

Televisionization

Enactments of TV Experiences in Novels from 1970 to 2010

Claudia Weber



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Abstract

TV's conquest of the American household in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s went hand in hand with critical discussions that revolved around the disastrous impact of television consumption on the viewer. To this day, watching television is connected with anxieties about the trivialization and banalization of society. At the same time, however, people appreciate it both as a source of information and entertainment. Television is therefore 'both...and:' entertainment and anxiety; distraction and allurements; companionship and intrusion. When the role and position of television in culture is ambiguous, personal relations with, attitudes towards, and experiences of television are equally ambivalent, sometimes even contradictory, but the public and academic discourses on television tend to be partial. They focus on the negative impact of television consumption on the viewer, thereby neglecting whatever positive experiences one might associate with it.

By analyzing a selection of novels, this study explores how narrative texts which are published between 1970 and 2010 enact ambiguous TV experiences, and how they, by doing so, enrich the public and academic discourses on television. It argues that the chosen works do both: they encourage and discourage the readers to experience what is here suggested to be called "televisionization of everyday life" without prejudice.

Keywords

televisionization, television culture, TV experiences, Tichi, teleconsciousness, Deuze, media life, reality TV, validation, Baudrillard, hyperreality, telemorphosis

Meinen Eltern

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Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Televisionization of Everyday Life	29
Chapter 3: Dreading the Human Adaptation to Television: Jerzy Kosinski's <i>Being There</i> (1970).....	81
Chapter 4: Living TV Life in Times of Indetermination: Don DeLillo's <i>White Noise</i> (1985).....	103
Chapter 5: The End of Reality and the Disappearance of Fear: Ben Elton's <i>Dead Famous</i> (2001) and <i>Chart Throb</i> (2006).....	131
Chapter 6: Anxieties Reloaded and Fears Overcome: Emma Donoghue's <i>Room</i> (2010)	161
Chapter 7: Final Conclusion	183
Works Cited	199

Abbreviations

BT	<i>Being There</i> (1970)
CT	<i>Chart Throb</i> (2006)
DF	<i>Dead Famous</i> (2001)
GO	<i>Going Out</i> (2002)
R	<i>Room</i> (2010)
TC	<i>The Circle</i> (2013)
WN	<i>White Noise</i> (1985)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Today, television is both dispensable and ubiquitous. It is both a medium long replaced by other media technologies and one of the most important media we have. Television is both attraction and anxiety; it is both appreciated and condemned. In times, then, when the role and position of television in culture is ambiguous, personal relations with, attitudes towards, and experiences of television are equally ambivalent, sometimes even contradictory.

But then again, has this not been the case right from the start? TV's conquest of the American household in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s went hand in hand with critical discussions, with these discussions revolving, first and foremost, around the disastrous impact of television consumption on the viewer. To this day, watching television is connected with anxieties about the trivialization and banalization of society. At the same time, however, people appreciate it both as a source of information and entertainment. In the so-called post-TV era,¹ critics and scholars alike consider quality TV² to be an art form comparable to literary elite fiction. Renowned television scholars like Robert J. Thompson speak of series such as *The Sopranos* as something that “went beyond anything imaginable in the old network era in terms of content, narrative complexity, language and lots more”

¹ Like Milly Buonanno (11), for instance, I think of the era of television as the second half of the twentieth century and the post-TV era as the period following that. Although it is of course impossible to pinpoint a date when the age of television ends and the post-TV era begins, scholars usually agree that there is a significant turning point at the end of the 1990s (see Robert J. Thompson's preface to the volume *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*). The consensus that the post-TV era started approximately at the turn of the century is suggested by books entitled *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* by Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson from 2004 or *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era* by Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay from 2009. In the former, Spigel argues that there is “a new phase of television – the phase that comes after ‘TV’” (2); in the introduction to the latter, Turner and Tay summarize the many changes in TV from an international viewpoint: “Globalizing media industries, deregulatory . . . policy regimes, the multiplication and convergence of delivery platforms, the international trade in media formats, the emergence of important production hubs in new ‘media capitals’ outside the United States/United Kingdom/Europe umbrella (particularly in East Asia), and the fragmentation of media audiences – as what were once national audiences slice up into more and more taste fractions – are all changing the nature of television: its content, its production, how and where it is consumed” (2).

² As indicated by the slogan “It's not TV. It's HBO,” new forms of television are generally considered as high-quality entertainment that differs considerably from television of the TV era.

(xviii). Suggesting that we are now entering “the era of TV after TV,” Michele Hilmes argues that “television is becoming respectable, even admired” (452). In reference to Charles McGrath, “respected literary figure and longtime editor of the *New York Times Book Review*,” Hilmes speaks of contemporary American television in terms of its rise as an art form and quotes the title and header of McGrath’s article that, in her opinion, “say it all:”

“The Triumph of the Prime-Time Novel: More than movies, theater, or even in some ways books, television drama is a medium for writers. They use its power, weekly, to tell us how we live.” (Hilmes 453)

According to McGrath, “TV is actually enjoying a sort of golden age” and is becoming a medium “for enlightenment” (qtd. in Hilmes 453). In order to demonstrate that McGrath is not the only critic who compares dramatic series such as *ER* and *Law and Order* with novels by Charles Dickens, Hilmes refers to the author Steven Johnson, who compares the series *24* with George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*:

Johnson describes a recent episode of *24* that in its 44 minutes of screen time contained, by his count, more than 21 central characters and 9 distinct but interweaving narrative threads, all dependent for their meaning on the viewer’s understanding of a complex set of details from previous episodes. He argues, like McGrath, that this level of diegetic elaboration comes far closer to a literary classic like George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* than to the simplistic episodic television of yesteryear. (455)³

And yet, despite the quality TV-movement, the reality TV formats that continue to emerge are time and again made responsible for the low standard of contemporary television. The president of the German Bundestag, Norbert Lammert, for instance, is only one among many critics who condemns what he calls the loss of quality in German television (qtd. in *Spiegel Online*).⁴ Thus, television has always been an ambiguous (pop-)cultural phenomenon: it alienates and fascinates, educates and stultifies, is rejected and is valued – which is more true today than ever before.

³ Other authors and critics also draw attention to the narrative richness of American television series. In an article in the German magazine *Stern*, Hannes Ross reflects on what he calls the new forms of television which he compares with the social novel and which he thinks meet the standards of the cinema (Ross 116-17). In an interview by Richard Kämmerlings in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the authors Martin Kluger, Ulrich Peltzer, and David Wagner discuss whether such series already have the quality of the cinema and consider them to be as narratively rich as the novel (Kämmerlings n.p.).

⁴ Hilmes’ comment implies that this accusation is not necessarily specific to the German context: “In fact, American television, after years of being regarded as the global McDonald’s of media, has finally gotten some respect not only from its own critics . . . , but from other nations around the world” (465).

Literary fiction is a space where these highly ambivalent, often contradictory, if not to say paradoxical, relations to and experiences of the TV apparatus, televisual products, and the TV environment are articulated. Novels, according to the basic assumption of my study, disclose collective attitudes towards television, because they enact experiences with and perceptions of television in an environment in which television is both omnipresent and obsolete. By analyzing a selection of what I claim to be representative TV novels – Jerzy Kosinski’s *Being There* (1970), Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985), Ben Elton’s *Dead Famous* (2001) and *Chart Throb* (2006), as well as Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (2010) – I aim to show that these literary works dramatize, produce, discuss, and enact the many contradictions individuals living with TV encounter in their everyday lives. I argue that the analysis of TV novels throws into sharp relief ambiguous and contradictory TV experiences to which the readers can connect. My study therefore starts with the question of how TV novels enact experiences of and relations to television in the TV environment. Using an inductive approach that positions the novels center stage, I attempt to demonstrate that TV novels inform both the readers’ personal TV experiences as well as the public and academic discourse on television.

Approaching Ambiguous and Contradictory TV Experiences through Novels

In the foreword of Milly Buonanno’s study *The Age of Television: Experiences and Theories*, Horace Newcomb calls her approach to TV a “‘both...and’ approach” (Newcomb qtd. in Buonanno 8). Acknowledging the different perspectives Buonanno adopts, he expresses his appreciation of her construction of a multi-dimensional theoretical map of television (7-9). Newcomb’s labelling of Buonanno’s approach brings to the fore something which is also true for how the selected novels enact TV experiences: they are full of contradictions and therefore ‘both...and.’ DeLillo’s *White Noise*, for instance, contrasts characters arguing that “TV is a problem only if you’ve forgotten how to look and listen” with others that consider TV “just another name for junk mail” (50). Donoghue’s *Room* opposes a child who would love to “watch TV all the time” to a mother who teaches him that “it rots our brains” (11). Kosinski’s *Being There* articulates complaints about television’s absorbing power, whereas Elton’s reality TV satires overlook the viewer in front of the television set, focusing instead on the viewer as a participant in a reality show. The novels are, in themselves, ‘both...and:’ they enact different sorts of TV experiences that seem to be inconsistent with one another. More than that, as a selection of fictional texts, the novels are both supportive and contradictory towards commonly expressed views in that discourse. Whereas Kosinski’s novel reinforces critics’ concerns over a

downfall of cultural values by offering an entirely negative portrayal of American TV society, Donoghue presents her readers with a world of enchantment and ease. Moreover, as a selection, the novels both respond to and establish distance from one another. As I have just suggested, *Being There* and *Room* differ in their depictions of TV culture and their enactments of TV experiences, but they also agree upon many aspects, such as the collective fear that humans are slowly, but irresistibly turning into half human, half machine-like creatures.

The ‘both...and-frame’ of the selection suggests that the attempt to come to terms with TV experiences is a highly complex and bemusing endeavor. A look at TV cultures worldwide confirms that contemporary television is characterized by seemingly opposing trends. While there are (still) complaints about the low quality of television and, due to that, the trivialization and banalization of society, scholars agree nevertheless that TV is (still) one of the world’s most powerful media for communication – despite the unprecedented expansion of the Internet (Thussu 2).⁵ Furthermore, people regard television either as a positive form of diversion, a friend, a family member, or, in contrast to that, a source of fear, which is why it is generally agreed that we had better consume it with care or not at all.⁶ Also, today, the conventional, conservative anxiety about television’s dangerous impact on the viewer seems to be outdated. Yet, new anxieties seem to have emerged that revolve around losing TV. Emma Brockes articulates concerns that the collective streaming of shows on devices other than television means an end of a shared culture where family members gather in the domestic setting

⁵ Underlining her argument, Daya Kishan Thussu writes: “The number of television sets in the world has more than tripled since 1980. . . . Industry estimates show that more than 2.5 billion people around the globe watch on average just over three hours of television a day, on more than 4,000 mostly private channels. Since visual images tend to cross linguistic and national boundaries relatively easily, television carries much more influence than other media, especially in developing countries. . . . In Europe, television remains the primary provider of information for most people, according to a report on European television produced by the Open Society Institute (Open Society Institute, 2005)” (1-2). Unfortunately, Thussu draws on sources on the verge of being out of date, and she only refers to European television. Although Thussu’s argument is therefore vulnerable, I support her claim that TV still holds an exceptional position in today’s world. Taking the same stance, Volker Roloff argues that, despite the expansion of the Internet, TV is still the most important stage of and for society (18). Confirming this claim with regard to Finnish TV viewers, Jukka Kortti even goes as far as arguing that young people, who are believed to have dumped television for the Internet, watch TV more than ever (309). Television news especially is still considered as most trusted and most important source of information worldwide (Hill, *Factual* 8; Hill refers to an opinion poll conducted for the BBC in 2006). I therefore believe that Buonanno’s prediction from 2008 that “television is destined to remain paramount in the daily lives of many individuals in many and varied parts of the world” (32) remains true.

⁶ Interviews with television viewers conducted by David Gauntlett and Annette Hill attest to this claim. Based on the interview material, they confirm that television “can be a source of pleasure, providing companionship, especially for people who are living alone, and it can also be a source of anxiety, or guilt, creating tension in the domestic space” (110).

(n.p.). The fact that, in the post-TV era, people have started to look at television from a nostalgic angle (Brookes speaks of the decline of the “golden age of family togetherness,” n.p.) proves what Christian Von Tschilschke calls a tradition in cultural critics’ attitudes towards new media which are usually met with skepticism (37-38). It is rather paradoxical that the characteristics of television, that were criticized for so long, have started to be cherished now that new technologies are taking over its position and role in culture.

Equally paradoxically, one can nowadays watch television without using it. People speaking about watching TV must nowadays anticipate the question of how and where they consume it. Do they sit in front of the good old TV set, or do they prefer the Internet and a technical device other than television? And can watching quality TV series still be considered as a form of television consumption if one puts a Blu-ray Disc into the laptop? More than that, television is both global and local.⁷ Arguing that, in times of globalization, “local, national or regional conditions are still powerful determinants” and that, despite the rise of digital media, “the ‘old’ media such as television remain dominant in most locations,” Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay draw attention to the fact that television (and thus television studies) in the post-TV era is far more complicated than ever (3).⁸

With regard to the novels’ ‘both...and-mindsets’ I will focus my analyses on the novels’ enactments of the characters’ various and often conflicting TV experiences. Early American TV novels from the 1940s and 1950s, like later novels from the 1970s and 1980s, focused on the threat of television and on issues such as surveillance and the invasion of TV into people’s private lives (Tichi, *Electronic* 130). Somewhat surprisingly, this is also the case with novels from the post-TV era. By expressing the same concerns as their ‘predecessors,’ these contemporary texts make it clear that such anxieties are long-established but unresolved. Thus, although the acculturation and naturalization⁹ of television appears complete, and although people are now directing concerns about such issues as public surveillance towards newer technologies and media, the fear of the power of television is still noticeable. Jeffrey Sconce is only one of the critics who supports this claim; as recently as at the turn of the millennium, he wrote that “television remains, even forty years after its introduction into the American home, a somewhat unsettling and alien technology” (qtd. in Buonanno 16). The television-phobia Sconce refers to is also articulated in recently published novels. Thus, despite their different historical and cultural contexts and their

⁷ See Buonanno’s overview of the seemingly opposing current developments of television which she conceptualizes as two different paradigms: imperialism vs. indigenization (chap. 6).

⁸ Sharing the same view as Turner and Tay, John Hartley refers to both the continuity and change of television in his article “Less Popular but More Democratic? *Corrie*, Clarkson and the Dancing *Cru*.”

⁹ Other scholars who have elaborated on TV’s acculturation, naturalization, and domestication include Buonanno; Postman (*Amusing*); Tichi (*Electronic*).

generic diversity, the works selected for my study raise television-related questions that have occupied people's minds in the TV era and, as the analyses will prove, continue to be pressing. They enact TV experiences that are emblematic of both the TV age and the post-TV age.

The selection of TV novels responds to and nourishes what Neil Postman, one of the most prominent television critics of his time, complains about in the mid-1980s: that "television has gradually *become* our culture" (80; original emphasis).¹⁰ Today, Postman's statement seems highly nostalgic, or does it? In the 1980s, it was representative of Western societies that – while still getting used to living with television – suffered from a fear of TV in which the medium had been "demonized" and provoked "worry, anxieties and discontent" (Buonanno 16, 15).¹¹ Condemning television for attacking literate culture and for directing knowledge and ways of knowing (Postman 86, 80), Postman expresses his regrets that, in a culture "whose information, ideas and epistemology are given form by television," every subject of public interest and the public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television (28, 79). Speaking of "Our culture's adjustment to the epistemology of television," Postman points out that TV is now "taken for granted" and "accepted as natural" (81, 80). Postman's representative critique of television in the 1980s draws attention to and cautions against the omnipresence of television which he perceives as an integral part of everyday life and thus as a threatening invasion.¹²

From a culturally pessimistic viewpoint that seems to be informed by critics such as Postman, the selected novels express a television-phobia that

¹⁰ In reference to Postman, Manuel Castells also speaks of "the intellectuals[sic] frustration with the influence of television," claiming that this frustration still dominates the social critique of mass media (356). Knut Hickethier also remarks that the threatening obliteration of culture through television is an abiding topos in the discourse on television (192).

¹¹ Tichi (*Electronic*) is able to demonstrate that all sorts of articles published in the TV era with headlines such as "Be Good! Television's Watching" by Robert M. Yoder from 1949; "The Real Menace of TV" by Jane Whitbread and Vivian Cadden from 1954; "Oh, Mass Man! Oh, Lumpen Lug! Why Do You Watch TV?" by Wallace Markfield from 1968; or "The TV Addict" by Michael Tennesen from 1989 are indicative of the highly skeptical attitude towards television in the U.S. The fact that this attitude does not seem to have changed in times that are considered to be post-TV is proven by books such as Cheryl Pawlowski's *Glued to the Tube: The Threat of Television Addiction to Today's Family* from 2000.

¹² Other TV critics who argue (more or less) along the same lines as Postman are, as Kathrin Ackermann and Christopher F. Laferl point out, Theodor W. Adorno, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, or Botho Strauss (Vorwort 7). Ackermann and Laferl refer to these critics in order to underline their claim that "TV bashing" is still a commonplace of intellectuals within and outside of academia. This implies that they also recognize that this sort of TV-era critique is still practiced. Von Tschilschke even goes so far as to say that the hostile attitude towards television that critics such as Barthes or Deleuze express (he even speaks of their "intellectual contempt;" my translation) is one reason why (French) literary fiction deals with television only very hesitantly (36-38).

responds to the invasion of television in all areas of human everyday life.¹³ The fear of the invasiveness of TV is, as the readings of the novels make clear, a human fear of the convergence of life with television. From the characters' perspectives, the chosen works articulate a human angst related to the indistinguishability between what they perceive as 'actual' reality and the realities constructed and transmitted by TV. More than that, the characters' anxieties pertain to the impact of television consumption on human consciousness, which dissolves into television and turns into "teleconsciousness" (Tichi, *Electronic*); the privileged status of TV in a culture where television constitutes the point of reference for all kinds of human experience; and the collectively shared feeling that humans are slowly, but irresistibly, turning into machines and becoming "humachines" (Poster).

However, although the selected novels enact this collective television-phobia, their portrayals of television and the TV environment, as well as their enactments of TV experiences, do not solely focus on the fear of TV's invasiveness. The novels rather pinpoint that, in an environment in which TV is ubiquitous, the characters experience television in ambiguous ways. The chosen works depict characters in everyday life situations – in which television either plays a decisive or a minor role – who have difficulty in understanding television, who try to come to terms with themselves in relation to television and who attempt but, in the end, fail to differentiate between TV and 'actual' reality. Thus, on the one hand, the novels suggest that the characters fear, perhaps even condemn, TV's invasiveness; on the other hand, however, they stress a state of 'natural' confusion unburdened by qualitative judgments. By taking a closer look at the ways in which the characters behave in relation to, as well as think and feel about TV, readers learn that the characters are not necessarily driven by fear, but that they are, simply speaking, perplexed. The novels carry notions of anxiety and rejection, but they also attenuate these notions. By depicting characters at a loss to try and understand the roles and functions of television in culture, the ways in which they can relate to it, and how it affects them, the selected works also manage to disregard human anxieties. The feelings of uncertainty or suspense expressed through the characters are thus not unavoidably connected to notions of fear.

Even more contradictorily, the chosen works also place emphasis on the characters' positive experiences with television. Viewers cited in David Gauntlett and Annette Hill's study appreciate TV's entertaining presence: "TV is like a husband – you probably wouldn't know what to do without one (42-year-old mother and freelance journalist); the best TV is like a good novel – totally absorbing and enriching (45-year-old female teacher)" (114). Just like these viewers, the characters turn to television to find reassurance

¹³ For further reading on the question of how people use television in everyday life, see Silverstone (*Television*); Gauntlett and Hill. For the more general question of how people use and integrate media in their everyday lives, see Pink; Tacchi.

and security. On top of that, the novels present characters that simply disregard television's omnipresence in everyday life situations. Therefore, on the one hand, the novels propose that the characters cannot escape the invasiveness of TV in all areas of life, thereby implying that, in order to live with television, one has to accept and, in the end, give in to it. These implications are, on the other hand, denied; in some instances, the characters experience their co-existence with television not as the necessary evil but as a naturalized way of life. For example, the novels do not suggest that failing to differentiate between TV and such a thing as 'actual' reality is an unsolvable problem one has to fear. Instead, through the characters, they propose that failing to differentiate between different realities is a new sort of experience humans adapt to naturally.

By indicating (to some extent) that the characters have not yet overcome the, by now, old concerns over TV's invasiveness, the chosen novels reinforce the critique of television emblematic of the TV age. It is against this background that the characters' indifference towards television, which some of the novels enact, constitutes one of the most vital findings of the analyses. Reading the selected novels in light of contemporary television and media theory makes clear that these works, as I will argue, anticipate a technological change currently under scrutiny, a change Mark Deuze calls "the disappearance of media." Deuze argues that, today, people take television and other media for granted. They overlook its physical and mental presence and accept it as an integral element of their everyday life routines ("Media" 137). Portraying the ways in which humans adapt to a world in which television is ubiquitous, TV novels anticipate what media scholars like Deuze have started to pay attention to only recently. Therefore, from today's perspective, the novels' enactments of how the characters experience TV's naturalization can be understood as an anticipation of a new way of life I call 'TV life' and which Deuze, with regard to media in general, introduces as "media life" ("Media"). In fact, the novels do both: they bemoan the naturalization of television and suggest that TV life is the new way of being.

Television, Television Environment, Television Culture, and Television Experiences

When talking about television, television environment, television culture, and television experiences it is necessary – and yet impossible – to define these terms in the context of my study. John Fiske, one of the leading experts in the field of television studies, starts the introduction to his seminal work *Television Culture* by saying "Any book about television culture is immediately faced with the problem of defining its object. What is television? And, equally problematically, what is culture?" (1). Just like Fiske's standard

work and, in fact, every piece of writing thematizing television culture, my study faces the difficulty of defining its subject matter.¹⁴

Television is: a commodity; a cultural agent; a text; a pop cultural medium; a machine or, more precisely, a late capitalist machine; an apparatus *cum* art form; a technological device; an empty technology; an economic and social institution, an ideological institution, and a cultural institution; a sign system and a financial system; an enormous industry; an environment; certification; a network; sounds and images, fragments, a collection of discrete programs; a household appliance; a piece of furniture; a spectacle; a disseminator and definer of cultural atmosphere; a mechanism of transparency; cultural education; an intruder, a whipping boy, and a predator that is powerful, manipulative, and hypnotic; a house pet, good company, a family member, and a provider of intimacy and friendship; a symbolizer of internationalism; social status, taste, and desire; a world maker; complex and paradoxical; and, simply speaking, what the audience makes of it.¹⁵ This list of approaches to and experiences of television (which could be continued even further) demonstrates television's complex nature, which makes defining it highly complicated, if not impossible. My study, however, is not interested in possible ways of defining television. I rather focus on how the novels present the characters as perceiving, experiencing, and understanding television in their everyday lives. I will therefore adopt what Buonanno calls "a phenomenological and human-centric perspective" (13), which focuses on human experiences with and through television, and I explore its potential through the perspectives of characters in TV novels that enact experiences in the TV environment.

The idea of the TV environment refers to a private or collectively shared cultural space in which television plays a decisive or a minor role, or where it is, to allude to Kosinski's *Being There*, 'just there.' The term TV environment is informed by the simple fact that, since TV's conquest of the household in the 1940s, people's surroundings have been imbued with television, which is either in the center of interest or constitutes an entity whose presence is neglected.¹⁶ Inspired by Cecilia Tichi, I would like to use the term environment to evoke the notion of television as an encompassing surrounding earmarked by a variety of social attitudes (*Electronic 3, 6*). The term television culture, then, refers to the more general idea that in American culture and other cultures worldwide television has been a constitutive element ever since its emergence. Western cultures, that is to say "our histori-

¹⁴ TV scholars and critics alike have frequently pointed out the difficulty of coming to terms with television both as an object of study and a cultural phenomenon. See, for instance, Buonanno 27; Ellis 2; Fiske and Hartley 16; Gitlin 3, 4. I feel Postman's claim from 1993 that "we have yet to learn what television is" (*Amusing 165*), is therefore still true today, perhaps even more so than ever.

¹⁵ See Arlen; Dienst; Fiske; Fitzpatrick; Kaplan; Newcomb; Tichi; Wallace.

¹⁶ In 1988, Mark Crispin Miller observes that TV is everywhere and has itself become the environment (8).

cally produced systems of beliefs and codes” (Castells 357), is according to my underlying assumption, shaped by television.¹⁷

I use the term (and idea of) television culture in the singular, not the plural because the novels force me to. The selected works refer primarily to the American cultural context and therefore American television. As a Polish immigrant to the U.S., Kosinski uses his in-between position to write – and complain – about American culture and politics. DeLillo’s *White Noise* is also undoubtedly situated in American culture. Elton, an author with dual British/Australian citizenship, satirizes British and American versions of travelling reality TV formats.¹⁸ Donoghue’s *Room* offers a number of hints that the novel is located in an American context.¹⁹ Moreover, the novels I briefly refer to in the conclusion of my study, Scarlett Thomas’ *Going Out* from 2002 and Dave Eggers’ *The Circle* from 2013, also invite their readers to situate the stories in American TV culture.²⁰ As the chosen novels are primarily situated in and concerned with American television culture, I will draw heavily on secondary literature about American television. I will consider and refer to secondary texts about TV in other national and cultural contexts if their findings apply to the novels under discussion. My procedure suggests that many of my theoretical observations and results can be generalized with regard to TV experiences that readers from around the world can re-experience and identify with.²¹

¹⁷ I follow Castells who argues (with regard to media communication in general) that new technological systems fundamentally transform (Western) culture, as culture is mediated and enacted through communication (357).

¹⁸ Despite being adapted to national and local conditions, the formats Elton’s novels satirize share the same core features. Hilmes, for instance, considers such reality TV formats as “the first truly transnational TV forms” (429), and I agree. I am therefore convinced that the findings of the satires’ analyses will be the ones one can most easily generalize with regard to the American context and other TV cultures.

¹⁹ The text mentions American animated TV series such as *Dora the Explorer*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and *Backyardigans* (R 10-11, 29). It also refers to the American movie *The Great Escape* (95). Furthermore, the American setting becomes obvious when the characters talk about American currency (264-65).

²⁰ Thomas’ *Going Out* is set in Britain, but when it comes to television, it refers mostly to American TV. Eggers’ *The Circle* is set in California and clearly refers to the American context.

²¹ If one attempts to find answers to the question of why TV experiences can very often be generalized with regard to viewers from all around the globe, there are many aspects one would have to bear in mind. One such issue is the dominance of American television in many parts of the world. Other arguments concern the connections between different TV cultures and (trans-) national television industries or the emergence of a global television market. In my study, however, I will not dwell on the much debated topic of the Americanization of television worldwide. I will neither discuss the idea of the rise of global television nor whether one should think about the international influence of American television in terms of media imperialism or colonization. My reason for focusing primarily on American TV is the novels’ situatedness in, and their strong links to, American TV culture. For further reading on the topics just addressed, see, for instance, Havens; Parks and Kumar; Sinclair.

I do acknowledge, however, that the chosen novels differ considerably in some respects, and the authors' different national and cultural backgrounds are but one reason. Firstly, the fictional works were published within a time span of four decades and thus in different historic moments (from *Being There*, published in 1970, to *Room*, published in 2010); in my analyses, I intend to respond to this factor. The novels also differ with regard to generic ascriptions, for they range from standard works (*White Noise*) to popular literature (*Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb*). The topic of television is, on top of that, either pivotal (*Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb*) or secondary (*Room*). And yet, despite these differences, they touch upon similar themes, depict and discuss similar phenomena, use similar images, evoke similar ideas, express a similar critique, and enact similar TV experiences. The novels' enactments of TV experiences through the characters are therefore comparable. It is due to these similarities and intersections that I consider the selected works to enact TV experiences in a way that American readers, but also readers from around the world, can re-experience.

By TV experiences, then, I mean the characters' experiences of, with, and through television in an environment where television is an integral part of everyday life. The term 'experience' encompasses the characters' perceptions and their understanding of, as well as relationships with and attitudes towards, television. I do not wish to limit my analyses to the novels' representations and imitations of perceptual processes, nor do I intend to restrict the analyses to the ways in which the texts present the characters' opinions on television. Working with the concept of TV experiences enables me to consider the complex enactments the narrative texts offer with regard to the characters' everyday lives of, with, and through television.

Theoretical Implications and Considerations

When I speak of the novels' potential or capacity to articulate a critique that they at the same time question, enrich, or perhaps even subvert, I am inspired by Winfried Fluck's elaboration on the functions of literature in *Das kulturelle Imaginäre (The Cultural Imaginary)*. Based on his conviction that whenever we speak about literature we also implicitly talk about its functions, he claims that literary fiction operates as a mode of communication that allows for tentatively transcending particular situations in life (13-14). Fluck's idea to regard literary fiction as a test ground for actual life experiences is in line with my understanding of the novels' capacity to respond to the public discourse on television and enact TV experiences to which readers can relate. My approach to the potential (or function) of literature corresponds with approaches such as Kai Sicks' in his investigation of sports novels. Sicks considers the novels to be engaged in the cultural problems of their epoch in order to negotiate, hold certain positions, and point out culturally significant contexts (10, 16). Sharing the same conviction, Tichi bases

her approach to television culture on the belief that cultural artifacts both shape consciousness and reflect that shaping, and that they, by doing so, disclose the social construction of TV (*Electronic 7*). What is more, I hold the position that the selected novels enlighten their readers with regard to their own TV experiences. Through the novels' enactments of experiences of, with, and through television, and through the representations of the characters' attitudes towards television, the texts bring to the fore the ambiguous, contradictory, and paradoxical experiences television and the TV environment facilitate.

Kathrin Ackermann and Christopher F. Laferl also proclaim the capacity of novels to point out culturally significant contexts and voice a critique of TV culture. They consider fictional narratives as contributors to, and having affinities with, discussions on the value of television led by philosophy and cultural studies (Vorwort 8).²² Ackermann and Laferl, as well as the contributors to their volume *Transpositionen des Televisiven: Fernsehen in Literatur und Film* (*Transpositions of the Televisual: Television in Literature and Film*; my translation), approach novels with the acknowledgement that they reflect on TV culture critically, thereby taking part in interdisciplinary discussions on the value, functions, and roles of television in culture. Holding the same view, I will show that the portrayals of TV culture in these novels, and their enactments of TV experiences, respond to the by now well-known lamentations about television's invasiveness voiced by critics worldwide. More than that, however, I will demonstrate that the novels' depictions of television culture and enactments of TV experiences are more differentiated and multifaceted than suggested in the academic and public discussions to which Ackermann and Laferl refer. I argue that TV novels represent and shape the critical and condemning public discourse on television, but I also recognize that they do more than simply repeat or affirm established opinions. The chosen novels question and enlighten these discussions, and they re-evaluate statements which seem to prevail through their multifarious enactments of TV experiences.²³ Due to the privilege of literary fiction to inherit an observational position and function (Von Tschilschke 34), TV nov-

²² Holding the same view, Von Tschilschke speaks of literature as an observer (34). He emphasizes the multiple intersections between the literary and non-literary, in addition to scholarly-academic discourses, and provides examples of novels anticipating and reacting to the public discourse on TV (52, 41). In reference to Jürgen Link's understanding of literature as an inter-discourse, Von Tschilschke bases his observations on the belief that literature has the potential to present media-relevant problems in particular, concrete, personalized, condensed, and ambivalent forms (54).

²³ In the analysis of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *La télévision* from 1997, Von Tschilschke argues that the novel implicitly quotes media-theoretical positions such as McLuhan's, Virilio's, Baudrillard's, Postman's, or Bourdieu's (46). With regard to the novels explored in my study, I would like to suggest that they not only implicitly allude to these critics' positions, as suggested by Von Tschilschke; rather, they question, challenge, and further elaborate on them.

els highlight issues that the academic and public discourse on television has so far, for the most part, neglected.

In order to investigate how the selection of texts simultaneously responds to and questions the critique of television that is typical of the TV age, I need to refer to the television theory and criticism of the TV era. From a culturally pessimistic angle, the novels represent, engage with, and produce what I call a television-phobia emblematic of the TV age. The skepticism towards television and its outright denunciation by critics, among whom Postman is only one of many, is echoed in the novels' critical portrayals of TV culture. Although TV novels might be informed by this cultural pessimism, and are considered as affirming it, they also distance themselves from this critique. I will therefore delineate the negotiation between TV novels and the academic and public discourse on television to detect the ambiguities and contradictions of TV experiences that are enacted in the novels and largely disregarded in the academic and public discourse. But what about the novels published in the post-TV era? I will argue that they respond, at least to some extent, to the cultural pessimism in ways similar to novels of the 1970s and 1980s. Accordingly, I will also read them in the light of the theory and criticism of the TV era.

