

Jan Pinseler

Power and Hegemony in Reality Crime Programmes

On the Relevance of a Cultural Studies Approach for Analysing Media Images of Reality

Abbreviated online version of a paper presented to the Cultural Studies Now conference, London, 22 July 2007

Reality Crime Programmes on Television

Images of crime constitute an important part of every day media output. Both, fictional and real crime stories do more than just represent crime. Rather, they provide us with knowledge about crime. And thereby, media images of crime do have a considerable influence on our perception of the world. Reality crime programmes and crime-appeal programmes have some common characteristics, so that we can treat them as one genre. Recently, there has been an addition to the Reality TV genre which deals with offenders. Shows like the British and American *Brat Camp* and the German *Teenager außer Kontrolle* show troubled teenagers who are sent to a place one could describe as a boot camp to get “treatment”. But before going more deeply into re-education programmes, let me start by showing how crime and deviance are depicted on crime-appeal programmes specifically and in media in general. Taking re-education shows into account, I will then go on to show how the genre of Punitive Reality Television takes an active part in drilling people into a neoliberal society.

Surprisingly, there are only a few studies on crime-appeal programmes.¹ These programmes are sometimes discussed within the context of Reality TV, but mostly, the German *Aktenzeichen XY... ungelöst*, *Crimewatch UK* or *America's Most Wanted* are treated as the stepmother of Reality TV. This is rather surprising, since far from being the strange relative, crime-appeal programmes are forefathers of Reality TV and very much alive today with shows in more than half a dozen countries. Probably the very first such programme ever – *Die Kriminalpolizei warnt* – was transmitted as early as 1938 on Nazi German trial television (Winker, 1994). Already in this early form of reality crime television there was one core element of crime appeals on television: authenticity. The importance

1 The most notable exception being an anthology ed. by Fishman & Cavender (1998).

of authenticity being produced can also be seen in the West German programme *Aktenzeichen XY... unbekannt* that started in 1967. *Aktenzeichen XY.. unbekannt* – one way or the other – became model for the genre of crime-appeal programmes.

Crime-appeal programmes do not only show crimes. Rather – as I have shown elsewhere (Pinseler, 2006) – they deal with the victim's everyday life before the crime at considerable length. Films on crime-appeal programmes mostly follow a recurring pattern: On one side there is an ideal world which the victim lives in. On the other side there is the evil, the crime. This can be called the *ideal world pattern* of depicting crime. This ideal world has special characteristics: it is the world of a small monogamous heterosexual family of West European descent. Criminals come from outside and break into this ideal world. Coming from outside could be either that they come from outside the victim's house or that they come from outside the world of ordinary people ethnically or socially. Alternatively, the criminal is shown as being abnormal, a pervert, deviating mentally, as someone living in our society and who must be expelled from the world of normality to restore the ideal world. By asking viewers to call in with evidence they are asked to help restoring this ideal world. The importance of this *ideal world pattern* for the depiction of normality versus crime is highlighted in cases in which the victim's life does not entirely resemble the ideal world as it is usually depicted on these programmes. In these cases crime-appeal programmes use repairing strategies, especially by including or excluding the victim into or out of the world of normality. Thus, in crime-appeal programmes, the world is dichotomously organised into good and evil. A victim can never be evil and a criminal will never be good.

Media Depictions of Crime and Deviance and the Production of Hegemony

According to Ericson (1991) one can distinguish between two different strands of research on media depiction of crime: the media effects model and what he calls the dominant ideology approach. In short, according to the effects model media transport messages which lead to direct effects by recipients. What these effects are is highly discussed, results of research are quite contradictory. To analyse media representations of crime researchers of this strand usually compare media images to reality. Subsequently they

argue that the media image is a biased one. One problem of this kind of research is how to measure “reality” itself. Normally this is done by using official crime statistics, misinterpreted or mistaken for reality itself.

