades on their tasks. These programmes often give the audience a possibility to participate, by calling in and give information about unresolved cases etc.
2. Docusoap. Documentary serials with strong resemblance of soap operas. Pleasure is most important here, even though the series also have an informational aspect.
3. The game frame. This is all kinds of new programmes with strong elements of game, for instance where a group of people are left on a deserted island to survive as Robinson Crusoe.

It is mainly the programmes that fit in the third category that can be considered wrongly termed docusoap. A good example is the Nordic concept *Robinson*, a series that has been shot in a Danish, Swedish and a Norwegian version, made by the same production company. This programme is about a group of people who are sent to a "deserted" island in the Philippines, to live from what nature can give, to compete in tasks given by the producers, and to compete against each others. One person after the other is sent home, until a winner emerges as the last person left on the island. When this serial was presented in the newspapers, several publications used the word *docusoap* in the presentation⁹. Of course these programmes have a strong element of docusoap, in that the viewers follow the participants' "daily life" on the island. But still, the element of *game* is predominant. The participants have all applied to take part. The programme doesn't follow the participant's normal life, but shows the way they live

⁹ E.g. The Norwegian monthly magazine *Henne* presented *Robinson* under the heading "Real TV",. The article refers to *The Loud Family* (sic) as the first "real-TV"-serial, and include the

in a setting staged by others. The frame is in other words alien and supplied by the producers,- and that makes it more of a game than a documentary.

1.3. The ancestors: The history of the observational documentary

Docusoap is a *hybrid* genre, a new invention in television. One of the factors that have made this genre possible is very practical: Closely related to the growth of docusoaps is the technical revolution, where the small, handy digital cameras have come to replace the rather heavy Beta camera that has been television standard. Together with tiny cordless microphones attached to the filmed person's collar, this new equipment has given the filmmakers a much larger freedom in shooting.¹⁰ Interestingly, the technical revolution of the late 1990s resembles very much the one that led to an extensive change in documentary film making in the 1960s. The new formats of documentary that emerged then are the grandfathers of the docusoaps. These observational films harvested a lot of critique, some of which is relevant also for the docusoaps. This chapter offers an introduction to Direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*, while chapter 4 includes a more thorough analysis of a docusoap strongly related to Direct cinema.

The *vérité* formats

Many of the docusoaps of today owe a lot of their form and style to the two main directions in documentary film in the early 1960s: Direct cinema that developed in the USA and Canada and *cinéma vérité* in France.

British docusoaps in the same definition.

¹⁰ All docusoaps do not necessarily use this equipment,- most of them would use a soundperson with a shotgun mike. The important aspect is that the possibility is there, and it is used.

These new ways of making non-fiction film in the early 60s developed in part because of a dramatic change in the equipment used. Lightweight cameras and synchronous sound enabled the filmmakers to go out and seek the objects of their films in a radically different way than before, and many "areas" of reality became much more accessible. Less light was needed, and the shooting could become more spontaneous. Direct cinema and cinéma vérité both sought immediacy, intimacy and what they held as "the real", as opposed to the well planned dramaturgy and more glossy look of traditional cinema, and the reconstructed reality of the earlier documentaries¹¹. This is exactly what the docusoap makers wish as well,- to be there when it's happening. An extreme variety of this is seen in the British docusoap *Driving School* and the Norwegian *Klar, ferdig, kjør!*, where there are even cameras present on the dashboard of the car. The camera crew is in a following car, with their own camera.

Direct cinema and cinéma vérité were two clearly opposed directions when it came to the content of the films. The disagreement was over the amount of filmmaker intervention and its effect. The American artisans of direct cinema believed that they came closest to "the truth" by being as little noticed as possible. The French intellectual filmmakers claimed that only through intervention could "the truth" come forward, and that the camera itself would be a catalyst for this. The most well known practitioner of cinéma vérité is the French anthropologist Jean Rouch. Where the Direct cinema-directors strongly believed that the unnoticed camera would enable them to tell the truth, so Rouch believed that the act of recording would reveal the truth:

"You know very well that when you have a microphone - such as the one you are now holding, and when you have a camera aimed at people there is, all of a sudden, a phenomenon that takes place because people are being recorded: they behave very differently than they would if they were not being recorded: but what has always seemed very strange to me is that, contrary to what one might think, when people are being recorded, the reactions that they have are always infinitely more sincere than

¹¹ See for example Macdonald & Cousins 1996:249.

those they have when they are not being recorded." (Rouch in Macdonald & Cousins 1996:268).

At first comparison, it would seem that the link from today's docusoaps are strongest to the American movement. John Corner, for instance, argues that

"The French cinema vérité movement, with which the work of the anthropologist Jean Rouch is most often associated, was in fact very unlike modern television vérité in approach. Far from wishing to render the camera "invisible" and to project what happens before it as some magical capturing of the spontaneous, Rouch and his associates showed the film-making process intervening in the events filmed, with participants not only looking at, but also addressing, the film-makers." (Corner 1996:43).

These styles have influenced television documentary making, leading to the term "vérité style" that is presently used. The term is used to describe documentary that employ some of the techniques of the two above-mentioned styles, but without following the strict rules of the original movements. What remains is the aesthetic, with grainy pictures, sometimes out of focus, hand-held camera and on-location-shooting. When people in the film or television business now say that this or that film is "vérité", this is very often what they mean. Film scholars have a tendency to look down upon this style in its current form, perhaps because it belongs to television and is then more industrialised and commercial. Brian Winston, for instance, suggests that the form has developed because it is cheaper to make than true observational cinema is:

"Vérité is an ersatz style developed by television on both sides of the Atlantic, a bastard form which reduces the rigour of direct cinema practice to an easy amalgam of handheld available-light synch shooting and older elements. Vérité films (and tapes) contain direct-cinema-style material, but can also use commentary, interviews, graphics, reconstruction and the rest of the realist documentary repertoire. As a consequence, shooting periods and ratios are reduced to levels close to traditional norms. Thus it is that the current dominant documentary style is not direct cinema itself, but is rather a derivative of it." (1996:210)

John Corner sees this development as an adaptation for television:

"The 'purist' form of observationalism practised by Graef¹² was always hard to sustain and many television series of the 1980s, though they followed the general approach and projected themselves as "fly on the wall", also used interview and occasionally voice-over to provide a continuity of information throughput and to provide an additional means of obtaining coherence and structure.." (Corner 1996:51).

This is where the docusoap belongs, although there can be large variations concerning the degree of directorial intervention. The span stretches from the continuity editing and scenes consisting of many different shots in the carefully directed *Driving School*, via the rougher, "camera-follows-events"- style of *Klar, ferdig kjør*, and to the Swedish Direct cinema-inspired *Sjukhuset*, where the directors claim to never have asked anyone to do anything for the sake of the camera. However, the impression is that most docusoaps employ an amount of directing of their pro-filmic reality to achieve what they want. Mark Bell at Selfridges in London, participant in *The Shop* (BBC 1998), explains that he was often instructed to repeat things he said that the camera didn't catch, and adds that he found it difficult to re-enact dialogues¹³.

Criticism of the vérité formats

¹² Roger Graef, maker of observational documentaries. Made among others the critically acclaimed serial *Police*, see for instance Winston 1995:210.

¹³ Cited in the Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten 30.10.98

The French and the Americans disagreed, basically about who got closest to the truth. Today, the notion that the camera presence in one way or another affects the behaviour of the people it films, is widely accepted¹⁴. In most docusoaps the camera presence clearly *incites* events, even in those serials that don't use staging or reconstruction. One example is the quarrelling between the operations manager and the chef in *Hotel*, that is clearly over-acted because of the camera presence. The camera gives the two parts an audience, to whom they can address small comments about each other. Another example is the British docusoap *The House* (BBC2 1996, about the Royal Opera House in London). Jeremy Isaacs, the former head of the opera house, recalls about the shooting:

"And what a cast they had; all of us played our roles with aplomb ... Colleagues who would normally have sent me down a paper to study the day before a meeting would now, having met Waldman (director of The House, ed.), enter my office unheralded, the camera backing before them, to bring me an instalment of financial bad news, provoking a reaction for the world to note. ... Keith Cooper¹⁵, who should have known better than any of us how to behave in front of the camera, seemed to enjoy his tantrums as Mr Nasty. He didn't need to curse and throw the telephone receiver down, but he did it with a will. He was totally in the wrong to let them film him firing a colleague. It was callous." (Isaacs 1999).

The questions that were debated across the Atlantic in the 60's are still just as relevant. One can very well ask which version of *The House* is true,- the one that Isaacs thought he knew, or the one the tv-crew got. This incident also raises questions concerning the possible exploitation of the participants in observational documentaries. I will return to this later in this chapter, as it is highly relevant both for the current docusoaps and for the other observational documentaries that have preceded the docusoaps.

¹⁴ See for instance Ellis 2000:116.

¹⁵ Public affairs manager Cooper was fired on one day's notice by the new chairman 1 1/2 year later. In an interview in the Daily Mail 1.3.99 he blames the docusoap participation for his career decline.

The first docusoap?

There is for the present not much written work on docusoap specifically. However, those who do write about it generally agree that the first docusoap ever produced was the American serial *An American family*, made in 1973 by Craig Gilbert, followed by the British serial *The family*, made by Paul Watson in 1974 as a similar concept¹⁶. Defining these two serials as the first docusoaps has only been done the last few years. The term *docusoap* was not yet invented at the time when these serials were produced. As late as in 1996, the media scholar John Corner writes about new trends in documentary television without ever mentioning the term docusoap. He uses the term "domestic vérité" about *The Family*, but refers that at the time, the series was criticised for being "real life soap-opera" (Corner 1996:47).

Both these series followed a family for a period of time, and in Britain the series even started broadcasting before the shooting was completed (Winston 1995:205). This is in itself a typical feature of fiction soap.

Almost 20 years after he made one of the first docusoaps ever, Paul Watson made another controversial docusoap, *Sylvania Waters* (BBC 1992). This serial follows an upper middle class Australian family and neighbourhood, and also aroused much public debate about its revealing portrayal of the family members. Even after having made these two, very important documentary serials, Paul Watson, in an interview on BBC's webpages, vigorously refuses to be called the father of docusoap:

"The current crop of docusoaps come 20 years after I made The Family. I can't believe that the genre has been gestating for all that time - they were produced for economic reasons, and because people needed something to laugh at. It wasn't because of me."¹⁷

¹⁶ See for instance Sand 1999:24.

¹⁷ http://search.bbc.co.uk/home/interview_archive/paul_watson.shtr

Paul Watson is now mostly famous for his critical documentaries such as the controversial *The Dinner Party* and *The Fishing Party*. In the above mentioned interview, Watson is very critical of the docusoaps of today:

"They are all the things that I try not to have happen when I make a film. Modern docusoaps have very little relevance to our lives - they touch us in the need of entertainment. Yes, there are too many, and they do not enrich our understanding of our neighbours or even of ourselves, because all we are invited to do is sit in our chairs and laugh at them."(ibid.)

Many docusoap-makers will oppose his claim. As I hope to show in this thesis, many docusoaps do invite us to do a lot more than sit and laugh. It is however clear that the entertainment aspect is a lot more prominent in the docusoaps than it in many other kinds of traditional documentary television or film.

Exploitation of participants

Docusoaps are extremely character-focused documentaries,- and many have noted that the characters themselves are often a bit original. The ethical question of exploitation of participants is natural to pose. I find it useful to draw some lines back into the history of observational documentary, and then look close at a docusoap example.

The participants in Paul Watson's observational documentaries are among those who, after having read the newspaper reviews, have felt exploited. *"Watson's characters have been surprised (and sometimes outraged) by the level of public debate that has taken place about their values and behaviours."*, as John Ellis writes (2000:117).

The same apparently was the case when this predecessor of docusoap, *An American Family* was screened. Director Craig Gilbert claims that all the episodes were pre-approved by some member of the family before screening, usually by the mother, Pat Loud, herself. (Gilbert in Rosenthal 1988:289). She always approved, only with smaller objections. She even wrote a letter to Gilbert after one screening, where she praises the crew for handling the film with kindness and honesty, and also expresses how enormously pleased she is with the result. But,-

that was before the serial had been screened on TV. Pat Loud became highly critical of Craig Gilbert, accusing him of betraying her and her family, after she had read the reviews of the serial. Many of these wrote about the Loud family the way you would about a new play. For instance: "*The breakdown of communication so striking in the Loud family is perhaps a typically American disease ... Again and again a single scene encapsulates the family tragedy...*" (Fredelle Maynard, in Rosenthal 1988:291). The interesting thing is, that these quotes are actually from a very *positive* review, one that interprets the serial exactly as Gilbert wanted,- like a piece of film that gives you inspiration to look at yourself and your own family, and perhaps do something.

One of the reasons why these problems occur, is that a character's performance in a documentary can be interpreted in many directions. The reaction from the participant who feels exploited, usually doesn't come until the TV reviews in the newspapers are printed, and the critics state their interpretation. This was the case when the very famous Norwegian documentary *Med hjertet på rett plass* (With the heart in the right place, NRK 1997) was screened. The film portrays an upper class woman, Ingeborg Sørensen, who arranges a charity ball on Valentine's Day. The film reveals that the economical result for charity is very small, and that the main goal is just to make a great ball for society. The main character saw the film before screening, approved, and even liked it,- but was shocked when she met the press reviews.

This seems not to be the case with the current docusoap-participants. Several of the docusoap stars are interviewed in papers and in tv-programmes following their fame. One interesting example is the colourful general manager of the Adelphi in *Hotel* (BBC 1997), Eileen Downey. The whole serial starts with Downey scolding a young employee in the most unsympathetic way, and there are several incidents throughout the serial where she is seen to employ "divide-and-rule-management", as well as being very rude to her employees. To the filmmakers, Eileen is exactly what they are looking for, a personality of the kind that leaves the audience open-mouthed. The ethical questions remain the same as for Craig Gilbert: Could she possibly be aware of how she seems on the screen, and how will her reaction be once she reads the critics? A different question concerns to which extent the

picture of her is true? What has been selected in the editing, and what has been left out? And how representative is what is shown for the whole situation?

Eileen Downey was indeed termed "Cruella de Ville" by her critics. But, like many other docusoap stars that have been interviewed some time after the screening, she seems happy with her performance. "What criticism? I've seen all the Press cuttings and I think they're favourable", says Eileen Downey to *The Daily Mail* 1.3.99. She adds that she has had plenty of job offers from other hotel chains after she was on television, because "anyone would want a businesswoman of my calibre to run their hotel" (ibid.).

The perhaps most famous docusoap star of all, cleaning woman Maureen Rees from *Driving School*, says that participating in the docusoap has only done her good. She has done several other tv-shows, and even recorded a single. Rees used the money she earned on all this to set up her own cleaning firm (which she stated in the docusoap was her dream), and says to *The Daily Mail* that the only thing she regrets is her life before *Driving School*.

It seems the press coverage has changed from criticism to an attitude of awe, that these people are the stars of our time. The press is now, as was the case with *Driving School*, more concerned with the authenticity of the documentary, and with ethical problems connected to claims of authenticity.

There are several reasons why the docusoap characters do not feel exploited the way a Pat Loud or an Ingeborg Sørensen does. First of all, docusoaps are entertainment, not investigative, revealing documentaries. The mood of the serials is light. Even so, many might think that Maureen Rees should have been protected against herself, failing the driving test 7 times and crying openly in front of the camera. Calvin Pryluck writes on ethics in documentary film making about the right to privacy: "*When we break down the defences of (participants) and force them to disclose feelings they might prefer to keep hidden, we are tampering with a fundamental human right*" (Pryluck in Rosenthal:88:259). This is true, but there is a very thin line between protecting people and denying them access to a television that is more and more accessible to everyone. Maureen Rees got her licence in the end. She

was quite happy with her own performance, and it could very well be argued, she has as much right as everybody else to be on television.