As suggested earlier, however, I will also read the novels against the background of cutting edge television and media theory. Doing so not only helps to demonstrate that the earlier novels anticipate current theoretical discussions, but also helps to acknowledge and analyze those facets of the selected works that would otherwise remain undiscovered. It would therefore be fatal if the perspective taken on the novels was limited to their most obvious feature: the collective fear of TV's invasiveness. More than that, as some of the novels are published after the so-called end of the TV era, it is crucial for me to also consider ongoing discussions. Despite the fact that these novels also express the television-phobia of the TV age, their more ambivalent take on contemporary television, TV-related cultural phenomena, and their more differentiated enactments of TV experiences must be acknowledged. The 'both...and-mindset' therefore also concerns my theoretical and methodological handling of the chosen novels. I will both contextualize them in the history of television and open up space to let the novels speak for themselves. This selection of novels sometimes prompts me to adopt a diachronic perspective that considers the many changes of television. At the same time, however, the selection demonstrates an unavoidable sense of continuity which I cannot ignore.

As far as the most recent developments of television are concerned, the focus will be on the emergence and spread of reality television as one of the most dominant contemporary television phenomena – a focus again enforced by the novels. Interestingly enough, all the selected novels – from *Being There* to *Room* – address issues that I am able to investigate against the background of topical discussions on reality TV and, in relation to that, celebrity culture. The TV experiences under scrutiny concern the realization of

a convergence of life and TV on different levels that affects ideas and conceptions of life, reality, self, and what it means to be human.²⁴ In order to comprehend and analyze the novels' enactments of such TV experiences, I will refer to Jean Baudrillard's theorization – if one wants to call it a theorization – of the “hyperreal.” Baudrillard's claim that reality has turned into hyperreality is part of his argumentation in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (originally published in French in 1976), and he continued to develop this idea throughout his oeuvre. The formula “dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of life in TV” is articulated in *Simulacra and Simulation* (originally published in French in 1981) and again picked up in his social critique in *Telemorphosis* (originally published in French in 2001). In the success of the reality TV format *Big Brother*, Baudrillard sees further proof that we live in a hyperreal world in which life and TV are merging. As for the novels' analyses, these Baudrillardian ideas help to explain how the characters experience everyday life of, with, and through television. His findings prove beneficial when it comes to grasping the characters' state of confusion and their indifference to television. As for the theoretical investigations and considerations, Baudrillard's cultural diagnoses help to give reasons for the human fear of television, but referring to these Baudrillardian thoughts also helps to explain that there is nothing to be afraid of.

More often than not, critics consider Baudrillard's observations to be driven by nostalgia and technophobia. Whereas I fully agree that Baudrillard is nostalgic, I am hesitant to call him a technophobe. I would therefore like to advocate a more differentiated and unreserved approach to Baudrillard's TV-related cultural diagnoses, which admittedly have a nostalgic flavor. Baudrillard's observations of his cultural surroundings and his efforts to understand techno-cultural phenomena express the well-known human anxiety about technological progress. His thoughts are therefore very much in line with what I think of as the typical, dismissive critique of TV that critics such as Postman express. In contrast to simply denouncing TV, however, Baudrillard's writing on television culture is not only a lamentation; it is a way of coming to terms with and trying to explain his TV experiences in an environment of dissolution. In short: whereas Postman's critique is primarily driven by an inner urge to *defend* humankind against the invasiveness of television and its cultural power, my reading of Baudrillard is that his writing is primarily driven by an inner urge to *comprehend* what he, like Postman, experiences as a frightening development.

I think it is important here to elaborate on my impressions of Baudrillard's writing, as it is my aim to make a small but necessary contribution to working with, questioning, and further developing Baudrillard's observation that Western cultures are characterized by technologies that have

²⁴ With regard to media in general, Deuze claims: “Over the last few decades, the key categories of human aliveness and activity converged in a concurrent and continuous exposure to, use of, and immersion in media” (*Media x*).

an impact on how one perceives, experiences, and understands the world. His theorization of the dissolution of life into television and television into life is the starting point for my argumentation. I consider TV novels to dramatize these Baudrillardian claims and to enact the human experience of living in a hyperreal environment. However, the novels' ambiguous and contradictory portrayals of TV culture and their enactments of TV experiences also make clear that the characters do not necessarily perceive the convergence of TV with the so-called 'actual' reality in terms of fear. The novels' enactments of TV experiences rather highlight feelings of confusion and indifference. They propose that humans and technologies such as television organically adapt to one another, and that this naturalization and human adaptation to television does not necessarily connect with human reservation and denunciation. I aim to keep developing Baudrillard's theorization in the sense that one can describe the dissolution of life into television and television into life in more neutral terms. Disconnecting the idea of the hyperreal from nostalgia and using it in an unbiased way helps to understand what the novels suggest through the characters: that the human fear of television is slowly being replaced by indifference.

One also becomes aware of this notion in Baudrillard's writing, although it has remained largely disregarded. When Baudrillard, as he does throughout his oeuvre, uses terminology from the natural sciences (such as 'metamorphosis' and 'osmosis' when he suggests that society has been "telemorphosed," *Telemorphosis* 48) to investigate the dynamics between technological progress and socio-cultural processes, he indicates that such developments are somewhat natural, organic, and evolutionary. The focus on the technophobic flavor of Baudrillard's argumentation, from a perspective that sees Baudrillard as a nostalgic, has had the effect of critics having so far neglected other important implications of his techno-cultural attestations (as non-denunciations). It is not least through the readings of the selected novels and their contradictory enactments of TV experiences that Baudrillard's observations can be read in a new light.

Although referring to Baudrillard's thought helps to approach television experiences through the lens of TV novels, it also leaves open many questions. How, for instance, does the total telemorphosis of society (Baudrillard, *Telemorphosis* 28) affect the characters in their everyday lives? And how do they experience life in an environment of hyperreality? Since Baudrillard's cultural diagnoses are largely too abstract to give answers to such questions,²⁵ I consider it necessary to combine them with approaches to TV culture that are more example-oriented. I will therefore bring together Baudrillard's TV-related generalizations with elaborations such as those Tichi makes in her seminal study *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American*

²⁵ Baudrillard's abstract thinking has been criticized widely. Nick Couldry, for instance, suggests that Baudrillard's "extreme generalisation" should be "opened up to empirical work" (29).

Television Culture. Tichi's study delineates the many ways in which television affects people living in a TV-saturated environment, thereby also showing in which ways these interactions, in turn, create TV culture.

By connecting Tichi's research with discussions in contemporary media studies, I will be able to highlight the important implications of her 1991 study. I intend to show that the ongoing relevance of Tichi's arguments – for instance, that consciousness may have turned into “teleconsciousness” (*Electronic*, chapter 5) and that humans may have started to live not only with, but through television (137) – is enacted in the selected novels. I also aim to make clear that Tichi's findings on TV culture and, more precisely, TV experiences anticipate claims recently made by Deuze: that contemporary life is, in fact, media life (“Media,” *Media*). I will therefore bring together the theory and criticism of the TV age with contemporary media studies. By doing this, I will be able to elaborate further on the Baudrillardian claim that the telemorphosis is total, and pinpoint the relevance of this techno-cultural observation in the context of today's media-saturated world as portrayed in the chosen novels.

Literary Review

An overwhelming amount has been said and written about television culture since TV's invasion of the household in the middle of the twentieth century. The number of texts that focus on the literary-fictional contribution to these discussions, however, is rather limited.²⁶ Tichi's *Electronic Hearth* from 1991 is one of the few direct contributions to this subject matter. Aiming to retrace the assimilation of television as a new technology in American culture (6), Tichi draws on such diverse cultural material as cartoons, short stories, novels, advertisements, and journalistic articles, so as to demonstrate how these different texts and artifacts have shaped what she calls the “TV environment.” Since “The environment cannot speak for itself but must be spoken for and about” (4), Tichi argues for the decisive role of cultural texts in representing and, by doing so, shaping TV culture. Based on the hypothesis that television has been imbued with socio-cultural meanings by these texts, Tichi claims that they not only represent but, indeed, constitute the American TV environment (7).

Tichi reverts to a variety of cultural texts – as interpretive texts in the wider sense of the term – and artifacts, and it is this variety that strengthens her argumentation. At the same time, however, the compilation of a corpus

²⁶ Julika Griem also argues that “The history of television's interplay with literature . . . has been given less attention than the relations between literature and photography or the successful ménage between literature and the movies” (465). Griem's observation from 1996 is in my opinion still true today. I therefore agree with Von Tschilschke's claim that the thematic or formal-structural references to television in literature, and especially the potential of literary fiction to operate as an observer of TV culture, is still a neglected research interest (31).

of such heterogeneous cultural material implies that the particular ways in which the different sources shape and represent TV culture are somewhat neglected. Although this does in no way interfere with Tichi's overall argumentation, her work leaves open questions my study is interested in investigating, questions directed specifically at the novels' capacity to critically reflect on television culture and enact TV experiences. Whereas Tichi's work argues for the potential of diverse cultural texts to shape the TV environment and not only reflect that shaping, I consider this interrelatedness as a given. The focus of my study is instead on how TV novels bring into visibility the ambiguities and contradictions of TV experiences through the characters' perspectives. My study also aims to investigate how the selected narrative texts enact unbiased TV experiences. Through their enactments, they both anticipate and reject discussions on the human adaptation to TV as an evolutionary process.

Irmela Schneider's German contribution "Fernsehen in der zeitgenössischen Literatur" ("Television in Contemporary Literature;" my translation) from 1988 is one of the earlier articles attempting to systematize the engagement of novels with TV culture. First and foremost, her study is based on the observation that literary fiction in the TV era is more and more concerned with television.²⁷ Claiming that writers attempt to come to terms with their experiences in TV culture through writing (168), she makes clear that writers integrate TV in literary fiction in different ways: in the fictional world, for instance, protagonists can either directly or indirectly be influenced by TV, or TV can operate as a symbol (158-61). In the 1980s, these observations might have been illuminating. From today's viewpoint, they are of course dated. Schneider's indication that the authors' take on television is usually negative and highly satirical (158, 168), however, resonates with my claim that TV novels offer a critique of TV culture, thereby responding to human concerns emblematic of the TV age.

Like Schneider, Tichi provides an article that acknowledges the thematization of television in literary fiction. In "Television and Recent American Fiction," published in 1989 and thus before the publication of *Electronic Hearth*, she limits her sources to the genre of the novel. Distinguishing between pre-TV and TV-era writers, Tichi argues for the "ubiquitousness of TV in novels" (111) and demonstrates how television "now makes its presence felt in the very structure of fictional narrative" (110). In this contribution, in which Tichi retraces what could be called a first approach to a literary-fictional outline of the public discourse on television, she focuses on TV's formal impact on American fiction.²⁸ My study acknowledges the im-

²⁷ Castells writes that, at that time, "the best-seller lists . . . became filled with titles referring to TV characters or to TV-popularized themes" (358). Unfortunately, he does not provide any examples that would support this statement.

²⁸ Tichi analyzes, for instance, how fiction enacts the experience of TV as a continuous flow (119).

fact of TV on narrative form, structure, and style, but I am not primarily interested in these interdependencies. Nevertheless, despite her focus on narrative form, structure and style, Tichi acknowledges that the thematization of TV in novels is “an index of the spread of the technology in . . . United States history” (111). Proposing that television should be considered a legitimate subject matter in American fiction, she stresses the need to argue for the collective acknowledgement that both “literary and TV texts are conjunctive in the contemporary American consciousness” (113). She also underlines the urge to draw attention to what she calls “the battle lines” (112) between literature as a valued medium vs. TV as a non-valued medium²⁹ and provides examples of the novels’ ambivalent portrayals of TV, which she, however, only ascribes to the generation gap (pre-TV-era vs. TV-era writers).

Obviously inspired by Tichi’s contributions, Peter Freese devotes two articles to the phenomenon of TV-era novels. In his analysis “Bret Easton Ellis, *Less than Zero*: Entropy in the ‘MTV Novel’?” from 1990, Freese is interested in form, structure, and narrative style.³⁰ At times, he touches upon the cultural environment of a generation growing up with MTV and hints at the critical potential of the novel – and thus on its reflection on the American television culture in the 1980s. His focus nevertheless remains on the narrative strategies that he claims are influenced by TV. However, in a later article entitled “‘High’ Meets ‘Low’: Popular Culture in Contemporary American Literature” from 1994, Freese demonstrates that “the ‘high’ medium of serious literature increasingly finds its raw material in the ‘low’ realm of popular media-made fantasies,” which is “a realm in which the country’s electronically disseminated mass culture is examined and evaluated” (“High” 79-80). There, Freese also places great emphasis upon how the novels negotiate a culture characterized by the increasing pervasiveness of television, claiming that “these stories are cultural landmarks that establish an epistemological horizon against which to negotiate shared meanings and come to terms with the world” (80).³¹ Analyzing “elite fiction” such as John Updike’s *Rabbit-tetralogy*,³² DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and Kurt Vonnegut’s

²⁹ This dichotomy is, indeed, symptomatic for many scholars of that time interested in investigating the role of TV in literary fiction.

³⁰ Freese claims, for instance, that the 108 very short chapters of the novel are geared to the limited attention span of the characters and readers used to being exposed to the endless flow of TV, and that the use of the present tense responds to TV’s effect of immediacy (“High” 71-72).

³¹ Bringing up this thought, which forms the basis for my study, Freese’s article is focused on the claim that “serious literature can no longer afford to disregard the ‘noisy’ material of mass culture” (“High” 97). Freese does point out that TV-era fiction addresses the characters’ changed perceptions of the world and themselves, and he does comment on the ways in which literary fiction dramatizes this change of human perception. However, since he limits his investigation to this article, an elaborate analysis of the novels’ enactments of such experiences is still pending.

³² *Rabbit, Run* (1960); *Rabbit Redux* (1971); *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981).

Cat's Cradle (77), Freese illustrates that these works revolve around prevalent issues, such as the changed perceptions of oneself and the world as discussed by Baudrillard, or the phenomenon of the "human pseudo-event" as coined by Daniel J. Boorstin (76, 79). Freese achieves to offer an overview of American fiction dealing with television-related cultural phenomena, thereby joining Tichi in her attempt to delineate a literary history of the public discourse on TV. The questions that remain unresolved concern the close analysis of how these novels enact ambiguous and contradictory TV experiences.

Like Tichi and Freese, Julika Griem retraces the peculiarities of pre-TV-era vs. TV-era fiction in her article "Screening America: Representations of Television in Contemporary American Literature" from 1996. Arguing that American fiction is "increasingly influenced, threatened, and inspired by television and its electronic heirs," Griem observes that the "Literary representations of television during the 1960s and 70s count on the 'otherness' of the medium," whereas fiction of the 1980s is "characterized by a greater ubiquity and acceptance of television" (465, 471). This observation creates the basis for my argument that the novels' engagement with television culture becomes more and more ambiguous over time. The only convincing example Griem offers, however, is one small passage of DeLillo's *White Noise*. Her argument then gets lost in her acknowledgement that, in times of the acculturation of the computer (and, a little later, the Internet), American fiction not only refers to television but shifts its focus to newer technologies. This point, although most certainly important to mention, distracts Griem from putting more emphasis on her claim – and discussion of how – the representation of TV changes over time.³³ She centers her argumentation on the observation that TV-era writers explore "how the medium gives way to more complex networks of communication technologies" (465). More than that, her claim that contemporary fiction shifts its focus to newer technologies is, in my view, untenable. Donoghue's *Room*, for instance, and Thomas' *Going Out*, to which I will refer in my final conclusion, both neglect the Internet and media devices other than television to a large extent. In *Room*, the Internet and computers are mentioned, but as a twenty-first century reader, one expects the novel to put the role of the Internet in the story more center stage. In *Going Out*, the Internet does play a major role, but it does not overshadow the importance of television in the protagonist's life.

An approach to the subject matter slightly different from the aforementioned is offered by David Foster Wallace in his widely known essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" from 1993. Arguing that American fiction addresses prevalent, culturally significant questions such as

³³ In the end of the article, Griem refers to Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, intending to call attention to its ambiguous portrayal of TV (480-81), but she does not address this ambiguity directly. By not doing so, Griem unfortunately fails to stress the point she claims to make: that novels of the 1980s are characterized by the acceptance of TV.

“What is it about televisual culture that we so hate? Why are we so immersed in it if we hate it so?” (157), he stresses the power of literary fiction to respond to television culture (172). Concentrating on a subgenre he calls “fiction of image,” which “uses the transient received myths of popular culture as a *world* in which to imagine fictions about ‘real,’ albeit pop-mediated, public characters” (171; original emphasis), Wallace states that the novels do not simply use or mention televisual culture; they have, he makes clear, “a genuine socio-artistic agenda” that makes them respond to it (172). Considering TV-era fiction to be a response to TV culture is one of the basic assumptions of my argument. I claim that in the secure space of fictionality they are able to expose how the characters experience and come to terms with the ambiguities and contradictions they face in the TV environment.

In the preface to the aforementioned and more recently published German volume from 2009, *Transpositionen des Televisiven: Fernsehen in Literatur und Film*, the editors provide an outlook on the contributions. According to their conclusion, the articles in their collection prove that literature tends to adopt a critical view towards TV, a view mostly negatively inflected (Vorwort 10). Finishing their preface by stating that most of the works analyzed present a differentiated view on the medium, Ackermann and Laferl stress simultaneously that these views are still dominated by generalizing, negative judgments; positive assessments of television are, they agree, still missing (15). The differentiated views the contributions offer according to the editors are indeed missing – at least as far as the articles on TV in literature are concerned. According to my reading, these contributions support the claim that novels voice a typically dismissive critique of television. As for the latter claim that positive assessments of TV are still pending, my analyses of the selected novels show that their portrayals of TV culture and enactments of TV experiences are ambiguous and not altogether negative.

One contribution in Ackermann and Laferl’s volume that I would like to highlight is Von Tschiltschke’s “Literarische Fernsehbeobachtung in Frankreich: Von Milan Kunderas *La lenteur* (1995) zu Jean-Philippe Toussaints *La télévision* (1997)” (“Literary TV-Observation in France: From Milan Kundera’s *La lenteur* (1995) to Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s *La télévision* (1997);” my translation). In this article, Von Tschiltschke lists a few features which are, according to him, fundamental to the analysis of TV novels. Arguing that literature operates as an observer (34), he points to Kundera’s novel to show how novels express an extensive, radical, and consciously anachronistic cultural critique, which is focused on three main issues: the disappearing boundaries between intimacy and publicity, the public exploitation and aestheticization of morality, and a way of life that centers on hedonism and happiness (43). Irrespective of the fact that this list needs, in my view, further explanation, I aim to show that the novels’ critique of TV culture is not limited to these three topics. Apart from that, Von Tschiltschke detects a conventional, culturally pessimistic attitude towards television in Toussaint’s novel also, and he concludes that there are multiple intersections

between literary and non-literary, as well as scholarly-academic discourses (47, 52). My study will not limit itself to the observation that the chosen novels are in line with a non-literary critique *à la* Barthes, Bourdieu, or Postman. Rather, I will investigate how the novels challenge and enlighten these critical voices.

All of these contributions are based on the observation that literary fiction reacts to the pervasiveness of television in culture³⁴ – an observation that today appears trivial and that we take for granted. In 2014, critics and scholars have long attested to the ubiquity of television. Due to the expansion of the Internet and the huge variety of diverse technical devices, television and its omnipresence fall into oblivion. The emergence of ever new technologies in the so-called new media and digital media, along with the collective will to use them, have caused TV's avant-garde-status to be superseded. In other words, television culture has opened up and turned into a multi-media and digital media culture, and the same discussions previously inspired by and centered on television are now evoked by and directed towards its successor technologies. As this study illustrates, television has long become a part of our contemporary cultural environment, which makes its presence in (literary) fiction practically mandatory. In the same way humankind has long ago become used to having access to and being surrounded by the printed book, which was considered a groundbreaking, revolutionary invention by the end of the fifteenth century, humankind has become used to consuming and being with television in everyday life. In a sense, references to and a critique of TV in novels seem hardly worth mentioning anymore, since the presence of the medium goes without saying. Questions should therefore not revolve around the fact that television has long ago become a subject matter in literary fiction, but should address the question of *how* novels discuss TV culture and what kind of TV experiences they enact.³⁵

Another aspect the above mentioned approaches have in common is the differentiation between pre-TV-era and TV-era novels. The scholars I listed manage to make clear that fiction writers who did not grow up with television experienced and evaluated its cultural pervasiveness in a different way to those who never knew what life without television was like, which is an issue that becomes noticeable in the narrative techniques and styles the authors apply. This finding gives support to the assumption that consuming and simply being with television in everyday life has a significant impact on how one perceives and experiences the world and thus oneself. Clearly, when

³⁴ Another contribution whose essence is limited to this observation is Uwe Japp's "Das Fernsehen als Gegenstand der Literatur/-wissenschaft" ("Television as a Subject Matter in Literature and Literary Studies;" my translation) from 1996. A contribution that takes this realization as a starting point is Dagmar Schmelzer's "Jugendkultur und Fernsehkonsum in den Romanen der Spanischen Generation X" ("Youth Culture and Television Consumption in the Novels of the Spanish Generation X;" my translation) from 2009.

³⁵ Yet, we should not forget that the novels analyzed here both support and counter the idea that humans have adapted to TV life.

analyzing literary fiction of the 1940s to the 1980s, one should not neglect the implications of the generation gap these scholars never fail to emphasize. Since then, however, the significance of this generation gap has more and more faded away, simply because the literary scene has started to be dominated by writers who have never known life without television. In short, pre-TV-era writers have become extinct; today, every writer is a TV-era writer – and it will not be too long before the generation of post-TV-era writers takes over.

Whereas the authors of these contributions felt the need to legitimate their research on a pop-cultural medium like television by highlighting its presence in, as Freese calls it, “elite fiction,” – thereby implicitly opening up a debate on ‘high’ vs. ‘low’ culture and the latter’s (non-)place in academic literary research – I will not follow this rhetoric of defense and legitimization. Rather than distinguishing between literary (sub)genres and attesting literary value or non-value to the corpus, I will draw on diverse novels that, despite their particularities, share many characteristics, which gives them an even greater force of expression. When novels of such heterogeneity pinpoint certain aspects *despite* their heterogeneity, their propositions must be even more significant. Attesting literary value or non-value does therefore not elucidate my argumentation.³⁶ Then again, how do the novels position themselves with regard to the debate on ‘high’ vs. ‘low’ culture? Are the chosen TV novels self-reflexive about their potential loss of cultural currency? And how does the novel as a form which is potentially culturally conservative conceive of itself with regard to television?

As mentioned above, Tichi draws attention to “the battle lines” between novels (or rather, literary fiction in general) and televisual products, and Freese does the same when he observes that elite fiction finds its raw material in the low realm of popular culture. The questions I would shortly like to address against this background are: How do the novels deal with TV culture, and how do they (as an archaic cultural form) place themselves and their functions in relation to the televisionization of everyday life? Are they self-reflexive in discussing TV culture and enacting TV experiences? Most of the novels selected for my study are highly satirical, but I do not regard their dealing with television as a self-reflexive way of interacting with a medium unable to shake off its reputation as a lower cultural form. It rather seems to me that they are – to some extent – critical of the other medium they are commenting on. Yet, they do not question their own reflections on television. I would therefore like to argue that, by portraying and discussing

³⁶ With regard to his study on sports novels, Sicks also explains that he is not interested in considering or even taking part in quality valuations, convinced that he could not gain relevant insights by doing so. Literary texts, he explains, become meaningful through their reference to cultural contexts, and this happens regardless of their literary value (15-16).

TV culture, albeit critically, the novels imply that commenting on the medium of television is a legitimate topic in literary narratives.³⁷

As this review should demonstrate, the analysis of TV novels and their engagement in critical discussions on TV culture are for the most part limited to articles. It is due to these limitations that the aforementioned contributions cannot provide a thorough account of the novels' ambiguous and contradictory enactments of TV experiences, which I will be investigating in more depth. Also, the articles date back to the 1980s and 1990s, and therefore do not address more recently published English-speaking novels and recent developments in TV culture. The German volume by Ackermann and Laferl from 2009 is the most topical publication upon which my study can draw. With a focus on Romance literature, however, the contributions concerning TV in literature are rather selective case studies limited in length that can therefore only serve as starting points for further investigation. A monograph with in-depth analyses of selected, representative TV novels is still pending.

Objectives and Structure

We experience television in all sorts of ways, and it is sometimes challenging to come to terms with one's own feelings and attitudes towards television. The public and academic discourse on television might help us to gain a better understanding, but these discussions tend to be partial. They influence our own experiences in the TV environment. Sometimes they even overshadow our thinking and instincts, forbidding us to approach and, indeed, experience television without prejudices. In short, they bar us from feeling what we feel and experiencing what we could experience. This is also true for the reading of the chosen novels. I assume that the well-known denunciations *à la* Postman overshadow the reading and understanding of the selected novels. Supporting this claim in his analysis of Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, Brian McHale calls on his readers and the readers of *Vineland* to approach the text in a less biased fashion: "What if we suppressed our automatic inclination to read denunciation into such a passage, and instead tried to read it 'neutrally' or 'innocently'?" (124). It is therefore my aim to show that the selection of novels can operate as a means of understanding our own TV experiences better, experiences that are often ambiguous and contradictory. I argue that the selected texts enrich the public and academic discourse on television through their enactments of TV experiences. Some of them even anticipate pivotal discussions in media studies today.

³⁷ The only novel opening up this debate is *Dead Famous*. Elton's reality TV satire discusses the cultural value of contemporary reality television in relation to Shakespeare's plays, and I will dwell on this discussion in the analysis of the novel (conclusion of chapter 5).

Through their portrayals of television culture and the enactments of TV experiences, the selected novels reflect on how humans live their everyday lives in the TV environment, how they relate to television, and thus, more generally, what roles and functions television has in culture. By using the characters' perspectives to filter human experiences with, of, and through television, they join the established critique of TV's invasiveness. My study intends to demonstrate that the chosen works (re-)construct the cultural pessimism emblematic of the TV age. In contrast to expectations one might have, this is also true for the works published in the post-TV era.

Acknowledging this revelation, my study also makes clear, however, that the novels' enactments of TV experiences become more and more complex over time. I therefore aim to prove two things at the same time: Firstly, the enactments of TV experiences in the particular novels are full of ambiguity. Secondly, the novels' enactments of TV experiences both alter and do not alter over time. So far, readers of *Being There* and *White Noise* have predominantly emphasized the novels' critical comments on TV culture. Scholars unanimously consider DeLillo's protagonist a representative of the by now traditional negative view on television. Trapped in the condescending discourse on TV, they seem incapable of detecting the protagonist's confusion and uncertainty, and TV's assuasive impact on the character of the professor and father. By underlining the novel's satirical engagement with television, DeLillo's readers neglect the novel's ambiguous, contradictory, and paradoxical depiction of and response to TV culture. Against this background and through the analyses of the selected novels, I am determined to show that humankind has both overcome, and failed to overcome, the collective fear of TV's invasiveness – which is, after all, the catalyst of the denouncing TV-era litany.

The TV-era concerns that the novels articulate while simultaneously questioning and revising them revolve around Baudrillard's observation that life and TV have dissolved into one another and that the telemorphosis of society is total. Baudrillard's cultural diagnoses help to delineate and explain the characters' TV experiences, but one must simultaneously scrutinize and elaborate them further. To do so, it is necessary to consider other approaches to TV culture that enlighten Baudrillard's abstract and at times fragmentary observations. Drawing on approaches to TV culture such as Tichi's and Deuze's should help to more adequately understand the novels' enactments of TV experiences. Tichi's and Deuze's considerations and theorizations on the fusion of life with TV (and, in Deuze's case, media in general) will therefore flow into an extension of Baudrillard's theorization of the telemorphosis of society.

The reason why I consider Tichi's approach to TV culture and Deuze's cutting edge conceptualization of media life to supplement Baudrillard's theorization of the hyperreal is that both of their studies are devoid of nostalgia and technophobia, although they are situated in and draw on a hyperreal environment. Referring to Tichi's and Deuze's ideas will therefore help to

clarify that Baudrillard's theorization of the hyperreal can help to contextualize the novels and to frame their enactments of TV experiences – if one frees the idea of the hyperreal from notions of nostalgia and technophobia. Baudrillard's writing is not pessimistic but it is nostalgic, and critics will always connect it to feelings of nostalgia. Baudrillard's concepts therefore help to pinpoint the characters' uneasiness enacted in some of the novels. However, the novels present some of the characters as accepting an environment of hyperreality. They are not afraid but confused, and some of them simply disregard or even play around with the fusion of life and TV. In other words, through the enactments of TV experiences, the novels suggest that life in hyperreality has become the normal condition. The characters enact the human adaptation to life in a hyperreal environment, which is why some of the characters' experiences are not dominated by anxieties. Due to Baudrillard's nostalgic tendency and the cultural pessimism critics usually associate with him, it is problematic to speak of hyperreality with regard to the more positive enactments of TV experiences. It is therefore necessary to dissociate the use of the term from notions of nostalgia. This I do by referring to approaches such as Tichi's or Deuze's, which have a much more open, unbiased position.

These theoretical implications and considerations constitute the focus of the second chapter of my study. The second chapter is supposed to contextualize the novels in the history of television and inform my readers about central debates and dominant critical voices one can ascribe to specific cultural moments. I intend to offer my readers an overview of both television theory and criticism, because I claim that this knowledge is basic for understanding the novels' portrayals of TV culture and their enactments of TV experiences. However, the theoretical frame I use is not a guideline in the strict sense of the word; rather, it is a sort of orientation guide that points to the main discussions about TV from the beginning of television until today.

The other chapters are devoted to the selected novels in chronological order. Chapter 3 introduces Kosinski's *Being There* (1970) as a satire on TV culture that represents and reaffirms the age-old fear of TV's fatal impact on those who indulge in it. By delineating the acculturation of TV, the novel anticipates the televisionization of everyday life, that is the adaptation of human life to television. Nevertheless, as it comments on the process of naturalization satirically, it condemns the idea of TV life, thereby stressing television's disastrous impact on society. *Being There* presents Chance, the protagonist, as an anti-hero whom the narrator functionalizes as a deterrent. 'Look what happens to you if you keep on watching TV,' is what Kosinski's narrator seems to shout at the endangered TV generation that the author himself, quoted in an interview, calls "a nation of *videots*" (Sohn 52; original emphasis).

The fourth chapter is an analysis of DeLillo's success novel *White Noise* (1985). Like *Being There*, the novel is known as a satire on television. I intend to show that *White Noise* is representative of the prevailing skepticism

towards TV's naturalization, but I also aim to offer an unbiased reading that breaks with categorizing the novel as a typical critique of television. More than simply responding to the fear of TV's invasiveness, *White Noise* highlights feelings of uncertainty and indifference. It portrays the characters on their way to adapting to television by finding sophisticated reasons for not having to resist its appeal. Still in line with the critique of its time, DeLillo's novel portrays TV life in much more ambiguous and contradictory ways.

Chapter 5 jumps to the new millennium and investigates Elton's pop-cultural reality TV satires *Dead Famous* (2001) and *Chart Throb* (2006). Devoid of the anxiety about TV's invasiveness, these novels do not criticize television as an integral part of culture, but they satirize the ways it is used – and for what purposes. Ridiculing the worldwide success of reality TV and the ordinary celebrities it produces, the novels enact the appearance on television as a naturalized, and not exceptional, form of being. The focus concerning characters *on* and *behind* rather than *in front of* television marks an important shift in how novels portray television culture and enact TV experiences. I will argue that this shift in narrative representation exposes changes to television experiences in the era of reality TV.

The last analysis in chapter 6 of Donoghue's *Room* (2010) travels forth in time – which refers to the date of publication as well as the novel's emancipated enactments of TV experiences. *Room* is, in many respects, very similar to *Being There* and *White Noise*, but despite the similarities, *Room*'s portrayal is not dominated by notions of fear. Against this background, I will argue that the novel highlights an ongoing alteration in TV experiences today. It is therefore even more paradoxical that *Room* represents, at the very same time, the arguably outdated critique of TV as a medium of harm. Through the character of the mother, it enacts a sort of TV experience emblematic of the TV age. By presenting two opposing enactments of TV experiences, Donoghue indicates that collective fears are both surmountable and persistent. The novel suggests that in TV culture there is both victory over and an insistence on anxieties about television.

I shall summarize the main findings in the conclusive and last part of my study. Chapter 7 will provide an overview of how the novels enact contradictory TV experiences to which the readers can relate. I aim to show that, analyzed in sequence, TV novels suggest that humans fear the adaptation to TV life and that they have, at the same time, overcome this fear. This is, of course, a contradiction in terms... or is it? By applying a diachronic perspective on the chosen novels, it becomes evident that the televisionization of everyday life has both progressed and not progressed. I will use the conclusion of my study to show that my findings apply to novels other than the ones selected for close analyses. At the very end, I take a look at Thomas' *Going Out* (2002) and Eggers' recently published *The Circle* (2013). With regard to the latter, I will discuss the question of what contemporary TV novels might look like and how they might enact TV experiences. Or could

it be possible that TV novels have ceased to exist in times when TV has, as one might want to claim, lost so much of its cultural significance?