The dominant ideology approach evolved around critical criminology in the 1970s. (e.g. Cohen, 1980). Summarised rather crudely, critical criminology scholars argued that crime is not natural, but a social construction conditional on social order and power relations. The seminal book *Policing the Crisis* by Hall et al. (1978) referred to this and to Becker’s (1966) labelling-approach. The main achievement of this study was, that it showed the relationship of politicians, the media and crime by taking the social conditions under which they operated into consideration.

Ericson (1991 p. 221) empathises that mass media institutions work in a more complex network of social institutions than implied in *Policing the Crisis*. In his view, mass media are more than just mechanisms for reproducing ideology and upholding hegemony. He accuses the dominant ideology approach of oversimplifying mass media as ideological apparatuses. Instead, he suggests an ‘institutional approach’ to replace the ‘ideological’ approaches of ‘ideology researchers on the left and “moral majority” effects researchers on the right’ (ibid. p. 223). A free market, Ericson argues, would push mass media organisations not to behave as instruments of ideological control, ‘because mass media texts must articulate with the concerns of a diverse array of organisations and institutions in order to obtain a sufficiently broad share of the market’ (ibid.). Thereby, the same principals of “free market economy” would ensure that mass media do not simply promote conservatism.

Looking back from today this seems to be quite a bold assumption, especially if one takes mass media in the United States after 9/11 into account. It seems obvious that “market mechanisms” – or, to put it more precisely, the conditions under which media corporations function within a capitalist society – have contributed to this absence of critique. Ericson’s argument ignores one basic aspect of Hall et al.’s analysis, namely of how media depictions of crime and deviance serve as means to uphold the hegemonic ideology. To the critics of the dominant ideology approach hegemonic ideology is simply what politicians say. Therefore, any statement of a person outside the ruling power bloc is seen as a non-hegemonic statement. This ignores that – especially mediated by mass

media – dominant ideology seems to be natural and is constantly reproduced by subordinate classes. Therefore, if we want to explain what depictions of real crime on popular television mean for society, we need to take ideology into account. This is especially true since we deal with processes of inclusion and exclusion, of disciplining and punishing, of depicting a specific conception of what constitutes normal, appropriate behaviour and what doesn't.

The way normality and deviance, crime and criminals, are depicted on crime-appeal programmes is at least insofar of interest because these programmes allegedly intent to enable viewers to help solving the crimes depicted. Using techniques of producing authenticity the image of crime is passed off as reality itself. That way authenticity is produced not only for depictions of crime itself but also for depictions of the world of victims. This in turn is passed off as direct re-enactment of reality, too. Since they – allegedly – only “re-enact” crimes the way they “really happen”, crime-appeal programmes have the ability to lead a moral discourse which portrays certain moral values as unquestionable and obligatory for every member of society. But if certain people are shown as deviant and publicly accused in media, crime-appeal programmes do not only propagate certain moral values but in addition take part in producing ideology. Using the *ideal world*-pattern, they also depict the rules to which every member of society has to abide, as long as s/he does not want to belong to the world of crime. Crime-appeal programmes successfully give the impression that they defend universal rights even though they in fact defend specific rights, especially the right to private property, which is a precondition for a capitalist society. Thereby these shows contribute to the successful production of hegemony and, hence, the maintaining of the current social order.

Punitive Reality TV

This gives a first idea of what makes punitive reality television different from other forms of Reality TV. Keppler (1994) suggests a distinction between narrative and performative forms of Reality TV. The most remarkable characteristic of the latter being that they do not only re-enact real events but intervene and change the actual life of participants. Crime-appeal programmes intervene into lives of people in a very direct way.

They reconstruct the suffering of crime victims but they intervene into the lives of suspects. But Punitive Reality TV does more and this becomes obvious if, for comparison, we look at shows like *The Apprentice*, *The Swan* or *Pop Idol*. While participants within these shows take part on a voluntary basis, the programmes nevertheless, as Thomas (2007) argued, walk a thin line between getting the contenders on the programme to discipline themselves and them being disciplined by so called trainers and instructors.