1.4. Docusoap in Norway and in Britain

An American Family and *Sylvania Waters* are the ancestors of docusoap, but the start of the genre's success as commercial, soap-like entertainment, was probably a series called *Animal Hospital Week*, that was shown in Britain in 1994 (Ellis 2000:141). After this serial had proven successful, many other docusoaps emerged in Britain. They all attracted rather large audiences, ranging from the quite successful serials like *The House* (BBC2 1996, about Covent Garden Opera house, max. 4 million viewers), *Health Farm* (BBC 1998, 7 mill.) and *Clampers* (BBC 1998, about parking wardens, 7.5 mill.), to the ratings successes that made everybody want to be on the docusoap-wave: *Hotel* (BBC 1997, 10 mill), *Driving School* (BBC 1997, 12 mill.) and *Airport*, that in March 1999 was the largest docusoap-success so far on the ratings, with up to 13 million viewers.¹⁸

The format has spread, at least to Scandinavia: Both Sweden and Denmark have their docusoaps. In Denmark, *Stripperkongens piger* (The girls of the striptease king, TVDanmark 1999) has been a ratings success as the most watched programme of the channel. In Sweden, the first episodes of *Sjukhuset* (TV4 1999) were the most watched on their channel, with the exception of the news programme.

Norway lags a little behind. Until the turn of the millennium, only one proper docusoap had been made in Norway: *Klar, ferdig, kjør* (TVNorge 1999), that I will discuss in detail in chapter 3. There have, however, on NRK been two productions related to the genre, that I will just mention here. One is a serial called *U 8 1/2*, about eight young people (one pregnant, who makes up the one-and-a-half person) who moved into a house together. This is a remake of the British *The Living Soap* (BBC 1993/94), a serial that John Corner describes as doing "radical modifications ... to vérité." (Corner 1996:51). In the sense of narrative structure, this programme is docusoap. It follows and focuses on characters that have a setting in common.

What removes it from docusoap is the strong element of staging,- that the situation they are in is imposed on them by the TV-channel. In this sense, it is closer to Corner's *game frame*, like the *Robinson*-programmes.

The other predecessor is a 3-episode serial called *Politiskolen* (Police academy, NRK 1998). Following the students of the Police academy in Oslo through 3 years of education, it is structured more by chronology than by the narrative principles of soap. The characters never become well-defined and familiar, a characteristic of docusoap. The episodes had more than 900.000 spectators, high ratings in Norway, but this first try of something resembling docusoap was not followed by NRK until recently.

The spring of 2000 has seen four Norwegian produced docusoaps so far. TV2 has tried a mainstream, prime time soap called *Dyreparken* (The Zoo), a safe concept that was bought from Britain. NRK1 has screened *Vi er Vål'enga* (We are Vål'enga) and *Flekke United*, both shown after prime time and clearly aimed at the youth segment of the audience. TVNorge has shown *8 barn i vente* (8 children to come) at an even later hour.

1.5. TV-scheduling.

For the most part, serials are created as vehicles for selling viewers to advertisers, and, as such, they first and foremost serve the interests of the institutions that produce, broadcast, and sponsor them.

Robert C. Allen (1999:24)

In chapter 3, I will discuss which factors are decisive for why the format of docusoap is so popular on television right now, and how concepts are recycled by the industry. The concept of scheduling is central to this question. Here I will provide a brief historical framework for

¹⁸ Daily Mail 1.3.99, and Aftenposten 30.10.98, Dagens Næringsliv (ukjent dato, 1998.)

understanding the commercial functions of seriality, and the scheduling strategies in a society with many tv-channels.

The tv-serial as commodity

Some explanation of the docusoap success can be found in the history of the fictional series, soaps and others. Following the rapid development of cable and satellite television, fiction series were almost globally distributed in the 1980s (Allen:1995:12). These series, North American, Latin American, British or Australian, became a commodity, a relatively cheap way for the broadcasters of filling air time with entertainment. At this stage, there were only a few European countries who produced their own soaps¹⁹.

During the 1990s, more and more countries started producing their own soaps and not just broadcasting foreign soaps (O'Donnell 1999:28). The large growth in the number of TV-channels demanded more and more programmes to fill broadcasting time,- and lesser profits for the TV-channels. Compared to producing fiction soap, docusoap is cheaper to produce. As they saw a new possibility for making a profit, television companies threw themselves onto the new wave.

Seriality: Guaranteed profit

All use of the serial format has a purpose, argues Roger Hagedorn: The serial on TV promotes the next episode of itself, through the use of the cliffhanger (Hagedorn in Allen 1995:28). It promotes the brand name of the product, e.g. the production company's name, and it promotes the medium itself, expressed for instance in TV2's slogan *Norges seriemester* (Norway's serial champion). As I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, seriality has been used in commercial television such as in the USA from the very start. In the European countries, with national public service-broadcasters, the situation was different. The growth in the number of

¹⁹ Norway got its first soap in 1994, when NRK launched "I de beste familier" (In the best of families). Even if it was a considerable success, with more than 1 million viewers, NRK stopped it after 21 episodes. (O'Donnell 1999:136).

TV-channels has forced television to change also here (Ellis 2000:45), even if from the early days of public television, *repetition* has been an important way of structuring broadcasting.

*"The era of scarcity saw the development of the routines of the television series, of the multiple versions of the same basic format. This habit, which makes television production a much more industrial process than film-making, also binds it profoundly to its audience. Television is familiar and everyday, and its series return in the same form in the same time slots with a reassuring familiarity."*²⁰

Scheduling in Ellis' "era of scarcity", when countries had one or two tv-channels, was built upon television's assumptions of what people were doing at certain times,- e.g. coming home from work, finishing supper, and upon the assumptions of when people watched television,- at the dinner table while eating, or in the sofa after finishing the meal. As long as a country has 2-3 TV-channels, traditionally one public broadcaster and one or two commercial channels, the scheduling is based on *complementarity*. Each channel seeks to offer something different from the other, from the assumption that the audience is an all-inclusive, relatively homogenous mass. The situation is totally different once you get more than 3-4 channels. The audience is then conceived as consisting of minorities, and programming can seek to reach these minorities, and often unify some of them (Ellis 2000:71).

The competition between the TV-channels in Norway has not yet fully reached the stage it has in other countries, e.g. in Britain. Norway still has only 3 terrestrial channels that cover

²⁰ John Ellis calls the first decades of television "the era of scarcity" in his book "Seeing Things" (2000:48). The next era, that of availability, is what we are living in now, with TV readily available, but still scheduled. In the future, Ellis predicts, we will enter the third era,- the era of plenty.

the whole population, and one with less coverage. From being based on complementarity, however, the two main channels NRK1 and TV2 choose more and more to compete head on.

The planned schedules for the autumn 2000 show that news and current affairs are still their preferred means of competition, as it has been for the last years. There might still be surprises, - scheduling strategies are in general cards that are kept close to the chest. The third chapter of this thesis will discuss how docusoap can be used as such a strategy, but before that, I will discuss the docusoap's narrative structure in chapter 2.

1.6. Theoretical approach

The following chapters of this thesis will offer 3 analyses, each discussing a pair of films. Each of these analyses uses a somewhat different theoretical framework to bring out different perspectives on docusoap.

Chapter 2 concerns narrative, and how this is shaped by television. The chapter offers an analysis of the docusoap *Hotel* and the fiction soap *Hotel Cæsar*. This pair of films is chosen because they provide a tool for analysing the relationship between docusoap and soap. *Hotel Cæsar* is chosen because it is the only daily, Norwegian soap opera. I chose to compare it to *Hotel* because of the similar setting in a hotel, that provides a background for discussing similarities in choice of locations and topics in soap opera and docusoap. In this analysis I will draw upon theory written on fiction soap, mainly Hugh O'Donnell, Robert C. Allen and Jostein Gripsrud, but also Christine Geraghty and Roger Hagedorn. By applying their theories on a comparative analysis of the two formats, I will discuss how the soap opera has influenced the new genre of docusoap.

Chapter 3 discusses the production of docusoap and its place in the schedules of the TV-channels. Drawing mainly on John Ellis' theoretical work on scheduling, I will develop this theme by looking at how the TV-channels schedule their output, and also how formats and themes are being recycled and re-used. For this purpose, I have chosen to analyse another pair of films, the British docusoap *Driving School* and its Norwegian remake *Klar, ferdig kjør* (Ready steady drive). This pair is chosen because of the relation between the two serials.

The production history of *Klar, ferdig kjørt* offers a useful case for studying the process of negotiation that precedes the final result on the TV screens. I will show how this negotiation between director, production company and commissioning editor was decisive for choices made in the production process. This concerns both the reasons why the format of docusoap was chosen, why the driving test became the theme of the first Norwegian docusoap, as well as why some features from the British serial were kept in the Norwegian one, where as others, like the style, were not. This again will shed light upon how television uses this new hybrid genre, and how the documentary serial is shaped by the way television uses it.

In chapter 3 I will also offer a close analysis of the levels of meaning in *Klar, ferdig kjørt*. For this purpose, I will again employ John Ellis, and discuss docusoap in relation to his concept of working through²¹. I will also use Hugh O'Donnell's model for analysing the narrative levels of soap operas, and apply it to this docusoap (O'Donnell 1999:21).

In chapter 4, I proceed to discuss the concept of authenticity. For analysis in this chapter, I introduce another pair of films, the Swedish documentary serial *Sjukhuset* (The Hospital, 1999) and the Danish fiction serial *Riget* (The Kingdom, 1994). These are chosen because of their apparent similarity. A comparison of the two provides a tool for analysing why a certain visual look is perceived as more authentic, and why some fiction films strive for this look. Since *Sjukhuset* is closely related to the Direct cinema filmmaking tradition, I will employ theories concerning the observational cinema movement that developed in the 60s, mainly Brian Winston's work, but also draw upon the work of Bill Nichols and John Corner.

Through these three analyses I hope to shed light upon the docusoap genre, and in this way tell something about the television documentary today, and its relation to its medium.

²¹Ellis 2000:102.

"..the only narrative form that has been developed especially for the broadcasting media - the soap opera".

Jostein Gripsrud

2. What is this genre?

A comparative analysis of the docusoap *Hotel* and the fiction soap *Hotel Cæsar*.

In the docusoap genre, *seriality* has been chosen as a method for making documentary programmes more attractive for television. In this chapter I will discuss *why* this is so. It is the genre of soap opera that is the main serial inspiration for docusoaps. Analysing an episode of a fiction soap, and comparing it to a docusoap episode, will shed light upon what characteristics of the fiction soap that have been adopted by the docusoap, and how this influences the narration of the docusoap. For this purpose, I will look at two serials: The Norwegian fiction soap *Hotel Cæsar*, and the British docusoap *Hotel*. I have chosen two episodes from these series by random, the only criterion being that they were not the first episodes in the serials, as the initial episodes where many characters have to be established invariably will have a slightly different structure. My chosen episode 226 of *Hotel Cæsar* and episode 4 of *Hotel* are both typical of their genres.

The soap genre was introduced to the people of Norway with the American soap opera *Dynasty*. *Dynasty* was a prime-time soap of the kind that became common in the USA in the mid-1980s (Hagedorn in Allen 1995:39). These once-a-week serials tend to have a slightly higher status than the everyday soaps that are shown earlier in the day. The extent of industrialization of the production is of course much higher for a show that is on every day than for making a weekly episode, and this might explain some of the low cultural status of the soaps²². This adds an interesting dimension to the debate about docusoaps. As long as fiction soap remains to be considered as a lesser cultural form, the poor image that sticks to it will naturally follow the soap-label, also when it is attached to documentary. As mentioned

²² For 1 episode of the weekly soap *Dynasty*, the director could be given 7 days of preparation and 7 of shooting. For a daily soap there is just 1 day shooting for each episode, according to Jostein Gripsrud (1999:306). Under these shooting conditions, the easiest, most cliché solutions must always be chosen, he argues.

previously, some will therefore choose not to use the term, as is the case with the serial *Sjukhuset*, which I discuss in chapter 4.

For many years, soap was something that came from abroad, but, following the development in the rest of Europe, Norway now has domestic soaps²³.

The real life hotel and the fictional one

Norway's first domestic²⁴ daily soap was *Hotel Cæsar*, which began its run on TV2 five days a week from 1998. The serial has grown to become a success for TV2, reaching its peak so far with episode 220, attracting 881.000 viewers on February 4. 2000²⁵. This episode gave TV2 a marketshare of 55 %.

In Britain one of the greatest successes for the BBC the last years was the docusoap *Hotel*²⁶, about the luxurious Britannia Hotel Adelphi in Liverpool. It has been shown twice on TV2 in Norway ("*Velkommen til Hotel Adelphi*", 1998 og 2000.) This chapter will offer a brief comparative analysis of the two. I will look at similarities and differences in the structure of the soap and docusoap, both regarding the ways of presenting individual episodes, and the narrative structures.

2.1. Narrative structure in soap and docusoap

²³ The production of soap has increased immensely in Europe the last years. Hugh O'Donnell writes in *Good Times, Bad Times*: "*In mid-1989 there were eight domestic soaps in production in Europe, six in the UK, one in Eire and one in Germany. ... By mid-1997, as I bring this manuscript to a close, the number has increased to over 40.*"

²⁴ domestic here meaning "made in Norway", not domestic as in concerning the home.

²⁵ http://www.tv2no/caesar/_hovedside.html

²⁶ The title is "Hotel", but I will use "Hotel Adelphi" throughout this thesis for clarifying purposes.

As mentioned in chapter 1, both fiction soap and docusoap are *serials*. They are "to be continued". To analyse which features of fiction soap the docusoap has adopted, I will start with a comparison of the narrative structures of an episode of *Hotel Cæsar*, and of *Hotel Adelphi*.

The many storylines

Hotel Cæsar. Characteristic for the narrative in soap are the many interrelating storylines or plotlines that develop parallel to each other. Each episode is then concentrating on a few of these storylines, jumping back and forth between them (Allen 1995:18). Usually, but not always, one storyline will stand forward as more important for the episode than others. One example of this is episode 226 of *Hotel Cæsar*: The episode opens with two young girls, Tove and Benedikte, discussing a party they are going to the same night. The topic of their conversation is drugs, and we understand that one of them, Tove, has been into drugs before. Next, cut to office where a woman, Ninni, has an angry conversation with a man, Jens August. The woman tells him that he is not the father of the child she is carrying. Then, cut back to the two girls. The mother of one of them enters, tells that she can't babysit, and leaves a letter. Cut back to Ninni, and so on and so on. This fragmented way of telling is characteristic of the narrative style of the soap.

The storyline concerning the 2 girls comes forward as the main one in this episode. We return to it 6 times during the 25 minute episode. In addition, there is a related storyline emerging from it: The mother can't babysit because she has a romantic date with the piccolo she has been trying to have an affair with. There are three main storylines in this episode, but if the "branching" storylines are counted, we reach a total of six. They change seemingly unpredictably, in the way that is characteristic for soap (Gripsrud 1995:216), but retain their "internal" dramaturgy.

Hotel Adelphi: The docusoap *Hotel Adelphi* also follows several storylines in its fourth episode, but the *presentation* of them differs dramatically from the fiction soap. The episode starts with the narrator telling that there are three weddings taking place at the hotel today, and this is the main storyline. Three other storylines are specific for this episode: The

chambermaids being dissatisfied with having to do too many rooms; a symphony orchestra rehearsing in the dining room, and the reception switchboard being out of order and causing problems. There are also several smaller storylines that are touched upon, for instance the ongoing disputes of the Chef and operations manager Brian Birchill. These storylines continue across the episodes all through the serial, in a way that is similar to soap.

The never-ending narrative

Classical storytelling usually has one central storyline, is built on a cause-and-effect-chain, and very often deals with a protagonist trying to reach his goal. Typical for the classical drama is to follow this struggle until the protagonist reaches the goal, and then, whether he succeeds or not, the story is "solved", it ends. The ending or closing of the narrative holds a great deal of the spectator pleasure in the narrative.

The soap story, or rather, the soap structure that allows the telling of many stories, is very different²⁷. First of all, there is no closure. Even if one of the many storylines seem to close,- a character dies or disappears,- this is never irreversible (Allen 1995:19). For instance, NRK's longest running soap, *Offshore*, was stopped in 1999 with an episode that "rounded up" many of the characters and storylines on a cruise ship. Here, several of the previously stormy and unresolved relationships came to a reconciliation which gives the characters a possibility to "live happily ever after". The closing of the narrative is however not at all definitive. All the stories can be revived at a later time, if NRK so wishes.

Since there is no solution to the dramas in soap, the pleasure of the narrative lies elsewhere. In the current episode of *Hotel Cæsar* none of the storylines come any closer to a "solution" or an "end". We are given lots of possibilities for imagining how the different storylines are connected to each other, and we can speculate where the plots are going. Tove receives a letter, telling her that she is charged with drug sale. Has she really done this? Will her mother know? How is she going to get out of the problem? To the accidental spectator, these questions might not seem too intriguing. As several scholars have remarked, it takes a lot of knowledge to fully understand and appreciate a soap episode²⁸.