Chapter 2: Televisionization of Everyday Life

Kosinski's TV satire *Being There* from 1970 comments critically on the disastrous impact television was back then feared to have on human perceptions of the real. It hints at cultural fears emblematic of the TV era that revolve around the indistinguishability of TV reality and 'actual' reality, and the influence of the medium's presence on human everyday life. In the 1970s and 1980s, *Being There* was not the only novel expressing human anxieties about TV. In his analysis of Pynchon's *Vineland*, McHale argues:

Vineland . . . reflects the routine interpenetration of TV and 'real life,' the intimate interaction between what has been called 'TV flow' (the succession of program segments, commercials, etc.) and 'household flow' (the succession of domestic tasks and activities, see Altman (1986)).

Contextualizing his argument, McHale refers to the readers' environment where "TV has come to pervade our lives in . . . profound ways, shaping and constraining our desires, our behavior, and our expectations about others" (117). In the post-TV era, exactly 40 years after the publication of Kosinski's satire, Donoghue published the novel *Room* that tells a story similar to *Being There*. Like Kosinski, Donoghue confronts her main character with the question of how to differentiate between 'actual' reality and the realities of TV. It seems as if the 40 years separating the two novels do not affect the authors in what they believe to be pressing questions connected with the cultural environment upon which they draw. Both authors depict characters equally occupied with finding out how to come to terms with different versions of reality, thereby implying that these TV-related questions were topical in 1970 and continue to be topical today.

Dealing with how humans perceive, experience, and understand reality in a more and more technologized environment, TV-era novels represent, exemplify, and question many ideas which Baudrillard proposes in his theorization of the hyperreal. Throughout his oeuvre, Baudrillard argues that what Western cultures believe to be 'actual' reality has become more and more unsteady. Developing these thoughts, for the most part in the 1970s and 1980s and thus in the TV era, he mainly refers to television to make what one might want to call his most fundamental claim: that reality has turned into hyperreality. In *Telemorphosis*, one of his last publications from 2001, Baudrillard then proclaims "an integral telemorphosis of society" (28). Further elaborating his idea first expressed in 1981 that television has become

“intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real” (*Simulacra* 30), Baudrillard states that “reality massively transfuses itself into the screen in order to become disembodied. Nothing separates them any longer. The osmosis, the telemorphosis, is total” (*Telemorphosis* 49).

Back in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, television was for humankind what diverse technical devices and worldwide access to the Internet are for humankind today: a new way of life. Now that Western multi-media and digital media culture is characterized by the emergence of new technologies and the spread and growing importance of the Internet, Baudrillard’s diagnoses seem both overcome and even more valid. The claim that technologies affect the ways in which humans experience and come to terms with reality is now directed at newer media technologies and not any longer at television. And yet, considering the dominant trend of reality TV, Baudrillard’s observations are still true for contemporary television. It is thus no coincidence that Baudrillard’s declaration of the total telemorphosis of society overlaps with the broadcast of the French version of *Big Brother*, for Baudrillard’s *Telemorphosis* is a direct reaction to the broadcast and worldwide success of this reality TV format.

With regard to my analyses of TV-era novels (*Being There* and *White Noise*), Baudrillard’s idea of the hyperreal can operate as a theoretical frame helping to explain the characters’ relations to and attitudes towards television and their experiences in a cultural environment of which television is a constitutive part. Critics and scholars even read novels published in the TV era – and DeLillo’s *White Noise* serves as a case in point – as reactions to or examples of Baudrillard’s attestation that the world has become hyperreal.³⁸ This is also true for Donoghue’s recently published *Room*, which to a certain degree reads as if it refers to the cultural climate of the TV era. Elton’s reality TV satires can also be analyzed by drawing on Baudrillard’s TV-related observations presented in *Telemorphosis*. Since Baudrillard’s thoughts on the hyperreal are emblematic of the TV age and are still cutting edge with regard to technological progress and media development, they offer fruitful starting points for the analysis of both TV-era and post-TV-era novels.

Crucial aspects that Baudrillard’s elaborations omit, however, concern the question of how telemorphosis affects the individual. With regard to the selected novels, the question is how Baudrillard’s claim that society has been telemorphosized (*Telemorphosis* 48) explains the characters’ experiences of TV’s omnipresence in everyday life. So as to analyze the novels’ enactments of TV experiences, this chapter will outline the theoretical discussions on the topic to which Baudrillard has made a significant contribution. The theoretic-

³⁸ Quite a number of critics have regarded *White Noise* either as a literary response to Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, or as a literary expression of thoughts that have come to be considered as Baudrillardian. According to Mark Osteen, John Frow was “the first to elucidate the connection between *White Noise* and Baudrillardian simulacra” (Osteen, Introduction xiii). See also Boxall; Schuster; Wiese; Wilcox.

cal findings will help to analyze the ambiguous portrayals of the characters' experiences with reality in the TV environments the novels depict.

In *Electronic Hearth*, Tichi finds various ways to answer the question of how the acculturation of TV affects us in our everyday lives. Referring to cultural texts that represent human experiences in the TV environment, Tichi argues that television has become "the frame of reference for virtually every life experience," and "the standard by which the non-TV world is perceived, ordered, and understood" (37). In the recently published book *Media Life*, Deuze argues along the same lines as Tichi, proposing that contemporary life is media life and that "Media benchmark our experience of the world, and how we make sense of our role in it" (xi). Deuze proposes that it is due to the "supersaturation of media messages and machines" (x)³⁹ that life is "lived *in*, rather than *with*, media" ("Media" 137, original emphasis). Focusing on television, Tichi elaborates on the same idea, arguing that "We live *through* it" (*Electronic* 137; original emphasis). Moreover, Deuze also observes that media have become "the primary definer of our reality" (*Media* xiii). This thought establishes a link, not only to Tichi's elaborations, but also to Baudrillard's claim that reality is, in fact, hyperreality.

I intend to bring together Tichi's and Deuze's approaches with Baudrillard's more abstract and general techno-cultural diagnoses: in a cultural environment in which TV and life have dissolved into one another (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 30), humans experience everyday life in reference to, or rather through, television (Tichi, *Electronic* 137). With reference to Tichi, Deuze, and others, I aim to give examples of and explain how televisionization affects human everyday life, thereby responding to, informing, further elaborating, and enlightening Baudrillard's claim that society has been telemorphosized. This I do to contextualize my analyses and to demonstrate their embeddedness in and response to the public and academic discourse on television.

Actual Reality, Hyperreality, Multiple Realities

McHale says about *Vineland* that the question 'What is reality' is an exercise that constitutes the very fabric of the novel (137), and this is equally true for the novels analyzed in my study. Before turning to the novels and their engagement with this question, I consider it therefore mandatory to offer a short overview of the philosophical debate framing the narratives.

³⁹ In their response to Deuze's article "Media Life," Sebastian Kubitschko and Daniel Knapp criticize Deuze's emphasis on the ubiquity of media. This attestation has, according to them, become a truism (359), and I agree. Rather than a conclusion, however, this observation is the starting point for my argumentation, the context that I will draw on, and I feel this is also true for Deuze's study.

Today, humankind is interested in finding out how the huge variety of media technologies affects the ways in which we perceive, experience, and come to terms with reality.⁴⁰ In the TV age, critics focused this question on TV. Although coming to terms with reality has been a fundamental question for humanity ever since,⁴¹ it seems to have become more and more pressing with the emergence and spread of television. Since then, it has of course gained in topicality with the rise of newer media technologies, forms, and genres. It was in the heyday of TV, however, that Baudrillard proposed that life and TV had merged. In that time, he observed that the medium itself could no longer be identified as such and that one could no longer speak of a medium in the literal sense of the word. The medium, he explained, was entangled and diffused in the real, and this argumentation resulted in his formula “dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of life in TV” (*Simulacra* 30).

Baudrillard started thinking about the nature of and human access to reality early on. In the “The Order of Simulacra” in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, he defines the real as “that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction.” Since we live in an era that is characterized by multiple opportunities for reproduction, “the real is not only that which can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced.” Baudrillard concludes that one can no longer speak of the real but “the hyperreal” (73; original emphasis). It is therefore “no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody” but “a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (*Simulation* 2). Consequently, in a highly technologized environment, Baudrillard sees no origins anymore; the real is only imaginable in simulated form (Butler 24). According to Baudrillard, the result of this development (as outlined in the “The Order of Simulacra”) is a world that has become “real beyond our wildest expectations” (qtd. in Merrin 40). In elaboration of Baudrillard’s ideas, William Merrin thus speaks of an “excess of reality” (39; original emphasis), a reality Baudrillard himself describes as “more real than the real” (qtd. in Merrin 39). Television, Baudrillard suggests throughout his oeuvre, has propelled and is exemplary of reality as hyperreality.

By claiming that life and TV have dissolved into one another, and that the medium is now diffused and diffracted in the real, Baudrillard acknowledges the capacity of television to simulate reality. As Merrin explains in reference to Baudrillard:

The medium does not dissolve away to give a direct experience of the real, but dissolves instead *into* the real, into a state of simulation. Even an increasing

⁴⁰ For further reading, see, for instance, Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* from 2010.

⁴¹ This claim is supported by Sofie Van Bauwel and Nico Carpentier who argue that humans naturally strive for “immediate access to truth and reality” and are therefore challenged by the idea of it being a social construct: “The idea that reality is a social construct challenges some of our most basic certainties” (“Trans” 1).

perfection of electronic technology and its representation of the real would only represent the perfection of this simulacrum: as Baudrillard argues, ‘the more closely the real is pursued with colour, depth and one technical improvement after another, the greater does the real absence from the world grow’ (CS [*The Consumer Society*], 122). (Merrin 52-53)

Contending that a technology such as television does not simply represent the world but rather becomes the world, Baudrillard acknowledges that Western multi-media culture is characterized by technologies that produce what is considered as ‘actual’ reality:

With information technology . . . there is an effect of the realization of the world. The world, which from the dawn of time has been myth, fantasy, fable, becomes realized through technology. (“Interview 5” 44)

The realities produced by television and other technologies have turned into what one conventionally perceives as ‘actual’ reality. When Baudrillard thus speaks of the realization of the world through technology, he shows that everyday life experience of what one considers to be ‘actual’ reality is determined by technologies such as television which have become integral parts of Western cultures.⁴²

In the TV era, Baudrillard realizes that what one believes to be ‘actual’ reality, and the ways in which it is constructed and transmitted by television, have merged – due to TV’s ubiquity. According to him, television culture of that time was characterized by an unprecedented degree of ambiguity: never before had Western cultures had such difficulty in discerning what ‘actual’ reality was in relation to the ways in which that reality was transmitted, constructed, and challenged by technologies such as television. I agree that the idea of such a thing as ‘actual’ reality was and continues to be affected by realities produced and transmitted by television and other media technologies, and I agree that the idea of ‘actual’ reality has dissolved into all sorts of media realities. Baudrillard’s observation is today more true than ever. In times when people live their lives on or, indeed, through Facebook and so-called virtual reality games, the idea of the hyperreal gains even more ground and topicality.

Baudrillard’s claim that reality has been replaced by hyperreality seems to imply, however, that he believes in such a thing as an empirical, ‘actual’ reality whose substitution he comments on nostalgically. At the same time, he suggests that ‘actual’ reality has always been an idea established in West-

⁴² In *Reading Simulacra*, M. W. Smith supports this argument. Claiming that human experience “disappears into a high-tech, mass-media, ‘hyperreal environment’” (viii), Smith proposes that “the real is now defined and delineated as that which can be represented or reproduced through these technological forms” (2). Consequently, “technology, as an illusion of the real, itself becomes the world” (67). See also Couldry’s work wherein he argues for “the naturalisation of the media’s authority” and delineates how the media affect the ways in which facts turn into social realities (12).

ern thinking. If this is what Baudrillard intends to suggest, I agree in the sense that *the idea of 'actual' reality* has, in the age of television and in times of other media technologies, been replaced by other ideas of how reality can be conceptualized. In my view, the theorization of the hyperreal points to the realization that 'actual' reality is revealed as an idea, not an empirical truth.

Picking up the thought that media take part in shaping one's understanding of reality, Deuze suggests that contemporary life is media life. Rather than believing in media determining life, people should understand that "every aspect of our lives takes place in media" (*Media* x). Affirming what Baudrillard calls the "effect of the realization of the world" ("Interview 5" 44), Deuze writes that media reproduce and constitute the world (*Media* xi): they operate as "the primary definer of our reality" (xiii). In the analysis chapters, I will demonstrate that the novels respond to this idea. McHale says about *Vineland* that none of its characters experience reality in a raw, unmediated way, because it is always shaped by TV models (117), and this proves equally true for the narrative texts selected for my study. Although the focus of my study is on television, Deuze's suggestion that there is no outside of media (*Media* xii) lines with the Baudrillardian idea of the hyperreal and supports one of the, in my view, most central claims that the novels make: that there is no such thing as an 'actual' reality, and there never was. With the growing governance of television, the idea of 'actual' reality has started to comprise more and more versions of different realities, and this is becoming, as Deuze argues very convincingly, even more obvious in today's media-saturated environment.

What then do I mean by reality as 'actual' reality, hyperreality, or realities in the plural in the context of my study? One basic assumption my argumentation rests on is that the term 'actual' reality does not refer to such a thing as empirical reality; rather, it refers to a convention that sinks into oblivion, due to it being so well-established. Many critics have already pointed that out. According to Mike Gane's reading of Baudrillard, "only the cultures of the West have developed a category, a notion and an ideology of the real and have produced, and reproduced, a real world" (*Jean* 34; original emphasis).⁴³ Baudrillard therefore calls the West "a culture that has made the principle of reality the heart of its control over the world," whereas other cultures function on the principle of illusion ("Interview 17" 176). Fiske argues along the same lines when he refers to "the discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed" (21). Following these arguments, my

⁴³ "For Baudrillard," Gane argues, "the real is never privileged as reflecting an exterior truth into culture. It can only become a category within a culture when the symbolic order has lost its pre-eminent place" (*Jean* 39). Confirming this reading Rex Butler writes that "if we can speak of Baudrillard in terms of a real, it is not some external real, a real that exists out there" (18).

study suggests that the idea of ‘actual’ reality refers to a culturally agreed conception of reality, and not to such a thing as an empirical truth.

Approaching ‘actual’ reality as an idea, a way of understanding the world, goes back to Plato. An established reading of the “Allegory of the Cave” as offered in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* is that the world humans perceive through the senses is illusory. The objects in the material world are only “mutable copies of timeless universals,” copies of what Plato calls “Forms” and “Ideas.”

The Forms constitute a realm of unchanging being to which the world of individual mutable objects is subordinate. Because the Forms are immutable, they are more real – and more true – than the changeable material world. (Leitch 41-43)

But who has, according to Plato, access to the original Forms and Ideas? One common reading is that they are created by God (Murdoch 6), which makes God the only entity with access to reality and truth, access human beings would forever be denied.

Resulting from this, Plato argues that art can only copy objects in the material world. As these objects are themselves only representations of the Forms, art “can only lead further away from the truth,” “further into the world of illusion and deception” (Leitch 43). Artists are therefore “three removes away from reality,” accepting appearances naively or wilfully instead of questioning them (Murdoch 6). A contemporary understanding of this worldview would then be that media like/as art equally lead humans away from reality. Through media, humans live in a world of deception and illusion; for them, real access to reality and truth is impossible. It is this impossibility of ever getting access to truth and reality that Baudrillard points out when arguing that humans want but never get to experience absolute raw reality, concluding that it is a secret that will never be uncovered (*Telemorphosis* 18, 52).

One explanation of why humans will never have access to reality is provided by Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant claims that the material world, the world of nature, or what we call ‘actual’ reality, is and will always be a world of appearances. This he argues by explaining the nature of human beings; it is due to who we are that we cannot experience what Baudrillard calls absolute raw reality. I would like to quote in greater length a passage from Jay F. Rosenberg’s illuminating reading that elaborates on Kant’s understanding of human access to truth and reality:

On Kant’s account, we need to distinguish between things as they are *for us*, i.e., considered as possible objects of our experience, and things as they are *in themselves*, abstracting from the conditions of our possible experience of them. Trivially, then, we can have no *experience* of things as they are in themselves, i.e., apart from the conditions of our possible experience. Indeed, since . . . all empirical concepts . . . derive their conceptual content from their rela-

tionships to sensory intuitions, Kant concludes that we cannot even have any *conception* of things as they are in themselves. Our experience of the world of nature is always and necessarily an experience of things as they are *for us*. Kant thus arrives at the striking conclusion that the world of nature is literally a world of *phenomena*, i.e., a world of *appearances*. (60; original emphasis)

As Rosenberg makes clear, human beings experience the world perceptually, through their senses (53), which is why we cannot experience the material world outside of what we are. We, according to Kant, filter the world through what we are and how we perceive, and this is why experiencing what we believe to be ‘actual’ reality is impossible. We are bound to what we are, to being human.

Based on these fundamental philosophical insights, I think of ‘actual’ reality as a way of making sense of the world and life in this world; it is an idea of how to describe the environment we live in and of which we are a part. I understand Kant to be suggesting that since humans have only human-centered and subjective access to the natural world this implies that such a thing as ‘actual’ reality is, in fact, a collection of multiple versions of reality.

Let me now link this fundamental understanding of human access to the material world with Baudrillard’s claim that ‘actual’ reality is hyperreal: living in an environment of which television (and, speaking about today, media in general) is a constitutive element underlines and brings into consciousness the understanding that there is no such thing as an empirical or ‘actual’ reality. This realization is usually met by anxiety, an anxiety many critics of Baudrillard also see in his writing. However, linking it with Kant’s explanation that humans are bound to their own being and experience the world in human-specific ways, dispels the fear of this realization. ‘Normal’ or ‘natural’ is not to say that such a thing as ‘actual’ reality exists; the realization that ‘actual’ reality is a variety of multiple understandings or versions of reality is much closer to human nature and how we as human beings perceive, experience, and understand the world.

In a sense, then, reality has always been hyperreal. My reading of Baudrillard’s thoughts on the hyperreal is that they emphasize the Kantian realization in times of an increase in media technologies. What is new is that television – and I stick to the case of TV in the context of my argument – represents the world in a way that is closer to the human understanding of what ‘actual’ reality is. As we all know, television does not reflect ‘actual’ reality but constructs it.⁴⁴ Every show is the outcome of televisual production

⁴⁴ As far as this argument is concerned, Van Bauwel and Carpentier object quite correctly that the emphasis on the media-constructedness of reality can be mistaken for implying that there is such a thing as empirical reality (“Trans” 3), a delusive conclusion I do not intend to validate.

and editing techniques.⁴⁵ Even the news is an outcome of these processes, which is why one cannot think of them in terms of a neutral transmission or documentation of the material world.⁴⁶ TV is nevertheless “an essentially realistic medium because of its ability to carry a socially convincing sense of the real” (Fiske 21).⁴⁷ Richard Kilborn writes:

Ever since the earliest days of film, one of the abiding aspirations of moving image producers has been to persuade their viewing publics that they are watching something which has a direct connection with the ‘real world.’ (421)

Television has become, he explains further, “deeply implicated in the ‘realist’ enterprise” (422).

Although it is culturally and socially agreed that television only represents versions of reality and does not reflect what people believe to be ‘actual’ reality, it is commonly mistaken for mirroring, or willingly and intentionally imagined to reflect it.⁴⁸ The relation between television and the idea of reality is thus inherently complex and at times contradictory.⁴⁹ When talking about the realistic medium of television and other realistic media technologies that one has access to today, one is inclined to believe that Plato’s contempt for art would probably rise exponentially. What is new is that TV today is more deceitful than art was in Plato’s times. The conceptual boundaries between TV’s representations of different versions of reality and these different versions of reality are today even more blurry than the boundaries between art’s second-order representations and the objects as first-order representations of the Forms and Ideas. One is inclined to conclude that the idea of the hyperreal and the realization that ‘actual’ reality is but one ver-

⁴⁵ This has been delineated by a number of scholars, among them Fiske and Hartley who ascertain television to be “a human construct” and “the result of human choice, cultural decisions and social pressures” (17).

⁴⁶ The constructedness of the news and so-called factual TV at large is complicated in times of reality TV and highlighted through reality shows. In her seminal study *Factual TV: News, Documentary and Reality Television*, Hill elaborates on the relation between factual and reality television from the audience’s perspective. Delineating how the spread of reality TV affects factual television such as the news, current affairs, and documentary, she observes that the distinctive feature of factual television is now hybridity and that the “boundaries between fact and fiction have been pushed to the limits” (2; see also Kilborn 422).

⁴⁷ John Ellis argues along the same lines, explaining that TV “works through reality, processing it and worrying over it in order to define, explain, narrate, render intelligible, marginalize or speculate about reality” (qtd. in Bignell, *Big* 60). Jonathan Bignell contends that television “aims to contain and explain the real, especially through the form of narrative, in order to comply with expectations of cultural verisimilitude” (*Big* 62), and Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn agree that “television produces a ‘realistic,’ ‘common sense’ and therefore recognisable and familiar view of the social world” (3).

⁴⁸ Fiske refers to this phenomenon as the “transparency fallacy” (21).

⁴⁹ Supporting this statement, Bignell writes that, in the analysis of television, reality is an ambiguous term (*Big* 60), and Fiske and Hartley note that the world of television and what we call our real social reality are both clearly different from and, at the same time, related to each other (24).

sion of what one believes to be ‘actual’ reality must come up in times of television and media-saturation.

Hyperreality as the New ‘Actual’ Reality: The Example of Reality Television

One example of how contemporary television further blurs the conventionalized or naturalized boundaries between first- and second-order representations, thereby questioning the idea of ‘actual’ reality and taking part in creating awareness, is reality-based television. In other words, reality shows dramatize the Kantian realization by blurring the naturalized boundaries between the established idea of ‘actual’ reality and its TV representations.

“What is a reality show” asks Hilmes (428), and correctly so. Ever since its emergence and success⁵⁰ as a television genre, it has proven challenging for viewers and critics alike to come to terms with reality TV. More often than not referred to as “a slippery thing to pin down” (Hilmes 428) or “a catch-all phrase” (Kilborn 423), reality TV is a kind of hybrid one cannot easily characterize and which is therefore generally perceived as something in-between fact and fiction, life and TV entertainment.⁵¹ Making the same observation, Anastasia Deligiaouri and Mirkica Popovic argue: “In fact, what Reality TV has achieved is a blurring of the boundaries between daily life and TV life” (70). M. W. Smith also maintains that the distinction between real life and television is vanishing in times when “real life is increasingly becoming the subject of TV” (2). Since reality TV comprises a variety of genres,⁵² Mark Andrejevic is right to claim that there is not any one way

⁵⁰ Reality TV’s outstanding status has long become mutual consent. Referred to as “the so far most-noted television phenomenon of the early twenty-first century” (Bignell, *Big* 6), producers have recognized that reality shows have come to dominate their schedules (Cronin, “Reality TV”). Reality TV scholars state that “few would . . . contest reality TV’s reach and longevity” and observe “the genre’s maturation as a distinct, and widely recognized, cultural form” (Ouellette and Murray 1-2). In this spirit, James Friedman posits that “no genre form or type of programming has been as actively marketed by producers, or more enthusiastically embraced by viewers, than reality-based TV” (6). See also Andrejevic 2; Hill, *Factual* 9.

⁵¹ In this context, that is the rise of reality TV as a television genre and its becoming a cultural phenomenon, Ib Bondebjerg calls the famous O. J. Simpson trial the “symbolic climax in the hybridization of public and private discourse on television.” The documentation of Simpson’s trial, often referred to by television scholars and critics and generally considered as a media event *par excellence*, was a mix of journalistic practice with “all the qualities of fictional narrative” (27). Critics and scholars therefore agree that it is emblematic of the convergence of TV and everyday life.

⁵² In *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray provide a list of different formats and subgenres (5). Today, of course, this list needs an update. With regard to the American context, see Hilmes (428).

of defining it (64).⁵³ But there is, nevertheless, a common ground in attempts to pinpoint the genre's characteristics: the multiple definitions on offer share their acknowledgement of the genre's hybrid nature⁵⁴ and its "self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real" (Ouellette and Murray 3).⁵⁵

Reality TV's hybridity, usually the focus of critical debates,⁵⁶ is, as Sofie Van Bauwel puts it, "borne out of this merger of strong professional intervention in the way that reality is mediated and constructed, and the desire for unmediated access to reality, authenticity and ordinariness." Combining real (in the sense of authentic) with fictional material results in "representations of a constructed and contingent reality that combines an explicit process of manufacturing reality with glimpses of authenticity" (21).⁵⁷ Reality TV's focus on 'authentic' personalities, situations, problems, and narratives is regarded as its primary distinction from fictional television (Ouellette and Murray 5). With regard to *Big Brother*, John Corner affirms that "the idea of observing what is a mode of 'real' behavior" is in the center of a show that represents "real characteristics of real people, even if the material and temporal conditions for that behavior have been entirely constructed by television itself" (44-45). It is a vital requirement of reality shows that viewers can easily relate to what is being shown (Kilborn 424). At the same time, however, reality shows are supposed to entertain, to be a sort of package of authentic portrayals of everyday life situations and "all the excitement and razzmatazz of show business" (424). Reality TV is therefore highly paradoxical: viewers expect it to document everyday life in its purest form while this form of entertainment is simultaneously required to "deviate from the norm of boring, everyday routine" (424). Reality TV's versions of everyday life are enhanced versions of the everyday that combine the ordinary with the extraordinary.

⁵³ Thompson says about quality TV that a precise definition has been elusive right from the start, but that we know it when we see it (xix), and I feel this is also true for reality television.

⁵⁴ *Big Brother*, for instance, has become known as a talk show; a social experiment show; a game show; and a docu-soap. I shall note, however, that reality TV is not the first television phenomenon characterized by hybridity. I would therefore like to refer to Biressi and Nunn's objection that "Hybridity has always characterised factual filmmaking's refashioning of older forms for the modern television market and the boundaries between fact and fiction have never been clear-cut" (23; see also Kilborn 421). Some scholars and critics, of whom Hickethier is but one example, consider television as such to follow the principle of overlapping and blending, but the German media scholar also acknowledges that the blending of conventional boundaries (for example of genres or forms of narration) has been an even more dominant characteristic of TV since the 1990s (202, 207-08).

⁵⁵ See also Biressi and Nunn (10-11); Holmes and Jermyn (5); Van Bauwel and Carpentier ("Trans" 3).

⁵⁶ One strand of criticism is the concern that reality TV has "a disruptive influence on truth claims within factuality" (Hill, *Factual* 112; see also *Reality* 7).

⁵⁷ Hill's audience research proves that the mix of manufacturing processes with glimpses of authenticity is, among viewers, acknowledged as a distinct feature of reality television (*Factual* 141)

It is also necessary to make note here of the ongoing debate surrounding the question of how far the behavior of reality show contestants “within a fully managed artificiality” (Corner 45) can be considered as ‘real’ or ‘authentic,’⁵⁸ and this question eventually goes back to the thoughts Erving Goffman articulates in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* from 1959. Comparing face-to-face interactions in everyday life situations with theatrical performances, Goffman makes clear that people’s behavior is always, at least to a certain degree, a form of performance, because people attempt to control their behavior and behave according to social norms. With regard to reality TV, other scholars have already discussed the idea of ‘authentic’ behavior vs. performance in reference to Goffman,⁵⁹ and I will not dwell on it much further. I would still like to connect the authenticity/performance question in the context of reality TV to some arguments brought forward by (media) scholars who suggest that, in today’s media environment, the experience of being filmed is turning into an everyday life experience.

In reference to Sybille Krämer, Deuze writes that people nowadays perform themselves in terms of media (*Media* 94), claiming that “we do share a heightened sense of being watched – of having to perform ourselves in front of diversified yet imperceptible audiences” (237). Eva Illouz also argues that people experience their lives in terms of performance as “media-like lifestyles” (182). These observations hint at what I would like to call a naturalization of performed, in-front-of-camera behavior. The idea that everyday life experience connects to the realization of being watched, and the claim that everyday life today is a media-like lifestyle, indicate that the feeling of being watched turns into a natural way of being. In a reality show, the participants’ awareness of being filmed of course affects their behavior. I therefore suggest that, when it comes to judging the authenticity of their behavior, we must consider three arguments. Firstly, the participants of *Big Brother* would have to act 24/7, and it is doubtful that reality show candidates can act non-stop without breaking with the person – alias character – they are determined to be in the eyes of the public. Secondly, as more and more people have the chance to be on TV, appearing on a reality show is nowadays turning from an extraordinary into an ordinary, everyday life experience. Thirdly and consequently, being is nowadays more and more affected by the awareness that one might be filmed, which is why behaving as if in front of a camera, that might or might not be there, turns into a naturalized way of being. In short: authentic behavior turns into staged behavior which is the new authentic. In the context of reality TV, the notion of performed vs. authentic behavior must therefore be reconsidered.

⁵⁸ Hilmes remarks that the question whether reality TV is real or authentic “has provoked a lot of discussion, especially from those who dislike reality TV’s slipperiness and claims to factuality” (429).

⁵⁹ Corner’s article from 2009 just mentioned tackles the question. See also Hill (*Reality*).

Against the arguments put forward so far, we can conclude that the hybridity of reality programming results from many determinants, such as the show contestants' partly performed, partly authentic behavior. In more general terms, then, the hybrid nature of reality TV results from its claim to solely document 'real life situations' by simultaneously running through all the usual stages of production. Just like any other televisual product, reality shows are outcomes of production techniques and strategies that cannot do without scripts. Whereas some claim that reality shows need to be scripted for the most part (Schawinski 262), others argue it would be wrong to assume that everything is pre-produced, pre-fabricated, and pre-organized (Groebel 153). Reality TV producers Mark Cronin and Richard Hall agree that reality shows are technically non-scripted but still follow a certain plan (Cronin, "How;" Hall, "Reality TV"). Thus, while producers do not prepare a script they stick to meticulously, they nevertheless aim to create an interesting story. They must be "as skilled at using classic storytelling techniques as fiction writers;" reality shows rely in the same way on the classics of storytelling (such as the three act structure), just like movies or plays (Cronin, "Reality Show").⁶⁰

Due to being at least partially scripted, reality shows are more often than not attacked for manipulating both the show contestants and the audience.⁶¹ Responding to this accusation, Cronin explains that reality shows are manipulated to different degrees. According to him, some shows are so heavily manipulated by producers that they actually motivate participants to pick a quarrel. In contrast to that, he continues, other producers do hardly anything at all, letting events play out as they occur. Yet others suggest certain actions, but they do not directly force participants to do something in a certain way (Cronin, "How").⁶² One can therefore conclude that the degree of manipulation varies. The fact that the lines between manipulation, non-manipulation, and implicit forms of manipulation are very thin certainly adds to the genre's hybridity and the feeling that this form of televisual entertainment is a blend of television and what one believes to be 'real' life.

It is interesting to note that the interpenetration of television and everyday life in the context of reality TV was first discussed at the beginning of the

⁶⁰ Although reality shows must be regarded as outcomes of production techniques and strategies that base on scripts, I would like to support Biressi and Nunn's objection that "the production of reality programming and its documentary and factual TV forebears has everything to do with 'reality', although we always have to adopt a posture of scepticism towards any claims that they have fully represented reality and real life" (3).

⁶¹ Kilborn notes that the genre's hybridity leads to accusations of manipulation and distortion. He makes clear that such misgivings mirror those formerly directed towards documentary formats that critics feared to distort the reality of what they were supposed to represent through strategies of over-dramatization (423, 431).

⁶² Both Cronin and Hall argue, however, that manipulation is not necessary if the cast is correct, if the plan of the show is well thought through, and if problems are cleverly created for the contestants to solve (Cronin, "How"; Hall, "Reality Show").

1970s in reference to *An American Family*, which is often called the predecessor of contemporary reality television. Considered as one of the milestones in (reality) TV history, the “documentary-style coverage” (DeVolld 16) allowed the viewers to follow the everyday life routines of the Californian Loud family. Known as “the most controversial and talked-about television program for its time,” critics instantly acknowledged *An American Family* as “the beginning of a new way to explore the complexities of contemporary reality” *THIRTEEN*). Writing about the Loud family in 1981, Baudrillard maintained that no one knew what was authentic and what was not: “Here and there, a single nebula whose simple elements are indecipherable, whose truth is indecipherable” (*Simulation* 32). The feeling Baudrillard describes has, I believe, intensified ever since the broadcast of *An American Family*. Due to reality TV’s proliferation and success, and the emergence of new subgenres such as social problem series, the blending of television and everyday life is a process still ongoing.