This is – to a considerable degree – different in Punitive Reality TV programmes. Here the “participants” do not agree to being part of any programme. While this is not a big issue with crime-appeal programmes it is for shows like *Brat Camp*. In this show troubled teenagers are put into “education camps” where they are exposed to severe forms of often pointless discipline in order to re-educate them into law-abiding members of society. For instance, in the German *Teenager außer Kontrolle* on the commercial RTL channel the youngsters are denied decent food, to wash, to move outside a very small stone circle and to talk to each other for an initiation period in the camp. The teenagers themselves did not agree to being put into the camp or on television. Their parents did for them. But agreeing that have been put into the camp is helpful – or successfully giving the impression of doing so – seems to be a vital part of the submission process these youths have to go through. Therefore, these shows switch the focus from “participants” disciplining themselves to them being disciplined. This switch of focus is underlined by them not being able to leave the show, a last resort to contenders on lifestyle television programmes.

All forms of performative Reality TV use forms of self-disciplining and being disciplined, but the emphasis is different. Disciplining oneself means that contenders on television shows try to conform as much as possible to certain norms, values and practises. Being disciplined, on the other hand, is the act of presenters, instructors, supervisors, wardens or policemen and -women using their power to get a participant to do something s/he would not do otherwise. While lifestyle formats still involve some form of voluntariness, crime-appeal and re-education programmes solely use coercion. By using coercion to discipline people, these shows demonstrate what happens to those who refuse to discipline themselves and thereby refuse to internalise the boundaries and demands of a neoliberal society. Those who deny self-discipline are forcibly disciplined by others.

Conclusion

Punitive Reality TV programmes work on two levels. On the first level – and in a very direct way – they discipline participants or try to bring alleged criminals to justice. On the second level they teach viewers on what kind of behaviour is tolerated and what is outside of normality. In a time, when, as Castells (1998: 344) puts it, ‘a considerable number of humans, probably in a growing proportion, are irrelevant, both as producers and consumers’ there is a significant need to control those who are excluded from vital parts of economic, political and social participation. This control can be more easily exercised by getting the excluded to internalise control and persuading them that the way society works they still have a chance of succeeding in climbing up the social ladder. But those who stopped believing this have to be shown the severe consequences of not behaving accordingly. Hence, where lifestyle TV appears to be the carrot that promises a lucrative career, Punitive Reality TV is the stick, disciplining those who no longer believe in the carrot. While crime-appeal programmes inform us of a criminal being caught, *Brat Camp* shows young offenders actually being punished. In these shows one can enjoy the spectacle of punishment. But while this is not the gruesome public torturing to death, Foucault (1975) describes at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*, it still is public, public and at the same time put on for the television camera. The inmates of *Brat Camp* are only here because of television, have to act for the camera and their humiliation is public. Therefore this kind of punishment is a public spectacle and panoptic at the same time.

References

- Becker, H.S. (1966). *Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Free Press.
- Castells, M. (1998). *End of Millennium. The Information Age*, vol 3, Economy, Society and Culture. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cohen, S. (1980). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics. The Creation of the Mods and the Rockers*. Oxford: Robertson.
- Ericson, R.V. (1991). Mass Media, Crime, Law, and Justice. An Institutional Approach. *British Journal of Criminology*. 31(3) pp. 219-249.
- Fishman, M. & Cavender, G. eds. (1998). *Entertaining Crime. Television Reality Programs*.

New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House.

Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J. & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the Crisis. Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Keppler, A. (1994). *Wirklicher als die Wirklichkeit? Das neue Realitätsprinzip der Fernsehunterhaltung*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Pinseler, J. (2006). *Fahndungssendungen im deutschsprachigen Fernsehen*. Köln: Halem.

Thomas, T. (2007). Heidis Girls und Popstars-Mädchen. Inszenierte Lebensträume und harte (Körper-)Arbeit. *Betrifft Mädchen*. 20(3) pp. 108-114.

Winker, K. (1994). *Fernsehen unterm Hakenkreuz. Organisation, Programm, Personal*. Wien: Böhlau.

Jan Pinseler is lecturer in cultural media studies at the University of Lueneburg (Germany). He works on media depictions of crime and deviance, on alternative media and methods of media research. Recently, he published a book on Crime Investigation Programmes on German Television.