²⁷ See for instance O'Donnell 1999: 6.

²⁸ See for example Allen 1995:20.

My chosen episode 4 of *Hotel Adelphi* is not so close to the narration of the soap when it comes to the openendedness. The main storylines of this episode are all concluded by the end, the same way as in a *series* structure (see chapter 1). However, there are several smaller, ongoing storylines that continue across the episodes of *Hotel Adelphi*.

The 3 main stories of this episode,- the organization of 3 weddings in a day, the beginning of an uproar among the overworked chambermaids, and the breakdown of the reception switchboard,- are all resolved by the end of the episode. Weddings are celebrated, the rebellious chambermaid resigned and got a new job, and the switchboard is fixed. These stories are all concerning external actions that the central characters of the Adelphi universe have to handle. The long-term storylines that continue from episode to episode are, exactly as in soap, never resolved or closed. The most important one of these, the ongoing battle between Chef and Brian Birchill, will continue to be an un-detonated bomb for the whole serial,- and certainly one that gives the competent spectator greater pleasure than it gives the viewer who is there for one episode only.

The competent spectator

The soap format allows a new spectator to enter the soap universe at any given episode,- but with difficulty. The soap rewards the long-time spectator,- she can do a reading of an episode that is far more advanced than the accidental spectator's. It takes *competence* to fully enjoy the narrative (Allen:1995:8). Watching an episode of *Hotel Cæsar* for the first time, it is almost impossible to understand the relevance of the different happenings, simply because the universe of the soap is unknown. To a competent spectator, all the small information given has relevance. "*In order to realize pleasure from their engagement with the serials, the viewer must "stay tuned"* (Allen 1995:12).

In the typical way of soap, scenes from the different storylines in *Hotel Cæsar* (4-5 subplots in this episode), change unpredictably (Gripsrud 1995:216). Each scene usually has a dramaturgy of its own, gives an emotional *kick*, before it ends (ibid.). For the accidental spectator, these *kicks* are instantly recognizable and understandable, and help the viewer to get into the story, perhaps to that she will later become a devoted viewer.

The "wrapping",- narrative help for the spectator

The soap usually also gives additional help to uninitiated spectators, by using small "flashbacks", short cuts from the last episode, at the start of each new episode. As I will show, these are more for the initiated viewer, who has perhaps missed an episode or two, and not so much for the "beginner".

A new, un-initiated spectator to a fiction soap like *Hotel Cæsar* will have trouble in understanding the first episode watched. This is very seldom a problem with docusoaps, as the "wrapping", or initial information given, is different, and designed to give all spectators, new and old, the possibility to understand. Both soaps and docusoaps have an introductory sequence before the storytelling of the episode starts,- usually some kind of recapitulation of events that have happened, or "teasers" of events to come. This "wrapping" is usually a lot more internal in a soap than in a docusoap. To illustrate the differences, I will describe the way an episode of *Hotel Cæsar* is presented, compared to a *Hotel Adelphi*-episode:

Cæsar

The 116th episode of *Hotel Cæsar* starts with short cuts of action from the last episode, some of them separated by a short white flash, possibly to distinguish them from the "realistic" clean cutting of the "main" episode. There is no voice over to explain, only the characters themselves saying things about each other, things that are clearly important to the competent spectator. Then, after the "reminders", the title sequence starts, with all the serial characters in panorama and the title: *Hotel Cæsar-Et hjem for oss, et hjem for deg* (- a home to us, a home to you..) The opening sequence is followed by a total shot of the hotel (actually a hotel building in Oslo), and then the episode itself starts with two girls discussing whether to go to a party or not. They talk about boys and about drugs. This is perhaps the main storyline of this episode, recurring six times during the episode, and ending with a cliffhanger.

Very few docusoaps reach this level of intricacy on the level of relations. On the contrary, most docusoaps have a very clear explanation at the start of each episode, actually leading you by the hand into each episode. I will exemplify this with describing in detail the opening scene of *Hotel Adelphi*'s episode 4.

Adelphi

First, the opening sequence which is accompanied by upbeat music: A total shot of the building, with fast (digital effects) zooms in on the windows, behind each we see some of the main characters. Then the episode starts, with the narrator telling us, in a very elegant way, what are the main stories of today's episode.

Opening picture: C.u. balloon with wedding inscription being inflated. Staff working.

V.o.: "The Adelphi will host 50 weddings this summer, 3 are taking place today. Operations manager Brian Birchill will need all his staff for the 350 guests."

Brian phones people to ask them to work, goes busily around in hotel informing that there are 3 weddings and a symphonic orchestra. Brian reaches office, 6 staff short already. Room manager tells that there is also a room problem, yesterday's couple does not want to leave the bridal suite. Cut to chamber maid in corridor, knocking on door:

"-I'll come back later, it's only the maid, I'll come back later."

V.o.: "They have 7 hours to clean 391 rooms."

Cut to dining room where orchestra is rehearsing.

V.o.: "The orchestra has 2 hours to rehearse,- in three hours they will have to be replaced by dinner tables All this has to be coordinated by Brian."

After such an introduction, the un-initiated spectator will have no difficulties in entering this universe and understand all the storylines. The premise of the episode is, (as it very often is in this serial): Will the joined forces of the Hotel Adelphi staff really manage these enormous and impossible-seeming tasks that they have?

Stay tuned: The cliffhanger

Not only does fiction soap have a distinct narrative form, - just as important are the *interruptions* of the narrative. Soap is built around the interruptions that television requires (Allen 1995:17), and because of soap's mainly commercial purpose, it is of vital importance

to pull the viewers along to the next episode. The device used for this is the so called *cliffhanger*; a moment of such suspense that the audience "must" see the next episode. Obviously, the cliffhangers are used by the end of each episode. The individual commercial contract of each TV station or country is also of vital importance. In the USA, the soap episode is normally 45 minutes long and consists of 4 "acts", divided by commercial breaks. Each act has a dramatic curve that is rising before the breaks, and even more so towards the end of an episode (Gripsrud 1995:216). The most dramatic questions occur at the end of a season, to keep the spectators' interest alive across, for instance, summer vacation. The interruption in itself becomes a part of the narrative,- the part where the spectator is at work in figuring out what is going to happen next (Allen 1995:18).

TV2, which broadcasts *Hotel Cæsar*, and also has sent *Hotel Adelphi* in Norway, is by legislation not allowed to interrupt programmes with commercial breaks, with a few exceptions for longer entertainment shows, game shows etc. That means that an episode of *Hotel Cæsar* has a dramatic curve rising steadily towards the end of the episode.

In episode 226 of *Hotel Cæsar*, the cliffhanger doesn't seem too dramatic,- a slightly "bad guy" could be appointed to be the hotel manager,- the cliffhanger question being "will this happen? The broadcaster also helps us, the spectators, by asking this question in voice over when the credits are on screen. This is clearly an unresolved plotline that continues on to the next episode.

Since many consider the cliffhanger to be the foremost characteristic of the soap genre, it is interesting that *Hotel Adelphi*, and many other docusoaps, don't use this kind of cliffhanger at all. Both in this and the other episodes, all the stories are solved within the episode. The narrator actually completes all the stories, and sums up in this specific episode that Pat (the chambermaid) left 3 weeks after, she now stacks shelves at a local cash-&-carry, Michelle and Tony (one of the married couples) got a daughter, and the switchboard is repaired. Then, the narrator goes on to tell that next week Eileen receives hundreds of war veterans, Evelyn has a shift from hell,- and will Brian catch his plane to Torremolinos? These are not at all cliffhangers, since their stories are not even started. They are *teasers*. As such, they are yet another device to help organize the docussoap narrative around the interruptions.

The docusoap that does employ cliffhangers the most, is the Danish *Stripperkongens Piger* (The Girls of the Striptease King). As each episode usually features one or more striptease shows or competitions, the serial takes great care that the girls always have a few more garments to strip when the commercial break starts.

Other docusoaps

As it finishes most of the main stories in each episode, *Hotel Adelphi* in this matter is not typical of the genre, as it has more of a *series* than a serial structure. The docusoap genre is a hybrid one, and different ways of storytelling are used the way the filmmakers think they will work best. In most of the other docusoaps, the narrative closeness to the soap is more obvious. In, for instance, *Stripperkongens Piger*, the plotlines are more continuous across the episodes, and even the more event-based stories, like the girls' participation in the stripper-of-the-year-contest, is normally told over two episodes, with the classical cliffhanger at the end of the first episode. Also other Scandinavian serials such as *Klar, ferdig, kjør* and *Sjukhuset* have continuous plotlines all the way through.

Real time, parallell time:

One of the characteristics of soap is that it takes place in *parallel time* (O'Donnell 1999:6, Gripsrud 1999:216). This means that, with certain adaptations, we get the impression that what happens on TV has happened more or less at the same time as it has taken us to watch it. This is a truth with modifications. In a traditional everyday soap such as *Hotel Cæsar* (TV2), the episode usually starts in the morning, has a few "morning" scenes, and ends with something that happens the same night. Things that in real life takes more time,- a pregnancy, an illness, can in a soap be done in 4 -5 months.

Docusoaps will try to follow this scheme usually for the main story in each episode, but clearly gets problems when reality is changing,- e.g. pregnancy in *Hotel Adelphi*. Also, a "reality" universe will meet problems that do not exist in the fictional universe; changing seasons. This is clearly visible in docusoaps with outdoor shooting: In the Norwegian docusoap *Klar, ferdig, kjør*, the seasons clearly changed way too fast to support the concept of parallell time. The producers nonetheless tried to keep the seasons inside episodes, but sometimes showed snow and autumn in the same episode. Shooting in Bergen, Norway, the

crew obviously had to deal with extremely changing weather conditions, but the continuity problems this could have caused are to a certain extent solved through conventional means for showing the passing of time.

The location of soap and docusoap

Since soap opera emphasises talk over action, an important criterion for their choice of main locations is that they are places where people meet and talk. A hotel is this kind of location. Others can be a wealthy estate (*Dynasty*), a medical office (*A Country Practice*), or, in Britain particularly, a pub (*Eastenders*). The main location can be a public sphere, but there will normally be several domestic locations, in the private sphere of the characters. The amount of outdoors scenes varies. *Hotel Cæsar* hardly moves outdoors, except from the establishing shot of the hotel. NRK's soap *Offshore* developed a more and more outdoors-oriented look, shooting more and more scenes on real locations in the city of Bergen. This was where the head office of the oil company of the serial was situated. The other main location was the oil platform "Huldra", where some sequences were shot on location on a platform in the North Sea.

The early observational serials that are now termed the first docusoaps, *An American family*, *The Family* and *Sylvania Waters*, all had domestic locations. The present docusoaps tend to stick to the institutional, like the workplace, and only rarely follows their characters back home. If they do, it's only to complement the picture. The *home* is never the universe.

2.2. The function of docusoap

Studies of fiction soaps have shown that, although they are lightweight entertainment with no purpose of educating the audience, fiction soap nevertheless has a function in relation to its audience. It offers a fictional universe where problems and topics from the "real" universe can be brought out in full daylight, to be explained "teaspoon by teaspoon" and shed light upon from every angle. (See for instance Ellis 2000:110, O'Donnell 1999:225). In my chosen episode of *Hotel Cæsar*, many of these problems in modern society are touched upon: Drug abuse (one of the two young girls have apparently been into drugs before), (young) single

parenthood (the other girl has a baby son that she brings to the party), complications after divorce (Mercedes, the ex' of Åge, makes Solrunn jealous), "messing around" (Ninni tells someone she's been to bed with that he doesn't have to believe he's the reason for her pregnancy).

Docusoaps may have a similar function, but with a slightly different positioning of the spectator. Since docusoaps are non-fictional, they will invariably be less dramatic, and the events can be more complicated to read meaning from. The docusoaps can handle the same topics as above, but seemingly without *treating* them. The topics are there in *Hotel Adelphi*, for instance drugs: The porter finds a mysterious box with cannabis in a Japanese couple's room. Towards the end of the episode it turns out this is green tea. Or homosexuality: One of the "stars" of *Hotel Adelphi*, operations manager Brian Birchill, talks about himself in a strained situation: "I'm a 43 year old gay,- I shouldn't be doing this!" But his homosexuality is never an issue of debate or problematisation in the serial. This in itself is nevertheless also a way of treating a current and perhaps, among some, still controversial topic. The fact that a theme that would, in a fiction soap opera, cause an amount of trouble and discussion is treated as being perfectly normal in a docusoap, is also a way of treating a subject and of sending a message to the spectator.

The difference in the way we perceive docusoap and soap opera lies in the fact that they are two different genres, and one of them is non-fictional. Still, our knowledge from the other genres help us to read meaning from docusoap: "*Armed with the psychological knowledges which inform talk show debates and float around in soap operas, viewers of documentaries can bring their own analytic frameworks to bear upon the characters of documentary*", writes John Ellis (2000:116). In my analysis of the Norwegian docusoap *Klar, ferdig kjør* in the next chapter, I will discuss which meanings that can be read from this serial, that in the same way as *Hotel Adelphi*, does not problematise or discuss its, perhaps, controversial topics.

The comparative analysis of soap opera and docusoap in this chapter has shown from where the new genre docusoap receives its narrative inspiration. It has shown how a television form that is a structure for the simultaneous telling of many fiction stories, works well also on a non-fiction material. My analysis however also shows that some adjustments have had to be made to combine the soap opera and the documentary, mainly to make the material more

accessible to the spectator. Where soap opera can give us insight into what the different characters think and feel through reaction shots and close ups, a documentary soap uses the narrator to give us the information we need for understanding.

In my next chapter, I will move on to see how docusoap is used by television. Using the Norwegian docusoap *Klar, ferdig kjør* as a case study, I will look at the processes of negotiation that take place between the film director, the producer and the commissioning editor, and see how this negotiation is decisive for how the final product appears on television.

"The demands generated by the process of scheduling now drive the broadcast television system."

John Ellis

3. Why is it on television?

On the choice and recycling of formats and themes in docusoap

The previous chapters focused on the narrative structures that have influenced docusoap, and on how TV-serialisation has defined this new genre. These themes continue in this chapter, but I will develop them further by looking at how the TV-channels schedule their output, and also how formats and themes are being recycled and re-used. For this purpose, I will introduce two new serials: The first Norwegian docusoap *Klar, ferdig kjør*, and its British predecessor *Driving School*. Comparing the two, I will discuss the choice of topic and location, casting of characters, and visual and directorial style. I will predominantly concentrate on the Norwegian series, which was made after the success of the British one. In doing so, I will focus on the process of negotiation where all the above mentioned factors are discussed, factors that were decisive for how this serial was conceived, made, and broadcast.

The theoretical framework on narrative from the last chapter will also be utilised in this one. In addition, I will use concepts from John Ellis, particularly in relation to "scheduling" and "working through". Towards the end of the chapter, I will expand the theoretical framework to include concepts from Hugh O'Donnell. Utilising his theories on narrative levels in soap operas, I will analyse *Klar, ferdig kjør* with the purpose of understanding the meaning of the text.

3.1. A British success and the first Norwegian docusoap

The two serials I will concentrate on in this chapter are one of the most famous British docusoaps, and its Norwegian remake.

Driving School was directed and produced by Francesca Joseph for the BBC in 1997. The 8 episodes were shown in Norway on NRK 1998. According to ratings, this serial was a success in Britain, with up to 12 million viewers. The serial follows a number of characters through the process of getting their driving licences. *Driving School* created the first, big docusoap star in Maureen Rees. She is a rather eccentric cleaning woman, who in spite of failing her driving test numerous times, never gave up, and in the end (of the serial) succeeded in getting her licence. She became a celebrity in Britain, has opened supermarkets and recorded pop songs, and participated in numerous other TV-shows. The BBC has even made a documentary on her becoming a star: *The making of Maureen*²⁹. *Driving School* caused some debate because of its style, which makes spectators aware that they are watching a directed reality.

The Norwegian version of this series was *Klar, ferdig kjør* (Ready, steady, drive). Directed by Ole Egil Størkson, this 10-episode series was produced by the independent company Nordisk Film in 1998 on behalf of the commercial channel TV2, but was shown on TVNorge in 1999. The reason for this lies in the ownership structure of the two channels, which I will return to.