I would like to propose that reality shows *portray* and *exemplify* the fusion of television and life and by doing so *propel* this process; reality TV is *representative of* and, at the same time, *accelerates* the dissolution of everyday life into television and vice versa. Doing so, it raises awareness as to how humans living in a media-saturated world come to terms with the age-old philosophical question ‘What is reality and how do we access it?’ Thinking along the same lines, Raymond Williams noted – as early as 1974 in reference to *An American Family* – that the show’s hybridity revealed “a *fiction about reality itself*” (73; emphasis added). Although audience research proves that viewers are well aware of the fact that reality shows are staged and manufactured,⁶³ reality TV addresses questions that are pressing in an environment of complete dissolution where one is, perhaps more than ever before, denied definite ascriptions and categorizations. I therefore hold the same view as Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray who remark that reality television “encourages viewers to test out their own notions of the real, the ordinary, and the intimate against the representation before them” (8). In the era of reality TV, the experience of watching television is inextricably linked with fundamental ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological questions on the nature of and possible human access to reality. It brings humankind back to age-old debates that seem to have a new topicality in an environment of media-saturation.

In *Media Life*, Deuze calls upon his readers very emphatically to “be at peace with the perpetual plasticity” of reality. The worldview of today’s media-saturated environment does not necessarily have to be “atomized, fragmented and depressing” reality that is “permanently under construction” and can be controlled both individually and collectively (263). I agree with

⁶³ See Hill (*Factual*). Kilborn, equally convinced of the viewers’ raised awareness, even goes so far as to claim that the consumption of reality shows makes the audience “increasingly televisually literate” (422, 437).

Deuze insofar as I feel that today's worldview of our media-saturated environment is, but does not have to be, depressing, and I agree insofar as reality is in a way plastic and under permanent construction. I disagree, however, that one can think of reality in terms of control. Deuze's argumentation is based on the belief in an 'actual' reality that humans can access, though he appeals for thinking of this reality as being immersed in and, today, only accessible through media. I believe that human beings cannot and will never be able to access the material or natural world directly, and here my argumentation differs from Deuze's. I do agree, however, that media such as television play a more important role than ever when it comes to worldviews and conceptions of reality. Television, especially reality TV, has made the fact that humans live in and through multiple versions of reality starkly clear. I therefore also agree with Deuze that this realization does not have to go along with cultural anxiety, and I do so for the simple fact that it has never been different. Living in and through different versions of reality, in times of TV-saturation, is a state of being that one does not have to dread. This idea is also brought up and enacted in the selected novels. By portraying characters who have naturally adapted to TV's omnipresence, the novels enact TV life as the new form of being.

Human Consciousness as Teleconsciousness

In the article "Unreality Star," published in *The New Yorker* in September 2013, Andrew Marantz relates how more and more psychiatrists are nowadays confronted with patients that suffer from what has become known as "Truman Show delusion." Marantz tells the 'true life story' of Nick Lotz who is convinced that he is part of a reality show. Constantly searching for hidden cameras and editing equipment, the college student starts to grin clownishly when he speaks in class, for he wants to let the audience know that he is aware of being filmed. As far as Lotz understands, the production team uses a wireless speaker that is now in Lotz's head. This way they can feed him lines and give instructions that he is certain to hear. Determined to become a better performer, he even enrolls in acting classes. His aim is to win the show and be rewarded with hundred million dollars: "In Nick Lotz' mind, the show was everything, and everything was the show" (Marantz 34).

As it turns out, Lotz is not the only young person who suffers from such a form of delusion. Marantz reveals that, in 2002, the psychiatrist Joel Gold treated several patients who had similar symptoms: a member of a reality show production team believed that the show was actually about him, and another man was convinced that all his relatives and friends were actors who were following a script. Since these and other patients' accounts are reminiscent of the movie *The Truman Show* (1998), the disorder was named after that movie, which chronicles the life of a man who does not know that he is part of a reality show. Quoting another psychiatrist, Marantz reveals that the

sensation of being filmed is a symptom especially displayed by young people. This, Marantz remarks, should not come as a surprise; the contemporary living environment is distinguished by security cameras in all sorts of places,⁶⁴ and the increasing number of so-called reality TV stars that “really are just like us” proves how easy it is nowadays to become famous (34-35).⁶⁵

Marantz’s article provides evidence for the belief that consuming and being with television in everyday life affects humans concerning what they think, perceive, and how they experience. It suggests that watching reality TV has a delusive effect on people’s consciousness. As outlined above, reality TV’s trademark is the blurriness of generic boundaries, the blending of what one believes to be ‘actual’ reality and the realities of TV. Marantz’s article demonstrates that viewers obviously have difficulty in dealing with the interpenetration of ‘actual’ reality and the realities they face when watching television. It also indicates that people suffering from this delusion are predominantly young adults. The fact that scientists detect what they call a mental disorder in times when reality TV is turning into one of the most dominant and successful forms of televisual entertainment, and the fact that it is specific to the reality TV generation, both make clear that teleconsciousness is not just a phenomenon of the TV era alone. It is a phenomenon that has gained more and more importance over time. Deuze also emphasizes the implications of the Truman Show delusion for contemporary everyday life experiences. In order to argue that life today is lived in media, he devotes a whole subchapter to the Truman Show delusion where he proposes:

Metaphorically speaking, we are now all living inside our very own reality show (referring to the 1998 movie *The Truman Show* by Australian director Peter Weir): a world characterized by pervasive and ubiquitous media that we are constantly and concurrently deeply immersed in, that we are the stars of, and that remix and shape all aspects of our everyday life. (*Media* 253)

Deuze therefore concludes that the only unrealistic part of *The Truman Show* movie is the protagonist’s escape from the world, the only reality he knows – which is an escape denied to us (254).

What we learn from reading Marantz’s article is that the Truman Show delusion is a mental disorder, a deviation from the norm. The message is clear: being surrounded by cameras in everyday life and watching reality TV both have a negative impact on human health. In the course of this chapter, however, I attempt to show that the emergence of the Truman Show delusion is but one example of the mutual influence of watching (and being with) television and consciousness. Against this background, I use the idea of human consciousness as teleconsciousness in a much more neutral way. Although the phenomenon of the Truman Show delusion is a good example of

⁶⁴ Marantz writes that, in 2005, the New York Civil Liberties Union canvassed Manhattan and made out close to forty-two hundred cameras south of Fourteenth Street (35).

⁶⁵ I will discuss the contemporary phenomenon of the ‘ordinary celebrity’ later in this chapter.

how watching and being with TV affects consciousness, I argue that one does not necessarily have to think of the interdependency between televisionization and mental health in terms of a threat. On the contrary, I suggest that humans have adapted – and continue to adapt – to this environment.

The selected novels dramatize this shift in the way people get along with living in multiple realities, realities that are not outside of television. The chosen works enact the naturalization of living inside of and through TV by depicting the characters' adaptation to televisionized experiences. McHale says about Pynchon's novel:

Vineland mirrors this 'modelling' function that TV has come to serve in our culture. Many of its characters are preoccupied with conforming their lives to TV models. Some, the more self-conscious among them, reflect on the adequacy or inadequacy of TV models to reality, but even the self-conscious ones seem unable to free themselves from TV's grip on their lives. (117)

Like *Vineland*, *Being There* and *White Noise* address the collectively perceived difficulty of comprehending reality in a TV-saturated environment, and they enact the uneasiness this inner struggle in the characters' minds provokes. Analyzed in sequence, however, the novels indicate that the characters' feelings of uneasiness are slowly replaced by feelings of confusion and unconscious acceptance. The characters in Elton's novels do not question their inner urge to validate their lives through TV. *Chart Throb*, for instance, refers to the validation of life and self through television as a naturalized way of being and living in a world of which television is a constitutive element. By enacting human consciousness as teleconsciousness, the selected novels analyzed here allude to the human adaptation to perceiving and experiencing the world through television. This phenomenon I call televisionized consciousness or 'teleconsciousness.'

I wish to offer two examples that make clearer how the chosen texts enact teleconsciousness. The first example is taken from *Being There* where the protagonist, here the reflector figure, says: "Her words seemed to float inside his head; he observed her as if she were on television" (34). Chance, the protagonist, does not simply compare a conversation with a woman to television; rather, he perceives and experiences her *like* a TV character. He experiences 'actual' life in the same way he experiences it through television. For him, actual and television experiences are indistinguishable. *White Noise* draws the readers' attention to the same phenomenon. In one situation, the novel describes Jack, the protagonist, as experiencing himself like a character on television. Reminded of a stereotypical TV scene, Jack perceives his own actions in accordance with his TV experience:

I advanced into the area of flickering light, out of the shadows, seeking to loom. . . . I loomed in the doorway, conscious of looming, seeing myself from Mink's viewpoint, magnified, threatening. (WN 297)

Jack sees himself from the perspective of a TV viewer. He appears to have a perception that is highly determined by his TV experience. Through their enactments of the protagonists' TV experiences, both passages describe sensations that suggest there is such a thing as teleconsciousness.

As I have already stated, maintaining that media consumption affects human consciousness in these times of new media almost sounds like a truism.⁶⁶ Although it most certainly proves difficult to find scientific evidence for this determinism, one cannot imagine that life in a highly media-saturated environment does not have an impact on how one perceives and experiences one's surroundings and oneself. The fact that the Truman Show delusion has turned into an established mental disorder is, I believe, proof enough. Discussions on the ways in which television consumption might or might not influence the viewer were, in the age of TV, more often than not connected with a critique of TV as a pop-cultural (and thus trivial) medium that was considered to endanger viewers' intellectual development.⁶⁷ What is at stake here, however, is neither a delineation nor a continuation of this critical sermon but the question of how watching and simply being with television in everyday life was considered to affect consciousness in the TV era, and can still be considered to affect consciousness today.

Dealing with this very question in the early 1990s, Tichi proposes that one has to speak of human consciousness as "teleconsciousness" (*Electronic*, chap. 5),⁶⁸ her basic assumption being that, in an environment in which television is always switched on, consciousness adapts to these new surroundings. Tichi realizes that TV-era texts represent television viewers in three distinct ways: as passive, narcotized addicts,⁶⁹ active channel hoppers, and viewers with a "new state of mind" that is "interactive" and "multicentered" (118, 119). Since viewers must shift attention to and from television, Tichi argues that one has to speak of a "new pluralistic state of consciousness" or "the new media-age consciousness" (119, 124). So as to exemplify her claim, she refers to a well-known image of the TV era: the representation of

⁶⁶ Cultivation theory is but one field of interest that is devoted to answer this question, the basic assumption being that the mass production and distribution of media messages brings about the cultivation of collective consciousness (Gerbner 138). According to Karyn Riddle, cultivation theorists claim that "the more time people spend 'living' in the TV world, the more likely they are to believe social reality is congruent with TV reality." Cultivation theorists have so far focused on particular contents of particular media and content areas such as media violence and gender stereotypes (287), which is why my study, interested in the more general question of how watching and being with TV affects consciousness as enacted in TV novels, cannot profit much from this sort of research.

⁶⁷ In this context, Wallace, for example, speaks of "this well-known critical litany about television's vapidness, shallowness, and irrealism" (156).

⁶⁸ In the article "Television and Recent American Fiction" from 1989, Tichi already lays the foundation for her analysis of human consciousness as teleconsciousness, claiming that fictional texts "tell us something of the contemporary response to that situation" (121).

⁶⁹ McHale, for instance, comments on the "parallelism between TV addiction and alcoholism or drug addiction" in his analysis of *Vineland* (123).

the American housewife who both irons and watches television at the same time. The housewife's consciousness, she explains, "extend[s] into several activities at once, TV watching being just one of them" (118).⁷⁰ In the TV age, Tichi elaborates further, viewers are forced to steer their attention in different directions, continuously switching from one activity to another:

[I]t is not attention divided, not an either/or state, but one of multiplicity as the mind turns simultaneously to several centers of attention, constantly prioritizing and reprioritizing among them. The on-screen world may be compelling, even deeply absorbing, but only intermittently so as the mind reassigns itself new centers of attention. (121)

Like Tichi, I argue that television has an impact on human perception and experience. In contrast to Tichi, however, I would like to use the term 'teleconsciousness' to refer to a more fundamental idea. Instead of reverting predominantly to notions of multi-centeredness of human attention, I suggest not thinking of teleconsciousness only as a mode of television consumption. Tichi establishes a direct connection between consciousness and the ways in which viewers consume television, for example the modes of watching TV. Other critics also follow her approach by arguing for the multi-centeredness of attention. John Ellis writes that "TV is not usually the only thing going on" (128) and Andrejevic refers to a generation that is accustomed to doing different things simultaneously, for instance watching TV while shopping online (63). Like Tichi, Ellis, and Andrejevic, I see strong links between consciousness and the habits and modes of television consumption. More than that, however, I see direct connections between consciousness and televisual content and form, both of which affect the ways in which humans make sense of reality. In other words, I will not only use the term 'teleconsciousness' in reference to habits or modes of watching television, but I will link it to *what* (level of content) television transmits and *how* (level of form) this is accomplished. Therefore, in my understanding, the idea of human consciousness as teleconsciousness implies crucial and more fundamental changes in humans' perceptions and experiences, in the sense that humans live with, in, and through television.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Dorothy Hobson's audience research in *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera* from 1982 supports this observation. Hobson's interviews with housewives revealed that "women were engaged in a complex series of activities, such as cooking the evening meal, whilst at the same time attempting to watch their favourite soap on the television" (qtd. in Gauntlett and Hill 6).

⁷¹ I would like to mention here that Tichi also expresses the more fundamental idea of living life in terms of television (see her chapter "Certification – As Seen on TV" in *Electronic Hearth*), but she does not clearly relate it to her theorization of teleconsciousness. For her, teleconsciousness is a form of television consumption, the representation of which she contrasts both with the representation of the viewer as passive, narcotized addict and that of the viewer as active channel hopper interacting with the screen. I will, however, come back to her enlightening thoughts on living life in terms of and through TV later in this chapter.

In order for me to expose the ways in which the selected novels enact tel-econsciousness through the characters, I consider it useful to offer an overview of prevalent theoretical discussions on the modes of television consumption. The following section is therefore devoted to the question of how the experience of watching TV is theorized.

Experiencing TV: Modes of Watching Television

TV age-theories regarding different modes of watching television, referred to as the so-called “glance and gaze’ theories” (Buonanno 37), generally differentiate between the domestic TV experience and the cinematic experience,⁷² with the latter usually seen as being superior.⁷³ One sympathizer with the cinematic experience is Baudrillard. Being asked whether he likes going to the cinema and what position he holds on television, he ascribes a certain capacity to the (old) cinema which he does not ascribe to TV:⁷⁴ ensuring a dream-like experience (“Interview 2” 34; “Interview 7” 67).⁷⁵ Arguing that the cinema “serves the purpose of allowing you to lose track of the time of the day,” Baudrillard explains that television is “a screen and nothing but a screen” perceived without consequence, emotion, or passion (“Interview 2” 29-30).

Ellis states that “TV offers a radically different image from cinema” (127), and Baudrillard agrees. The difference Baudrillard sees between the images of the big screen in contrast to the images of the television screen are crucial for understanding his line of argument, which is why, at this point, I would like to quote him at length:

The television screen seems to me to be a place where images disappear, in the sense that each one of the images is undifferentiated and to the extent that

⁷² Buonanno affirms that theories on the modes of watching TV are “conceptualized in reference and contradistinction to going to the cinema” (37).

⁷³ In his seminal 1974 publication *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Williams might have been one of the first scholars to propose the allegedly natural and unavoidable approach to contrast television with the cinema as the superior cultural art form (28).

⁷⁴ When Baudrillard ascribes a higher cultural value to the cinema in contrast to television, he exemplifies Von Tschilschke’s claim that there is a tradition in cultural critics’ attitudes towards these two media. Von Tschilschke argues that Barthes’ and Deleuze’s resistance to television, which is simultaneously in complete contrast to their high appreciation of the cinema, proves a well-known principle in media history: that new media are usually met with skepticism. TV is in relation to the cinema what the cinema was in relation to literature: a trivial medium (37-38). In 2014 and with regard to the quality TV movement, the relations between the cinema and TV are, of course, in need of reconsideration. To call quality TV products such as *Breaking Bad* the novel of the 21st century or contemporary television better than the movies is to express what is, by now, a prevalent opinion.

⁷⁵ Although Baudrillard sympathizes with the cinema, he admits at some point that it has changed and that it has become hyper-realist, regressing towards empty perfection (“Interview 2” 30). This accusation is one he has also made against television.

the succession of images becomes total. Contents, emotions, things of great intensity, all take place on a screen that has no depth, a pure surface, while the cinema is also a screen, of course, but has depth, be it fantastic, imaginary or something else. The television is there, it's immanent, and it turns you into a screen. You have a quick, tactile perception of it, little definition. Basically there is no strong image; what it requires of you is a sort of immediate, instantaneous participation, in order to read it, make it exist but not make it signify. In order to have an image you need to have a scene, a certain distance without which there can be no looking, no play of glances, and it is that play that makes things appear or disappear. It is in this sense that I find television obscene, because there is no stage, no depth, no place for a possible glance and therefore no place either for a possible seduction. The image plays with the real, and play between the imaginary and the real must work. Television does not send us back to the real, it is in the hyper-real, it is the hyper-real world and does not send us to another scene. ("Interview 7" 69)

Baudrillard considers the television screen and thus the televisual image to be more superficial and therefore less capable of warranting a "dream-like situation." To him, only the cinematic image allows a "play of glances" – the glance constituting the central concept in Baudrillard's argumentation – and therefore the feeling of being in an "all-embracing dream" ("Interview 2" 34). In contrast to the cinema that offers a seductive play between the real and the imaginary, television does not seduce. Instead, it calls attention to the staging of reality.

The question arising from this theorization is what mode of watching television allows for. Indeed, in television theory of the TV age, this is a popular discussion. Ellis, for instance, pinpoints one of the most prevalent assertions on the modes of television consumption in television theory: TV, less intense than the cinema, is the regime of the glance rather than the gaze (137). Thus, whereas Baudrillard ascribes the mode of the glance to the cinema, Ellis inverts this conceptualization, arguing instead:

The gaze implies a concentration of the spectator's activity into that of looking, the glance implies that no extraordinary effort is being invested in the activity of looking. (137)

Whether or not the mode of watching a cinematic movie and its capacity to get and hold viewers' attention is labeled "the glance" (as Baudrillard calls it) or "the gaze" (as referred to by Ellis and as conventionally labeled in television theory), the argument in TV-era theory that the cinema experience is distinct from the television experience, and that only the former is deeply attention-grabbing is generally agreed upon. Whereas the gaze is characteristic of the cinema experience, the glance, "absent-minded, casual, nonchalant . . . is associated with television" (Buonanno 37).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ In the following, I will use these conceptions in accordance with Ellis and thus in accordance with their prevalent uses in television theory.

Despite using different terms, both Baudrillard and Ellis agree that the characteristics of the televisual image disallow intense experiences. This is in contrast to Tichi, whose argumentation invites the conclusion that external factors determine whether the viewer gazes or glances at television. In reference to an American advertisement of the 1950s, which used the well-known and stereotypical image of the ironing and TV-watching housewife for its purposes, Tichi identifies proof for her argument of the multi-centered viewer (*Electronic* 117-18). The housewife's multi-centered attention is the result of her household duties and therefore of the need for her not to watch TV without also taking care of the laundry; the housewife cannot gaze since she is forced to also pay attention to the ironing. Her choice to watch television *next to* taking care of the ironing is a conscious decision against the mode of the gaze and for the glance. According to this chain of ideas, the mode of watching is not the consequence of TV's inability to attract and hold viewers' attention, but a conscious decision one necessarily has to make in particular situations. This contradicts the idea that the televisual image is inherently incapable of capturing and holding the viewers' attention.

Another argument against the assumption that television is *per se* incapable of allowing for the gaze derives from an anecdote of the TV era as popular as the one about the ironing housewife. The complaint about children whose parents prove unable to distract their offspring from the screen is but one example of TV's capacity to provoke the gazing mode. In this context, Buonanno refers to the popular image of the couch potato:

We like to immerse ourselves in this kind of viewing with undivided attention, our eyes glued to the screen. The derisive epithet 'couch potatoes' would not have become so widespread if the image, even if it is exaggerated, of viewers sprawling on the sofa and almost incapable of taking their eyes off the television set did not have a certain credibility. (38)

Kosinski's *Being There* also refers to the idea of the viewer glued to the television screen. As a matter of routine, Chance turns on the television and "gazed at the reassuring images" (33). Countering Ellis' and Baudrillard's claim, the two examples of culturally established anecdotes – the ironing housewife and the couch potato – as well as the enactment of the viewer glued to the screen in Kosinski's novel, give evidence to the fact that television is *not* inherently incapable of permitting the viewer to gaze. According to these anecdotes, Kosinski's satirical representation of the TV viewer, and Tichi's and Buonanno's arguments, a number of external factors – the environment, the situation, social expectations, and individual needs – determine which mode of watching we apply when watching television.

Whereas both Baudrillard and Ellis argue that TV only allows for inattentive glances, I would like to support Tichi's and Buonanno's explanation that TV also allows for the gaze. Along with Buonanno, I propose that "the ways of watching television include *both the glance and the gaze.*" As she says,

“Both are appropriate, according to the circumstances and our inclinations and both are made possible by the domestic nature of the context” (39; original emphasis).⁷⁷ I argue that this is also true for contemporary television.

However, the crucial question I feel the need to address once again, and which further complicates the discussion, is whether gazing at the cinematic screen provides the same experience as gazing at the television screen. In reference to Ellis, Baudrillard, and Marshall McLuhan, I attempt to show that both television and the cinema invite viewers to feel absorbed, but to different degrees and in distinct ways.⁷⁸ Whereas Ellis and McLuhan do not even speak of absorption but of another kind of attention, Baudrillard distinguishes between two kinds of absorption: absorption in the sense of fascination with regard to television vs. absorption in the sense of seduction in reference to the cinema.

Dwelling on the reasons why the very distinct characteristics of TV-era television do not render it possible for viewers to feel absorbed, Ellis alludes to the TV image’s “directness” that has an “effect of immediacy:” “It is as though the TV image is a ‘live’ image, transmitted and received in the same moment that it is produced.” As a consequence, viewers feel addressed, as in a conversation (132). This corresponds with Baudrillard’s observation that the cinema is distinct from television. The TV image is more superficial than the cinematic image and therefore less capable of warranting a dream-like situation. It is unable to seduce the viewers; instead, it calls attention to the staging of reality and requires the viewers to participate immediately (“Interview 7” 69). TV’s immediacy as one of its most fundamental features is also acknowledged by McLuhan, one of the most-cited TV-era scholars, who speaks of the “all-inclusive *nowness*” (366; original emphasis), and an intimacy between television and the viewer (348). These televisual qualities, it needs to be stressed, do grab the viewers’ attention, but, as Ellis suggests, in a different way than the cinema: “It is not that the experience is less intense than cinema; it has a distinct form of its own” (138). Ellis conceptualizes this distinct form as “diversion” (168). According to him, then, television can be as intense as the cinema, but while the latter absorbs, television diverts.

⁷⁷ To underline her claim, Buonanno offers two contradictory scenarios of television watching habits in the domestic sphere: “In the ambience of the home, interwoven with relationships and duties, it can happen at some times of day and stages of life more than others that a switched-on television set provides a counterpoint or background to our main occupations or, if we are lonely, gives us the company of human voices and pictures that require no more than a glance from time to time, just to confirm that they are there.” At the same time, she demurs: “Although the theory of the glance may deny it, in clear contradiction to speculations on television’s hypnotic power, television can be not only a background and a means to lateral involvement, but also a primary focus of interest, attention and gaze” (39).

⁷⁸ At this point, I feel it necessary to stress once again that this is a discussion on the modes of watching television of the TV era. At a later point, I will shortly address the pressing question why, with regard to contemporary television, one should reconsider these debates.

Similarly acknowledging TV's particular way of catching the viewers' attention, Baudrillard conceptualizes TV's capacity to absorb the viewers as "fascination:"

When I watch television I'm not really concerned with its quality. I'm interested in a sort of travelling of pure images – a sort of *fascination*. I remain, as it were, at the level of fascination, rather than that of production, consciousness, quality and so on. So at this point there's a step that I haven't taken. I stay behind. I prefer to remain in this state of *absorption*. ("Interview 16" 167; emphasis added)

This confession is rather disturbing, considering that Baudrillard also argues that, as demonstrated above, only the cinema permits a dream-like experience that leaves one "hypnotized," in a state of "numbness or ecstasy" or "absorption" ("Interview 2" 32; "Interview 16" 167). In order to understand this apparent confusion, I need to quote Baudrillard one more time and in greater length:

One's response to the image on the screen [B. is unmistakably talking about the *television* screen] is not the aesthetic response of an observation characterized by distance, judgment and pleasure. It's something else. It's something extensive, something superficial. It's another game, another very *fascinating* game. When I'm in the realm of images, when I'm in the realm of the screen, when I'm in that kind of hyper-reality, I'm totally *absorbed* in that domain. If I'm in the domain of the profound, then I'm in literature – that's my job, after all. But when I'm watching the screen, I'm more or less a pure spectator. ("Interview 16" 167-68; emphasis added)

Watching a screen is in a way *all-absorbing*. ("Interview 17" 174; emphasis added)

Baudrillard, just like Ellis, differentiates between different kinds of attention or absorption. When watching television, Baudrillard is fascinated and absorbed, but on a more superficial level. Rather than being taken in, he claims to stay on the surface and become a spectator of a game, of the travelling of pure images. The fascination provoked by television is not a dream-like absorption but "a way of blending in with the screen, to be immanent with the screen" ("Interview 9" 85). This is an observation also made by McLuhan: "With TV, the viewer is the screen" (341).

Generally considered to be one of Baudrillard's most important influences (Merrin 44), McLuhan acknowledged TV's capacity to fascinate very early on and connects it to his well-known claim that TV, as a cool medium, forces the viewers to participate (366, 348): "The mosaic form of the TV image demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being" (365). Baudrillard also considers television to require "a sort of immediate, instantaneous participation" ("Interview 7" 69), which is, in McLuhan's words, an in-depth involvement that does not "excite, agitate, or arouse" (368). Both McLuhan and Baudrillard therefore affirm TV's capacity to get and hold

viewers' attention, and one might want to call it absorption; more importantly, however, they stress that television evokes fascination, a direct and deep involvement that entertains, but that does not excite, agitate, or arouse. My understanding of Baudrillard is therefore that he acknowledges TV's power to attract attention, and, disturbingly enough, he even speaks of absorption when referring to both television and the cinema.⁷⁹ He suggests, however, that only the cinema warrants a dream-like sort of absorption, whereas television attracts the viewers' attention more superficially and less emotionally.

Let me now sum up this complex and rather confusing TV-era discussion on the modes of watching television. The TV-era scholars mentioned here argue that watching television is a different experience than going to the movies. One can speak of absorption in both cases, but these theorists consider the absorbing experience of the cinema as more intense and emotional than that of television. Television is a 'live' medium that suggests 'nowness,' directness, and immediacy. As such, it only allows for attention on the surface and does not allow the viewers to lose track of their surroundings. While Baudrillard, Ellis, and McLuhan state that the televisual image is inherently incapable of generating the same mode of watching and thus the same experience as the cinematic image, others such as Buonanno and Tichi counter this claim, arguing that factors external to the image as such are responsible for how TV is consumed and thus experienced.

I hold the opinion that one must consider all these different positions when trying to understand how television viewers experience television. TV allows for both the glance and the gaze, but gazing at the televisual image might, in some respects and under special circumstances, differ from gazing at the cinematic image, so that the TV experience differs from the experience of going to the movies. I argue, however, that in many cases one cannot clearly pinpoint what sort of absorption the particular viewer experiences, and I argue further that this is confirmed by the readings of the novels. The protagonist of *Being There* is, as I wrote earlier, described as gazing at "the reassuring images," thereby countering the claim that viewers only glance but never gaze at television. At the same time, Chance enacts the kind of TV experience conceptualized by Baudrillard, Ellis, and McLuhan: a viewer who, fascinated by the travelling of pure images, stays on the surface, and who is neither aroused nor agitated. In contrast, Donoghue's novel portrays a protagonist that responds to the images of television with huge enthusiasm. The mother of the same protagonist therefore bans her son from watching more TV, because she fears that her son would become too immersed in the worlds of television. In the analyses, I will further elaborate on the different

⁷⁹ I would like to note that Baudrillard does not always clearly differentiate between the cinematic and the televisual screen. Very often, he speaks of screens in general, so that his arguments seem to overlap and contradict one another – even more so when he acknowledges, at least rudimentarily, that both media have developed and keep on developing over time. Sometimes I cannot clearly allocate his arguments about dream-like experiences, fascination, and absorption either to the cinema or television.

enactments of TV experiences. I can nevertheless say already that the novels allude to all the different positions outlined above, emphasizing different aspects in different contexts and thereby both illuminating and complicating these theoretical approaches.

With regard to contemporary discussions on how television is consumed and experienced, one must acknowledge that the technical advances of television have brought about changes in the quality of the televisual image, making it nowadays less distinct from the cinematic image as it was in the 1970s, 1980s and even 1990s. In the twenty-first century, television has developed significantly; since the 1990s and thus after the time when critics such as Ellis or Baudrillard voiced their assumptions, television has made tremendous technological progress. Ellis, for instance, based his observations on the fact that, back in 1982, the televisual image was characterized by minimal definition, so that he stated without a qualification and correctly: “The TV image is of a lower quality than the cinematic image in terms of its resolution of detail” (127). Today, however, this generalization is no longer valid. The up-to-date television set has high definition (HDTV) or even Ultra HD television (UHDTV) with which companies such as Sony advertise an extraordinary viewing experience that results from a “four times clearer” picture and “images with superb brightness and authentic detail” (*Store Sony*). Apart from more and more television sets that have the technological means to offer HDTV or UHDTV, the number of programs in a higher than usual resolution is also increasing.

In addition to that, one should also acknowledge the size of the televisual screen. Formerly, the television screen was referred to as the small screen, a well-known expression that was based on the comparison of the big cinematic screen with that of TV. Although the cinema screen is, most obviously, still incomparable to the televisual, the latter has started to expand; Sony sells television sets with 65" screens – in contrast to screens sold in the 1980s with a size ranging from 12 inch to sometimes 30 inch models (Ellis 127). Thus, the features that were, for a long time, exclusive to the cinematic image and screen have now also become characteristic of television. This underlines the argument that the domestic viewing experience, although still lagging behind the cinematic, is nowadays characterized by features that were formerly exclusive of the cinema.⁸⁰ From today’s view, TV-era theori-

⁸⁰ Another example supporting this argument is the experience of watching a movie in 3D, an experience that is no longer only offered in cinemas but that viewers are nowadays also able to enjoy at home. Sony advertises the 3D television with explicit reference to 3D in the cinema, hinting that the home experience is even better (*Sony*). It needs to be emphasized, however, that just like TV the cinema as a technology has been and is still developing irresistibly, and I do not intend to argue that TV has finally caught up with it, or that it ever will. I would like to suggest, however, that television, due to constant technological advance, might soon be or is already able to allow the viewer to experience the sort of dream-like and absorbing experience that, for a long time, was exclusively offered by the cinema. I therefore argue that McLuhan would nowadays have to reconsider his claim that improved television would not be

zations on the modes of television consumption such as Baudrillard's and Ellis' require reassessment.⁸¹ In order to understand how the characters of TV-era novels experience TV, however, I felt the need to retrace these theorizations, acknowledging at the same time that technological advance and new forms of televisual entertainment go hand in hand with new TV experiences.

By way of contrasting the televisual with the cinematic experience of the TV era, the theoretical elaborations on how television catches and keeps up the viewers' attention should clarify that television has the capacity to fully grab and hold the viewers' attention, and that it does so in its particular ways. This understanding proves fundamental for arguing that human consciousness has dissolved into TV and turned into teleconsciousness. However, it is not only the habits and modes of consuming television that affect human consciousness; televisual content and the ways in which it is produced and transmitted all determine how viewers perceive and experience life and themselves through television. What I mean by televisual content are the programs on offer in all their generic variety, such as soap operas or the news. The form of television refers to the level of television production and transmission, for example how TV producers edit this content and bring it across. This entails, for instance, storytelling and production techniques and also the program structure. More than that, the form of television comprises its technological attributes and functions, amongst other things the size of the screen or the on and off switch. I would argue that all these different 'dimensions' of television, which are obviously inextricably interconnected, determine how TV realities and, in relation to that, the idea of 'actual' reality are perceived and experienced.

The way in which television *content* affects the TV viewers is one phenomenon upon which I would like to elaborate. The selected novels suggest that the characters imitate behavior, language, etc., as portrayed on television. They depict how the characters in the textual actual world take television characters, from for instance soap operas or people appearing in talk shows, as reference points for their own actions. Through these enactments, the novels argue that ways of being and experiencing things are affected by how they are displayed on television. The phenomenon of using television as a template for one's own actions is satirized in *Being There* when Chance emulates the behavior of characters he has seen on TV: "Imitating what he had so often seen on TV, Chance moved towards the vacant chair at the table" (52). The notion of life as an imitation of television is also acknowledged by Tichi who demonstrates that TV language (she speaks of the "TV lexicon," *Electronic* 36) is exploited and used in other areas of life, thereby

television anymore (342); then again, in times of online television, the question of how watching television can be defined is, admittedly, under negotiation.

⁸¹ Bignell also argues that one must question established concepts such as the flow or the glance ("Seeing" 160).

underlining her argument of a “growing governance of television over diverse areas of human experience and situations” (35). Making the same observation, Smith states that people “reference their ‘real’ human experiences to episodes of shows like *The Brady Bunch* or model their behavior and language off of TV” (120; original emphasis).

Whereas the imitation of behavior and language both illustrate the power of television on human behavior, I propose that TV shapes consciousness in a still more invasive way. The passage taken from *White Noise* referred to at the beginning of the chapter, wherein the protagonist experiences himself like a character in a stereotypical scene, indicates that television viewers experience everyday life situations in the same way as, and thus in reminiscence of, similar TV episodes. Endorsing this belief, Smith writes:

Moreover, it seems as if now the real happens always already to be referenced to its hyperreal representation on television. With its corresponding loss of context as a televised image, the real readily becomes a continuation of a previously existing ‘scene’ of television representations already familiar to us. (120)

The well-known and very meaningful expression ‘as seen on TV’ refers to the phenomenon of encountering situations in one’s life that are reminiscent of similar situations one knows from television. The former advertising slogan ‘As seen on TV’⁸² has long ago started to be used to describe the analogy between situations in life and television, with the latter constituting the “frame of reference” (Tichi, *Electronic* 37) for the former rather than the other way around. The notion of television as a real life-template is also broached by Postman who writes that “how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged” (*Amusing* 94). Williams also notes in passing, but rather meaningfully, that “watching dramatic simulation of a wide range of experiences is now an essential part of our modern cultural pattern” (59).⁸³

The experience of being reminded of a scene in a television series or a sitcom, for instance, supports the claim that televisual content has an effect on consciousness. The ways in which such scenes are produced and transmitted (namely the forms of television) are, however, equally responsible for the feeling that ‘actual’ reality resembles life as shown on TV. Viewers, I argue, have become accustomed to classic and therefore stereotypical plot structures, particular camera angles, or frequently used cuts that they feel they encounter and, indeed, experience in life. Through the focalizer of the protagonist, *White Noise* enacts this phenomenon: “I looked for a blanket to adjust, a toy to remove from a child’s warm grasp, feeling I’d wandered into

⁸² Tichi explains that the expression ‘As seen on TV’ was an advertising slogan that, “from the early 1950s, appeared in the United States on products from toys to kitchenware to clothing” (*Electronic* 133).

⁸³ See also Couldry; Silverstone (*Message*).

a TV moment” (233). Thinking of a similar TV scene, Jack feels as if he is in the on-screen world, not his everyday life world, both of which seem to have dissolved into one another.⁸⁴ It seems as if he experiences this moment in the same way he has experienced a TV moment before. Although the text does not give any clues as to why Jack feels that way, readers are to believe that DeLillo’s protagonist is not necessarily reminded of a *particular* TV scene revolving around a father who covers his sleeping child with a blanket; rather, the passage seems to suggest that Jack is used to thinking in terms of television,⁸⁵ meaning that his perception has adapted to how viewers process typical TV scenes with regard to composition and production/editing techniques, for example camera angles, moves, cuts, fadings or light effects, and so forth.

In the public and academic discourse on television, the impression that life resembles TV is an established topic. In his recollections of travel experiences in the U.S., Baudrillard describes his travel experiences as being reminiscent of the cinema. Asked if he sometimes has the impression of being in a film, Baudrillard admits: “But sometimes you see scenes that begin strangely to resemble scenes in films.” Arguing that this is the case “particularly in America, to a quite painful degree,” he elaborates:

If you drive round Los Angeles in a car, or go out into the desert, you are left with an impression that is totally cinematographic, hallucinatory. You are in a film: you are steeped in a substance which is that of the real, of the hyper-real, of the cinema. (“Interview 2” 31)

In another interview, he recollects: “once you’re out of the cinema, which is a circumscribed space, the whole country is cinematographic; when you’re there, you’re in a film.” In his view, this experience “has a constant impact on daily life” (“Interview 7” 67). Obviously, Baudrillard ascribes the media-influenced perception that I am arguing for to the cinema only. I suggest instead that this kind of perception and experience is not only influenced by the ways of experiencing the cinema but equally by the everyday experiences of, with, and through television. If, as Baudrillard states, “cinema has a profound effect on our perception of people and things,” (“Interview 2” 31) then I argue that television has as well, because it is predominantly the televisual and not the cinematic screen that is an integral part of everyday life.

The phenomenon of Europeans who perceive and experience the U.S. in terms of TV clearly has to do with the overload of typical images viewers know from watching American sitcoms, reality shows, movies, etc., which they remember when actually encountering the sources of these representa-

⁸⁴ Interestingly enough, Tichi also refers to this very passage of *White Noise* when she argues for a “television lexicon”, that is the “appropriation of TV terms for personal situations” (*Electronic* 34-37).

⁸⁵ The idea of living in terms of television was first proposed by Tichi (*Electronic* 137), and I will refer to her thoughts later in this chapter.

tions. The feeling of a *déjà-vu* might simply be the recognition of such a televisual image, but the process of comparing one's experience with one's televisual pseudo-experience⁸⁶ suggests that television operates as a life-template. Reinforcing this argument, Kosinski, who conducted experiments with children and teenagers of the first TV generation, notes that they prefer pseudo-experience to real life experience: "They find it easier to watch televised portrayals of human experiences – violence, love, adventure, sex – than to gain the experience for themselves" (qtd. in Sohn 52, 54). In a similar rhetoric, Boorstin suggests that this lies in the fact that images are "more vivid, more attractive and more persuasive than reality itself" (*Image* 36), claiming in a later part of his argument that "We fill our lives not with experience, but with the images of experience" (252) – and thus with televisual pseudo-experience. The example above illustrates that this television-induced *déjà-vu* is suggestive of a sort of perception influenced by one's TV experiences. The fictional enactments of teleconsciousness mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter, as well as Baudrillard's self-monitoring, propose that the ways in which Las Vegas, for instance, is televisually represented affects how it will be perceived and experienced once the viewer is actually on the spot. Although such accounts certainly do not apply to every tourist in the U.S., they nevertheless hint at TV's impact on human consciousness.

Based on such observations and from very early on, critics have argued that television influences and changes the ways humans perceive and experience the world. This assumption is basic for McLuhan's famous pronouncement "the medium is the message" (7). Arguing that media such as television are "extensions of man," he considers them to extend the central nervous system, the senses, and thus human consciousness (3-4): "The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance" (19). Emphasizing his claim, McLuhan points to the transformation of vision and awareness; changes in people's sense-lives and experience; and the imaginative reorganization through television (66, 362, 363). Williams asserts that the inherent properties of television as an electronic medium have altered humans' basic perceptions of reality and the relations with each other and the world (11). It is the "forms of attention" that television requires the viewer to apply, he suggests, which establish a close link to the "most general modes of comprehension and judgment" (87). Postman also argues that television transforms people's ways of thinking (*Amusing* 13). Supporting this claim, Fiske and John Hartley explain that human perception is not an inherited but a learned mechanism:

⁸⁶ In this context and in reference to Baudrillard's *Ecstasy of Communication*, Smith does not use the expression 'pseudo-experience' but speaks rather of a "replacement of live experience" (45).

Moreover, . . . the codes and conventions which comprise our particular culture's ways of seeing are incorporated into the modes of perception of each individual to such an extent that we are largely unconscious of their operation, just as we have little consciousness of, or control over, our metabolic processes when we digest food. (69)

In their view, since information is never just neutrally absorbed but “decoded, understood and responded to,” consciousness is determined by “culturally learnt codes and conventions” (69), all of which are culturally affected cognitive processes. Manuel Castells therefore speaks of the “normalization of [TV] messages,” claiming that today (which, in his case, is 1996), “atrocious images of real war can almost be absorbed as part of action movies.” Castells therefore asserts that media tend to work on consciousness and behavior (365).

Although some of these critics obviously have different intentions when arguing for the effects of television on human consciousness, all of them acknowledge the impact of TV (and the media in general) on people's everyday lives and their perceptions and experiences of reality. The claim that the “properties of television” (Williams 11) have altered consciousness and turned it into teleconsciousness is further nourished under consideration of the phenomena described above: the imitation of behavior as seen on TV; the comparison of everyday life situations with television; the feeling that life resembles TV; and the feeling of perceiving ‘actual’ reality in terms of television. If, as Smith argues, “in all facets of life, real experiences have been replaced with representations and simulations” (52), human consciousness cannot have escaped the invasion of television in the twentieth century. In an environment where life and TV have merged, consciousness, too, has blended with television.

Living in a TV-imbued environment that has an impact on consciousness has implications for how humans come to terms with reality and their sense of self. As a part of human life, television has turned into a significant reference point for people's sense-making strategies. The next part of the chapter is therefore devoted to the idea of the ‘casting society’ in the context of celebrity culture. I suggest that, in this cultural environment, people validate their experiences and themselves through television.

Validation of Life and Self through Television

“The media have . . . become the last authority for self-perception, the ‘reality test’ of the social persona: I am seen, therefore I am.” (Frohne qtd. in Biressi and Nunn 95)

“I just want this so much. I really, really want it *so much*. It's all I ever wanted. Since I was a little girl...” This is how Elton's pop-cultural reality

TV satire *Chart Throb* (11; original emphasis) introduces Shaiana, a female casting show contestant who wants to become famous. Having no other dream in life than that of becoming a successful singer, the teenage girl tries everything to become a candidate on a TV talent show in order to please the judges, the audience, the world and, finally, herself. Highly satirical, Elton's novel depicts an (apparently) ordinary teenager who is obsessed with the idea of becoming famous. By confronting the reader with such a fictional character, *Chart Throb* alludes to innumerable celebrity aspirants who aim to appear on television. Ridiculing the contemporary British and American casting society, this fictional example draws attention to the increasing number of people who use the possibility of a television appearance as a sense-making strategy. I argue that the inner wish and willingness to become publicly-known through television is a means of self-validation and, more generally, the validation of reality and life; it is a phenomenon that shall be investigated in reference to the celebrification processes of reality shows. Offering chances for ordinary people to appear on TV and turn into (ordinary) celebrities, television appearances attest to one's existence in the TV environment. It seems that, in order to have the feeling that you exist and are real, you need to be staged and seen on television.⁸⁷

Contemporary reality television is, to a considerable extent, dominated by the concept of the casting show. It is due to this televisual – and cultural – development that the notion of the casting society has achieved more and more popularity. Bernhard Pörksen and Wolfgang Krischke, for instance, claim that Western societies are turning into casting societies, that is to say cultures of permanent self-expression that are enhanced by systematically deployed media performances. Whoever wants to become noticed within such an environment has to appear on television and 'become medial' (Vorwort 8; "Casting" 14). The urge to 'happen medially' appears to be facilitated by the well-established and productive celebrity-making processes of reality TV shows that have, as Joshua Gamson remarks, "transformed celebrity culture by opening up unprecedented space for ordinary people to become celebrities" (1065). In this spirit, Pramod K. Nayar claims that "We live in a culture of celebrity," because more people than ever "have the chance to be or become celebrities" (1, 15). Su Holmes and Sean Redmond

⁸⁷ The inner urge to be seen on reality TV and share intimate moments with the public is a phenomenon that coincides with people exposing their private lives on Facebook, Twitter, etc. The validation-discussion is therefore perhaps even more topical with regard to the Internet and the notion of living one's life online. I would still like to support Jos de Mul's objection that humans have always understood themselves with the help of, or even through, media: "Ever since Kant's Copernican revolution, we know that experience is constituted and structured by the forms of sensibility and the categories of human understanding, and after the so-called linguistic and mediatic turns in philosophy, it is generally assumed that media play a crucial role in the configuration of the human mind and experience. Media are interfaces that mediate not only between us and our world (designation), but also between us and our fellow man (communication), and between us and ourselves (self-understanding)" (95).

attest that “Celebrity culture has a pervasive presence in our everyday lives – perhaps more so than ever before” (0), and Ellis Cashmore states that “Fame-hunger is a malaise of our times” (205). Turner even argues that “There is no sign yet that the spread of celebrity culture has reached its limits” (“Approaching” 11). In this context, the chances to become a celebrity have increased in number significantly. As a result, a new type of celebrity has started to emerge: the “ordinary celebrity” (among others, see Turner, *Ordinary*).⁸⁸

Quite a number of scholars have investigated the phenomenon of ordinary people being portrayed and perceived as celebrities.⁸⁹ As early as in 1961, Boorstin conceptualized this sort of celebrity as a “human pseudo-event” in his by now widely known book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, which contrasted the celebrities of that time with heroes of the past. The significance and topicality of Boorstin’s concept of the human pseudo-event in the reality-TV context is proven by the fact that the chapter “From Hero to Celebrity: The Human Pseudo-event” from *The Image* has been reprinted in the volume *The Celebrity Culture Reader* (2006) edited by P. David Marshall. Boorstin describes the celebrities of the past as heroes characterized by their exceptional deeds, whereas today’s celebrities are results of media publicity and consumer interests. Propelled by the Graphic Revolution, the human pseudo-event has become a cultural phenomenon of more and more people who have started to be known, not for having achieved something, but simply for being known. Hence, the celebrity is solely “a person who is known for his well-knownness” (*Image* 57). Whereas the hero was “distinguished by his achievement” and “created himself,” the celebrity is distinguished by “his image or trademark” and is “created by the media” (61). Relegating to the hero as a self-made man, Boorstin emphasizes both the media’s and the consumers’ agency in the production of celebrity.⁹⁰

Although ‘ordinary celebrity’ in the reality TV context represents the dominant phenomenon of fame at the end of the twentieth and the beginning

⁸⁸ Hill remarks quite correctly that there are different constructions of the ordinary, due to the diversity of reality television and its countless subgenres. She therefore concludes that this affects the general understanding of what ordinary means (*Factual* 179). Although I support the observation that the cultural understanding of ordinariness changes over time, there is still a common understanding of what we mean by ‘ordinary’ in the context of reality TV: a person who is not a trained actor, who is determined to appear on a reality TV show, and who might even strive for remaining in the spotlight afterwards.

⁸⁹ In *Understanding Celebrity* Turner conceptualizes it as the “demotic turn,” and in *Celebrity* Chris Rojek distinguishes between “ascribed, achieved, and attributed celebrity” and speaks of “celetoids” when referring to “the accessories of cultures organized around mass communications and staged authenticity” (20-21).

⁹⁰ Holmes and Redmond also draw attention to the decreasing value of what people agree to be worth worshipping. Using a different entitlement, that is “the modern celebrity,” they observe that celebrity researchers tend to regard the modern celebrity as “a fall from an earlier period when fame had more scarcity and prestige” (14).

of the twenty-first century, Holmes points quite correctly to “the significance of Gamson’s work on the history of celebrity construction” and what she, in reference to him, calls “the two claim-to-fame narratives.” As Holmes explains, Gamson argues for the co-existence of two ways in which fame originates, for instance through the myth of the nature of the talented self vs. the manufactured self, both of which “continue to jostle for legitimacy and cultural visibility” (254-55). Gamson’s approach is thus in contrast to Boorstin’s absolutist assertion that the talented hero has completely vanished and been replaced by the manufactured celebrity. Crucial for my argumentation, however, is acknowledging the current boom of the latter.

Reality TV’s celebrification machinery facilitates a celebrity production that has reached new dimensions within the last decade. Highlighting the manufactured nature of the celebrity, Turner also states that the scale with which the media has begun to produce celebrity ‘on its own’ has increased significantly (“Mass” 156-57).⁹¹ Reality shows have “made it possible for someone working at a supermarket checkout one week to be nationally famous the next” (Cashmore 189). Ordinary celebrities are outcomes, if not to say products, of reality TV shows and what Chris Rojek calls “cultural intermediaries:”

Celebrities are cultural fabrications. . . . In fact, celebrities are carefully mediated through what might be termed chains of attraction. No celebrity now acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries who operate to stage-manage celebrity presence in the eyes of the public. ‘Cultural intermediaries’ is the collective term for agents, publicists, marketing personnel, promoters, photographers, fitness trainers, wardrobe staff, cosmetics experts and personal assistants. (10-11)

Television therefore plays a major role in the process of celebrification, and this is especially true for reality shows. Supporting this claim Turner states:

Installing ordinary people into game shows, docu-soaps and reality TV programming enables television to ‘grow their own’ celebrity, to control how they are marketed before, during and after production – all of this while still subordinating the celebrity of each individual to the needs of the particular programme or format. The extent to which this is now done, and the pervasive visibility its most successful products can achieve, make this is an extremely significant shift not only in terms of the production and consumption of celebrity but also in terms of how the media now participate in the cultural construction of identity and desire. (“Mass” 156-57)

By offering the ‘person next door’ opportunities to appear on TV, the televisual celebrification machinery opens up what are believed to be possible career options and cultural desires (Turner, “Mass” 162).

⁹¹ The tight connection between reality TV and the rise of the ordinary celebrity is outlined in the works of Bell; Bennett and Holmes; Cashmore; Fairchild; Hearn; Holmes and Redmond; Nayar.

However, celebritydom is not only a career option; becoming a celebrity is a means of self-validation and the validation of life through television. Attempting to elucidate this statement, I will elaborate on the reasons for the success and appeal of reality shows by considering the perspective of show participants and their incentives to take part in them, as well as the retrospective evaluations of their experiences.⁹² My argumentation relies on empirical research by television scholars who either conducted interviews themselves or draw on such data.

Using the example of *Big Brother*,⁹³ I would like to present some of the reasons for the fascination created by the format, in order to demonstrate that one among them is the need reality show contestants feel to validate their lives and attest to their own existence. I argue that *Big Brother* contestants strive for an experience that is realer than real,⁹⁴ a hypothesis confirmed by interview material with reality show participants. As the interviews and their evaluations by reality TV scholars make clear, contestants asked about their motivation to appear on a show name reasons that revolve around notions of self-discovery (Andrejevic 108; Andacht 59); confronting and finding oneself (Biressi and Nunn 99); self-expression (Andrejevic 8, 19); personal growth (2, 19); and getting real (18). As one contestant explains retrospectively:

What I got out of the show is that all of the characteristics that I figured out about myself were put to the test throughout the show during certain situations. . . . So I came away from the show being even more confident in who I am. (qtd. in Andrejevic 108)

According to the contestant's self-evaluation, the show offered her the chance to learn about herself. This corresponds to what one *Big Brother* housemate said during the show: "Everyone here is on a journey to learn about themselves" (qtd. in Andrejevic 109). Reality TV scholars such as Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn therefore argue for a "new horizon of contemporary self-realisation" (99).⁹⁵

⁹² As Holmes remarks, the interconnectedness of television, celebrity, and (self-)validation has been pointed at before: "Reality TV fame has been investigated by academics and cultural critics as the ultimate means of self-validation in contemporary society. While Couldry [2000] theorized the concept of the media/ordinary hierarchy. . . , others [here she refers to Biressi and Nunn] have investigated how Reality TV has functioned as a new horizon of contemporary self-realization – both naturalizing, and catering to, the desire to have one's existence validated through televisual observation" (253).

⁹³ I assume that most of the arguments on the appeal of *Big Brother* also apply to other formats and therefore reality TV in general. Furthermore, research conducted about the question on the appeal of reality TV is very often grounded upon this very format, which is known worldwide.

⁹⁴ Hill, for instance, claims that, in the context of reality TV, one can observe the "intensity of experiences" (*Factual* 104).

⁹⁵ An aspect I cannot dwell on but that I would like to at least point to is the connection between reality TV as a means of self-validation and what Biressi and Nunn call "a culture of

The experience of learning about oneself while knowing that this learning experience is or will be transmitted on television is, as I argue, a means of self-validation. Confirming this hypothesis, Nick Couldry argues that appearing on TV is considered as a form of “prestige or cultural capital” (48), and Biressi and Nunn state in reference to new media in general, especially the Internet and what they call “webcam sites,” that these media spaces have been associated with social identification (101). Confirming these arguments, a *Big Brother* contestant says:

I'd gone and had this experience, but I could never describe the things I saw, the things I did, and the feelings I felt to everyone. And then you think, oh, wait, they're going to see it on TV.... And that's the whole point about *validation*. It [the show] *validates* what you did and why you were there. (qtd. in Andrejevic 108; emphasis added)⁹⁶

Having her experience and the feelings she had in certain situations confirmed by the television broadcast, and thus by the public, seemed to make her realize that her experience was real. According to her statement, she needed to know that her experience would be broadcasted in order for her to be able to believe and feel what had happened on the show. The experience could not provide her with a sense of validation; knowing that her experience was real had to be affirmed by her experience's televisual representation.

Andrejevic supports this line of argument in the conclusion he draws. According to him, the “willing subjection to surveillance on the *Big Brother* show comes to serve as a demonstration of the strength of one's self-image – of one's comfort level with oneself.” The camera, he continues, operates as a guarantee that what happened actually happened and that the contestants consider themselves to be more real (110). Although I generally agree with Andrejevic, I suggest that it is not the camera *per se* that is regarded as a guarantee but rather the knowledge that one's experience will be broadcasted and witnessed by thousands or even millions of viewers. Whereas Andrejevic states that show contestants strive for “the guarantee of the authenticity of one's uniqueness,” I rather conclude that the contestants feel the desire for experiencing their ‘realness,’ or in Andrejevic's words, becoming “more real to oneself” (110).

The phenomenon of self-validation through television has also been elaborated upon by Tichi. Arguing for the “certification of human experience in

narcissism.” Biressi and Nunn introduce and elaborate on this connection in reference to Christopher Lasch's research (99+).

⁹⁶ This quote corresponds with what a candidate of the reality show *The Real World* said in an interview: “you feel everything you do is imbued with significance” (qtd. in Couldry 47). Being filmed and knowing that the coverage will be broadcasted (or is being broadcasted live) makes the experience meaningful.

the TV environment” (*Electronic* 130),⁹⁷ she claims that television as the dominant technology of the 1990s changes one’s relation to the world: “We experience events in its terms, begin to live in reference to it and ratify experience in terms of its on-screen simulation. We live *through* it” (137; original emphasis). According to Tichi, television is a source of sense-making and validation that prescribes one’s way of perceiving, experiencing, and understanding the world. In accordance with the statement of the show contestant mentioned above, that the show validates “what you did and why you were there,” Tichi asserts that the “self is ratified in the broadcast of its own image” (138); to be “transposed onto television is to be elevated out of the banal realm of the off-screen and repositioned in the privileged on-screen world” (140).

Tichi’s argument corresponds with Andrejevic’s belief that contestants wish for confirmation of their uniqueness. Nevertheless, my objections to his hypothesis are also shared by Tichi. Arguing that “the ways in which being broadcast – ‘as seen on TV’ – began to constitute a new kind of ontological state in which the self, its place, its actions are ratified and validated” (*Electronic* 137), she affirms that the desire to appear on television has more fundamental implications than those assumed by Andrejevic: the self feels the urge to validate its existence and reality through television. In this spirit, Tichi explains what I would like to support:

Thus, the slogan, ‘as seen on TV,’ once formerly attaching to purchasable products, has come to imply much more. Still best understood in the United States as a marketing device, the slogan points further, toward the cultural change wrought by television in the introduction of a new set of cognitive and perceptual categories in which what is real or unreal is superceded by what is televised and what is not. (138, 140)⁹⁸

A question yet unresolved concerns the paradoxical idea that appearing on television is (a) considered as an extraordinary experience that (b) more and more ordinary people are able to have so that (c) this formerly extraordinary experience is turning into an ordinary, everyday life experience. Like Andrejevic, many critics highlight the uniqueness ordinary people seem to feel when appearing on the screen. As mentioned earlier, Tichi refers to the on-screen world of television as an elevation out of the banal realm of the off-screen world; Biressi and Nunn argue that people feel the need to “stand out” (100); and, drawing on interview material, Couldry makes clear that appearing on television is acknowledged as a form of prestige (48).⁹⁹ Highlighting

⁹⁷ With regard to media in general, Deuze also speaks of the validation of existence and sense of self (*Media* 54).

⁹⁸ These explanations by Tichi on the ways in which television certifies life and one’s existence inform my understanding of how and why consciousness has turned into teleconsciousness, a connection that Tichi, however, does not establish in her research.

⁹⁹ Couldry quotes a talk show candidate who explains that she felt like stepping into a valued place (47). Another person Couldry quotes that appeared as an extra on the British show

the extraordinariness of appearing on television, these scholars argue that it is the impossibility that matters in how people relate to television and the media/ordinary division (Couldry 118).

It seems, then, that we are facing a paradoxical situation: while Couldry and others claim that people feel empowered through TV appearances, I would like to add that, in an age of reality TV in which the television landscape is populated by plenty of ordinary people, TV appearances are no longer considered impossible (Couldry) or unique (Andrejevic). Appearing on television is nowadays becoming an ordinary, everyday life experience that is mandatory in order to feel real and be validated. The on-screen world, formerly conceived of as precious and sacred, has merged with the banalities of everyday life. Tichi's distinction between the banal off-screen and the privileged on-screen world has, I believe, become unstable. What Couldry labels the media/ordinary division is thus a paradox with regard to people who use TV appearances as a means of validation. In the age of reality TV, the formerly sacred space of the privileged on-screen world is turning into an ordinary, integral part of people's everyday lives.

Satirizing the naturalization of appearing on television, Elton's novels draw attention to the paradox I attempt to point out. The characters in his satires desperately want to become much celebrated singers. Aiming to stand out, they use television to become publicly known. At the same time, however, they experience being on TV as a normal way of life, not an extraordinary experience. As I intend to show in chapter 5, *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* enact the paradox that appearing on television is still considered an extraordinary experience that is on its way of turning into an ordinary, everyday life experience.

The appearance on television as a means of validation has notions of an escape from one's private life into the public. Whereas TV entertainment is commonly considered to allow an escape from reality, or to divert, as Ellis has it, consuming and appearing on reality TV signifies "an escape *into* reality" (Andrejevic 8; original emphasis).¹⁰⁰ In contrast to the well-known image of the movie star chased by paparazzi who tries to escape *from* public view, the ordinary celebrity aspirant escapes *into* the public gaze to be acknowledged and validated. Based on their interview material, Deligiaouri and Popovic also state that, discontented with their lives, reality show contestants attempt to escape from their actual lives and expose themselves to an unknown audience (76). In contrast to the chased star, who has become sick of standing in the limelight and yearns to not be watched, the reality show candidate is afraid of not being watched (74). Baudrillard therefore speaks of

Coronation Street expresses his happiness about appearing on TV, if only once in his life (117). Both statements underline that appearing on TV is connected with feeling extraordinary.

¹⁰⁰ Kevin Robins writes that the benefits of the new media offer an "escape from mundane reality into a new simulated reality" (qtd. in Biressi and Nunn 98).

a “forced visibility and over-exposure” and a “forced participation” in an environment that requests people to speak and communicate endlessly (*Telemorphosis* 8-9). The participation in reality shows, this escape into reality, is a means of validation one feels forced to pursue. Supporting this argument, Slavoj Žižek observes that “the subject needs the camera’s gaze as a kind of ontological guarantee of his/her being” (qtd in Biressi and Nunn 102). Drawing on Žižek, Biressi and Nunn maintain that reality shows constitute an affirmation of the self, since reality TV promotes the desire to be observed and to have one’s existence valued through observation (102).

With regard to Žižek’s claim that the camera’s gaze functions as an ontological guarantee, I raise the same concerns I did regarding Andrejevic: I suggest that it is not necessarily the camera’s gaze that functions as an ontological guarantee, but the knowledge that one is or will be seen by the public on television. More than that, I propose that it is not only the others’ gazes that evoke the feeling of being validated, but the sheer fact that one’s image is televised. Being gazed at by others has eternally been an affirmation of the self, an affirmation of being a social being, of being part of a community. The need to be seen by others through television, however, is a potentialization of this age-old human desire.¹⁰¹

It is also crucial to realize that self-validation through television is not only connected to knowing that one will be seen by others. As argued above, people participating in reality shows seem to feel an inner urge to see themselves do whatever they did on the show. They look for a confirmation of their experience. In contrast to the age-old desire to be seen by others, this collective urge is a rather new phenomenon facilitated by the technological means to observe oneself. Deuze points out:

Seeing yourself live is no small achievement. In fact, it is safe to say that up until recently one’s ability to witness oneself was limited to only the richest and most privileged members of society – those who could afford to commission artworks such as drawings, paintings, sculptures and plays in their name and about their persona. (*Media* 238)

The claim Tichi made in the early 1990s that “the importance of being ‘seen on TV’ has reached deep into popular culture” (*Electronic* 137) was therefore prophetic: in times of reality TV, feeling the urge to be seen by thousands or millions of viewers and seeing oneself doing so is a phenomenon that has come to characterize TV culture. As discussed before, television has turned into the benchmark for life, allowing conclusions such as Smith’s who observes that “the TV screen ritually ‘informs’ individuals of who they are, what makes them happy, what they fear and desire; they need merely stay ‘Plugged In’ to MTV” (66). The phenomenon of validation through television further supports the idea that conceptions of reality and ways of

¹⁰¹ Considering the means that the Internet offers for people to stage themselves and, indeed, exist online, this argument is now truer than ever.

dealing with them are currently changing. People striving to appear on television seem not to fear what Baudrillard calls dissolution of life into television. They rather seem to experience this process of convergence as a ‘normal,’ naturalized way of being.

Like teleconsciousness, the validation of life, reality, and self through TV has started to attract attention as a phenomenon in TV culture. Whereas both phenomena – human consciousness as televisionized consciousness and validation through television – exemplify TV’s significant and powerful cultural status, I do not intend to suggest that we can entirely separate between them. I have separated the analyses of both teleconsciousness and (self-)validation through TV for reasons of clarity. I would like to note, however, that both concepts are linked inextricably. The televisionization of everyday life implies that people perceive and experience reality through television, which is why they cannot but make sense of the world and themselves on the basis of their televisionized perception and experience. If humans perceive and experience life in reference to television, TV must also affect human sense-making strategies. On a phenomenological level, the validation of life and self through TV and teleconsciousness are mutually determined.

When Humans and TV Apparatuses Converge: Humachines in the Making

The cultural imaginary¹⁰² of the TV era is characterized by images of what Mark Poster calls “humachines” – fusions of humans and machines – that express human incomprehension and fear. Both the selected novels and the academic and public discourse on television allude to images of humachines, suggesting that human beings not only live in reference to television and strive after appearing on television as a means of validation, but that they have actually started to merge with the apparatus. In the same way consciousness has dissolved into TV and turned into teleconsciousness, the images alluded to in the chosen novels, theoretical discussions, and public discourse articulate fears that human beings are merging with the apparatus of

¹⁰² Drawing heavily on Wolfgang Iser’s highly elaborate analysis of the interrelations between the real, the fictive, and the imaginary in *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, wherein Iser presents an impressive account (“Historical Preliminaries”) of the understanding of the imaginary as a “relatively modern term” (171; Iser differentiates between Coleridge’s idea of the imaginary as a faculty, Sartre’s conceptualization of the imaginary as an act, and Castoriadis’ idea of the radical imaginary), Fluck defines the cultural imaginary both as a space in which imagined meanings forge ahead to be articulated and a pool of pictures, affects, and desires that continuously keep stimulating the individual imaginary (21). Based on these thoughts, my understanding of the cultural imaginary is best expressed in reference to Graham Dawson who defines it shortly as “those vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs, and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time, and articulate its psychic and social dimensions” (qtd. in Hamscha 14).

television. The image of the viewer as a coach potato glued to the screen and narcotized by TV's mantras is one of the most prominent ways in which these concerns are expressed:

Critics have warned against a nation of robotized individuals and their families living hand to mouth out of cellophane bags in front of the television, itself an anesthesia chamber of corporate capitalism. The critics fear the addiction of men and women so narcotized by television that they become immobilized, apathetic, robotic. (Tichi, *Electronic* 106)

The comparison of TV viewers with zombies is another example of the human anxiety about the "human-machine hybridization" (Deuze, *Media* 26).¹⁰³ The images of narcotized viewers as humachines or zombies express that people fear to turn into half-human beings that adapt to the evil apparatus of TV. Such concerns are neither specific to the medium of television, nor to the cultural environment of the end of the twentieth or the beginning of the twenty-first century; one can claim, however, that the dislike of advanced technology reached formerly unknown heights when television became a domesticated, naturalized medium.¹⁰⁴ In the TV age, critics regard television as a threat to what it means to be human. As chapters 5, 6 and the conclusion of my study will show, the selected novels published in the post-TV age suggest that humankind has not yet overcome these anxieties. At the same time however, all of the selected works propose that television has been anthropomorphized; they enact the acceptance of the apparatus in the home and depict it as a family member and a reliable friend.