Klar, ferdig, kjør was the first Norwegian docusoap³⁰. In many ways it is similar to its British predecessor. Both serials have the same main themes: They follow people who are trying to get their driving licences, but also focus on their private lives, particularly amongst the more important characters. There are some small differences: *Driving School* concentrates mainly on people who want to learn how to drive an ordinary car,- an exception is the policemen who are learning to drive emergency runs. The span is wider in *Klar ferdig kjør*, as it follows people through the process of getting the licence for car, truck, motorcycle or military tanks.

²⁹ BBC Online, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/choice/docusoap/index>.

³⁰ As mentioned in chapter 1, there have been two earlier productions in Norway that are related to the genre: *Politiskolen* (The police academy, 3 episodes by NRK in 1998), and *U 8 1/2* (NRK 1994), a serial about 8 young people living together in a house on the initiative of the producer.

Like *Driving School*, *Klar, ferdig kjør* also has its "star", Kathe Johannesen. She has many similarities with her British counterpart, but unlike Maureen, Kathe never succeeds in getting her licence.

Both these serials are based upon an ordeal that a large part of the population goes through. As such they fall within the common descriptions of the docusoap. John Ellis, for instance, has described the docusoap as a serial that "*follows well defined characters within an institution ... or taking them through a commonplace ordeal like a driving test.*" (Ellis 2000: 114). As there are good reasons for choosing these themes, I will discuss both the ordeal and the institution as topic and location for docusoap later in this chapter. At this point I will just mention that the choice of topic also gives these serials a slightly different structure from *Hotel Adelphi* that I discussed in the last chapter.

3.2. Docusoap as scheduling strategy

The main interest in this chapter is to establish some factors that were decisive for why and how *Klar, ferdig kjør* (*KFK*)³¹ appeared on Norwegian TV-screens. This concerns both the reasons why the format of docusoap was chosen, why the driving test became the theme of the first Norwegian docusoap, as well as why some features from the British serial were kept in the Norwegian one, where as others, like the style, were not. This again will shed light upon how television uses this new hybrid genre, and how the documentary serial is shaped by the way television uses it.

Norwegian tv-structure

To understand why *KFK* was made, and broadcast the way it was, it is necessary to know something about the history of television in Norway. In 1999, when *KFK* was broadcast, Norway had (and still has) only three and a half terrestrial broadcast channels. In addition, there are several satellite channels that broadcast partly in Norwegian.

The terrestrial channels are the old public service-channel NRK1, the first commercial channel TV2 (launched on September 9. 1992), and TVNorge, that started as a satellite

channel, but is now terrestrial. The "half" channel is NRK2, launched by NRK in 1996. Because the transmitting system is less developed than the others', NRK2 can only be received by less than 60 % of the population who don't have cable or satellite disc.

Amongst the satellite channels with some programmes in Norwegian are TV3, Canal + and Viasat Plus. In addition several channels, like BBC Prime and Discovery are subtitled in Norwegian.

NRK started the public TV broadcasting in Norway in 1960, and had a total monopoly of Norwegian television until the London-based TV3 started broadcasting some programmes in Norwegian in 1987.

³¹ From now on termed KFK.

NRK is financed by licence, and presents itself as a public service broadcaster, i.e. standing for "quality, cultural responsibility and social obligations"³². NRK1 is still the most popular channel with the highest ratings, especially within the adult segments of the audience. NRK2 is a secondary channel and was originally designed for niche-oriented programmes,- for instance special youth programmes and the more elitist culture programmes like operas and folk music. These programmes are still there, but lately NRK has shifted all its feature films to NRK2, as well as quite a few imported quality drama series.

TV2 is a private channel, but has some public service obligations. It is commercially financed, but has restrictions on the amount of advertising it can broadcast, and the way this is done. There are for instance as a general rule no commercial breaks inside programmes. TV2 is by far the second most popular channel in Norway It is steadily approaching NRK1 in the ratings, and sometimes has a larger audience than NRK for particular programmes. TV2 presents itself as a *contrast* to NRK, marketing itself with the words "youthful, fresh and creative", and "We do not want to be staid and boring ... a different tv-channel from our competitors."³³

³² <http://www.nrk.no/info/> (this and the next 2 quotations translated from Norwegian by AMK.)

³³ <http://www.tv2.no/omtv2/>

The third channel, TVNorge, presents itself as a "broad entertainment channel", with the core values "young, modern and entertaining"³⁴. It consists largely of imported series, but is also the most innovative channel when it comes to trying out new hybrid forms in factual television³⁵.

In the mid 90s, TV2 bought shares in the less popular TVNorge, and by 1999 owned 49 % of the channel. The ownership deal included the responsibility for increasing TVNorge's market share³⁶. At this time, TVNorge had a popular image as "bartekanalen", (*"the moustache channel"*), a reference both to the moustache of the host of the channel's very popular game show *Casino*, but also implying that its main audience were people with moustaches, - seen by many as a typical attribute of lower middle class, un-intellectual men with "simple interests". When TV2 was working to increase the ratings for TVNorge, they started scheduling programmes that would be attractive to a younger, more urbane audience.³⁷

This way of perceiving the population not just as one audience, but as many different segments, is typical of a society with many TV-channels, one belonging in the "era of availability", to use John Ellis' concept that I introduced in chapter 1. John Ellis argues that in this "era of scarcity", when a country has only 2-3 channels that broadcast for a limited amount of time each day, the audience is still perceived as an all-inclusive, relatively homogenous mass. However, once the countries get more than 3-4 channels, as most countries have in the "era of availability", the audience is seen as consisting of minorities that can be addressed singly or in groups (Ellis 2000:71). This perception is the basis for target scheduling, where the channels schedule a programme that is believed to appeal to a certain

³⁴ <http://www.tvnorge.no/omtvnorge/>

³⁵ For instance *71 grader nord* (71 Degrees North) and *Muldvarpen* (The Mole), that are game programmes where the competitors are taken through difficult tasks in Norwegian wilderness or the south of France.

³⁶ TV2 later in 1999 paid itself out of this obligation.

segment of the audience. The strategy is to "peel off" these segments from a larger audience watching a competing programme.

³⁷ From taped interview with Ole Egil Størkson, director of *Klar, ferdig kjør*.

With four terrestrial broadcasting channels, the situation in Norway should have been one of hard strategic fighting for spectators. The reason why this is not (yet) the case, lies in the fact that the real competition is between only two channels: NRK1 and TV2. Because of TV2's ownership deal to increase TVNorge's ratings, there was a period where TV2 actually scheduled TVNorge as complementary to TV2, not as competitive. Likewise NRK makes sure that NRK2 is complementary to the main channel NRK1. Thus, the fierce competition between the channels, that belongs in the era of availability³⁸, has hardly started in Norway. The two main channels still compete mainly by scheduling their news programmes, and also sports programmes, against each other. The autumn season 2000 will, however, see head on-competition between similar entertainment programmes on TV2 and NRK1, and this kind of competition becomes more and more common.

Britain: Fighting for Friday prime time with docusoap

In the fight for spectators in Britain, docusoap has become a strategic weapon. To schedule a docusoap against another successful programme was already common in Britain at the time when *KFK* was commissioned in Norway. In January 1995, the BBC succeeded in stealing market shares from ITV on Friday night, thanks to *Animal Hospital Week*, a programme that was in part a predecessor for *Vets* (Ellis 1999:141). According to Ellis, BBC had tried for some time to figure out how to attract viewers at the same time as ITV ran its police series *The Bill*. BBC first tried to "beat" ITV with a reality-serial that they hoped would have the same attraction as *The Bill*, *999 Lifesavers*. The thought was that both had the same kind of "flashing blue lights"-appeal. This was not a success. A closer look at the ratings figures showed that the audience of *The Bill* was younger than expected, and contained more women than expected. The narrative structure of *The Bill* was then analysed, and found to be much closer to that of a soap, that generally has a more feminine audience. *Animal Hospital week* was scheduled against *The Bill*, and was an unexpected success. John Ellis calls this event the beginning of the docusoap-wave in Britain. It is seen as having proved that factual television combined with the characters and structure of soap, actually attracts big audiences.

³⁸ Ellis 2000:61.

On this background, it is natural that it was TV2, in the challenger's position, that was first in making a docusoap in Norway.

***Klar, ferdig kjør* as possible scheduling strategy**

KFK was originally commissioned for TV2, but the management then decided to screen it on TVNorge instead. *KFK* became part of the Monday night schedule, together with the talk show *Mandagsklubben* (The Monday Club), a show that was designed to appeal to young people. *Mandagsklubben* included elements that would contrast it as much as possible from the other channels' output, like beer-drinking, swearing, "raw" humour and "politically uncorrect" opinions. The strategy was that these two programmes would lift two other low-rating programmes, one just before *KFK*, and the other between *KFK* and *Mandagsklubben*.

Both *KFK* and *Mandagsklubben* would very likely give a pre-echo and echo effect for each other. *KFK* would as well probably have an appeal to a younger, urban audience, as it became quite different in style from the more sedate British version *Driving School*. The decision to move *KFK* from TV2 to TVNorge was taken after the production was started, and while the serial was already taking shape³⁹. *KFK* did, in fact, turn out quite different from *Driving School*, and I will return to these style-issues later.

TV2 has later sold their shares in TVNorge. Even if *KFK* showed steadily raising ratings, and even higher ratings for the rerun in early 2000⁴⁰, there has been no more Norwegian docusoaps produced for TVNorge. The spring season 2000, NRK has screened two docusoaps so far: *Vi er Vålerenga* (We are Vålerenga, about young football players), and *Flekke United*, about an international college in Norway. Both are shown thursday at 22.00 hrs, probably because they are thought to appeal to a young audience. Neither have been vastly succesful, *Vålerenga* attracting from 346.000 to 480.000 viewers, *Flekke United* slightly less.

³⁹ Interview Ole Egil Størkson

⁴⁰ (Ratings from TVNorge)

As this is being written, in April 2000, we see a possible try from TV2 to break into NRK's weekend hegemony by scheduling a docusoap at Friday night prime time. The strategy has similarities with what we have seen in Britain, where the schedulers use their knowledge about the demographic of the audience for placing the right programme in the right slot. What we see is that TV2 places their first Norwegian docusoap, *Dyreparken* (The Zoo), at 20.00 hrs Friday night. The same slot on the competing channel, NRK1, contains a quite successful celebrity musical quiz show, that probably appeals to a slightly older audience than a docusoap (at least in Britain) would. Just before, at 7.30, NRK has one of its legendary and most popular programmes, *Norge Rundt* (Around Norway). This is a kind of "soft" reportage programme, with a high curiosity factor. This programme also probably attracts an older audience than its competitor, TV2's successful fiction soap, *Hotel Cæsar*.

Dyreparken could count on inheriting some spectators from *Hotel Cæsar*, - spectators that continue watching the next programme on the same channel. TV2 is trying to peel off the younger segments from NRK on Friday night at 8.00, in addition to keep its own *Hotel Cæsar*-watching audience stay on the same channel. The development of docusoap as scheduling strategy has come to Norway, but doesn't seem all that successful in its first three weeks. While *Hotel Cæsar* has close to 600.000 viewers, the figures drop by more than 120.000 for *Dyreparken*. And the ratings seem to be falling: *Dyreparken* started with a market share of 34,7 %, and had 25,1 % after two weeks.⁴¹

3.3. The recycling of formats

Docusoap is a format, a way of presenting documentary material. As I will show later in this chapter, the format itself favours some choices of topics and locations. Still, there is plenty to choose from for the inventive director. When the independent production company Nordisk Film was asked to do a docusoap, they came up with several ideas for the commissioner, TV2:

⁴¹ TV2 operates with marketshares, the share of those watching TV at that time.

"I developed ten pitches for this. TV2 was very interested in one of them, on the suburb of Loddefjord, but that was a very ambitious idea. Then Driving School came in from the side. I remember we sat a a meeting, me, Per Cristian (Magnus)⁴², and some others, and Eldar Nakken, the senior project manager at TV2 called and said he had seen Driving School, and it was hilarious. And when Per Cristian hung up, he just turned to us and said "we are going to make Driving School." The decision was made as simple as that. Per Cristian was interested in money, because Nordisk Film barely had money at that time, and when he understood that Eldar Nakken would buy it immediately if we made it, he decided just to go for it."⁴³

To make a docusoap on the suburb of Loddefjord in Bergen,- a lower class (as far as one can describe people by class in Norwegian society) suburb with a relatively bad reputation, would have been truly innovative and original, and also ambitious, as the director points out. Instead, TV2 chose a a safe concept that has already been "chewed" by the BBC. But *Driving School* had been a great ratings success in Britain, where it was seen by 12 million people, and was also quite popular when it was broadcast on NRK1. There was no reason why Norwegians shouldn't like a Norwegian version of the same theme. Instead of gambling on something new, TV2 and Nordisk Film chose safety first, and imported the concept.

"He saw that this was BBCs biggest success in docusoap so far, and it was safe to go for it, almost a guaranteed success."⁴⁴

More sitcom than docusoap

As a way of introducing the serials, I will briefly show their similarities, which lie in the narrative structure. The chosen style of the Norwegian *KFK* was however quite different from

⁴² Daily manager at Nordisk Film at the time.

⁴³ Taped interview with director of KFK Ole Egil Størkson, february 2000.

⁴⁴ Taped interview with Størkson.

that of *Driving School*. This was a decision from the directors side. They both rely very much on humour, resembling sitcom as much as soap. I will give a few examples:

In both *Driving School* and *KFK*, each episode concentrates on a few characters, inter-cutting between usually two or three, or even four characters/storylines for longer periods before introducing new storylines. The scenes with each character are at times "relevant" to the main theme of learning how to drive, and at times less relevant to the theme but important for revealing the personality of the character,- or for the comic value of the scene. Much of the comic value comes from the audience's own knowledge of the situation,- that they know both the normative order (how things ought to happen) and the typical order (how things really do happen). Laughter is often created where the normative and the typical are set in contrast to each other ⁴⁵. The humour in these serials comes about when the driving school pupils violate the normative (the correct way of driving) by doing the typical (choosing the wrong lane, almost crashing with other cars, screaming out in fear as they realise there is a pothole right in front of the motorcycle).

There is also humour connected to the characters themselves, as many of them are rather special, as I will return to under the section on *casting*. A lot of the humour is on the level of language, as several of the characters in both serials, are rather colourful. Much humour also lies in the situation, like in the first episode of *KFK*, where Monica is introduced through a bird's eye shot of her car choosing the wrong lane.

Narrative structure

More than in for instance *Hotel Adelphi*, where the characters are very closely related to the job they do, or the "role" they play in the hotel, *KFK* and *Driving School* have to use small storylines that lie outside the main storyline (which is the same for all the character: They learn to drive). The purpose of these scenes is that we shall get to know and remember the characters. In the first episode of *KFK*, we see Kathe Johannesen's job at the aquarium of Bergen, and a second storyline concerning her is opened: The search for her father (a late driving school teacher)'s old car. This quest goes on the whole series. We are also presented

⁴⁵ For more on this, see Lovell 1982: 22.

for another of the characters, Monica Didriksen, her suburban home environment, and her handball hobby.

Neither *KFK* nor *Driving School* use cliffhangers in soap's sense of the word. Like in most other docusoaps, the narrator's short listing of things to come in the next episode has some of the same function, but perhaps not as strong as a dramatic cliffhanger.

3.4. Directed reality: An ethical or a practical question?

These two serials are very different when it comes to *style*, even if they are both made in a kind of *vérité* style, a hybrid of direct cinema, cinéma vérité and other elements like commentary and interviews (see chapter 1). The shots that both of them have in common, are the sequences from inside the cars, shot by two small cameras on the dashboard. Outside the cars, things are different. *KFK* employs a more pure observational style, that gives the viewer a strong feeling of being present when things are happening. The camera is handheld, the shots are relatively long, and the sequences are not edited together from many shots. The shots can be blurred and unsteady, there is the occasional microphone or crew member in the shot, and there is no use of tripod. Few cutaways are used, sequences are edited with jump-cuts.

Driving School, on the other hand, has a more stylised form. There are some sequences of "fly-on-the-wall"-like shooting, where characters meet and interact seemingly undisturbed by the camera, but there are small hints that make the spectator understand that this is a directed reality, and this is what caused some discussion in Britain.

The serial is full of well-composed, steady shots,- clearly the photographer uses tripod. The interviews, or sequences where characters address the camera directly, are very often done in a clearly staged way. For instance, Paul Farrell, the driving teacher, is a devout Christian, and is placed on a bench in a church when talking about his troubles and anxieties. His new business partner, Pamela Carr, is pictured talking in her ever-present cell phone standing in a

church tower. Joan, another rather eccentric character, is interviewed in her living room with all her 7 grandchildren playing at the same time very close in front of her. The overall lighting of the serial is as bright as can be,- this is not a matter of "the fine art of available light shooting". In several other documentary modes, these elements are all quite normal,- but in this serial we react to it. The reason why this happens, is that the directing is made obvious,- the staging is conspicuous.

The shotlist of one single scene from *Driving School* will illustrate this style. This is the scene where the 18-year old Danny has received his licence, and goes for the first time in his car to pick up a girl for a date:

1. Tot. (on tripod) girl's house, car enter from cam left, pan left, Danny out of car.
2. Med. shot (handheld) from opposite side of car: Danny walks round car into c.u., camera follows him to house door.
3. Tot. (tripod) Danny from behind in front of door.
4. c.u. girl, opens door.
5. c.u. Danny's hand with car keys.
6. c.u. girl.
7. Tot low angle, they leave the house, walks out of frame cam. right.
8. Head & shoulders (handheld) as they walk to car, he opens door for her.
9. Tot of car (tripod) from other side of street. The car starts, leaves frame cam. right. Tilt up to rainbow over the house.

It is interesting to see that this scene is very much *soap*, in that it uses close-ups of faces, close-up of meaning-bearing objects (the car-keys), and the symbolic (the rainbow shot) (Geraghty in Corner & Harvey 1996: 201).

This scene has taken, carefully estimated, at least 6 different camera positions, where several involve getting the camera on and off a tripod. There is in other words no way that the profilmic event could have happened unmediated. Just as important: The film's mediation of reality is so obvious that even the average tv-spectator actually notices it, with the reaction "hey, the filmmaker must have made them go into the car several times to manage this!". In

another scene, we are in Maureen's dark bedroom when she suddenly wakes up in the middle of night to start reading theory for her test the day after. This is just too unlikely,- no TV-crew would ever (even if allowed) spend night after night in a bedroom, waiting for someone to wake up.

This kind of reconstruction is not new in documentary film. It was the preferred style of the "founders" of documentary film in the 30s, and was used up to the time when lightweight equipment allowed the camera crew to actually be there when things took place. The man who is usually given the honour of "inventing" documentary film with the words "a creative treatment of actuality", John Grierson, reconstructed all the time. Apparently, he for instance had a sculptor design a studio set to represent a trawler's cabin for his famous film *Drifters* (Winston 1996:120). Before the lightweight, portable equipment with synchronous sound came in the 60s, it was virtually impossible to shoot documentary inside a small fishing boat. But the Griersonians took care to distinguish between reconstructing events that had actually taken place, from reconstructing events that had never taken place (ibid.) This is an opinion shared by the director of *KFK*, as I will show below. It is also an opinion that it is possible to twist and turn in various degrees. Making a character drive the car deliberately a second time the same way as he did accidentally the first time, just to get the additional shot, is perhaps not such a large alteration of reality. But what if the driving takes place 3 or 4 times, for close-ups and totals and so on?

The reason why we, the spectators, react to the style of *Driving School*, may well be found in the history of documentary film. Since the observational modes of documentary became possible with lightweight equipment, we have learnt to believe that vérité style means that what we see is not reconstructed. With the direct cinema-movements, the observational documentary films came to be seen as windows on the world (Winston 1996:162). When *Driving School* mixes observational style with a strictly directed and reconstructed style, the spectator, or rather, the critics, get problems with accepting it. *Driving School* had large ratings throughout the serial, which indicates that whether the audience experienced it as authentic or not, they didn't let this interfere with the enjoyment of watching the serial.

Other signs that what we see is mediated in some way by the film crew, are readily accepted, - a microphone in the shot, a question or reaction from the director, an adjustment of focus, frame or iris on the air. We accept these because they make us believe that what goes on in front of the camera only happens there and then, - adjust camera or miss the scene. The careful shooting and editing of *Driving School* reminds us that the reality is directed.

3.5. The process of negotiation and *Klar, ferdig kjør*

When *Klar, ferdig kjør* was broadcast, the product that was shown on the screen was a result of a long process of negotiation between the commissioning editor TV2, the production company Nordisk Film, and the director Ole Egil Størkson. This negotiation, traditionally seen as a tug-of-war between art (the director) and money (commissioning editor), is decisive for the final result. I will therefore discuss several central points of this production history, and focus on how choices were made that were decisive for the final result. In doing so, I will utilise as a theoretical framework Christine Gledhill's concept of negotiation as part of the creative process:

"Negotiation at the point of production is not, however, simply a matter of potential contradiction between the needs of the media industries and user groups. Within media institutions, the professional and aesthetic practises of "creative" personnel operate within different frameworks from, and often in conflict with, the economic or ideological purposes of companies and shareholders. Such conflict is, indeed, part of the ideology of creativity itself." (Gledhill quoted in Goodnow 1994:237.)

I have already mentioned how the choice of concept and the choice of theme for the first Norwegian docusoap both were strongly influenced by the commissioner's (TV2's) opinion. But for the choice of style, they gave the director free hands after having approved of his pilot episode, which included several of the main characters. When asked why *KFK* is different in style from *Driving School*, the director answers:

"That's because he (Nakken) didn't have any influence after that. I tried as much as possible to make it my project. TV2 wasn't in and controlled us in such a way (during shooting). They came in at a later stage when I was editing episodes, and then we had tougher discussions. But then I had already done the casting and chosen an artistic style."⁴⁶

The conclusion here is that TV2 didn't see the style as important for the serials success,- or perhaps that they were aware that the style of *Driving School* had proven problematic in Britain. The director was definitely sure he wanted it different:

"Driving School was very "countryside", a small town, very cute and nice, and extremely directed, I think they had even written a script for each episode. All those things were not acceptable for me. No script, observational as far as possible, and more urban."

Still, *KFK* uses reconstruction, e.g. the bird's eye shots of pupils choosing the wrong lane. These scenes consist of the "original" incident shot inside the car, and the bird's eye shot. This is recorded later, with the car performing the same manoeuvre as before. The director has no ethical problems with this. He is pragmatic:

"If the incident has already happened, you can make certain arrangements afterwards, if you ask me. That's just so that people will understand what really happened ... (The bird's eye shot) If I hadn't done that, people wouldn't have understood the geography, this was just to save the situation on TV."

The narrator

The *narrator* is another feature from *Driving School* that *KFK* chose to use. Both narrators use laconic comments and understatements to increase the comic value, but the Norwegian

⁴⁶ Interview with Ole Egil Størkson, this and the next quotation.

narrator is much more than that. To understand the importance of this specific narrator, we have to go back in history.

In the mid 70s, the Norwegians had their first encounter with that famous American genre, *soap*. It was not a real soap that introduced the nation to the genre, but a sitcom made as a parody of soap. Its English title was *Soap*, in Norwegian it was called *Forviklingar* ("complications"). When this series was broadcast on NRK in the 70s, the introduction at the start of each episode was always read by the well known TV presenter Harald Mæhle. His characteristic voice and dialect ("*Still confused? Not after this episode of Soap!*") became national knowledge at that age of monopoly television, and still is remembered by a large part of the population. Thus it represented a special treat to the viewers when the first Norwegian docusoap was presented by the very same voice that introduced us to the real soap. This was the director's idea with using this narrator. He was not aware that more recently, Mæhle also had lent his voice to children's TV, and thus was associated with *Ole Brumm* (Winnie the Poo) more than with *Soap*, at least in the young parents-segment. The director has been criticized for his choice of narrator because of this, and says he would probably have chosen another narrator, had he been aware of this.⁴⁷ This means that also the narrator was a choice that the director was allowed to choose without too much intervention from the commissioner, at least after they made it clear that the narrator must not speak with a Bergen accent, a criterion that I will elaborate on below. The director also had freedom to write the voice over himself, and compared with most of the English docusoaps, the commentary in *Klar, ferdig, kjør!* is very colourful. With its extensive use of adjectives and description, and a humour based on understatement, the narrator's comments are clearly more important in the storytelling in this docusoap than in many others.

Casting

The process of negotiation gave the director relative freedom to choose his preferred style. When it came to the choice of characters, the commissioning editor had far more remarks. I will return to these after a short discussion of casting in documentary film.

⁴⁷Ibid.

Many are unaware of, or react negatively towards, the fact that documentary filmmakers now are using the word *casting* about their main characters, the way fiction filmmakers talk about finding their actors. It is, however, possible to read the word casting in two slightly different ways. As I see it, casting in documentary can mean A) to find the best, most suitable characters among (in this case) people who are learning to drive, or B) to place people who are not about to learn to drive in this position, just because they are suitable characters.

A) is nothing new. Obviously, factual television, both journalistic and documentary film, has always depended on finding the right person to exemplify what the reporter or filmmaker wants to convey. There has always been a wish to find someone who both is the right person with regards to the factual part (that she, for instance, has experienced the thing the film is about), but who is at the same time "a good screen personality". Everybody who has worked with camera and people knows that some people are better on TV than others. The BBC, for example, interviewed several hundred candidates for their docusoap "*The shop*" (Aftenposten 30.10.98). This is not something totally new,- so did American documentary film maker Connie Field for her feature documentary *Rosie the riveter* from 1980 (Corner 1996:136). The new element, especially as docusoap is concerned, is that the "screen personality" very often is more important than the factual part. This is where B) comes in. Two of the largest stars in KFK, Kathe Johannesen ("the aquarium lady") and Mia Hundvin (the handball star), were cast in this sense of the word. Johannesen had already appeared in another documentary about Bergen, and Nordisk Film asked her if she would like to take driving classes, which she would. Hundvin didn't have any concrete plans, but her handball team had a sponsorship deal that would give her a brand new car once she got her licence, so it was probably a matter of time⁴⁸.

In Britain, BBC was criticised in a similar case, concerning docusoap-star Ray Brown from *Clampers* (Later to host a gay blind-date-show). It became known that his normal workday contained administrative tasks, and not the actual "clamping" on the street level. The critique was met with the argument that he would actually be on the street, in periods of staff shortage. The director of *KFK* has no ethical scruples in this matter:

"If this was an investigative documentary about terrible conditions in a driving school, and I had "planted" a pupil, yes. But in this format, that has no intention of revealing, - if people are asked or not is less relevant as long as the situations they are in are real. And there are no constructed situations."

Like *Driving School*, and several of the other British docusoaps, *Klar, ferdig, kjør!* has stars. The main star opens episode one; Kathe Johannesen, "among the Bergeners known as "the aquarium lady"", as the narrator puts it. This colourful and slightly eccentric woman is *gefundenes fressen* for any docusoap maker, with her dramatic story of serious fear of cars after being hit by a car when cycling in her youth. The parallel is almost too obvious when looking at the first episode of *Driving School*; Introducing *Maureen*, who became the first, great docusoap-star in Britain. She is, as her Norwegian counterpart, a slightly eccentric (or rather, very eccentric) woman who has spent almost 7.000 £ on trying to get her licence so far.

Other stars include one of the main profiles on the national handball team, who also happens to be an attractive looking young woman, and the Philippino wife of a Norwegian sailor, who go through all the terrors of rehearse driving with her husband in his brand new expensive car.

⁴⁸ Information from tape interview with Ole Egil Størkson.

The casting was one of the topics where the director and the commissioning editor had some disagreements, based on the fact that the serial is set in Norway's second largest city, Bergen. The commissioner, TV2, was very concerned that the local colouring shouldn't be too strong. The director was strongly advised to find characters that did not speak the characteristic Bergen accent, and had quite some arguments with TV2 about this "impossible casting criterion"⁴⁹. They ended up agreeing on the majority of characters having a West-Norwegian accent, but chose, as mentioned earlier, a narrator with a different dialect.

This negotiation is very descriptive of general notions in Norwegian society, where many feel that media, with some exceptions for news reports, are very Oslo-centred. The strong local attachment of *KFK* can be seen as a major advantage for the serial, as it gives the spectators the pleasure of seeing the very recognisable locations and "peeping" into everyday life in a part of Norway that is not the capital.

Driving School took place in Bristol, but to my knowledge, nobody has ever said anything critical about the geographical choice. In Norway, these things are different.

Number of episodes

The area where the negotiation process came out most clearly in the disfavour of the director, was in the discussion of the number of episodes. The director felt that his evaluation of his material was set aside.

⁴⁹ Interview Størkson.

"I was convinced that we should only make eight episodes. They didn't accept this. I reviewed the [videotaped] material; I only wanted to use the best, not over-use the material at any cost just to fill some slot in the schedule. Make something that I could defend 100 per cent. So I wanted to cut out some characters ... I told this to my project manager (at the production company), he said yes yes, but this [suggestion] was never passed on to TV2. I learnt that it was better to deliver 10 average episodes than 8 really good ones, because that's what we promised, and they might pay us less if we didn't do that. So that's the business behind it. Not that I look upon myself as an artist in these circumstances, but artistic decisions get put aside."⁵⁰

Even though the director believed that the commissioner would agree with him, and prefer what he considered to be 8 really good episodes to 10 average, he could not himself tell this to TV2, as that would be disloyal to his production company. *KFK* was made in 10 episodes.

3.6. Choice of topic and location

It is clear that one of these serials copies the concept of the other. But even if this wasn't the case, there will still be a tendency that docusoaps become very similar to each other. Most docusoap-makers would probably agree: Some topics or locations are more suited for making a docusoap than others. I will here try to see some tendencies in both what kind of topics become docusoap, and how and why those topics are recycled. I will also look at what kind of people become characters in a docusoap.

I will present two possible approaches for explaining which locations and topics are chosen for docusoaps, both related to the conventions of the ancestors of the docusoap; The documentary and the soap.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

If one approaches the genre from the documentary tradition, the choices of topics and locations can be explained as a convention from the history of documentary film:

To shoot within an institution gives the advantage of taking the audience "behind the stage", to *reveal*, something that documentary film always has loved to do. In docusoap, this takes the shape of showing what goes on behind the facade of a hotel, hospital, theatre or opera, airport or shopping centre. This tradition stretches from the early days of documentary, from films like *Coalface* (inside a coal mine, 1935) via the long series of institutional Direct cinema films, like Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* and *High School*, and to today's docusoaps.

For a docusoap that chooses this "institutional" approach, I think in general one can say that it needs to choose an institution that fulfills certain criteria.

- a) The institution actually has an "inner life" that is sufficiently different from the facade to be interesting.
- b) The institution (-s facade) needs to be relatively well known to the audience, so that they will be interested in knowing what goes on backstage.
- c) The institution needs to be big enough to provide interesting situations and enough characters for a whole serial.
- d) The activity of this institution contains "goals" or "quests" that provides possibilities for some classic dramaturgy.

Approaching the docusoap's choice of location from the theory of fiction soap offers another aspect. Robert C. Allen points out that

"open (fiction) serials tend to be organized around locations where characters regularly have occasion to meet: restaurants, hospitals, nightclubs, doctors' offices, lawyers' offices, corporate headquarters, etc. And characters are given occupations that depend on "talk": doctors, nurses, lawyers, entrepreneurs, police officers." (Allen 1995:20)

A look at a brief listing of some of the British docusoap successes tells us that the producers choose according to

A): the soap's demand for "talk-enhancing" locations, and

B): the documentary's desire to reveal or disclose what's behind the public facade.

"*Airport*" about Heathrow international in London. (BBC 1996, 1997, 1998, shown on TV Norge 1998 and 1999).

"*Hotel Adelphi*" about the big and luxurious Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool (BBC 1997, shown on TV2 1998 and 2000).

"*The shop*", about the shopping centre Selfridges in London. (BBC 1998, TVNorge 1999)

"*Cruise*", about a luxury cruise ship in the Carribean. (BBC 1998, TV2 1998).

"*Clampers*" about parking wardens in London. (BBC 1998, TVNorge 2000)

Also the Swedish *Sjukhuset* (the Hospital) and the Danish *Stripperkongens piger* (the girls of the striptease king) have interesting locations. The hospital both has the "backstage" element, and the identification for everybody who has ever been in contact with a hospital.⁵¹

Stripperkongens piger shows the striptease business both from the front and from the backstage, where the strippers talk matter-of-factly about their tits and shaven bodies. Of course this serial benefits from the peeping instinct of its viewers, and perhaps the expectation of seeing the occasional naked breast.