I would like to investigate the contradiction that TV is both perceived as a validating, sense-making entity that operates as a point of reference for one's life and treated as an angst-inducing apparatus with the power to turn humans into machines and itself into an animate being. This contradiction in how the experience of, with, and through television is enacted is further complicated by the fact that the selected novels offer alternative reactions to the angst-inducing idea that humans and machines merge. They relate to and emphasize McLuhan's positivist stance on the media – for which his contemporaries attacked him continuously. As the analyses will show, the characters are perhaps skeptical of television, but they do not altogether fear the fusion of humans with TV apparatuses. They rather revert to television as a means of identification. Enacting the contradiction that humans fear the dissolution of humans into machines on the one hand while accepting the appa-

¹⁰³ Concerns over humans that turn into zombies not only connect to the emergence of television. Today, the image of the zombie is used with regard to new media technologies, so that the old fears directed at television are now directed at computers, cell phone devices, etc. For further reading, see Deuze, who devotes two subchapters to this topic (*Media*, chap. 5); Newman.

¹⁰⁴ It can be assumed that concerns about the power of machines over human beings were already prevalent in times of the Industrial Revolution.

ratus on the other, the selected novels are able to pinpoint what McLuhan famously advocates in the TV era, but for what he has been criticized since: that humans should embrace TV instead of condemning it.¹⁰⁵ Doing so, the novels propagate the view that humans should aim at reconciling with machines, thereby aligning with Deuze's argumentation in *Media Life* that humans should not dread but accept the convergence with machines as an evolutionary process.

The images of TV viewers as zombies or humachines and television as a half-human entity are, as I said, evoked in both fictional and theoretical texts. In the context of his theorization of the modes of television consumption, Ellis takes part in the humanization of television. Talking about TV's "perpetual presence," that is the fact that "TV continues whether a particular set is turned on or not" (134, 138), Ellis implicitly describes television as an animate being that, whether viewers draw their attention to it or not, continues to live, eluding human control. The idea of the apparatus' self-control solidifies when Ellis continues to write about TV as "the eye that sees" (164). Claiming that viewers do not look at the world directly but that television looks on their behalf, Ellis ascribes human traits, if not to say consciousness, to television: "It is TV that looks at the world; the TV viewer glances across TV as it looks" (164). The way in which Ellis puts his theorization into words ("TV as it looks") evokes the idea of television as an apparatus with the human capability to observe.¹⁰⁶ These connotations are further consolidated when Ellis argues for: TV's ability to simulate eye contact ("The broadcast TV image is quite often directly addressed to the viewer, in a simulation of everyday eye contact," 138), TV as a "bystander" in the home (160), and TV as the viewer's accomplice ("For broadcast TV, the regime of viewing is rather one of complicity with TV's own look at the passing pageant of life," 160).

The equation of television and human beings – only implicitly made by Ellis – is explicitly pointed out by Baudrillard when he claims that "We ourselves are screens." Upon being asked whether humans are becoming images, Baudrillard affirms that they are, commenting that, in times of communication networks and endless communication circulation, humans communicate just like the media and thus become "the terminals of all this communications network" ("Interview 13" 146). The recipient is no longer a mere outsider but a part of this network:

It is almost dialogues between terminals or between different media. In a way it is the medium conversing with itself, this intense circulation, this type of au-

¹⁰⁵ Today, McLuhan is quoted more than ever. Media scholars go back to his work, which they now agree was revolutionary (Castells 357) and had significant implications for the analysis of media today.

¹⁰⁶ See also Ellis' formulation "the TV look at the world becomes a surrogate look for the viewers" (163).

to-referentiality of media which includes us in its network. But it's somewhat of an integrated man-machine circuit.¹⁰⁷

Baudrillard therefore concludes that, engaging in this circulation, humans and media have reached the same level of agency: "at the present the difference between man and machine is very difficult to determine" ("Interview 13" 146). In *Cool Memories IV: 1995-2000* Baudrillard underlines this thought, arguing that there is a "biological confusion" between humans and machines that implode into, penetrate, and assimilate one another (82). He finalizes this observation in *Telemorphosis*. In claiming that humans in Western cultures have turned into "individuated beings," "non-divisible with others or ourselves," Baudrillard prognosticates that "There will soon be nothing more than self-communicating zombies" (*Telemorphosis* 30-31).¹⁰⁸ Baudrillard links his argument about the dissolution of life and television with the ways in which he sees humans and the apparatus of TV merge. His statement that one can hardly differentiate between man and machine anymore, and his description of human beings as self-communicating zombies both indicate skepticism, perhaps even concerns over, the dissolution of the apparatus into human beings.

The blending of man and machine that Baudrillard describes constitutes McLuhan's basic understanding of how humans should relate to new media technologies. However, instead of commenting on this techno-cultural development with a tone of nostalgia and from a culturally pessimistic angle, McLuhan, as generally known and repeatedly criticized, has a positive attitude towards this convergence.¹⁰⁹

Electromagnetic technology requires utter human docility and quiescence of meditation such as befits an organism that now wears its brain outside its skull and its nerves outside its hide. Man must serve his electric technology with the same servo-mechanistic fidelity with which he served his coracle, his canoe, his typography, and all other extensions of his physical organs. But there

¹⁰⁷ In a later part of the interview, Baudrillard elaborates on this idea by arguing that subjects have been replaced by machines/media: "It's machines that communicate, it's the medium that communicates. It is so easy to let the machines work, they are gigantic substitution systems. In integrated circuits there is no more need for the intervention of a subject. On the contrary, everything works best when the subject is shut out, excluded" ("Interview 17" 174). According to Butler, Baudrillard had already dwelled on the approximation of men and machines in *The System of Objects* (originally published in French in 1968). There he suggests, as Butler explains, that "we move into the era of the man-machine" in which the human and the object have become inseparable (Butler 31, 33).

¹⁰⁸ Baudrillard uses the zombie-metaphor in reference to machines and media in general, especially when talking about the human dependency on and assimilation with cell phones, for instance in *Cool Memories IV*.

¹⁰⁹ In favor of my reading of Baudrillard, Merrin compares McLuhan's relation to and conceptualization of the media with Baudrillard's and writes: "Whereas McLuhan sees electronic media as 'organic' and thus implicitly more human, Baudrillard sees them as reducing our humanity, replacing our fundamental symbolic experience and relations" (52).

is this difference, that previous technologies were partial and fragmentary, and the electric is total and inclusive. (63-64)

The McLuhanist formula that one should consider media in their technological form as “extensions of man” (4) is in itself indicative of a convergence of humans and machines. The visualization of this formula has notions of the uncanny, and the taste of the bizarre is further established when he describes the human brain as being located outside its skull. Humans, according to his request, are supposed to completely devote themselves to technologies (“the electric is *total* and *inclusive*,” emphasis added), to “serve” them, and to perform “utter human docility and quiescence.” The word choice and the choice of the semantic field both generate a conception of humans subordinated to technologies, serving them, and allowing them to take over control.

This notion solidifies when McLuhan describes the first TV generation as carrying out the “commands” and the “all-involving sensory mandate of the TV image” with “perfect psycho-mimetic skill” (336). According to McLuhan, the final step would then be to delegate human consciousness to new technologies: “Having extended or translated our central nervous system into the electromagnetic technology, it is but a further stage to transfer our consciousness to the computer world as well” (67). Using this radical rhetoric, McLuhan describes technologies in general and television in particular as human substitutes which, in the electronic age, people have to trust. Technologies such as television will take the command and be equipped with human consciousness while humans follow obediently. In order to say that humans use the new media as extensions, McLuhan reverts to a terminology and a semantic field that portray humans as subordinated machines and machines as self-conscious, animate beings who start to control the world. This interpretation of McLuhan’s theorization feeds Baudrillard’s prognostication that humans are turning into self-communicating zombies.

In the Western cultural imaginary of the TV era, and with regard to the acculturation and naturalization of television, the dissolution of human beings into televisual apparatuses is an established fear. Against this background, especially under consideration of McLuhan’s theorization, the idea of human consciousness as teleconsciousness also has angst-inducing connotations. In the TV age, critics agreed that TV posed a dangerous threat to humanity, most importantly to human consciousness, and thus humans’ most distinctive feature. Deuze is of course right to claim that this collective anxiety about man-machine hybrids is not new; it is, he explains, part of long-lasting worries about artificial and lifeless humanoid beings (*Media* 20). Peter Sloterdijk’s warnings that humans have started to feel too comfortable with media and machines is thus, according to Deuze, another case in point:

Sloterdijk sees the ongoing integration of people and their media as a slippery slope towards an ecology of *anthropotechnologies* wherein human beings in the end decide – without much care or reflection – about natural selection through the intervention of biotechnologies. (*Media* 17; original emphasis)

I argue that this age-old human anxiety is currently undergoing a process of re-evaluation. It is therefore necessary to realize that McLuhan himself does not conceptualize television as a threatening entity. The concerns expressed by McLuhan are rather an act of interpretation by his readers who fear the development he describes. His description of TV's impact on humankind has, as outlined above, notions of the uncanny – but only if the angle applied to his argument is culturally pessimistic. Understanding McLuhan's work as a theory which conceptualizes humans in subordination to technologies and thus as a theory with angst-inducing implications might be a legitimate reading. Readers should not, however, categorize McLuhan as a critic in fear of human subordination. Rather than thinking of human subordination as the necessary evil, he describes it as an evolutionary process, which is why critics often accused him of trivializing the power of media. Humans do not have to fear television and media in general, McLuhan makes clear, because they adapt to these new means, possibilities, and circumstances in a natural way.

In his time, McLuhan's positivist stance over television was quite exceptional and therefore often disapproved of,¹¹⁰ because he distanced himself from the cultural pessimism usually expressed by the majority of his contemporaries. Judged from today's perspective, however, McLuhan was ahead of his time. Regarding the human adaptation to media technologies as a process of reconciliation and naturalization is an approach to the changes in the contemporary techno-cultural environment also propagated by Deuze. In *Media Life*, he suggests that humankind reconcile with media and “unpack the history of man-machine separation.” Calling the idea of medial domination over man or human domination over media a fallacy, Deuze maintains that it is possible to overcome this deception (xiii). In his view, the synthesis, that is to say the fusion of humans and technologies, is inevitable (17-18). We should therefore begin to think about “who we are as human beings in conjunction with nature and technology” (204).

The selected novels refer to the human anxiety about the man-machine-hybridization, but they also relativize the fear of this convergence. By highlighting the ways in which the characters learn to live with and through television, the novels correspond to contemporary voices, such as Deuze's, that propagate acceptance and emphasize the necessity of meeting the human-machine hybridization without fear.

The “history of man-machine separation,” which is slowly turning into a history of reconciliation, is quite long, of course. Katherine Hayles' seminal book *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* from 1999, which has become known as a standard work in studies on the posthuman, is but one example of how this question is tackled. In her recently published book *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* from 2012, Hayles argues that human beings and

¹¹⁰ He was, for instance, called a visionary with an inclination to hyperbole (Castells 357).

technological media evolve mutually, in line with one another. Deuze offers a short overview of different voices from all sorts of disciplines that share Hayles' acknowledgement that reconciliation is under way: Psychologists regard media technology as a part of human DNA, and Michael Rich, a pediatrician, states that media have become the air we breathe, proposing that media technologies should be considered as an integral part of human life and that discussions on their being good or bad should finally be overcome (Rich qtd. in Lewin). Director, writer, and cinematographer David Cronenberg is even more straightforward when prompting in an interview with *Wired* magazine: "Technology is not the name-less other. Technology 'R'Us: to embrace technology is to embrace, and face, ourselves. This we must do, and fearlessly" (qtd. in Sirius). All these statements indicate that there is only one direction in which humankind has to think when it comes to dealing with media technologies. It is, they imply, a way towards acceptance, reconciliation – or at least positive indifference.

I attempt to show that the chosen novels respond to McLuhan's open attitude towards television, which has recently been echoed by scholars like Deuze in relation to media technologies in general. Alluding to what Hayles calls "technogenesis," the novels enact the human adaptation to television as a process of naturalization one must not fear. Deuze's reference to Darwin's survival strategy, the principle of natural selection, implies that one should consider media life as an evolutionary stage. By portraying characters that experience televisionization as 'normal' or 'natural,' the novels propose that technogenesis, that is the idea that humankind is characterized by its co-evolution with (media) technologies, is under way.

Conclusion

On the basis of what I have outlined, I would like to suggest that TV experiences, both in the age of television and today, can be understood in terms of what I call the televisionization of everyday life. I have elaborated on a number of phenomena the novels enact through the characters: teleconsciousness; the validation of life, reality, and self through television; and the idea that humans and TV apparatuses dissolve into one another. All these phenomena are characteristic of the readers' environment where life and television have merged. If media technologies such as television are the realization of the world, then this TV-saturated world is the only environment one can rely on for making sense of and experiencing life. The novels suggest that television cannot *not* affect the characters' experiences and their understanding of life, reality, and self. This suggestion corresponds with the theoretical investigations retraced above. Inspired by my readings of the selected works – and other novels mentioned above and to which I will refer in the analyses and the final conclusion – I propose that everyday life experiences are to some extent televisionized. The term 'televisionization' pays

tribute to everyday life experiences in terms of television as enacted by the chosen novels.

The novels correspond to well-known cultural anxieties about television as expressed in the public and academic discourse on television. More than that, however, they stress that the characters' lives with and through television have been naturalized, as they have started to accept TV's omnipresence. The idea that life is televisionized acknowledges the novels' suggestion that TV's ubiquity was and still is connected with concerns. However, the idea that everyday life is televisionized also acknowledges that the human concerns over TV's dominance in culture are slowly turning into acceptance and positive indifference. Through the perspective of the characters, the novels indicate that televisionization is, simply speaking, how life has come to be. This I read as an anticipation of Deuze's conception of media life. As I will show in the analysis chapters, my reading of the novels in conjunction with my readings of theoretical texts and criticism leads to my conclusion that the novels enact both human anxieties and the human indifference to life with and through television. They enact the televisionization of everyday life in the sense that they anticipate the human adaptation to TV as a part of an evolutionary process, but they also enact the perceptible human insistence on fears of media technology. Inspired by the novels, I would like to use the idea of televisionization to pay tribute to the contradictory experience enacted by the novels, namely that television is both feared and disregarded.

In *Telemorphosis*, Baudrillard establishes a similar idea, which is why the last part of this chapter is devoted to an elaboration of how my understanding and use of televisionization connects to and breaks away from Baudrillard's cultural diagnosis in *Telemorphosis*. I will explain that the idea of telemorphosis does not fully capture the climate in TV culture from the TV age until today: Baudrillard's concept neither pays tribute to contradictory TV experiences, nor does it acknowledge that the naturalization of TV has started to be met by indifference, rather than solely fear. I shall note, however, that Baudrillard uses terminology from the natural sciences, a choice which has important implications for his use of telemorphosis and my understanding of televisionization. His explanation of the dissolution of life into television and television into life is but one example which demonstrates that Baudrillard refers to bio-chemistry in order to make his point. Thus, although he alludes to the naturalization of TV as an evolutionary process, he fails to acknowledge that one does not mandatorily have to connect this development to human anxieties. Although Baudrillard thinks in terms of naturalization and adaptation, he does not comment on the implications of using this terminology, therefore failing to pay attention to the ways in which humans have started to consider TV's centrality and ubiquity as a part of evolution. It seems as if Baudrillard's nostalgic tendency prevents him from realizing that life with and through television is not necessarily a scenario one has to regard as suspect.

Before further elaborating on my reasons for dissociating televisionization from telemorphosis, I shall start with taking a closer look at the term itself. The term ‘telemorphosis’ is a blending of the two concepts ‘osmosis’ and ‘metamorphosis’ with ‘television.’ The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines osmosis as follows:

the gradual passing of a liquid through a MEMBRANE (= a thin layer of material) as a result of there being different amounts of dissolved substances on either side of the membrane: *Water passes into the roots of a plant by osmosis.* (original emphasis)

A second definition in the same dictionary says that osmosis is “the gradual process of learning or being influenced by sth, as a result of being in close contact with it.” Both explanations pinpoint the gradual nature of the process and the notion of two merging entities. Metamorphosis, in turn, is defined as “the process of transformation from an immature form to an adult form in two or more distinct stages” as well as a “change of the form or nature of a thing or person into a completely different one” (*Oxford Dictionaries*) or, in a slightly more differentiated fashion, as (1) “a complete change of physical form or substance;” (2) “a complete change of character or appearance;” and (3), in zoology, “the change of form that accompanies transformation into an adult in certain animals, for example the butterfly or frog” (*Collins New English Dictionary*). The generally known use of the term in zoology stresses the gradual development of an animate being from infancy to adulthood whereas its use in biology revolves around the idea of change of a substance/form. Its interdisciplinary application aims to communicate the notion of transformation with regard to a subject’s or object’s character or appearance.¹¹¹

Applying the definition of osmosis derived from bio-chemistry to Baudrillard’s claim that reality has transfused itself into the screen, that reality and screen can no longer be separated, and that telemorphosis is therefore total, brings across the idea that ‘actual’ reality and TV realities gradually dissolve into one another. The membrane between these two substances – the idea of ‘actual’ reality and televisual realities – is thin and permeable, and the emphasis is on the gradual passing of the two substances. Considering the second source of the concept, metamorphosis, the idea of the development of something new solidifies, and the notion of gradual, if not to say gentle, change is replaced by a more forceful and dramatic one. According to the term’s understanding in zoology, the stress is on the transformation into an adult animate being (here, the transformation is still described as being

¹¹¹ All these uses communicate a process of transformation: an animate or inanimate being changing over time. But how does an object, for example television, change by itself? *The Oxford Dictionary* explicitly speaks of “a change of the form or nature of a thing or person,” but whereas the prevalent notion of evolutionary change applies to animate beings, it does not apply to objects. This leaves open the question of what external factors are at work.

gradual and gentle), a transformation the alternative uses of the term describe as being complete, resulting in a new state of being which is altogether different. Thus, the notion evoked by the reference to osmosis, that is the merging of two substances, is now dramatized, and the emphasis is a little less on the process of gradual change than on the emergence of a completely new physical form/substance/character/being.

Depending on the context in which the term 'metamorphosis' is used, however, it has different connotations. Describing the gradual transformation of an animate being from immaturity to adulthood, the term stresses the natural process of growing-up; highlighting the dramatic nature of the transformation (as suggested by the other definitions), the term can have notions of the uncanny, of alienation and deterrence. The understanding of telemorphosis is thus based on the notion of two substances that merge and dissolve into one another as well as the idea of drastic change of a being or an entity. The transformation is conceived of as natural or evolutionary, but it can also be dysfunctional and therefore disturbing.

Reading *Telemorphosis* against the background that Baudrillard's outlook is rather nostalgic, one can assume that he considers the dramatic development he points out as disturbing. One is therefore forced to understand telemorphosis as a process with negative, angst-inducing connotations. Considering the allusions Baudrillard makes to the field of experimental human research, genetic engineering, and other such fields or disciplines that express technophobia and suspicion of human progress, this impression solidifies. To give an example, Baudrillard starts his observations in *Telemorphosis* with the claim that reality has become experimental, and characterizes the *Big Brother* format as a social experiment show by calling it a "human amusement park," a "laboratory," and a "telegenetically modified sociality" (4). In order for him to express his critique of the format, Baudrillard borrows terminology from psychological research and genetic engineering. Apart from that, he draws on terms used in bio-chemical/medical research (he speaks of "contagion" or a "viral chain," 23). In his previous works, Baudrillard equally condemns the power of scientific research in Western societies, an uneasiness expressed again in *Telemorphosis*: "Everywhere, it is the protocols of science and verification which have inoculated us, and we are in the middle, under the camera's scalpel" (11). Against the background of these elaborations, one must understand the process of telemorphosis as a bizarre and intrusive techno-cultural development.

In *Telemorphosis* Baudrillard further develops his argument that life and television have dissolved into one another by referring to *Loft Story*, the French version of *Big Brother*. Since everyday life, he attests, is "already rigged by all the dominant models" (4), *Loft Story* and 'actual' reality cannot be distinguished anymore. Writing "we are all on *Loft Story*" captures his idea that the worlds as presented on and transmitted by television are indistinguishable from and therefore the same as everyday life. Maintaining that "the televisual universe is nothing more than a holographic detail of global

reality,” Baudrillard holds the opinion that “we are already within a situation of experimental reality” (5).

Describing the show as “both the mirror and the disaster of an entire society caught up in the race towards meaninglessness” (*Telemorphosis* 28), Baudrillard uses *Loft Story* as a case in point to complain about the “spectacle of banality” (6). For Baudrillard, the advent of a televisual phenomenon such as *Loft Story* is “the void of insignificance.” A show in which the ordinariness of everyday life is overexposed leaves “nothing more to be seen except for transparency” (44). Complaining that “Television created a global event (or better, a non-event), in which everyone became trapped” (28), Baudrillard expresses a social critique. He blames contemporary societies for ascribing power to television and the media in general, stressing that we cannot assign responsibility to the media but only to ourselves, their consumers: “Television has shown itself to be the strongest power within the science of imaginary solutions. But if television has achieved this, we are the ones who wanted it. There is no use in accusing the powers of media” (29).

Baudrillard describes the “lack of distinction between life and the screen” as a problem (*Telemorphosis* 46). In his opinion, viewers face the impossibility of knowing what is or is not real about *Loft Story*. For Baudrillard, *Loft Story* is exemplary of the total telemorphosis, in the sense that it is merely a detail in a process in which “all of ‘reality’ . . . has passed over to the other side” (48). In order to stress his argument, he reverts to the film *The Truman Show* “where not only is the hero telemorphosized, but everyone else involved as well – accomplices and prisoners caught in the spotlight of the same deception” (48-49). In line with Deligiaouri and Popovic, who, in their analysis of reality TV, argue that reality is becoming a show (“it is either reality presented as a show” or “a ‘show’ of reality,” 71), Baudrillard concludes that “Today, the screen is no longer the television screen; it is the screen of reality itself” (*Telemorphosis* 49-50).

Taking the example of the reality TV format *Big Brother* to prove the integral telemorphosis of society, Baudrillard points out that everyday life and life as transmitted and constructed by television have merged in the same way water passes into the roots of a plant by osmosis. The postulation that telemorphosis is total in the age of reality television is, as I read it, the peak of Baudrillard’s theorization of the dissolution of life and television, a nostalgically-connoted theorization which emphasizes the alienating and bizarre implications of these techno-cultural processes.

And yet, forgiving Baudrillard for his uneasiness, and trying to read and understand *Telemorphosis* in the first place not as a socio-cultural critique but a socio-cultural diagnosis, uncovers the text’s potential to affirm, and not to solely denunciate. By drawing on terminology and concepts of the natural sciences, Baudrillard evokes the notion of television as a constitutive part of evolution. Baudrillard’s attitude towards the media is, admittedly, not as open-minded as McLuhan’s, but he equally hints at the naturalization of TV – without, however, taking into account that humans do not necessarily fear

and condemn their adaptation to life with and through media. However, since one cannot deny Baudrillard's nostalgic bias, since his nostalgia overshadows the highly meaningful and important observations he makes and all their implications, I have decided to distance myself from his understanding of telemorphosis. Thinking of culture and society in terms of telemorphosis is to apply a nostalgic angle. With regard to the selected novels, I feel that such an attitude prevents one from realizing what these texts propose: that televisionization is not only feared, but that it is turning into a 'normal' way of being. Reading the novels exclusively in the light of Baudrillard's *Telemorphosis* prevents the readers from acknowledging the ambiguous and contradictory experiences they enact.

In this spirit, I also distance myself from the cultural pessimism commonly expressed by TV-era critics. Instead, I propose thinking of the televisionization of everyday life in terms of both an unsettling integration of television in culture and an evolutionary development humans do not have to fear. Thinking of televisionization from a human-centric perspective and through the novels pays tribute to the ambiguity of human experiences in a TV-saturated environment. TV-era theory places emphasis on the bizarre and, indeed, threatening implications of these techno-cultural processes, and these anxieties must be acknowledged. However, in order to understand the ambiguous and contradictory relations with and attitudes towards television as enacted by the novels' characters, one must also highlight the positive and indifferent feelings they are described as having towards television. In contrast to Baudrillard's argument that society has been telemorphosized, I suggest – against the background of my readings of the novels – that life has been televisionized. More than that, in contrast to Baudrillard's nostalgic approach to TV's omnipresence in life which describes its presence in terms of invasiveness, I follow the novels proposition that the presence of television has started to disappear from consciousness.

Chapter 3: Dreading the Human Adaptation to Television: Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There* (1970)

In the entry “The Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debates, 1960” found in the online *Encyclopedia of Television of the Museum of Broadcast Communications*, Erika Tyner Allen informs us that the political debate between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960 was “the first-ever televised presidential debate” which “marked television’s grand entrance into presidential politics.” She goes on to relate how, between the candidates, “the visual contrast was dramatic.” After his knee injury, Nixon was “twenty pounds underweight, his pallor still poor.” He wore “an ill-fitting shirt” and “refused make-up to improve his color.” In contrast, Kennedy was “tan and confident and well-rested.” Kennedy won. Commenting on his victory, Tyner Allen clarifies: “Those television viewers focused on what they saw, not what they heard.”

Scott L. Althaus refers to the Kennedy/Nixon debate as “a landmark in the history of American political campaigning,” explaining that it was a myth that the television viewers thought that Kennedy had won while those who listened to the radio thought that Nixon had won. Althaus implies that the belief in Kennedy’s overall TV-adequacy in contrast to Nixon’s screen-incompatibility is nothing but a fallacy. Unjustly, Althaus indicates and thereby attacks opponents of the medium, critics condemn the medium of television for advantaging physical appearance and disadvantaging content (119). Postman, for instance, holds the view that, since TV’s form works against the content, TV and politics are incongruent (*Amusing 7*). In the article “The Myth of Viewer-Listener Disagreement in the First Kennedy-Nixon Debate,” David L. Vancil and Sue D. Pendell argue in favor of Althaus’ objection against the belief that the televisual screen advantages people with a good, healthy appearance. Calling this widespread assumption “One of the most perplexing legacies of the first Kennedy-Nixon debate,” the authors investigate a number of often-cited reports and surveys that allegedly provide evidence for the fact that the medium of television favored Kennedy’s good looks, and that it therefore has the potential to betray the audience. To underline their argument, they resort to empirical research, revealing that “the most exhaustive survey of empirical research on the 1960 debates, by Katz and Feldman, reports neither the alleged listener-viewer disagreement nor any evidence in support of it” (16).

These discussions on the Kennedy/Nixon debate demonstrate three things. Firstly, it was and still is general knowledge that critics of that time considered television to advantage good appearances and neglect content. Secondly, there is no evidence for these assumptions. And thirdly, despite a number of television advocates who draw attention to the lack of evidence, the myth has not yet been discredited as a myth. According to general knowledge, the evil medium of television, inappropriate for serious, political issues, favored Kennedy's tan. Due to his good outer appearance, Kennedy convinced the American audience of his aptitude for presidency. As far as the public and academic discourse on television is concerned, this is the prevalent opinion.

Kosinski must have been convinced, not of Kennedy's aptitude, but of TV's potential to mislead the American society and the public's weakness for falling for the malicious medium. His novel *Being There* (abbr. BT) is a satire of television culture *par excellence* that criticizes a society sucked in by the screen. It tells the story of Chance, a young man, who has grown up in isolation with television as his only 'window to the outside world.' This tale of TV confinement depicts the protagonist as a strange, robotic entity in-between a human being and a machine, an anti-hero. Chance leaves the estate he has never gotten out of before whilst still a young man. By way of imitating the behavior of television characters, Chance impresses everybody he meets and is, later in the story, put forward for a high position in American politics. By alluding to the televisual event of the Kennedy/Nixon debate, the narrator of *Being There* positions the readers right next to himself, the critical authority, and forces them into complicity. The narrator describes Chance as a robot that follows television and others' orders mechanically. Seemingly steered by a remote control, Chance acts out behavior 'as seen on TV' and imitates the evil apparatus of television which is capable of deceiving and betraying the audience.

The rather short narrative introduces the reader to Chance's everyday life – in which, next to the garden, television plays the major role – and then focusses on the part of his life when he leaves the estate in which he has been captive for so long. Readers accompany Chance on his way into American society and witness his acculturation. Orphan Chance, now a young man, grows up in a house owned by the Old Man who is only referred to as such. Never in his life has he left the house – except for the garden he is supposed to cultivate. His only human – and social – contacts are the Old Man (who is his benefactor), the maid, and, occasionally, the maintenance man.¹¹² Thus, Chance is either occupied with working in the garden or with watching television. Because of the Old Man's death, however, Chance is ripped out of his normal life and must leave the estate. Surrounded by the 'real' world for only a few minutes (it turns out that, all his life, he has been living in Manhattan), Chance has an accident. To make amends, the woman called EE, whose driver has hit Chance, takes him home. EE (short for Eliz-

¹¹² See also Rothschild 54.

abeth Eve) lives with her wealthy, senior husband, Benjamin Rand, who is seriously ill and close to dying. During the rest of the story, Chance lives together with the Rands.

Due to misunderstandings and pure luck, Chance scales the upper realms of society and becomes a much-worshipped celebrity. Starting with a misunderstanding by EE who, instead of “Chance, the gardener” hears “Chauncey Gardiner,” as he is to be known from then on, this highly ironized success story develops inexorably. Perceived and treated as an economic expert, Chance not only wins the trust of the Rands, but also gets to meet – and impress – the president of the United States. These ‘American Dream’-notions¹¹³ culminate in the proposition that Chance runs for a high position in American politics/economy. The story ends with Chance escaping a social event and stepping out into a garden; the novel leads Chance and the readers to where the story began (Tiefenthaler, “Jerzy” 221).

‘Chance’ is an allegorical name charged with meaning. First of all, he has been given this name “because he had been born by chance” (BT 12). Secondly, Chance’s success story begins with meeting the Rands, and he only gets to meet them because of an accident and “through a series of fortuitous events;” this accidental crash is why Chance can “ascend[...] to the upper echelons of American society” (Simmons 56).¹¹⁴ More than that, it is the ironic discrepancy between denotative and connotative language and between the literal and metaphorical use of language (Tiefenthaler, “Jerzy” 221) which give rise to a chain of misapprehensions (Sherwin 38; Tiefenthaler, *Jerzy* 113).

As a “critique against mass media and the television generation” (Holstad n.p.), Kosinski’s TV novel¹¹⁵ has been called a parody of McLuhan’s optimism towards media as expressed in *Understanding Media*, and an anticipation of Postman’s social and media critique in *The Disappearance of Childhood* from 1982 (Goetsch 83). My reading will further investigate the satiri-

¹¹³ *Being There* is often read as an allusion to or satirical comment on the so-called ‘American Dream.’ Paul Goetsch writes that Chance’s superficial success reminds the reader of critical American Dream literature (85); Sepp L. Tiefenthaler calls the novel a satirical parody of the American success myth (*Jerzy* 133); Maciej Świerkocki considers *Being There* to mock the American Dream (139); Barbara Tapa Lupack thinks of *Being There* not as an American Dream-story but as a video nightmare that spoofs the American Dream (“Hit” 60); and David Simmons, arguing along the same lines, attests: “The manner in which Chance rises to the top through sheer luck and coincidence serves to disrupt some of the more aspirational tenants of the ‘American Dream’” (56-57).

¹¹⁴ Herbert B. Rothschild argues that the misunderstandings stem from the discontinuity between Chance’s language and the language of those around him who take metaphorically what he intends literally (58).

¹¹⁵ *Being There* has also been labeled a “blatantly political novel” (Rothschild 50); a “moral” and “biblical allegory” (Lavers 76, 77) or a “Creation anecdote” (Holstad n.p.); a “parable” (Lavers 81); and a “satire” (Holstad n.p.; Kuna 487). In the context of my study, however, I move away from these aspects. I will only focus on the role of television in the world portrayed and satirically commented on in the novel.

cal portrayal of the American television society of the 1960s. I aim to show that *Being There* lines with the critical voices of its time. Simultaneously, however, it portrays a protagonist who accepts TV's central role and position in life without questioning it. My second aim is therefore to demonstrate that *Being There* is somewhat ahead of its time, because it delineates and enacts the naturalization of living in terms of television. Then again, the protagonist and the society that *Being There* depicts do not scrutinize or challenge the characters' adaptation to televisionization. The satire comments on the characters' indifference towards their adaptation to television critically. Since the fear of television constitutes the accelerator of the medium's denunciation, the novel reads as a condemnation of the way in which Chance and the society portrayed in *Being There* have become used to the televisionization of everyday life.