A guaranteed dramaturgy

Another element clearly present in the above mentioned docusoaps is the choice of a topic or location that provides a *guaranteed dramaturgy*. This is present in all topics that include some kind of difficult task that has to be managed (e.g. *Hotel Adelphi* has to feed 350 unexpected guests at short notice), a few hindrances that makes the task risky (e.g. not enough food in fridge, not enough staff on duty, Chef in explosive mood), and then usually success or happiness achieved through the hard labour of many people. The "guaranteed dramaturgy" element is also clearly present in serials like "*The Clampers*" (parking problems are

⁵¹ Of course, it also has the element of drama: The question "Will he survive?" in a documentary becomes interesting in a very different way than it does in a fiction serial. See the next chapter of this thesis for a closer treatment of this serial.

guaranteed to make people emotional), *Sjukhuset* (The hospital) where the dramaturgy is one of life and death, and in the new Norwegian docusoap *Vi er Vålerenga* (We are Vålerenga), about the 16-year football team of a well known club in Oslo.

The "commonplace ordeal" that John Ellis mentions, doesn't have quite as many examples. It is first of all the driving test that is the ordeal that most people have in common (*Driving school* and *Klar, ferdig kjør!*). Also a serial like *Vets in practice* (BBC 1997 and -98) has strong elements of this. Taking your sick pet to the vet is an experience that many people share. Of course, the classical drama structure is also very much guaranteed when you follow characters that have a very clear goal: to get their driving licence, or to cure their beloved rabbit from cancer.

The advantage of choosing this kind of location is also a well known move in documentary and journalism,- the creation of *identification*. Since a very large percentage of the population has gone through the same ordeal, they will all be able to relate to other people's problems at doing the same. And not least, they will be very interested in seeing how other people act in a situation where they themselves have been. The TV-program gets an almost therapeutical character, allowing people the relieving feeling of not being alone.

Several scholars have pointed out that soap operas can function as models or examples of for instance teenagers or families, offering insight into how other people solve their domestic problems (e.g. John Ellis 1999:111). I would argue that this almost therapeutic effect is just as present for docusoaps.

To use the driving test as an example: Almost everybody goes through it. For most people, it involves rather strong emotions,- insecurity, loss of control, the feeling of not being good enough, of disappointing oneself and other people. Not least,- at the moment of stress, you are usually alone with your "judge",- the man (seldom woman) your future existence with or without driving licence depends upon. The joy and relief of seeing other people's struggle, mistakes and problems is immense. *Driving School*, and especially *Klar, ferdig, kjør!* are also made with a great deal of humour, which of course adds to the therapeutic effect.

3.7. Working Through and docusoap

As shown in chapter 1, docusoaps are criticised for being pure entertainment and giving no useful social knowledge or information. When now trying to analyse what kind of meaning can be derived from a docusoap about learning how to drive, I find it useful to see these programmes in a larger framework.

Television documentary is to many still synonymous with a serious programme that takes up an issue, treats it journalistically from all angles, and reaches a conclusion in the end. This is a heritage from the time when there were only one or two tv-channels, and programme makers could assume that it would take a long time before the audience encountered another programme that dealt with the same issue. Each programme then contained a full and exhaustive treatment of the subject. Today, the situation is a different one. No single programme can expect to be as important as it would have been in the era of scarcity, writes John Ellis:

"However, this does not mean that television itself has ceased to matter. It means only that any individual programme has to consider itself part of a larger process of television in the era of availability, which I call "working through."

(Ellis 2000:72)

This *larger process* is how television as a whole treats the contemporary world through handling it in all the genres that are on TV. As an example, when the TV news present a news story on the expulsion of Philippine women from Norway, because they no longer have a right to stay after they divorced their husbands, the audience already knows the topic from a wide range of programmes, both as a problematised issue, and possibly also from entertainment genres. A character in a soap opera will meet prejudice for having a Philippine wife, there will have been documentaries on sex tourism in Asia and mail-order wives, talk shows and debates will feature as well psychologists as happy Norwegian-Philippine couples,

and an imported sitcom will have a Philippine domestic help as a main character. And, in a docusoap about learning to drive, a Philippine woman married to a Norwegian is one of the stars.

Working through and *Klar, ferdig kjør*

When I now analyse *Klar, ferdig kjør* I will do so with the concept of *working through* in mind. Because the audience can use all its experience and knowledge as television spectators, this lightweight entertainment genre can also give information, meaning and an interesting insight into another aspect of topics and themes prevalent in society and in the public sphere.

For the analysis, I will also use the approach of Hugh O'Donnell, who in his book on fiction soap, introduces several levels of narrative in the soaps (O'Donnell 1999:21). His concepts are useful for interpreting the various levels of meaning in the serials, and for answering questions on the intention of the serial, i.e. "what is it the filmmakers want to tell?".

In soap, O'Donnell argues, the *micronarrative* level is of importance. This is the level of the relationships between the characters, the emotion-based complications based on who loves/likes/hates who. It should be said, though, that in real life, people tend not to speak their inner thoughts out loud while staring into the open air,- a convention for expressing inner emotions in fiction soaps.

Even so, there are emotions in *Klar, ferdig, kjør*. First of all, there is the emotional side of the pupils and their dependency on their teachers, and vice versa, the teachers' attitudes towards their various pupils. Even if there is not a lot of outspoken emotions like there would be in a fiction soap, we still "read" the faces and expressions of the characters. The wife of one of the driving teachers, who takes part in the theoretical and mental preparation of the pupils, even cries for one of the students when he fails the theoretical test.

In the scenes where there are married couples "in action", there are some beautiful (and at the same time worrying) interactions; car-driving is an area of life where the sex-role-pattern is very obvious. The serial shows the housewife Dolores rehearsing (and doing mistakes) with her husband in the car, and his divided emotions. He feels impatient and annoyed with her for

her clumsy driving, but at the same time he really wants to believe in her, and is quite certain that she will get the licence. The emotions sometimes are more clearly expressed, like when Dolores finally gets her licence and sparks the perhaps most touching joy scene on Norwegian television that year!

The *metanarrative* level describes what issues are dealt with in the narrative. Hugh O'Donnell suggests that this is where the "newness" of a soap is felt, even if the stories on the micronarrative level can be seen as an endless repetition of a story we have heard before. In dealing with topical issues in the *metanarrative level*, a 1999 soap will still feel different from a 15 year old serial, in the way it deals with the current issues that might have become more or less outdated. O'Donnell mentions AIDS, homosexuality, drugs and racism as "staple" topics in fiction soap (O'Donnell 1999:22). Over a period of time, the general acceptance in society of these once controversial issues, will increase or at least change.

When discussing drama series like NYPD Blue, Hill Street Blues and Chicago Hope, John Ellis writes that "*This is drama that tries to carry the world upon its shoulder ... And its attempt to contain the multiplicity of the world proves the need for television to work through the anxieties and the uncertainties of that world, and to provide the audience with as many means of understanding as possible*" (2000:124). If this describes the function of TV drama, it is even more suitable for the docusoaps, especially this one that concerns learning how to drive.

On the metanarrative level, there are several meanings to be read from *Klar, ferdig, kjør*. "Female motorcycle- and heavy-vehicle-drivers" is clearly an issue. Two of the female pupils do "unfeminine" or at least uncommon things for women,- one takes motorcycle licence, the other becomes a bus driver. Even if these stories are treated with as much humour as the rest of the situations, none of the humour is sexist, which it could very easily have been. Even if female drivers of any kind exist in society, they are still controversial among male drivers, if not on an outspoken level. The message I read from the filmmakers in *Klar, ferdig kjør*, is: The women are as good as men. This corresponds well with another point that Hugh O'Donnell makes:

"At the level of the metanarrative soaps and telenovelas champion almost exclusively progressive views, coming out clearly against discrimination or narrow-mindedness of any kind, and often adopting courageous stances in relation to highly controversial issues"(1999:23).

Perhaps not as intended or clear, but still strong, is the topic of the wife that is rehearse-driving with her husband as a teacher in his brand new car. I have touched upon this before, but will here only mention that these, almost painful scenes for anyone who has been in or witnessed this situation in real life, opens to two different possible readings: Men might feel sorry for him ("his wife can't even drive"), while women would feel sorry for her ("her husband is a stupid, aggressive brute").

The *macronarrative* level relates to the kind of (mini-) society constructed by the serial. *Klar, ferdig, kjør* creates a society filled with "juicy" characters,- there are very few boring, quiet, "normal" people in this universe. The society portrayed is diverse. There is no obvious class conflict or contrast, but a Norwegian viewer will probably get the subtle signs that tell the social background of the participants. A local viewer, even more so. Dialects reveal the countryside background of both Stian (who never gets his licence), and Gerd Ingunn and Geir. They are what is (slightly derogatory) termed *striler* (out-of-towners) by the town people in Bergen. Establishing shots outside *Monica's* block of flats tells the local that she is from a suburb that is not considered the nicest of neighbourhoods.

This narrative level is closely related to the casting process described earlier. When the commissioning editor insisted on not having all the characters from the same (rather large) geographic area, they probably wanted to avoid the feeling of a society that is perhaps slightly different from what it would be in other parts of Norway. It does indeed provide an opportunity to see people you don't normally see on television, and this also offers new insight into contemporary society.

The result of the negotiation

This overview shows that the negotiating process is dominated by commercial interests, but that the result of the process nevertheless is a compromise where the director has had a large amount of influence. The points of negotiation that I have extracted from the production history of *Klar, ferdig kjør*, have shown that some choices, like the choice of theme and location, was done out of the expectations of ratings and popularity. The same can be said about the number of episodes. The director was given influence over style and dramaturgy, and to a certain extent, casting. This was a direct result of the negotiation, as the commissioning editor had wanted both casting, and to a certain extent, dramaturgy, to be different.

My analysis of *Klar, ferdig kjør* has also shown that docusoaps are not made for the non-commercial reasons that have been characteristic of documentary film making for decades, like "opplysningstanken", educational purposes or because the producers have a strong wish that "this is important and should be publicly known". Nor are docusoaps made for arts sake. They are made with the purpose of making many people watch TV, at a relatively low cost for the TV channel. Even so, as part of television's working through, they play an important part in the TV audience's understanding of the world. In the next chapter, I will discuss a serial that sets out to be less commercial than the ones I have discussed in this chapter, one that tries to combine the heritage from Direct Cinema with the serial format.

"Everything is up for grabs in a gigantic reshuffling of the stuff of everyday life"

Bill Nichols

4. Why these themes and styles?

The heritage from the 60s and television's need for authenticity.

I have shown in chapter 2 how the television medium has created the narrative structure of docusoap. In chapter 3, I discussed the choice of concepts and style in docusoap. These themes continue in this and in the final chapter, but I will use them to discuss a new pair of films: The documentary serial *Sjukhuset* (The Hospital) and the fiction serial /feature film *Riget* (The Kingdom,- also about the life in a hospital). *Sjukhuset* is a serial that in many ways combines the docusoap format with a more serious approach than the examples in the former chapters.

As in the other chapters, I will analyse briefly the narrative structure of *Sjukhuset*, which is different from many other docusoaps, mainly because there is no narrator. This is one of the features that links this serial quite closely to some of the historical roots of the docusoap genre, the Direct cinema and cinéma vérité movements. I will therefore discuss *Sjukhuset* in relation to these movements, and apply some of the critique against Direct cinema to *Sjukhuset*.

Riget is in many ways a formal predecessor to *Sjukhuset*, as their style is similar. Both follow serial narratives and both have a rough, "authentic" look. This similarity in style and structure, provides an opportunity to analyse television's need for an authentic material, both within documentary and fiction, an analysis that will mainly take part in chapter 5.

The Swedish documentary serial *Sjukhuset* (The Hospital, 1999), is an 8-episode portrait of Sahlgrenska Universitetssjukhuset (The University Hospital) in Gothenburg in Sweden. The serial is made by Carl Javèr and Anders Berggren and produced by Götafilm. The dramaturge David Wingate co-worked with the team. *Sjukhuset* was broadcast on Swedish TV4 in Spring

1999, and was a success in terms of ratings. With more than 1 million viewers for the first episodes, it was the most watched programme on the channel in these weeks.

Danish director Lars von Trier first made the fiction serial *Riget* (The Kingdom, 1994), and three years later *Riget 2* (The Kingdom 2). The intention was to make a only a tv-serial, but the 4 1/2 hour long cinema-version of this comic-thriller soap opera was widely distributed. *Riget*, though being fiction, had a very strong documentary feel about it. It is shot on 16 mm with available light only. Some sequences are shot with handheld camera, some shots are deliberately slanting. The camera movements are often fast and unsteady, and the editing is full of deliberate jump cuts. The story (or rather storylines, since *Riget* was utilising soap dramaturgy) is based in the Danish hospital Rigshospitalet (The National Hospital), called "Riget" ("The Kingdom") by its employees.

Sjukhuset shows intertextual links to *Riget*, not so much through specific images as through its mood created by image and music together. A spectator who has seen *Riget*, will surely have strong associations to it when seeing *Sjukhuset*. This intertextuality is, however, not necessarily intentional. Both serials have an "authentic" look, but as I will discuss in chapter 5, they might be inspired from other fiction serials rather than from documentary.

4.1. *Sjukhuset* and Direct cinema

Sjukhuset is in many ways different from the docusoaps I have previously discussed. The features that distinguish it from other docusoaps, are at the same time what relates it closely to Direct cinema⁵². *Sjukhuset* can be seen as an attempt to combine the Direct cinema ideals with the demands of television. I will discuss this relationship since it provides an opportunity to explore which changes the observational documentary has gone through in its adaptation to television.

⁵² See chapter 1 for a presentation of Direct cinema and observational documentary.

Observational documentary and Direct cinema in particular, has been widely criticised. I will discuss *Sjukhuset* in the light of this critique, as it illuminates some of the problems the observational mode has.

Sjukhuset is sufficiently different from the main crop of docusoaps for some, its makers included, to argue that it isn't a docusoap at all. On Swedish TV4's webpage, it is presented as "a documentary in eight parts"⁵³. Director and photographer Anders Berggren says about *Sjukhuset*:

"It's not a docusoap. A docusoap, or a fiction soap for that part, is only about superficial characters, and the characters rather become caricatures. The bad is always bad, the good is always good, the happy always happy and so on. That's what characterizes the soap. While a fiction serial or a documentary film has a different depth, where the persons can be in a good mood one day, but the next day they're not. The good could suddenly become mad or angry and so on. And this why we don't think it's a docusoap, it does not have the dramatic elements of the soap ... I'd rather compare it to a good drama serial,- there are hospital serials that are not soaps. In soaps, what you see is people talking. While in a drama serial there are scenes, things happening, a story that is carried forward. In a soap it's almost only people talking, yelling at each others, intrigues, it never moves forwards, only in circles. While this is a serial that starts and ends. If you look at British docusoaps, you have these very clear caricatures. There is nothing about life and death, no depth."⁵⁴

Related to what Berggren says about depth is what I will call the *mood* of the serial. The mood in most docusoaps is light and humourous, even if the humour can be rather black and

⁵³ <http://www.tv4.se/red/projekt/sjukhuset/>

⁵⁴ Taped interview with Anders Berggren 04.05.00., this and further quotations, my translation.

ironic. Although the characters go through various ordeals, from failing their driving test for the seventh time to being scolded by a furious hotel manager, the overall mode in the docusoaps is un-problematising and light. *Sjukhuset* is different in this matter,- it is *serious*. Most of the topics are serious, quite a few actually concern life or death for the people we are introduced to.

According to Berggren's argumentation, it is the *meaning* rather than the *shape* of the film that determines that *Sjukhuset* is not a docusoap. I would however argue that it fits the definitions of docusoap from my chapter 1. It has the characteristics that these serials borrow from fiction soap:

1. It has many storylines, and they continue "seamlessly" across the episodes. In the first episode, a total number of 8 more or less intertwining storylines are introduced. The main ones concern the young boy Micke who has a serious heart disease, the first day of the new hospital manager, a family where the father is donating part of his liver to his daughter, medical student Petra applying for, and starting, her summer job, and the staff's efforts to keep unwanted strangers off the hospital premises. The episode changes back and forth between these storylines, like other docusoaps do. Some storylines, Micke's and the new manager's, continue through the whole serial. In the last episode, the new manager resigns, thus allowing for a closing of the narrative structure.
2. Even if this serial ends, it has an inherent *potential* of running endlessly,- the main characteristic of a drama soap. At the end of the last episode, there are titles (or voice over?) telling what happened to the characters after shooting, e.g. "Micke is alive and well, his new heart functioning." This is no hindrance for making a successor, however.
3. It has a large number of characters (*shared protagonism*). A few of these continue throughout the serial, like Micke, the student Petra, the porter Lången, and the new manager.
4. It is not *a* story, but a dramatic structure that allows the telling of many different stories. The hospital itself is not a story, but rather the framework for the many things happening in it.