Life as an Imitation of Television

Growing up in isolation from the outside world, television is an integral part of Chance's everyday life. The reader learns that Chance watches TV nearly nonstop, because Chance is time and again described as turning it on ("Chance went inside and turned on the TV," BT 10; "He entered his room and turned on the TV," 13; "As soon as he opened his eyes, Chance turned on the TV," 65). For Chance, watching television is something he does and needs on a daily basis. The protagonist enacts children's behavior that pediatrician Rich comments on in an interview with *The New York Times*. Television is, he says, "like the air they breathe, the water they drink and the food they eat" (Rich qtd. in Lewin). Apart from entertaining and diverting Chance, television operates as a means of both education and socialization.¹¹⁶ Up to the point when he must leave the estate and his familiar surroundings, television and the garden are the only spheres Chance knows and reverts to in order to make sense of life and himself. Once outside, he is thus obliged to resort to these two realms that constitute his only sources of knowledge,¹¹⁷ offering him indicators for how to behave and feel in the outside world.

Brought up and socialized by television, Chance is a TV child in the purest sense.¹¹⁸ The text describes him as using his TV-nourished knowledge as a template for his actions. Once he leaves the limited space of his former habitat, Chance gets along by imitating behavior he knows from watching

¹¹⁶ Supporting this reading, Goetsch writes that Chance has been socialized and raised by television (88, 89). Other critics also consider TV to take over the role of Chance's parents (Gordon 4; Tiefenthaler, *Jerzy* 124) and to be responsible for his education and socialization (Tiefenthaler, *Jerzy* 124).

¹¹⁷ See also Lavers 79; Świerkocki 135.

¹¹⁸ See also Goetsch 89. Other critics regard Chance as a savage child, for instance Griffiths 142; Tiefenthaler, *Jerzy* 123.

television.¹¹⁹ When the Old Man dies, Chance cannot anticipate what will happen to him, but from watching TV he knows that “after people died, all kinds of changes took place” (BT 17), and after the Old Man’s death, when the lawyers responsible for the estate ask Chance to sign legal papers, he remembers what TV characters do in such situations:

Chance picked up the paper. He held it in both hands and stared at it. He tried to calculate the time needed to read a page. On TV the time it took people to read legal papers varied. Chance knew that he should not reveal that he could not read or write. On TV programs people who did not know how to read or write were often mocked and ridiculed. He assumed a look of concentration, wrinkling his brow, scowling, now holding his chin between the thumb and the forefinger of his hand. (24)

Taking behavior he knows from television as a template for his own decisions and actions, Chance masters the situation by way of copying behavior as portrayed on TV. Tichi observes that television operates as a frame of reference for actual life experience (*Electronic* 37), which is enacted by Kosinski’s protagonist. His television experience tells him not to expose his illiteracy, and his mimicry and gesticulation – equally taken from TV – contribute to successfully covering his disadvantage. Television therefore proves to be a reliable source of information, as the scene suggests that Chance handles the situation well, due to his perfect imitation of behavior he has seen on TV.¹²⁰

Being There underlines the value of television as a source of reliable information on education and socialization by depicting the characters as being fascinated by Chance. The characters Chance meets are not bewildered by his behavior. Instead, they respond well to him:

Thinking that he ought to show a keen interest in what EE was saying, Chance resorted to repeating to her parts of her own sentences, a practice he had observed on TV. In this fashion he encouraged her to continue and elaborate. Each time Chance repeated EE’s words, she brightened and looked more confident. In fact, she became so at ease that she began to punctuate her speech by touching, now his shoulder, now his arm. (BT 34)

His strategy¹²¹ of imitating TV behavior helps Chance to get along without encountering major difficulties. Feeling encouraged by his gestures and

¹¹⁹ Chance’s TV imitations are widely acknowledged: Tiefenthaler speaks of a passive adaptation to the behavioral strategies he has learned from watching TV which he uses as examples (*Jerzy* 121, 124); others write that Chance uses patterns or models from television to know how to behave (Gogol 9; Lavers 77; Sanders 178); yet others observe that Chance uses TV language he learns to mime (Lilly 394) or explicitly refer to him as an imitator (Goetsch 92; Gordon 7; Świerkocki 137).

¹²⁰ For further examples of Chance’s successful TV-imitations, see pp. 29-30, 33, 35.

¹²¹ I need to stress that, with regard to Chance, one cannot strictly speak of a strategy – although Tiefenthaler also uses the term (*Jerzy* 124). Chance’s decision to imitate behavior as

manners, EE's reactions stress how successfully he manages to socialize on the basis of his television-dominated upbringing.¹²² Readers might expect Chance, the Kaspar Hauser of the electronic age (Tiefenthaler, "Jerzy" 221), to encounter problems and provoke a feeling of alienation in those he meets. However, by depicting a nation of innocents who admire him without further ado, *Being There* proposes the opposite.

Chance's success with his TV imitations culminates in a scene where he is invited to a television talk show. Because of having watched innumerable talk shows in his life, Chance is entirely prepared for a situation that is basically completely new to him ("Imitating what he had so often seen on TV, Chance moved towards the vacant chair at the table," BT 52). In the end, Chance is overwhelmed with congratulations, not only for what he (allegedly) said but for his whole performance: "'You were great, sir, just great!' the producer exclaimed. 'I've been producing this show for almost three years and I can't remember anything like it!'" (55). Due to his TV education, Chance's imitations of culturally accepted behavior as represented on television convince and, more than that, impress the audience. Kosinski's satire ridicules a society that is unable to realize that someone displays behavior as seen on TV and imitates it one-to-one, a society unaware that the man before them lacked actual human and social contact for most of his life and only ever experienced its televisual representation. Chance can stand his ground in a world he has only learned about through television. The fact that his acculturation develops so smoothly satirizes a society highly dependent on and fascinated by television, which favors televisual copies over original human behavior.

Being raised by television, the novel suggests, is a possible alternative to being raised more conventionally. This idea, however, is instantly dismissed again, because the society the novel portrays is what Kosinski himself calls "a nation of *videots*" (qtd. in Sohn 52; original emphasis), a nation of idiots glued to the screen. This representation of American TV society illustrates the author's objections against television also expressed by critics like Postman. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, *Being There* is considered as anticipating Postman's critique in *The Disappearance of Childhood*. More than that, one can most certainly also call it an anticipation of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman's 1985 critique of the American television and entertainment culture, or in his own words, "an inquiry into and a lamentation about the most significant American cultural fact of the second half of the twentieth century," that is "the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television" (8). Postman attacks TV for

seen on TV does not seem to be a conscious decision – which is, however, a notion the term implies. Chance, a neglected young man, reverts to imitation as a means to get along in society, but rather than consciously deliberating about whether he should imitate TV behavior, he falls back on this approach simply because he does not know any better.

¹²² Tiefenthaler also stresses the success Chance has with his TV imitations (*Jerzy* 124).

“control[ling] the time, attention and cognitive habits of our youth” (149-50). Regarding TV as both a teacher and a reliable friend, Postman warns that it subtly becomes the command center he hopes society will regain control over (79, 166). The notion of television controlling society, and first and foremost the young people, is, it seems, Postman’s biggest concern. He worriedly observes the significant role of television in young people’s lives, especially with regard to their “notions of truth” and “ideas of intelligence” (27). Chance is a satirical fictionalization of the kind of human being Postman is anxious about. Educated and therefore controlled by television, Chance seems to be steered by his ‘TV teacher,’ mechanically carrying into execution what it commands.

Aside from imitating the behavior of television characters or media personae, Chance compares life to life as seen on TV, using the latter as the benchmark rather than the other way around. He has barely left the estate when he starts wondering: “So far, everything outside the gate resembled what he had seen on TV. . . . He had the feeling that he had seen it all” (BT 28). TV realities constitute Chance’s template for making sense of what he sees and experiences outside the estate. *Being There* alludes to Postman’s apprehension that TV entertainment is the “natural format for the representation of all experience” (*Amusing* 89). Postman criticizes the fact that, “We do not doubt the reality of what we see on television, [and] are largely unaware of the special angle of vision it affords” (80). Again, the novel suggests that Chance can rely on his TV experience; paradoxically enough, life seems to be a perfect copy of its televisual portrayals. ‘Actual’ reality is, in fact, just like a television program:¹²³

[A]s on TV, what would follow next was hidden; he knew the actors on the new program were unknown. He did not have to be afraid, for everything that happened had its sequel, and the best that he could do was to wait patiently for his own forthcoming appearance. (BT 34)

Applying TV terminology and his knowledge of the ‘structure’ or ‘texture’ of TV programs to the course of events in life, Chance experiences everyday life in terms of television. In line with the critique of television of that time, *Being There* suggests that there is such a thing as ‘actual’ reality menaced by television, a reality that must be saved from TV’s dangerous impact on culture and society. The novel presents the fusion of different versions of reality as a threat, and the idea that living with and through television results in a world less real expresses the well-known collective concerns over TV’s power.

¹²³ Other critics addressing the resemblance of Chance’s life to a TV program are Hutchinson 92; Sanders 178; Tiefenthaler, *Jerzy* 124.

Since Chance does not have any other knowledge base that he can rely on apart from television, his consciousness cannot *not* be affected by TV.¹²⁴ Chance's consciousness is therefore teleconsciousness in the purest sense.¹²⁵ Observing others feels to him like watching television. When he sees EE, he does not actually *see* her; all he sees is her "as if she were on television" (BT 34). Noticing others is for Chance the same as facing televisual representations of human behavior. Also, he is not emotionally disturbed when the Old Man dies. For Chance, his benefactor's death is nothing but another scene in his life, just like a scene of a TV show. Only taking a short look at the corpse, he immediately draws his attention back to television: "Chance gazed once more at the Old Man, mumbled good-bye, and walked out. He entered his room and turned on the TV" (13). His modes of thinking are deeply infused with television, so much so that TV even filters his perception of bodily reactions. When his mind blanks and everything around him seems to be spinning, Chance, whom one must assume to be the reflector figure, perceives it like a TV suddenly switching off (31). Chance reverts to his TV experience in order to understand his own feelings and the way his body works.

Readers also learn about Chance's teleconsciousness in a passage where EE tries to seduce him. When she enters his room, Chance lies on the bed and watches television. Since Chance requests her to masturbate – at least that is what she understands when he persists that he only wants to watch – she starts doing so in front of the turned on TV: "In the bluish light emanating from the TV, EE looked at him, her eyes veiled" (BT 86). This scene evokes the image of EE surrounded by the bluish light emanating from the screen. This image is again evoked when the texts goes on: "She got up, paced swiftly up and down the room, crossing in front of the TV screen" (86-87). With Chance as the reflector figure, the text describes a dark room in which the television screen is the only source of light, encompassing EE, swallowing her.¹²⁶ EE, it seems, has dissolved into the screen; to Chance, she is yet another shiny televisual image.

Chance perceives others, but also himself, like a TV image and explicitly states that he wishes to sink into the screen (BT 11) and turn into an image: "Chance could not imagine what being on TV involved. He wanted to see

¹²⁴ In this context, James D. Hutchinson writes that Chance's existence is conditioned by TV (89).

¹²⁵ Goetsch also calls attention to Chance's perception, which he feels is widened when he watches television: the TV personalities intrude into his consciousness while Chance simultaneously has the feeling of entering TV (86). In reference to Chance, Goetsch therefore speaks of the expansion of the self and of a form of perception that is in accordance with television (87, 91).

¹²⁶ The description of the room and the atmosphere created by the turned-on television screen starts on p. 84 ("When they returned from the dinner party, Chance got into bed and watched TV. The room was dark; the screen cast an uneasy light on the walls."). On the grounds of this depiction, the reader already has a room in mind that is soaked in bluish light.

himself reduced to the size of the screen; he wanted to become an image, to dwell inside the set” (50). Perhaps as a consequence of this wish, he considers himself to be a TV image floating into the world (11), and when he actually appears on a TV show, he imagines becoming an image for the viewers (53). Imaginations turn into firm beliefs, firm beliefs into conviction: Chance feels like he is merging with television images, becoming one of them. He is convinced that “By changing the channel he could change himself,” that “he could change as rapidly as he wished by twisting the dial backward and forward” (10), and that “he could spread out into the screen without stopping, just as on TV people spread out into the screen” (11). Chance’s consciousness is deeply televisionized, to the extent that he believes and actually feels what his television-dominated imagination suggests.

In the end, Chance experiences his whole life like a TV show, unable to acknowledge his very existence. In the last part of the novel, Chance seems not to see the ballroom he is standing in but only “a faint, blurred image of the grand ballroom” (BT 104). Unable to experience life directly, he perceives it in filtered form, thereby enacting the Baudrillardian claim that the real is nowadays only conceivable as a simulation. Instead of feeling as if he is actually experiencing what he experiences, he has the impression of seeing images of himself, not himself as actually ‘being there:’

Chance was bewildered. He reflected and saw the withered image of Chauncey Gardiner: it was cut by the stroke of a stick through a stagnant pool of rain water. His own image was gone as well. (105)

Chance is distanced from his self; he experiences his own being analogous to how he perceives characters on television. The self he was made to be, Chauncey Gardiner, is a character he was supposed to play. Looking back, it seems, Chance has the impression that he only acted out a role he was engaged to play, a feeling that makes his actual experience appear like a TV show, like another sequel in the program. Nevertheless, his true self, Chance who lived in the Old Man’s house, is also described like an image that has gone and been replaced, indicating that this version of him is equally unreal to him. Chauncey Gardiner, a person invented by others, was not his true self, but neither was Chance. Both were images of, but not identical to, him. His very existence is erased; it is only a copy without an original.¹²⁷ In the very end of the novel, Chance’s images seem to have disappeared. *He* must have had disappeared, for he had only existed in the form of his two images: “Not a thought lifted itself from Chance’s brain. Peace filled his chest” (105). Chance’s being, the novel suggests, is switched off and not there any longer. It is as if he had never existed (Holstad n.p.).

¹²⁷ See also Lavers 80; Rothschild 62-63; Sherwin 38.

Taking Chance, the ultimate TV viewer, as a case in point, *Being There* draws attention to the ways in which TV affects consciousness.¹²⁸ As Chance's "sense of reality . . . is generated and sustained by the way things happen on the screen" (Kuna 486), he cannot see a difference between TV realities and life, which to him are the same.¹²⁹ *Being There* suggests that such a thing as 'actual' reality does not exist, and moreover that there is no such thing as an 'actual' or 'true' self. Chance does not live in only one reality, because the established boundaries between the idea of 'actual' reality and TV realities do not make sense to him. Neither is he only one version of himself, because all along he is different versions of himself. In that sense, *Being There* anticipates the idea of the dissolution of life into television and television into life: Chance enacts living through television. However, refusing to accept this approach to life as a normalized way of being, and refusing to accept this approach to reality as a new conception of reality, *Being There* uses satirical means to reject this idea. Through satirical means, the narrator forces readers to condemn American society, which is ridiculed in the novel as a society that has already fallen prey to experiencing televisionization as a new, naturalized way of life.

Being There tackles the question of how humans deal with facing different versions of reality. Due to the protagonist's idiosyncratic worldview, Sepp L. Tiefenthaler considers the novel to be an interrogation of the nature of reality (*Jerzy* 126). F. M. Kuna understands Kosinski's satire as a novel about fundamental human problems with the ontology of perception, therefore calling it a "serious comment on problems of reality" (486-87)¹³⁰ while Barbara Tapa Lupack writes that Chance, encountering a blurring of fact and fiction, is confused over the nature of reality (*Plays* 6). Literary scholars unanimously regard *Being There* as a novel that problematizes human relations with reality in times when the socially-accepted idea of reality has started to be challenged. As a novel that addresses ontological and epistemological questions, *Being There* offers an emancipated way of approaching reality as a concept, and not as empirical truth. However, to consider *Being There* as a problematization of a conceptualization of reality that stymied and is now in need of reconfiguration is to neglect the answer the novel itself offers, for it suggests that new ways of thinking about and experiencing reality are deceptive.

¹²⁸ In an interview with Kosinski, David Sohn also calls *Being There* a novel about the influence of television on self-perception and human behavior (26).

¹²⁹ Tiefenthaler writes that, to Chance, TV images and the reality he experiences physically are identical. Chance's capacity to experience actual reality, he explains, is reduced to how it is constructed and transmitted by TV, so that distinguishing between these two spheres is irrelevant for him (*Jerzy* 126).

¹³⁰ With regard to *Vineland*, McHale offers the same reading. His suggestion is to think in terms of the postmodernist motif of "ontological pluralizers" or what he calls the "postmodernist ontological plurality" (125, 133).

Reading *Being There* as a novel about rethinking the established ontology, epistemology, and phenomenology of Western cultures in 1970 means to overlook the narrator's – and the author's – critical stance. In the often-quoted interview "A Nation of Videots" conducted by David Sohn in 1975, Kosinski explains that the young TV generation is endangered by the fact that they have to cope with living in two worlds simultaneously: the world of television that is *there*, and the actual world that is *here* (qtd. in Sohn 25). Kosinski fears that young viewers prefer TV realities – "televised portrayals of human experiences" – to experiencing life (52). He fears that, once they get used to this pseudo-experience, they will have difficulty living in the real world (56). In *Being There*, the narrator expresses these concerns over the disastrous impact the author believes television to have on perceptions of the real. Martin Tucker therefore argues that Chance's "reliance on television is a perfect symbol of our removal from the real" (222). As a fictional example, Kosinski's protagonist operates as a warning of what television consumption can do to a society invaded by the apparatus.

Being a Disappearing Image

Being There enforces TV age objections against the medium. Contemporary readers should acknowledge, however, that it anticipates, at least rudimentarily, a new way of thinking about the relation between television and reality in times of high television and media consumption. The novel presents the option of TV life as a new way of being, but it dismisses this idea through its satirical portrayal. Equally, through Chance and other characters, the novel enacts the human need to be seen and validated through TV, thereby anticipating a contemporary phenomenon in the context of reality TV. Chance is certain that being watched by others is necessary for humans to exist, or to actually 'be there:'

As long as one didn't look at people, they did not exist. They began to exist, as on TV, when one turned one's eyes on them. Only then could they stay in one's mind before being erased by new images. The same was true of him. By looking at him, others could make him be clear, could open him up and unfold him; not to be seen was to blur and to fade out. Perhaps he was missing a lot by simply watching others on TV and not being watched by them. (BT 18)

Obviously weary of only watching others and not being watched by them, Chance yearns to finally be noticed. Considering his lack of human contact over all those years, this does not come as a surprise. Chance finally wants to be acknowledged so that he feels like a social being and thus more human. Apart from that, however, the passage suggests that the narrator ridicules the human urge to be seen by others through Chance's comment, an urge that has undergone a metamorphosis since the advent of television and television-induced stardom:

When one was addressed and viewed by others, one was safe. Whatever one did would then be interpreted by the others in the same way that one interpreted what they did. They could never know more about one than one knew about them. (BT 32)

Generally speaking, this comment by Chance reflects the human need for social interaction. However, against the background of Chance's wish to become an image – a wish he hopes will finally come true when he is offered an appearance on the TV show – it also hints at the need to validate life and self through television. If one needs other people's gazes, what better way to achieve that than being on TV and seen by countless viewers?

The idea of self-validation through television has become a phenomenon of TV culture that has, for now, in times of reality TV, reached its peak. Kosinski's novel from 1970 already touches upon this phenomenon by criticizing the need to be seen and celebrated by an unknown audience. The way in which *Being There* introduces the idea of validation through Chance, however, generates contradictions. On the one hand, the novel describes Chance as striving for turning into an image, sinking into the screen, and dwelling inside the set. Chance wants to be seen by others at all costs. On the other hand, the text portrays him as a critical authority questioning the increase of this human urge in times of television. Chance seeks to appear on TV and be seen by millions of viewers, but he knows at the same time that being observed through television cannot replace direct social encounters. Before his TV appearance, he wonders:

He would be seen by more people than he could ever meet in his entire life – people who would never meet him. The people who watched him on their sets did not know who actually faced them; how could they, if they had never met him? Television reflected only people's surfaces; it also kept peeling their images from their bodies until they were sucked into the caverns of their viewers' eyes, forever beyond retrieval, to disappear. . . . Chance became only an image for millions of real people. They would never know how real he was, since his thinking could not be televised. (BT 52-53)

Previously depicted as a mentally disadvantaged character,¹³¹ Chance is now portrayed as a clever young man who is aware of the fact that human relations are culturally and socially determined. The narrative representation of Chance's consciousness is therefore inconsistent and disrupted (Tiefenthaler, *Jerzy* 127-28). Commenting on this contradiction, Tiefenthaler remarks that the reader's willing suspense of disbelief is overstrained when Chance, otherwise described as a completely naïve and moronic 'videot,' is suddenly

¹³¹ Whether or not Chance can be called a mentally disadvantaged character is under discussion. Whereas Gareth Griffiths claims that Chance is not disadvantaged but innocent (142), Hutchinson refers to him as a "retarded adult" (86). Others describe him as a "pre-self-conscious being" (Rothschild 54), "a shallow illiterate" (Sherwin 37), and as being childishly naïve (Tiefenthaler, *Jerzy* 116).

portrayed with another sort of consciousness. If Chance is the reflector figure, it is rather confusing to experience him both as a mentally disadvantaged young man and a self-conscious social critic. The novel forces the reader to accept Chance as the reflector figure, but this passage and the contradictions it provokes call this understanding into question. The passage suggests that Chance sees through the mechanisms of a society in which television is “the purveyor of a world without depth” (Rothschild 57), a world already dependent on the mechanically-produced visual image (Lavers 80). This notwithstanding, the readers have learned that he is not a critic but televisionized, that he is immersed in television and not to be trusted. This conflict bewilders the readers of *Being There* until the end.

The text makes clear that Chance realizes his upcoming TV appearance will not bring him closer to the people. They will only see his flat image instead of actually becoming acquainted with him. Since television can only reflect people’s surfaces and not their way of thinking, the text suggests through Chance that it cannot replace actual human contact. The novel therefore aligns with the well-known critique of American society’s superficial values and its ahistoricism.¹³² Boorstin articulates this strand of criticism in *The Image*, and so does Postman. Lamenting the “descent into a vast triviality” (*Amusing* 6), the latter considers television to transform American culture “into one vast arena for show business” (81). *Being There* responds to this human anxiety by contrasting Chance’s critical comment from above with the portrayal of a society that considers Chance’s TV appearance as “a truly remarkable performance” and him as “more at ease” and “truer to himself” than anyone they have ever seen; in opposition to Chance’s note that television only reflects surfaces, he is worshipped for being extraordinarily “natural” (BT 57). This leaves the impression that Chance’s viewers are satisfied with being introduced only to Chance’s flat image and not his true self – which the novel denies exists. What is more, they even prefer to direct human contact the televisual portrayal of a man who copies human behavior as seen on TV, regarding it more natural than actual encounters. The passage ridicules a culture of permanent self-expression through television where the characters favor copies of human contact over personally getting to know one another (Pörksen and Krischke, Vorwort 8).¹³³

In the world of *Being There*, the characters mechanically believe in whatever television represents, which also entails its representations of and narratives about the ‘American Dream.’ The narrator appears to suggest that the scripts of everyday life as represented on television operate as scripts for the characters’ everyday lives. Using TV’s representations as benchmarks for

¹³² See, for instance, Lupack’s and Tichi’s readings (Lupack, “Hit” 62; Tichi, *Electronic* 205-07).

¹³³ From today’s perspective, that is in times when social interaction is basically communication through emails or messages on Facebook or WhatsApp, the novel’s critique that such a form of social contact is less real appears in a new light.

understanding, acting, and thinking in everyday life, they follow these scripts mechanically. Only within a society that thinks in terms of television can Chance “ascend[...] to the upper echelons of American society” (Simmons 56). Mr. Rand, for instance, is close to dying and therefore eager to make sure that after his death his wife EE will not suffer for long. Anxious for finding an adequate replacement, he projects his ideas of a successful provider onto Chance whom he conceptualizes as both a “truly peaceful” person and a “real businessman” (BT 43, 35). Similarly, EE – madly in love with Chance – interprets his never dropping names and places as self-reliability, social confidence and financial security (59). Furthermore, “His Excellency Vladimir Skrapinov, Ambassador of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics” (68) is so obsessed with finding someone equally interested in Russian literature that he also ascribes his longings to Chance. Frivolously misinterpreting both his language and his behavior, the other characters see in Chance whatever they want to see, thereby making him “a creation of others” (Rothschild 62),¹³⁴ an object for those who “fill his empty shell with their own dreams and longings” (Lavers 80). Chance is a like product of television (Goetsch 88). Without an identity, he solely reflects the ideas society imposes on him,¹³⁵ and these ideas are fuelled by the consumption of televisual narratives that are, the novel seems to propose through its satirical portrayal, ‘unrealistic.’ The novel’s satirical representation of American society suggests that televisual representations of the American Dream are naïve and deceiving. The characters believe in the picture of Chance that they create on the basis of the realities offered on television. Their worldview, the narrator seems to argue, has been fuelled by the conceptions of life advertised on television.

Being There proposes that Chance is not a proper person but an idea, an image, of a person. This image is created on the grounds of the deceptive realities television represents. As a projection screen for others’ fantasies and wishes (Tiefenthaler, “Jerzy” 221), Chance, like a television character, can be designed according to their ideas that are nourished by TV. In the end of the novel, Chance is thus compared to a blank page. When the Russian secret service tries to gather information on Chance, whom they spuriously consider an American spy, they cannot find any. Since the Old Man did not keep any records, information on Chance simply does not exist. In order to draw attention to this fact, a character holds up a blank page and states: “This, my dear comrade, is your picture of Gardiner’s past!” (BT 94) Due to there not being any proof-giving documents, Chance is perceived as a man without a past, without a personality, like a white page. He is an image that, appearing on the screen for a second, vanishes the next.

¹³⁴ See also Sanders 180.

¹³⁵ See also Goetsch 85; Lupack, “Hit” 62.

The Robotic Humachine

The fear *Being There* expresses also pertains to the apparent fusion of man and machine. Chance, I have just proposed, is whatever others want him to be, but the text also portrays him as a being in-between.¹³⁶ He considers himself to be real (BT 53) and identifies with the plants in the garden, and therefore with animate beings. Yet, he wants to turn into an image, become one with the screen and the TV set, a non-human entity. Knowing that Chance would love to merge with television, both his way of thinking and his behavior give the impression that he identifies with the apparatus. His behavior is mechanical and automated, which is why he seems to be steered by a remote control. He mechanically follows other characters' orders ("Chance would do exactly what he was told," "Chance did what he was told," 12), and the act of switching on the television appears like an automatism. Due to Chance's machine-like behavior he has been called a "robot" and a "non-entity" (Holstad n.p.), a "videot" (Sherwin 39; Tiefenthaler, *Jerzy* 125), and "an inscrutable television addict" (Sherwin 39). By further delineating the idea of Chance as a man-machine, I attempt to demonstrate that it contributes to the cultural imaginary of a society that feels threatened by the invasion of the apparatus and the "conjunctions of humanity and technology" (Deuze, *Media* xvi).

Chance imitates the behavior of television characters and people appearing on TV, but he also imitates the 'behavior' of TV as an apparatus, a reading imposed on the reader by the text's choppy narrative style. As already mentioned, the act of switching on the television appears mechanical and automatic ("Chance went inside and turned on the TV," BT 10; "He entered his room and turned on the TV," 13). The staccato sentences of Chance's manner of speaking, coming to a head in the passage where EE tries to seduce him, underline this impression. Unable to understand the signals that EE is sending and accustomed to the mode of watching, Chance requests her to do what she feels like doing, explaining that he himself intends to watch.¹³⁷ In this passage, the request "I like to watch (you)" is repeated six times – on only one page (86).¹³⁸ The repetition of this one sentence is like a TV snippet that Chance, the apparatus, repeats over and over again, like a commercial or a typical television phrase. Untiringly repeating this one sentence, Chance's behavior is reminiscent of a machine, a robot, or the apparatus and its continuous flow of TV snippets.

The text makes the resemblance between Chance and television as an apparatus even more explicit. When the Rands' limousine hits Chance, he

¹³⁶ This reading is also offered by Rothschild who writes that "Chance never enters the state of becoming, and so he is not really a human" (54).

¹³⁷ According to Goetsch, Chance could not have learned about sexuality even by watching TV, since American television in the 1950s and 1960s did not show such programs (92).

¹³⁸ In other scenes as well Chance uses this very sentence, for example when a homosexual tries to seduce him.

fades out and finds that “his mind blanked, like a TV suddenly switched off” (BT 31). Comparing himself with the apparatus, Chance perceives his bodily reactions like a television that turns off, indicating that his body operates in the same way as the apparatus of TV. Chance is also incapable of displaying feelings and, indeed, being emotional.¹³⁹ This depiction of Chance also responds to the idea that he equals a machine without human consciousness and the ability to be emotional. When the Old Man dies, Chance is not affected (“Chance gazed once more at the Old Man, mumbled good-bye, and walked out,” BT 13), and later on, when first a homosexual and then EE try to seduce him, he remains as cold as stone (“He [Chance] remained still,” 83) and does not move (85). His upbringing, characterized by a lack of human contact, has made him indifferent, like “a basket of sensory perceptions lacking the ability to both analyze and emotionally feel” (Holstad n.p.). It seems that TV taught him how to imitate human behavior, but it could not teach him how to feel about others and himself. Chance’s comment on TV’s inability to transmit thinking (“his thinking could not be televised,” 53) can therefore also be applied to the non-enactment of emotion: one can watch people on television or watch TV characters display emotionality, but these televisual representations do not allow for *being* emotional. *Being There* sheds a negative light on Chance’s fusion with the TV set. Portraying Chance as a machine without feelings, the novel expresses human concerns over a dystopian vision of a world controlled by machines.

As for Chance’s incapability of being emotional, one is prone to object that televisual narratives – both fictional and factual – can indeed evoke emotions. Empathizing with a character so much that one cannot hold back one’s tears, or being so immersed in a thriller that one experiences actual fear, are but two situations with which all TV viewers are familiar. Chance must have seen many such scenes, but he obviously never felt anything. Despite growing up with TV narratives, which invite the audience to react emotionally in a way characteristic of storytelling in general, Chance does not have emotions of any kind. This is somewhat contradictory. Like the apparatus that continuously transmits a stream of images, which never questions what is being transmitted, solely taking care of never stopping the flow, Chance is described as being neutral towards whatever he is confronted with.

Baudrillard argues that watching television is not an absorbing experience, and it seems that Chance corresponds with this conception. Explaining that the television screen has no depth, Baudrillard is convinced that TV can only catch attention on the surface. In reminiscence of Baudrillard’s elaboration, Chance enacts the experience of a viewer who is fascinated and absorbed, but only on a superficial level. Chance is a spectator of what Baudrillard calls the travelling of pure images. Baudrillard’s theorization might or might not be an explanation of Chance’s portrayal as a viewer unable to empathize with televisual representations of people in emotional situa-

¹³⁹ See also Hutchinson (88).

tions. The text emphasizes undeniably, however, that Chance is emotionally indifferent and that he resembles the apparatus. Eager to turn into an image and dwell inside the set, he wants, and in the end somehow manages, to merge with television. This supports Baudrillard's observation that TV turns the viewer into a screen. The text proposes that Chance must have over-identified with TV, his parent and educator, adopting its attitude and its whole form of being.

As far as domination of machines over humans is concerned, the portrayal of Chance alludes to the well-known image of the narcotized coach potato that turns into a humachine. Reminiscent of McLuhan's description of people that carry out the commands of TV with "perfect psycho-mimetic skill" (336), Chance is presented as a half-human entity obeying others' and TV's commands. Writing that Chance "has come to terms with himself mechanically" and has been automated and computerized by the world, James D. Hutchinson suspects an ideal compatibility between Chance and television (86-87):

Kosinski strongly implies that modern man, living as he does in a highly technological society such as in the U.S., can only respond to his environment and to circumstances in a manner for which he has been programmed by his technology. (Hutchinson 89)

According to Hutchinson's analysis, Chance follows the McLuhanist plea to serve technologies such as television and to perform docility and quiescence mechanically and without hesitation. When, as elaborated in the previous part of my study, McLuhan generates a conception of humans subordinated to TV that takes over control, Kosinski's protagonist corresponds perfectly to this conception. As Hutchinson writes, Chance is an "automated man" conditioned by TV (88-89). The novel therefore sustains the clear separation of humans and machines and denies possible disruptions of this separation. *Being There* does not depict the naturalization of this "symbiotic venture" (Deuze, *Media* 30)¹⁴⁰ as a process with which humans can live in peace. Instead, it emphasizes the feelings of uneasiness that have accompanied human adaptation to television ever since, as the theoretical discussion in the previous chapter makes clear.