Furthermore it has the docusoap characteristics of following "ordinary people" in an institution, concentrating on everyday events. When the term docusoap is avoided, one should also keep in mind that the term itself has a certain ring to it that some filmmakers don't want to be associated with. *Docusoap*, the way the term is used in Britain, has come to signify popular, mass-produced entertainment television, not with documentary as a serious matter. This can partly be explained historically: The word *soap* itself had a derogatory meaning from the beginning:

"The "soap" in soap opera alludes to the use of the serial form from its earliest days to the present as an advertising vehicle for laundry detergents and household cleaning products. The "opera" in soap opera signals a travesty: the highest of dramatic forms is made to describe the lowest." (Allen 1995:4)

It is then "the lowest" of dramatic forms that now has lent its name to documentary. As with the soap opera, having a "high" form as the other part of the name hasn't necessarily increased the status of the new genre.

No staging or reconstruction

Sjukhuset is still different from most of the other docusoaps, mainly because of its Direct cinema ideals. The Direct cinema practitioners developed strict rules for how a documentary film was to be made. They were, according to Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins,

"drawing up a kind of filmic ten commandments: thou shalt not rehearse, thou shalt not interview; thou shalt not use commentary; thou shalt not use film lights; thou shalt not stage events; thou shalt not dissolve" (Macdonald & Cousins, 1996: 250).

This is how *Sjukhuset* presents itself at Swedish TV4's webpage:

"Their ambition with Sjukhuset is to capture people's everyday life without any adaptations, reconstructed scenes or dramatizations. The main motive is to just hang on and be there when it happens"⁵⁵.

Javér and Berggren did hang around the hospital, waiting for something to happen, for one year. They shot 200 hours of videotape for their eight episode serial, which is more than the average docusoap does. This is an expensive and time consuming method, another reason why most docusoaps aren't made this way. For a Direct cinema practitioner, it would be unthinkable to ask a participant to, let's say, enter the car once more, as was often done in for instance *Driving School*.

"This became a crucial element in the Direct cinema enterprise, the heart of the promise that the material was unmediated. (Richard) Leacock described "never asking anybody to do anything" as a "discipline" (Winston 1995: 150).

This is also crucial to the makers of *Sjukhuset*:

⁵⁵ <http://www.tv4.se/red/projekt/sjukhuset/> (my translation)

"We are always very strict not to arrange scenes. If it doesn't take place in the shot, it doesn't exist."⁵⁶

The filmmakers of this movement believed in the camera that just followed people around, and thus showed real life. Don Pennebaker stated it this way:

"It's possible to go to a situation and simply film what you see there, what happens there, what goes on ... And what's a film? It's just a window someone peeps through" (quoted in Winston 1995:149).

It can, however, be hard to understand what is going on if you just see it through a window. However *unmediated* the material is claimed to be, Direct cinema was soon accused of seeking "*situations of tensions and stress which were not necessarily of much social import but rather allowed the advantages of the new style to be highlighted*", as Brian Winston says (1995:153). The observational method does not construct or arrange, it *chooses*. Because the storytelling relies on showing, the filmmakers have to choose topics that are actually possible to *show*. Because the filmmakers want people to not concentrate too much on the fact that there is a camera present, they choose situations that facilitate this. This favours of course the concrete action rather than the abstract reasoning, and it favours some specific kinds of action. Javér and Berggren wanted to portray *the whole* of the hospital, but that was difficult:

⁵⁶ Taped interview with director and photographer Anders Berggren.

"If you enter the hospital there are many different departments. What directs this kind of films is what is visible in the picture. And for sure, the medical department in a hospital is important,- but it's not visible in the picture⁵⁷. Operations, on the other hand, are visible, you can see what's happening. So the choice is natural, to pick that part of the hospital where something is happening."⁵⁸

In other words, parts of the filmed reality has to be left out because they do not work well in this specific, observational mode of film making. This again means that the method favours action over talk, something that is evident in *Sjukhuset*. The critique is not new; Direct cinema has been said to rely on a crisis structure, one where people are so engaged in the crisis they are in that they forget about the camera (Winston 1995:153). Also events with a set agenda are more accessible for observational film making:

"It's not easy to shoot a conversation in the break room, I tell you. We have shot many metres of conversation. But it doesn't become anything. You look at it and think, no, this is nothing. Because people,- either they don't talk about these things, or so much is implicit. We understand it because we were there, but you can't see it in the material. Or they get nervous in front of camera, and don't talk. So it's very difficult to shoot a natural conversation in a break room. But if you enter a meeting room, somebody from the administration enters,- then it's an active situation. Those meetings give a lot better result, for film."⁵⁹

Direct cinema wants to show the unmediated reality, but it has to leave out perhaps important parts of this reality. *Sjukhuset* has become a universe of dramatic operations, meetings and emotions among the relatives of the sick. Almost absent are the more trivial sides of a

⁵⁷ The Swedish expression he uses is "*det syns inte i bild*".

⁵⁸ Taped interview with Berggren.

⁵⁹ Taped interview with Berggren.

hospital, the endless washing of bed-ridden patients, the feeding of patients, the laundry etc. By avoiding these themes, *Sjukhuset* leaves out part of reality, - it doesn't tell the whole story. At the same time, to choose the dramatic action sequences and the emotions of the relatives are probably what makes the film exciting, interesting, and deeply moving.

Unnoticed camera

Related to the wish not to arrange, was Direct cinema's wish to keep the camera unnoticed. The thought was that once the people that were being filmed got used to the camera presence, they would forget about it and just go on doing what they would do if there was no camera present. This meant that, at least in early days of Direct cinema, the camera crew's presence was often invisible to the spectator. *Sjukhuset* does not hide the fact that a film is being made. Carl Javér, the sound man, is clearly visible at least twice during the serial. There is the incident in the first episode where a secretary, a little stressed and confused, faxes an internal paper to the press. While talking to the crew she realises what she has done, pushes past the sound man squeezing him up against the wall and into the camera frame. Also in episode one is the porter Lången, who holds a jar of technical spirit to the nose of the sound man, for him to smell that it really is spirit. More than in other docusoaps, this brings to attention the process of film making, and actually adds to the authenticity of the serial. The audience of today knows a lot more about the film making process, and reads these elements as signs of authenticity.

Narrator

The most conspicuous difference between *Sjukhuset* and other docusoaps is the lack of narrator.

“Ideally, part of our whole purpose is to make the viewers their own commentators. Not to tell anything, but to show. Narration is only a leg that you use for support if you need it”

David Maysles (quoted in Macdonald & Cousins 1996:263).

The reason for choosing not to have a narrator can also be found in the beliefs of the founders of Direct cinema. Avoiding the narrator is the only way documentary can "*have the possibility at least of allowing the power of film to build*", as Robert Drew, often considered the founder of Direct cinema, has written (cited in Macdonald & Cousins 1996: 271). He meant that storytelling based on filmic-dramatic principles could allow also a documentary film to reach the big, general audiences the way the fiction movies do.

The Swedish filmmakers follow many of the Direct cinema codes, but the finished product shows that they approached the storytelling with some pragmatism. The problem that very often arises when filmed reality is shown without a commentary, is that it becomes very hard to understand just what this is about. The storytelling is based on action only, the characters have no inner life like they have in fiction. There can be no reaction shots like in a fiction soap, that help us understand what the person is feeling. As reality is very often ambiguous, so is the filmed reality. The commentary in a docusoap has the important purpose of eliminating that ambiguity.

Because observational documentary relies on showing rather than telling, it can not only be hard to understand, it can also become quite boring. *Sjukhuset* has this problem to some extent. It is difficult to grasp the significance of certain episodes, and this makes them un-interesting. This is a calculated risk from the filmmakers. They don't want to use a narrator:

*"I don't like that kind of film, it doesn't work. It works in American fact-based documentaries. But in these serials, it becomes really strange if a voice appears from above and tells me what I really was supposed to have seen in the shot. It feels like the filmmakers have failed: they haven't succeeded in shooting the incident, so they are forced to use a narrator. Sometimes I think it is better that you don't explain everything, leave it unexplained, rather than lean upon a narrator."*⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Taped interview w/Berggren.

Interviews

To remedy the problems of telling stories without narrator, *Sjukhuset* relies heavily on interviews. The Direct cinema practitioners, in theory at least, shunned interviews, or statements directly addressed to the camera. They preferred to record only "overheard" speech. *Sjukhuset* also uses a lot of overheard conversation, but the storytelling would indeed have become very difficult without the interviews. The filmmakers claim they at least didn't use planned interviews:

"If we need someone to explain, we just grabbed them as they pass in the corridor and ask them to explain. So there are no planned interviews with 20 questions on a sheet. We do the interviews ad hoc".⁶¹

I will distinguish between two kinds of interview used in *Sjukhuset*, because one of them is clearly there to help with the storytelling since the filmmakers have chosen not to use narrator.

One interview is the informal type, the short remark that is given to the crew as some kind of action is going on. The statement can be initiated by the crew, or by the character. A typical example would be a father standing by his son's bed, looking at the interviewer and saying "I guess he'll be all right, the operation went well". This type of interview gives the spectator an opportunity for identification, for sharing the feeling of those on the screen.

Then there is the more formal interview, the one that contains information. These are usually done in an interview situation, i.e. the interviewee is not doing something else at the same time. They are typically interviews with doctors who *explain*. An example is the introduction of one of the main storylines, about Micke who has a very serious heart disease. The pictures of Micke in his bed, with all the personnel and action around him, are being crosscut with an interview with his doctor who explains. Micke himself does not talk. We understand later in the serial that he is very weak and barely has any voice.

⁶¹ Taped interview with Anders Berggren

In this case, the story about Micke was obviously so important that the filmmakers didn't want to risk that spectators wouldn't understand it if it was made in strict Direct cinema-style. Another storyline, concerning a little girl that needs a liver transplant, is less fortunate. It takes a lot of time before it is clear that it is actually the father who is the liver donor. Part of the reason for this problem lies in the language. A native Swedish speaker would of course understand more. Knowing that a television spectator is usually less concentrated than for instance a film spectator, one must assume that also the Swedish audience will miss information. It is, at least by commercial standards, a risky way of making television:

"Dependence on the close observation of the particular, without expositional support, increases the possibility of incoherence and boredom, in relation both to observed particularity ("what's going on here?") and to the significance of this particularity for the general topic" (Corner 1995:88).

Editing

Sjukhuset does not follow the Direct cinema-codes of editing strictly. There is non-diegetic music, for instance on surgery sequences and on the visual "bridges" between different scenes. Some sequences are "fast-forwarded", and an interview with a doctor is edited with a white flash and a sound effect between sentences, the way news stories often camouflage a jump-cut. The latter can be seen as another way of adding to the authenticity of the film,- you show that the interview has been edited, instead of camouflaging the cut.

This comparison shows that *Sjukhuset* is a kind of Direct cinema-docusoap. It does not follow the strictest codes of Direct cinema, but has made several adjustments to make the mode fit its current place on tv. Some compromises are made to adapt the material to a television audience,- the interviews that help the understanding of what's going on. Other features that are not strictly Direct cinema add to the authenticity, like the soundman in the shot, the editing of an interview with white flashes between the various statements, and fast-forwarding of sequences.

4.2. Criticism of Direct cinema's storytelling

Since observational documentary relies on *showing*, and avoids *telling*, it has been criticized for not being able to be analytical. It can definitely be critical of the establishment, but this requires a certain behaviour from the situation being filmed. The well known examples of socially critical observational documentaries have all shown people who behaved in a way that spectators found revolting, but usually without the filmed people being able to predict this viewer reaction. The most famous example is probably the one episode from Roger Graef's serial *Police* from 1982 that became "*that rarest of things, a realist documentary which actually had an easily demonstrated effect in the world*", as Brian Winston puts it. The episode shows an interrogation of a woman reporting a rape, and the police acted in such a manner that it caused a public outcry. Other examples, although they haven't actually changed the world, are Paul Watson's "*The Dinner Party*" and "*The Fishing Party*", and the Norwegian "*Med hjertet på rett plass*" (With the heart in the right place), which all portray rich and/or conservative people and their, to the average tv-spectator, shocking behaviour.

One reason for the success of these films, is the clarity of the events that unfold in front of the camera. Upper class Englishmen shooting seagulls for fun when they are tired of not catching any fish become an easily read symbol of of unsympathetic men to whom the world is a playground. Conveying social meaning in an observational film becomes a lot more difficult when the filmed circumstances are not this clear.

Narrative levels in *Sjukhuset*

With its serious mood, *Sjukhuset* gives the implication that it *is* trying to say something important, rather than just entertain. Drawing upon the concepts of narrative levels that I introduced in chapter 3, I will analyse how this serial treats its topics, and what story it tells us.

This more serious approach might be the reason why there is relatively little going on on the *micronarrative level* (O'Donnell 1999:21). This level concerns the relationships between the characters, based on emotions (who loves/hates who) and also on more business-related alliances. Few of the stories in *Sjukhuset* are based on such relationships. Thus, we don't get the feeling that we *know* these characters the way we would in a drama soap, or indeed in

many other docusoaps. The important questions on this narrative level are not so much concerning the relationships between the characters as the relationship between the characters and the hospital itself. The questions have more to do with what will actually happen (will Micke have a heart transplant and will it be successful? Will Renée get well after the brain operation? Will the new manager solve the hospital's problems? Will Petra the medical student get an assistant job?).

The spectators see only the surface of these characters, their actions and what they themselves say, which makes it difficult for us to have any deeper knowledge of their inner emotions. However, this also opens up for interpretations. In episode 1, the young father Gerry donates part of his liver to his young daughter. We see him before and after the operation. As he wakes up, he is quiet and doesn't say very much. He looks groggy. A likely reading of this scene would be "he probably feels sick and groggy after the operation and anaesthesia". However, it can be read differently, like Anders Berggren does when asked to distinguish *Sjukhuset* from docusoap:

*"This is what I mean is the difference, that the dramaturgy of soap, it's that you're not supposed to get close to people ... I think that with the different people (in Sjukhuset), you get really close to them. In some situations, for instance with Gerry, who's giving half his liver to his daughter. And he's this healthy and happy person; "This will be fine", he says. But then when he wakes up after the operation he is in a lot of pain. And somehow you can tell by looking at him that he's wondering "what the hell did I actually do, was this so important, I actually could have died." because he hurts so much. But then after a while the pain goes away, and he's just happy to meet his daughter. That the persons have some kind of bottom. And then also the total picture creates a depth, in the hospital itself."*⁶²

⁶² Interview with Anders Berggren.

This "somehow you can tell by looking at him" is the core of the problems that observational film has in conveying meaning. It is very much up to the spectator to interpret and understand.

On the *metanarrative* level, *Sjukhuset* has one main topic that it deals with,- the crisis of the health care system in the Scandinavian welfare state. But again, the mode relies on what is visible and possible to shoot. The topic is only problematised from the employees point of view,- their problems with finding space for all the patients, the stress they feel when working under such conditions. This is clearly demonstrated in the last episode, when a devastating report on the working conditions in the hospital is being presented. These are the superficial signs of a health care system in crisis, but that is an interpretation that the spectator has to do for herself. The parallel is clear to Brian Winston's critique of the Direct cinema classic about John. F. Kennedy's presidential campaign, *Primary*:

"We learn nothing of the issues, of what divides the candidates, of the significance of the events filmed, except tangentially because the people being filmed happen, as it were, to be concerned with little else ... Any understanding we gain of the campaign is a sort of fortunate by-product of our own political and, now, historical knowledge"

(Winston 1995:152).

The question is whether the understanding is just a fortunate by-product, or a more calculated one. Filmmakers in Sweden today can surely expect some level of knowledge amongst their potential viewers. The serial is made for a domestic audience that are familiar both with the portrayed society and with the crisis of the welfare system. They will have some skills to interpret what they are not told in clear text.

Other topics that would, in a regular documentary, or in a fiction soap, have a large problematising potential, are not touched upon at all. One of the patients, epileptic Renèe who's brain is operated on, is a gypsy. This is just part of the background, and something that a non-Swedish viewer takes a long time to understand.

What kind of society is then portrayed in the *macronarrative* level of *Sjukhuset*? Certainly one in which a large gipsy family following their daughter to a brain operation is not problematic at all. The cosmos of *Sjukhuset* is one where social class and its implications is difficult to see. This is typical enough of the egalitarian Swedish society. The values that are celebrated inside the hospital are those that the staff portray: Industriousness, skills, ability to do the best out of difficult situations. There is a stark contrast between which topics seem difficult and problematic and which do not. In less serious matters the overall feeling is that things in general are difficult and problematic. Small trivial problems seem to cause lots of stress, for instance the staff's irregular parking of bicycles in the stairways, that is a storyline in one episode. Another example is the stealing of medical spirit from the toilets,- a problem that causes lots of action, from looking for intruders in long deserted corridors to meetings about reconstructing the entrance area. The things that in this hospital seem easiest are, paradoxically, to transplant a heart or a liver. These complicated operations are shown with the true admiration for professionals who master their tasks. Nothing fails or seems stressful, everything seems to work perfect. In this way, one can say that the medical employees at the hospital are portrayed as the heroes of this film.

What is celebrated is the modern hospital in itself,- the way it can save life, make lives better for so many people, the way its employees work extremely hard but still manages to be like angels for the patients. In a way the staff as community is the protagonist, with its goal of "saving life". Typically enough, the only main exception is mainly the new manager. He is shown as an outsider coming in, and admits to not having worked in a hospital before. And, in the epilogue, we are told that he quit the job shortly after.

There is no clear message to be read from *Sjukhuset*. It functions as a portrait of time in the life of a hospital, but does not manage to give any deeper sense of understanding of the crisis in the Swedish health care system, which was one of the goals of the filmmakers. According to some critics, they may have made just another observational documentary that is, as is Brian Winston's main accusation, "*running away from social meaning*" (Winston 1995:151). This is, however, a notion that sees documentary as a product that has reached its finished status as it leaves its makers, that it can or should not have larger possibilities than intended. Television documentaries are situated in the working through process that I discussed in the

last chapter, and are there subject to many different readings. The way that the theoretician Carl Plantinga looks upon observational documentary gives room for this option, the possibility of an audience reading many different meanings from a film. Plantinga's term for it is that observational documentaries have an *open voice*:

"Films of the open voice can be justified not simply for some presumed copying function, but for their epistemological hesitation. The open voice recognizes that we must approach some subjects with the humility of one who does not claim to know. The open voice may withhold high-level generalizations about its subject not in the name of imitation, but in an unwillingness to offer neat explanations and contextualizations. Withholding such high-level explanations also may facilitate a democracy of interpretation, allowing the spectator to come to her own conclusions" (Plantinga 1997:118).

Seen this way, Javér and Berggren manage to do something that was and is important for those who work in the observational mode: They open up for many different readings.

This chapter has concentrated on *Sjukhuset* and its relationship both to Direct cinema and the current trend of docusoap. I will continue to use *Sjukhuset* as analysis material for the next chapter, but then as a reference when discussing the fiction serial *Riget*, and fiction's need for authenticity.

"The clumsiness is a ploy designed to prove that what we are about to hear and see is real, authentic, unmediated"

Peter Humm

5. The search for authenticity

Documentary style in fiction film.

The previous chapters have mainly been concerned with the documentary serials' borrowing narrative structure and style from the fiction world, mainly from soap opera. In my final chapter I will try to complete the circle, by discussing how and why fiction film in its turn uses elements from documentary. I will introduce the fiction serial *Riget* for this purpose, because it is a fiction film that borrows many features from documentary. My analysis of *Sjukhuset* from the last chapter will continue in this one, because of this serial's specific relationship to *Riget*. The similarities and differences of these 2 films are useful in a discussion of why fiction film adopts documentary style. Drawing again upon work of John Ellis, but also Peter Humm⁶³, I will discuss how fiction achieves authenticity through this borrowing of documentary style. Towards the end of the chapter, I will expand my discussion to concern television's general need for authenticity, which in its turn is influential for the output of the TV-channels.

Resemblances with *Riget*

I will start with *Riget* and its strong resemblances with *Sjukhuset*. Every viewer of *Sjukhuset* that has seen *Riget* before, will be struck by the apparent similarities between the two. Since *Riget* was made 5 years before *Sjukhuset*, it would seem likely that the makers of *Sjukhuset* had a clear intention of using *Riget* as stylistic inspiration, and thus getting a lot "for free". Every viewer who has seen *Riget* will get a hint that "this is the kind of atmosphere we are going into". This recognition, conscious or subconscious, is by no means necessary for the understanding of the serial *Sjukhuset*, - it only adds extra "spice". The intertextuality *Sjukhuset* shows is by the form of *allusion*, that can:

⁶³Humm in Geraghty and Lusted 1998:228.

"Take the form of a verbal or visual evocation of another film, hopefully as an expressive means of commenting on the fictional world of the alluding film",

as Gerard Genette defines it.⁶⁴

The similarities between, or intertextual allusions from *Sjukhuset* to *Riget* seem obvious from the opening sequence of the former. It consists of slow motioned, deliberately unsteady shots of a big, rectangular building, strikingly similar to the Danish Rigshospitalet, with titles. The music is long, "mystic-sounding" synthesizer-tones. The music accelerates to a techno-ish rock, as the building shots alternate with situation shots of some of the main characters. These blurred shots of the big building come back from time to time, as they are used to make "bridges" from one storyline to another. They are always accompanied by the mystic, floating music. That same music also accompanies other sequences, e.g. shots from desolate corridors.

Riget

As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Riget* has the narrative structure of a soap opera, with one important exception: Every now and then, two kitchen employees, busy with the large hospital dishwasher, comments on the action of the film. The two of them have Down's syndrome, and their comments are often of a metaphorical character, e.g. "*The house itself is crying*". Thus *Riget* in a way has a narrator, that tells things that are not visible in the action and dialogue.

The elements that make it seem similar to *Sjukhuset* are, however, to be found in the style. In *Riget*, there is also a mystic-sounding synthesizer music on shots that don't have too much action, pictures from the basement corridors, and the helicopter-shot of the hospital that is used as a bridge between sections. There are operation sequences with much blood, staff meetings shot with handheld camera, there is the same structure of many parallel storylines that alternate. The ambience of the film is one of mystery and of unseen powers. Why would

⁶⁴ Cited in Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis 1992:206.

the creators of *Sjukhuset* want to add this atmosphere to their documentary? Photographer and director Anders Berggren says:

"It's really funny, people say it looks like Riget, but I shot Sjukhuset and I haven't seen one single episode of Riget. I hadn't seen it before we started shooting, and then after I started I didn't want to see because of the risk that I would be influenced by it. So I haven't seen it. ... Carl (Javér) has seen Riget, and we edit together. But many people who have later seen Riget say that there aren't really any similarities. ... I think it is like this: I don't know what Lars von Trier felt the first moment he entered a hospital, but I think that he and we got the same sensation of a hospital. Its a big building, lots happening 24 hours a day, and it can be quite frightening and a little dangerous. At the same time, there's an inherent security there, if you're there you're in good hands. Perhaps it's this feeling that reoccurs. Then there's one more similarity, Lars von Trier was also inspired by (the drama serial) Homicide."

In other words, the intertextuality is not intended or conscious. Berggren is perhaps right, that the inspiration from *Homicide* is part of the explanation. What the spectators think they notice as major allusions from *Sjukhuset* to *Riget* are really not that similar when examined closely. The similarity is not in the single element, like a shot or the music, but in the *mood* created by the relatively similar-sounding music and the relatively similar-looking location.

There is another feature of this intertextuality, that concerns the blurred and unsteady shots of the big hospital building that *Sjukhuset* uses in its opening sequence and in the "bridges". These give associations to *Riget*, because they *don't look like documentary*. The unsteady shots are *conspicuously* unsteady - the kind of "deliberate camera-adjustment-on-the-air"-style that is best known from the American drama series *NYPD Blue*. This is part of what John Corner in mid-90s-Britain noted as "*an increased inter-textual and inter-generic awareness (that) is widely apparent, modes of representation from "outside" of documentary often being imported across the border and vice-versa*" (Corner 1996b:150). The documentary has borrowed the style that fiction first borrowed from documentary to look authentic.

Authentic look in fiction

When fiction films take on the features of documentary, it is usually as a reaction against the mainstream, usually Hollywood, film. There has several of these reactions, including the French new wave and the Italian neorealism. Here I will mention the latest of these waves, the Danish Dogma 95, where Lars von Trier, the director of *Riget*, is one of the initiators. The Dogma filmmakers' themselves draw the lines back to the French new wave:

*"In 1960 enough was enough! The movie had been cosmeticised to death, they said; yet since then the use of cosmetics has exploded"*⁶⁵.

Interestingly, the Dogma filmmakers use a rhetoric that would fit well in a discussion of documentary film:

"To Dogma 95 the movie is not illusion! ... By using new technology anyone at any time can wash the last grains of truth away in the deadly embrace of sensation. The illusions are everything the movie can hide behind" (my italics).

In the documentary discourse, the word *truth* is approached with extreme caution. For this chapter, however, it is significant that it is closely linked to the word *authenticity*, which is what the Dogma filmmakers are after. In their search for truth, they all sign what they call their "vow of chastity"⁶⁶. This is basically a vow to avoid all kinds of artificial effects like filters, lights, music sound track, and also props and sets. The action of the film must take place here and now, all shooting must be done on location, and with handheld camera. It is obvious that what you get by following these rules, is a film that, although with a fictional story, is very close to an observational documentary.

Riget is not strictly a Dogma film, but it is clearly influenced by the ideas. It has borrowed the look of the documentary to gain authenticity. The excess of some of the documentary characteristics, like the jump cuts and the fast panning camera, adds to the irony that is an important part of *Riget*.

⁶⁵ This and the next quotation: http://www.dogme95.dk/the_vow/index.htm

These filmmakers could have chosen nice, steady shots on tripods, with sufficient light for a good resolution. When they chose to borrow the look of documentary it is because they want to add authenticity to their films. (Of course, it is also often cheaper and faster to shoot this way). In the following, I will discuss why this look is so important to the filmmakers.

The main part of their reason for choosing this style, lies in how we, the audience, perceive these pictures. Through watching television, we have learnt to distinguish between the different kinds of pictures we see. To understand the reasons for this, I will briefly look at the way we perceive television news.

The news look

In the news world, the "authentic-looking" footage is often termed as low quality footage. Video images that are dark, unfocused and unsteady makes it hard to see what is going on. In general, television news prefer a relatively steady, focused shot, that is bright enough for us to see what this is all about. That's considered good quality. The acceptance of low quality is proportional to the journalistic importance of the footage. High quality is expected on news reports done under good working conditions by skilled photographers and reporters. The wobbly, grainy, un-focused, often long-distance footage will only be used if necessary. Consequently we have learnt that the more amateurish the footage is, the more important is the event.

A useful example could be a news report covering a dramatic incident, for instance an avalanche hitting a village. The news report will consist of interviews with eyewitnesses and rescue personnel, shots of the snow heaps covering houses, and they will all be steady and of good television quality. But included in the report is perhaps some shots of the avalanche itself. These shots are unsteady and blurred, perhaps zooming planlessly in and out, and they have captions saying "amateur video". The shots are not *good* in terms of photographic quality, but they are a witness account: They are *authentic*.

⁶⁶ See appendix for the Dogma rules.

It is not surprising then, that the aesthetic that is a result of bad working conditions or lack of skill, is copied as a method for obtaining the same credibility and feel of importance. The handheld, unsteady camera and the blurred shots have become what can be called the *aesthetics of authenticity* (Humm 1998:230). The reason why fiction film picks up these aesthetics, is that fiction film also needs to be believed. This is particularly present in television drama series.

The aesthetics of authenticity are differently applied. One well known, but extreme example is the American drama series *NYPD Blue*. John Ellis writes that

"Documentaries have a provisional feel to their camerawork, demonstrating that events have been caught as they happen rather than constructed for the camera, although, of course, such techniques can be imitated in fiction: witness NYPD Blue" (Ellis 2000:115).

In *NYPD Blue* the documentary look is very stylised. Spectators not familiar with it often reacts with a hint of seasickness because of the moving frames. Unlike a handheld documentary camera, the *NYPD Blue*-camera moves loosely fastened on something. The shots are always level, they move horizontally or in controlled movements up and down. The handheld camera will very often lose the horizontal level. The "jump cuts" of *NYPD Blue* are often not done out of need, but for aesthetic purposes, for instance simply cutting from a wide frame to a slightly tighter one.

5.1. Television's need for authenticity

The fact that even fiction copies the aesthetics of authenticity, tells us how important this material is to television. The authentic images are at the core of a TV channel's output. The news broadcasts are extremely important for building a channel's credibility. The way we have learnt to read these images, makes us perceive them as real, relevant, credible and important. Docusoaps have, more or less, as I have shown, this credibility that comes from the authentic images, and this way they give us a different experience than the fiction soaps. When watching fiction soap treating complicated topics from our surrounding world, we

know, deep inside, that this is "only fiction". Docusoap takes a very different place in our perception:

"Instead of the suspension of disbelief that could be put as "I know very well [that this is a fiction] but all the same...[I will treat it as if it were not], the observational documentary encourages belief; "Life is like this, isn't it?" (Nichols 1991:43).

The wish to bring ordinary people onto television is deeply rooted in an institution like the BBC, argues Peter Humm in his discussion of the "home video" programmes like the British Video Diaries: *"Pressure does not come from people demanding air time for films they make at home on a Bolex or camcorder. The emphasis from the start is on a traditional notion of advocacy - the bourgeoisie oblige of the BBC producer"* (Humm 1998:230). This notion is closely linked to the journalist ideal of giving a voice to those who do not have the possibility to talk in public. Humm also points out that there has been a tension between this inherent wish of the television professionals to *"broaden the range of those represented on television and the search for new modes of expression (ibid.)"* This conflict concerns the above mentioned aesthetics of authenticity, that has taught us to believe that low quality is equal to authenticity. This conflict is also linked to the debate around Driving School that I referred to in chapter 3, because the good quality footage of this serial might reduce the notion of authenticity for the spectator.

Again employing John Ellis' concept of working through, I will place the films discussed in this thesis in the larger framework of television. The documentary serials that I have discussed in this thesis are a natural factor in the large process of working through. They take the reality footage, close to that of news, and process it.

The concept of working through in some ways counter the critical stands that many scholars have taken against docusoaps and the other new vérité formats. As chapter 4 has shown, especially Brian Winston has criticized documentary for "running away from social meaning". One reason might be that the new hybrid documentary formats do not fit into the concepts of the socially critical documentary. John Ellis puts it this way:

"Modern television does not, as it used to in the era of scarcity, provide any overall explanation, nor does it ignore or trivialize, as many have criticized it for doing. Television itself, just like its soap operas, comes to no conclusions ... It exhausts an area of concern, smothering it in explanations from almost all and every angle" (Ellis 2000:80).

As I have shown in the analysis of the narrative levels of *Klar, ferdig, kjør*, even a docusoap with a relatively outspoken goal of being pure entertainment, offers experiences and stories that increase our understanding of the world. John Ellis points out that the more mundane of the tv-genres are just as important as the critically acclaimed, high-status productions. Through the concept of working through, Ellis shows that the mundane forms,- talk shows, soaps, leisure tv, game programmes, together constitute a forum of great social importance.

The docusoaps often contain the same themes as all the other programmes in television's output, but are yet another forum for the treatment of these themes. They seldom give any answers, they don't point at something that is wrong and places the responsibility somewhere like the investigative documentaries do,- but they are open to our interpretations of contemporary society.

"Television refuses "the advantages of certainty" in favour of the pleasure and pain of living in the uncertain present. Television, in this sense, acts as our forum for interpretations." (Ellis 2000:99).

There seems to be an insatiable need for footage from this society around us. *"We hunger for news from the world around us but desire it in the form of narratives"* (Nichols 1994:ix.). It is this hunger that makes docusoaps profitable. As the competition in television is getting tougher, new ways of presenting authentic material are invented. The docusoaps enable television to remain authentic, but to do it in an entertaining and, for the most part, un-demanding way.

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