Apart from Chance's adaptation to television, the text also underlines the apparatus' metamorphosis into a half-human being. Through Chance's perspective, the TV set appears like a half-animate entity that robs the people it presents of their human core. *Being There* dramatizes the notion of television emptying the images it transmits when Chance seems to perceive the apparatus and television cameras as animalistic, monstrous beings. In preparation for the talk show Chance is invited to, he waits in an adjacent room where he watches the "big, sharp-nosed cameras" rolling around the stage (BT 51); he

¹⁴⁰ Here, Deuze refers to Sloterdijk.

associates these with animate beings that have faces and can move. TV also has “its own neither solid nor fluid face” (52). Later on, absorbed by what is happening around him, Chance sees the cameras “licking up the image of his body” and “recording his every movement;” he describes television as “peeling their [other characters’] images from their bodies until they were sucked into the caverns of their viewers’ eyes, forever beyond retrieval, to disappear” (52-53). Both the cameras and television are depicted as man-machines that peel the skin off people’s bodies. During his TV appearance, Chance feels the cameras meticulously recording his every movement, making sure that he cannot escape. Again, the cameras and TV appear like predators that encircle their prey, eager to attack it. Once they do, they savage the victim, devour the meat – the essence – and only spare the skin – the image. Reverting to notions of the animalistic and the monstrous, the novels suggests that television endangers the audience. It implies that the TV-monster is interested only in surfaces, in catching human life and spitting out only an unsubstantial copy.

In this passage, *Being There* fuels the idea of the dehumanizing effects of television on the viewers.¹⁴¹ In the aforementioned interview, Kosinski describes television viewers as “groups of solitary individuals watching their private, remote-controlled TV sets.” This prospect, “a nation of *videots*,” is for Kosinski “the ultimate future terror.” Like Postman, Kosinski’s concerns are directed at children who, growing up with television, are educated and socialized by the apparatus and could slowly turn into humachines. Based on experiments with schoolchildren and teenagers he carried out, Kosinski expresses worries over TV viewers who, fully immersed in the world of television, stick to the screen and are completely fascinated by what they are presented with: “They want to watch, they don’t want to be spoken to. They want to watch, they don’t want to talk” (Kosinski qtd. in Sohn 52; original emphasis). In this interview, Kosinski portrays young viewers in the same way he sketches Chance in *Being There*. Both the youth and their representation, Chance, are considered to be glued to the screen and to have dissolved into the apparatus. Asked about this comparison, Kosinski explains: “Of course, Chance is a fictional archetype. On the other hand, a number of teachers have told me that many of their young students resemble Chance” (qtd. in Sohn 25).

Being There reinforces the human anxiety going along with Baudrillard’s claim that the difference between man and machine has become more and more difficult to determine. TV-era readers of *Being There* agree with this reading. Ivan Sanders, for instance, describes Chance as a “sub-human” (181) and Lupack argues that Chance “cannot define his existence apart from the McLuhanesque medium” (“Hit” 61). *Being There* has a culturally pessimistic take on the conjunction of humanity and technology. Calling Chance,

¹⁴¹ Tiefenthaler agrees that *Being There* raises concerns over the degrading and dehumanizing effects of TV (*Jerzy* 128).

as Sanders does, “sub-human” expresses concerns over what Hayles conceptualizes as technogenesis, that is the idea that human beings and technological media evolve mutually. With Chance, *Being There* offers the readers an enactment of the humachine worshipped by American society. Through its satirical portrayal, *Being There* aligns with TV-era critics who propagate human resistance to media technologies such as television.

Conclusion

The critique of American TV culture that *Being There* expresses is directed at a society in which a man – or ‘being’ – like Chance is able to become a much-worshipped celebrity. In the novel, American society idolizes a young man educated and socialized by television who displays strong affinities with the apparatus and wants to turn into the screen. The society portrayed in *Being There* thinks of Chance as a successful, self-assured man at ease with and true to himself, as a man who is natural, strong, and brave. As someone with the “true mark of a leader” (BT 57), the characters believe in his becoming a leading figure in U.S. politics/economy. Direct and natural he is indeed. Asked for his opinion about the economy, he answers genuinely and sincerely by drawing on his gardening experience. Ironically, his comments are mistaken for being a “naturalistic approach to politics and economics” (70).¹⁴² Society spuriously perceives Chance as a straightforward man with a “down-to-earth philosophy” (69). Both the characters meeting him in person and the ones knowing him from television are equally fascinated by an innocent, naïve, unworldly creature (Tiefenthaler, *Jerzy* 116).

Kosinski’s novel contrasts the way in which its characters respond to Chance with how the novel forces its readers to feel about the protagonist. Readers, perhaps reminded of the myth of Kaspar Hauser, expect Chance to have a repelling and alienating effect on the society the satire depicts, because the protagonist alienates and repels the readers of the novel. The fact that the characters regard him as a celebrity is therefore a farce, since all he does is imitate TV representations of human behavior. From the readers’ perspective, Chance is not authentic or pure; he is a copy of a human being. *Being There*, however, portrays American society as being unable to recognize the fact that they face and are interacting with a copy, not a human and social being. It is, the text suggests, a society under the spell of the self’s copy. This becomes especially clear when a reporter asks Chance what newspapers he reads. He answers honestly and deliberately: “I do not read any newspapers. . . . I watch TV.” The reporter, neither astonished nor shocked by what he considers to be a revelation, answers back:

¹⁴² Calling this passage “one of those moments in which life imitates art,” Tichi clarifies that in 1981 Donald Regan, secretary of the treasury, similarly used an analogy to explain to President Ronald Reagan the precarious economic situation (*Electronic* 206-07).

Thank you, Mr. Gardiner, . . . for what is probably the most honest admission to come from a public figure in recent years. Few men in public life have had the courage not to read newspapers. None have had the guts to admit it! (BT 74)

Ridiculing the characters for having fallen prey to television, the novel criticizes American society for favoring TV over newspapers as a source of information. The characters, however, are hesitant to admit it; instead, they hide behind their newspapers. The passage draws attention to what Postman would openly condemn 15 years later: that due to television public discourse has become dangerous nonsense (*Amusing* 16). The problem Postman sees is that “television is at its most trivial and, therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high, when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations” (16-17). In other words, TV is, according to Postman, most dangerous with regard to news coverage, a critique which *Being There* also articulates.

For Chance, war is yet another television program, rather than a documentation of actual human cruelty: “The war? Which war? . . . I’ve seen many wars on TV” (BT 81). This declaration alludes to what one might want to call ‘the televisionization of war.’ Due to the constant broadcast of war footage, the characters seem to have become used to the cruelties happening in the world. This phenomenon – TV-induced sensationalism and news as a form of entertainment – has been widely acknowledged and denounced by critics like Andrew Marr: “The idea of news has altered. It stopped being essentially information and became something designed to produce – at all costs, always – an emotional reaction, the more extreme the better” (qtd. in Thussu 8). Holding the same view, Daya Kishan Thussu remarks:

Television news, particularly 24/7 rolling news, reaches its apotheosis in times of war and conflict. The dramatic visual spectacle of violence and death grabs the attention and engages the audience like few other media subjects, whether its causes are human (wars, riots, killings), natural (floods, earthquakes, hurricane) or both (famines). (113)

In 1970, *Being There* draws attention to a development that Postman fears in 1985 and that Thussu confirms more than 40 years later: the trivialization of war through TV news coverage:

As television news has been commercialized, the need to make it entertaining has become a crucial priority for broadcasters, as they are forced to borrow and adapt characteristics from entertainment genres and modes of conversation that privilege an informal communicative style, with its emphasis on personalities, style, storytelling skills and spectacles. Its tendency to follow a tabloid approach, its capacity to circulate trivia, blend fact with fiction and even distort the truth is troubling (Downie and Kaiser, 2002; Gitlin, 2002; Anderson, 2004). (Thussu 4)

Next to many other critics, Thussu claims that the news is nowadays comparable to fictional television programs, both of which fulfil the function of entertaining the TV audience, rather than transmitting information.

Being There addresses the comparison of news coverage and fictional programs through one of the characters:

‘Alas,’ the woman said, ‘in this country, when we dream of reality, television wakes us. To millions, the war, I suppose, is just another TV program. But out there, at the front, real men are giving their lives.’ (BT 81)

Alluding to the engagement of the U.S. in the Vietnam War, the character’s comment implies that television could actually operate as ‘a window to the world’ if the American society was prepared to treat what they see differently. Rather than dreaming of reality, they should face it and see the cruelty of ‘actual’ reality – instead of treating it like a form of entertainment. According to the character, television could operate as a wake-up call, were its potential as such not neglected and its capacity not misused.

The critique voiced here corresponds with Postman’s accusation that American television supplies its audience with nothing but entertainment, which is why the line between what is and what is not show business is vanishing (*Amusing* 89, 100):

And most important of all, there is no subject of human interest – politics, news, education, religion, science, sports – that does not find its way to television. Which means that all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television. (79)

Postman complains about the fusion of TV entertainment with news coverage and thus the dissolution of TV entertainment into everyday life. Ridiculing a society still interested in upholding the façade of a nation of well-educated newspaper recipients, *Being There* shares Postman’s concern that television turns the cruelties of life into pure entertainment.

As Tiefenthaler writes, *Being There* problematizes people’s simple-mindedness, naivety, and self-centeredness, which have become cultural values in the age of television in the United States (*Jerzy* 219-20). Whereas Andrew Gordon thinks of *Being There* as “a cautionary tale about the debilitating effects of television on our lives” (3), John M. Gogol argues that it shows us “the distortions it [television] could lead us to” (8). These and other literary scholars consider the society portrayed in the novel to represent the first television generation (Goetsch 83, 92; Lupack, “Hit” 60). Complaints and warnings center, as they say, on TV’s risk of addiction (Sherwin 39) and on its narcotic and hypnotic power that induces a dangerously regressive state of passivity (Gordon 3).¹⁴³ More generally, critics agree that

¹⁴³ See also Lupack who talks about the “all-pervasive hypnotic power of television” (“Hit” 58).

Being There satirizes a society that, through worshipping television (Goetsch 87), is “dull” (Sanders 180) and “benumbed, brainwashed, [and] bewildered” (Lupack, “Hit” 61, 68). Sanders speaks of an “anxiety for a civilization whose curiosity has been dulled, its senses deadened, by the electronic image” (180), and Scott C. Holstad claims that Chance, “guilty of existential apathy,” shows society that “this is where we have come” (n.p.). This collective angst also revolves around the idea that TV is evil (Lupack, “Hit” 60), that it deprives American culture of its essence and causes a state of “inherent meaninglessness” (Holstad n.p.),¹⁴⁴ and that it turns humans into humachines. Lupack therefore speaks of “a new sort of telegenic being,” claiming that *Being There* anticipates the frightening possibility of an “Ultimate Computer” (“Hit” 58, 65).

These comments all respond to the climate of the 1960s and 1970s when critics both feared and condemned television. The satirical portrayal of American society criticizes the adaptation of human life to the media technology of television, an adaptation one must dread and therefore counteract, as the novel suggests. *Being There* hints at the reconciliation Deuze calls for when he suggests people overcome the “dualist fallacy of domination of man over machine (or vice versa)” (*Media* xiii), but its satirical flavor is supposed to operate as a warning. Through Chance and the other characters, *Being There* enacts the human adaptation to the televisionization of everyday life, but it cautions its readers about it. The novel’s essence corresponds with and nourishes critics’ concerns of that time; it condemns the reconciliation of man and machine as a development about which to be anxious.

¹⁴⁴ Tucker writes about the “pointlessness in American behavior” (223).

Chapter 4: Living TV Life in Times of Indetermination: Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985)

The enactments of TV experiences in DeLillo's success novel *White Noise* (abbr. WN) are highly contradictory. In contrast to Kosinski's satire, *White Noise* never really condemns TV's omnipresence. DeLillo sketches a family whose members are at different levels of getting used to everyday life with and through television. The protagonist Jack, the father, is a little skeptical about its ubiquity, but he does not censure it. DeLillo presents him as a character that does not seem to know how to deal with and what to make of television and the collective angst associated with it. In the course of the story, he learns that he cannot stop himself from adapting to and living in its terms. In the end, he relies on others' explanations, which legitimate the medium's enjoyment and promote its naturalization. The characters upon whom Jack relies are his colleagues, who both represent and mis-represent the typical TV-age critique of the medium. On the one hand, they are aware of and allude to familiar concerns over TV's fatal impact on humanity; on the other hand, they reverse the criticisms commonly associated with television and offer reasons why television should be accepted and relished. Jack's oldest son, Heinrich, in contrast, articulates the well-known critique without challenging it. Conscious of the dangerous effects that in the 1980s TV is believed to have, he explicitly warns of the medium. The most confident and straightforward critique is indirectly represented by the students Jack's colleagues refer to in their discussions. Readers are informed that the students' generation is believed to have turned away from the medium, expressing a resistance to television that Jack's colleagues criticize and meet with incomprehension. The other children of Jack and his wife Babette are stereotypical representations of the TV generation; used to the televisionization of everyday life, they are simply speaking indifferent. For them, living with and through TV is a normal way of being that Jack equally adapts to in the course of the story.

As argued in the last chapter, *Being There* criticizes a society gradually adapting to television. The novel's satirical depiction of TV culture focuses on the anxiety concerning TV's ubiquity. *White Noise* responds to the process of naturalization and the shared feeling that television intrudes into people's everyday lives in the same way as *Being There*, but it also places emphasis on other feelings, reactions, and ways of thinking. DeLillo's novel

delineates how humans are slowly getting used to televisionization. Although the human angst over TV's fatal effects is part of the narrative, it differs from *Being There*, as it draws attention to feelings of confusion, resignation, conformity, indifference and appreciation. *White Noise* portrays strategies the characters use to be able to accept television's growing governance, strategies that legitimate the joy of watching and experiencing TV.

DeLillo invites his readers into a world of excessive consumerism and capitalism-worship¹⁴⁵ where authenticity and uniqueness have been replaced by copies of copies of copies,¹⁴⁶ a world of pop-cultural icons and celebrity worship where everybody seems to be occupied with death (Boxall 109; King 75; LeClair 387), and a world of scientific unreliability (Osteen, Introduction xii) with unmanageable amounts of information where knowledge is ambivalent at best.¹⁴⁷ In this world, television holds a permanent position and plays a significant role. The outstanding role of television is also acknowledged by Frank Lentricchia and Mark Osteen. Whereas the former says the novel tells a "surprising history of television" (Lentricchia 415), the latter calls it a "sly satire of television" and the novel's first section a "hyper-intelligent TV sitcom" (Osteen, Introduction ix).¹⁴⁸ Drawing on these findings, my reading focuses on the realization that television has an outstanding role in the characters' everyday lives. I will address the characters' experiences with the ubiquity of television, which they perceive both as an invasion and a normal condition. I will also elaborate on their ambiguous and contradictory relations to television, and their experiences with living in and through it. I shall, moreover, address the novel's enactments of the fusion of humans with TV apparatuses, a fusion about which the characters seem not to worry.

DeLillo's novel portrays an extract of the life of the Gladneys, an American patchwork family. Father Jack Gladney is the protagonist who tells the story as first person narrator. He is professor of Hitler studies, a research field he himself has invented, and works at the College-on-the-Hill in Blacksmith, an ordinary American town. His fourth wife, Babette (who has also been married four times before), does volunteer work. She teaches seminars

¹⁴⁵ Osteen speaks of the novel's depiction of the "deleterious effects of capitalism" (Introduction xii).

¹⁴⁶ Or, in Leonard Wilcox's words, "a world of simulacra, where images and electronic representations replace direct experience" (346).

¹⁴⁷ These are but a few examples of how scholars have approached *White Noise*. The novel cannot easily be assigned to a literary period or a genre. It incorporates a number of different characteristics and has therefore been denominated a "generic hybrid," encompassing as diverse features as those of "the domestic drama, the college satire, the apocalyptic melodrama, the crime novel, [and] the social satire" (Keesey qtd. in Barrett 97). *White Noise* is therefore known as a "novel of exposure and confusion" (Dewey 82); a "disaster novel" (LeClair 389); a "novel about popular culture" (King 74); a novel which is thematically concerned with origin and end (Barrett 99).

¹⁴⁸ See also John N. Duvall's article "The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*."

on issues like posture or eating and drinking and reads to the elderly. The couple has four children who actually live with them (others live with the couples' former partners): Heinrich (14, Jack's son), Steffie (9, Jack's daughter), Denise (11, Babette's daughter), and 4-year-old Wilder, the child the couple had together.

White Noise consists of three parts: (I) "Waves and Radiation;" (II) "The Airborne Toxic Event;" and (III) "Dylarama;" the second and third part also contain the two major plot lines of the story (Wiese 3). The novel – starting *in medias res* – is mostly set in the Gladneys' home, so that readers become acquainted with the family's everyday life routines. The first turning point interrupting the usual routines is The Airborne Toxic Event, the novel's central section (Orr 20). The term 'event' refers to a chemical cloud feared to poison the environment. All Blacksmith residents are therefore summoned to an evacuation. After only a short time of displacement, everything goes back to normal. The other plot line concerns Dylar, a drug supposed to counteract the fear of death. Both Jack and Babette are afflicted with this dread. Without her family knowing about it, Babette takes the drug, but the side effects give her away. When Jack finds out about the doctor prescribing Babette Dylar (or rather, providing her with it in exchange for sex), he tries to murder him, but does not succeed.

In the life of Jack and his family, watching TV and shopping are constitutive parts of the daily routines. Regardless of where Jack and the other characters reside, they are surrounded by white noise, that is the nonstop hum of the motorway; both the television and the radio running in the background; household appliances such as the fridge and the microwave; or loudspeaker voices in supermarkets. This "aural landscape" (Laist 73) permeates the atmosphere in the novel from the beginning to the end.

The novel's description of the aural landscape – of which television noise is a constitutive element – is a fruitful example of the characters' contradictory experiences with and relations to television. I shall therefore start by analyzing Jack's experience of the expressway close to where the family lives. Jack experiences the aural landscape of the story world in conflicting ways. Focusing the analysis on how he perceives the different sorts of noise surrounding him, I would like to show that he feels both soothed and repelled. These inconsistent feelings also pertain to Jack's relation to television, and more than that they are representative of the novel's overall ambiguous enactments of TV experiences.

When Jack describes the location of the family's house at the very beginning of the story, he speaks of a peaceful neighborhood "at the end of a quiet street." The very next sentence, however, destroys this idyllically depicted living environment, for the house is situated close to an expressway. This contradictory description, a quiet street near an expressway, is further ridiculed when Jack does not continue to address the consequences one would assume to follow. Instead of complaining about sleepless nights resulting from these disadvantageous living conditions, Jack highlights the noise's

soothing side effects: The traffic is not dense, but “sparse,” and it does not rumble or thunder but “washes past.” Also, it is not intrusive, but it provides the family with a “remote and steady murmur,” which accompanies them in their sleep. The noise’s calming effects described by Jack are contested when he mentions “dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream” (WN 4). This rather uncanny image of mysteriously whispering, unsettling voices disrupts the peacefulness just created. It seems that Jack experiences the noise of the expressway both as reassuring and disturbing.¹⁴⁹

Sarah Pink and Kerstin Leder Mackley propose that media technologies such as television belong to people’s aural landscapes in their everyday lives. People regard media as “part of the experiential, habitual and unspoken dimensions of everyday routines” (Pink and Leder Mackley 677). As such, media are “engaged for affective and embodied ways of making the home ‘feel right’” (678). In their study of media in everyday life, Pink and Leder Mackley found out that people’s going to bed routines “involve patterns of switching on and off that signify a transition, making the home feel right at night” (684). Test persons whose daily routines were observed and who were then interviewed explain that “the noise of ‘something being there’ in the background” has to do not with media content but with feeling the presence of these media (685). One interviewee reports that the idea of everything being switched off is connected with feeling at ease. Another explains that turning on the television first thing in the morning helps everyone to “wake up properly” (686). Families agree that sitting in front of the television in the evening is considered a relaxing time the family can spend together (687). These findings not only emphasize the ongoing significance and centrality of television in the domestic sphere today, but they also suggest that people have ambiguous relations to and experiences with television. Those tested by Pink and Leder Mackley report that “the on/off-ness” (686) of media – and television is referred to conspicuously often – is connected with being relaxed and feeling right at home. They also report, however, that the on-ness is sometimes experienced as disturbing. In short, people consider television to create a soothing background sound that is part of feeling at home, but they also consider it to provoke a feeling of uneasiness.

White Noise corresponds to these findings. Televisual noise is part of the aural landscape in the novel’s story world, especially in the family’s home. Next to domestic sounds such as washing machines, dishwashers or microwaves, television and the radio are the most prevalent sources of sound (Weekes 288). Never switched off, TV voices compose a constant background sound in the Gladney household which seems to have a soothing effect (LeClair 397), just like the noise of the expressway at night. It sur-

¹⁴⁹ Karen Weekes argues “the term ‘white noise’ can be used in either a positive or a pejorative sense, depending on whether it refers to an unremitting noise one is trying to escape or to the sound introduced as escape” (285).

rounds the family's life and is constant and reliable.¹⁵⁰ The notion of television sounds embracing the Gladney home is reinforced on the level of discourse, as TV sound-bites interrupt the narrative repetitively (Weekes 288; Wiese 11). Jack constantly reports the incoherent TV sentences he picks up:

After dinner, on my way upstairs, I heard the TV say: 'Let's sit half lotus and think about our spines.' (WN 18)

Someone turned on the TV set at the end of the hall, and a woman's voice said: 'If it breaks easily into pieces, it is called shale. When wet, it smells like clay.' (28-29)

Upstairs a British voice said: 'There are forms of vertigo that do not include spinning.' (56)

The TV said: 'And other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio.' (61)

The voice upstairs remarked: 'A California think-tank says the next world war may be fought over salt.' (215)

Readers of the novel experience the TV fragments interrupting the narrative like commercials interrupting the television program. In the same way TV viewers can rely on the next commercial break to come, DeLillo's readers can be certain to encounter the next TV snippet in their further reading. The apparently meaningless insertions seem to be textual morsels chosen at random, which the author interlaced in the narrative rather arbitrarily. Coming unexpectedly, these insertions accompany the narrative from the start to the end. Formally speaking, they operate as a TV sound-framework that embraces the narrative in the same way the TV voices in the story are described as embracing the family's life at home. In short, they enact the readers' experience of watching television.

TV viewers experience commercial breaks in conflicting ways. When watching a sitcom, one can rely on the interruption of the narrative flow one might want to use to go to the bathroom or take care of something else. At the same time, however, viewers experience these interruptions as annoying breaks that reduce the value of the televisual experience. The TV sentences that the text describes Jack as hearing seem to have the same effect on his character. On the one hand, the novel suggests TV sounds to be a part of the homely atmosphere. They create the atmosphere of feeling at home and being safe. Jack, it seems, feels comforted by the TV voices that keep telling him that he is not alone (LeClair 410). On the other hand, Jack seems to experience the TV bits he keeps hearing as "absurd phrases which emanate from the television [and which] are detached from any human meaning" (Laist 73). Jack feels disturbed in the midst of the house's aural landscape and tries to escape TV's "narcotic undertow" and its "brain-sucking power"

¹⁵⁰ Freese also pinpoints the calming effects of technologies in *White Noise*. According to his reading, "advanced technology" creates "a dependable and thoroughly domesticated environment" and is "predictable," "reliable," and "comfortable" ("High" 100).

(WN 16). He experiences the TV and radio¹⁵¹ noise he is constantly exposed to as exhausting. When he wants to switch off the radio, it is not because he wants to think, but because he wants to stop thinking (123). Jack's exposure to the medial aural landscape implies a constant alertness, a persistent compulsion to listen, concentrate, and think. He feels haunted by the voices continuously surrounding him and hurries out of the room when the radio switches on again, "fearing that some call-in voice . . . would be the last thing I heard in this world" (233).

As a constitutive part of the novel's aural landscape, television noise provides the Gladneys with an atmosphere that suggests solidity and trustworthiness, but which is also haunting and disturbing. Through Jack's perspective, readers learn that the protagonist experiences TV noise and the overall aural landscape in contradictory ways. It is striking, however, that Jack is the only character described as experiencing the TV noise ambiguously. Not once does the novel portray the other characters as being annoyed or disturbed in any way. Their "environmental use" of TV as a background noise and a part of sociability and comfort (Kortti 295)¹⁵² suggests that the family members simply adapt to the sounds of television.

In the following, I will analyze father Jack's ambiguous experiences of, and attitudes towards, television and contrast them with his children's indifferent relations to TV, his colleagues' positive feelings towards television which they defend in a self-confident manner, and with the generation of students who adopt the critical attitude one expects to be represented by Jack's pre-TV era generation. I will also draw attention to those passages of the novel that express the conventional critique of television. I aim to show that the novel alludes to this dominant strand of criticism, but that it refuses to identify with it fully. Since *White Noise* offers a less biased portrayal than *Being There*, my analysis of *White Noise* provides evidence for the claim that the enactments of TV experiences in the selected novels change over time, but that the anxiety about TV does not vanish completely. This chapter shows how *White Noise* anticipates the adaptation of humans to the televisionization of everyday life in a hesitant but forward-looking way. By reinforcing the stereotypical critique of TV's naturalization, the novel nevertheless manages to attenuate it.

¹⁵¹ Based on my observation that both television and the radio seem to fulfill the same narrative function in *White Noise*, I sometimes refer to passages which address the radio when attempting to make a point with regard to television.

¹⁵² Kortti refers to James Lull's categorization of the social uses of television in *Inside Family Viewing: Ethnographic Research on Television's Audiences* where he distinguishes between structural and relational uses.

Contradictory Enactments of TV Experiences

Since *White Noise*'s enactments of TV experiences are highly ambiguous, it is both a novel criticizing television and a novel that breaks with the well-known critique. An analysis of the novel's enactments of TV experiences through the protagonist exemplifies the conflicting ways in which it responds to and breaks with the conventional critique of its time. DeLillo describes Jack as not having an opinion; he is still on his way to finding out what to make of television. The protagonist does and does not represent voices of critical authorities such as Postman. He refers to the critical discourse on television, but he is also portrayed as listening to others who subvert the prejudices against the medium and find explanations that legitimate a joyful TV experience. A passage of a conversation between Jack and his colleague, Murray Siskind, turns the generation-specific attitudes towards television, which are usually emphasized in TV-era texts, upside down. Critics like Postman and Kosinski direct their critique at the TV generation, which they fear is under TV's spell. Their critique implies that the pre-TV era generation is still immune to television, whereas the younger generation cannot resist its invasiveness. Ridiculing this conception, *White Noise* represents the pre-TV generation as having started to appreciate the medium, the generation of young adults as being critical of television, and the children, the youngest generation, as being immersed in TV and simply used to living in its terms.

The open attitude that Jack's generation adopts towards television is first addressed in a conversation between Jack and Murray. Jack tells Murray about Babette's son Eugene who lives with his father in the outback of Australia. Since the boy is, as Jack explains, "growing up without television," he calls him "a sort of wild child, a savage" who is "intelligent and literate but deprived of the deeper codes and messages that mark his species as unique" (WN 50). Eugene seems to represent the sort of child that critics nostalgically long for. Not growing up with television, he is pure and not negatively affected by what critics describe as TV's polluting impact on the human mind. Jack, however, inverts these notions. He describes Eugene as a savage who lacks the advantages of a TV education. Murray's answer "TV is a problem only if you've forgotten how to look and listen" (50) demonstrates how their generation thinks of, deals with, and experiences television. They agree that TV can be problematic, but not in itself. Television, Murray implies, is only dangerous if not treated with care. Those afraid of or condemning it have simply forgotten how to use it wisely.

Murray then continues to talk about his students who are "beginning to feel they ought to turn against the medium;" they find that TV is "just another name for junk mail," and "the death throes of human consciousness." They are even "ashamed of their television past." These young adults are the ones who seem to fear and denunciate TV, not the likes of Jack and Murray. In Murray's view, watching television is a "great and humbling experience"

that is “Close to mystical:” “It’s like a myth being born right there in our living room, like something we know in a dreamlike and preconscious way. You have to learn how to look. You have to open yourself to the data.” Murray advertises watching television as a spiritual experience. The repetitions, he says, are “like chants, like mantras.” Enthused about how television “overflows with sacred formulas,” Murray advises that we “respond innocently and get past our irritation, weariness, disgust” (WN 50-51). Notably, Murray’s laudation reveals that his generation is equally aware of what the younger generation agrees to be TV’s fatal effects, but that he blames them for not taking television seriously enough. It is their own fault if they decide not to open up. Murray calls on humanity to behave like children and encounter television in innocent, naïve ways. His advice is, in other words, to neglect one’s doubts and devote oneself to TV’s mantras.

This passage suggests that not the students but Murray and Jack, having indulged in TV’s sacred formulas, are the ones who have not been able to resist its powerful appeal. Trying to make sense of and defend their non-resistance, however, they claim to be the ones who really understand what television is about and how it is to be used. Packaging their lack of resistance as a superior form of sense-making and knowledge, the two university professors believe in their own logic, but this logic is ridiculed: DeLillo satirizes the idea of authorized knowledge in times of abundant information when knowledge, ostensibly authorized, is portrayed as an outcome of forms of storytelling. By way of ridiculing authorities such as university professors, the narrator indicates that their advice cannot be trusted.

In the above-quoted conversation, Jack is presented as a confused, insecure character on his way to finding out what his opinion about television is. Murray is the one who talks most of the time. Except for telling him about Eugene, Jack only listens and asks questions. Since Jack has difficulty to form an opinion, he rather relies on those of others: “I didn’t know how I felt and wanted a clue” (WN 79). Relying on others’ opinions turns into a strategy which Jack uses to understand how to deal with and experience television. When he finds himself enjoying disaster footage on television, Jack admits that he feels absorbed: “There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We’d never before been so attentive” (64). Describing his family’s fascination by and absorption in this horrible news coverage, Jack neither feels guilty, nor shows himself to be ignorant of his own pleasure in observing human suffering. Insecurely he asks Alfonse, another colleague: “Why is it, Alfonse, that decent, well-meaning and responsible people find themselves intrigued by catastrophe when they see it on television?” (65). This question is one of the rare occasions when Jack enacts being critical of television. His question implies that he considers himself “well-meaning and responsible,” and he seems to wonder how he of all people cannot resist the alluring effects of television. Then again, he does not condemn his own behavior any further. His rather innocent question does not necessarily imply that he feels guilty and wants to fight his tendency to be

absorbed in televisual representations of agony. As the insecure professor who should but cannot be authoritative, Jack needs another authority to explain to him how he should feel and think. Instead of giving answers, he keeps on asking, because he does not have an opinion of his own.

Alfonse's reply reinforces the critique of television typical of its time. Explaining to Jack that "we're suffering from brain fade," Alfonse implies, but does not say directly, that television is responsible for human indifference towards other people's suffering. He explains: "The flow is constant. . . . Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them." According to him, it is due to the continuous flow of television that humans have become more and more indifferent. His critical observation is, however, attenuated a few sentences later when he makes clear that people "have every right to find it fascinating" when things happen on TV. Like Murray, Alfonse offers a convincing way out of feeling guilty and being critical of oneself. Jumping in, Murray elaborates on the reason for brain fade, explaining that people have "forgotten how to listen and look as children" and that it is "a simple case of misuse." Defending their own dependency on and fascination with television, the scholars naturalize the effects of television on viewers which are conventionally criticized. Feeling entertained by disaster footage, Alfonse assures us, is "natural" and "normal" (WN 65-66).

Like *Being There*, *White Noise* enacts the human adaptation to television, and like *Being There*, it echoes the uneasiness of the development it portrays. Notably, however, the well-known human anxiety is not enacted through and represented by the protagonist, the novel's dominant voice. As a passive agent, he embodies the innocence of a child which Murray advertises as the solution to the human/TV-predicament. Asking questions and listening to others' efforts to describe the human interaction with television as a process of naturalization, Jack is probably representative of many readers in 1985 who, as television viewers, were unsure how to deal with the medium: Jack is neither able to disregard TV's potential harm completely, nor is he capable of resisting or escaping it. Although *White Noise* addresses the human adaptation to the televisionization of everyday life in critical terms, it also suggests that humans get used to TV eventually.

A Heightened Form of Being

In the analysis of *Being There*, I proposed that Chance's TV imitations are evidence of his televisionized consciousness; I suggest the same with regard to the characters of *White Noise*. First of all, the characters' ways of thinking in terms of television are expressed through their falling back on the stereotypical categorizations of character types or roles used in (televisual) storytelling. Using stereotypical characters like 'the villain' or 'the beauty,' which have specific functions in a narrative, is a basic technique of storytelling in

general. In *White Noise*, Jack's colleague Murray talks about his neighbors living in the same house. His experiences of living with and describing his co-residents give the impression that his going to the movies or watching television affects consciousness. So as to explain to Jack what they are like, he uses categorizing descriptions:

A woman who harbors a terrible secret. A man with a haunted look. A man who never comes out of his room. A woman who stands by the letter box for hours, waiting for something that never seems to arrive. A man with no past. A woman with a past. (WN 10)

Asked by Jack which "one" he is, Murray responds "I'm the Jew" (10-11). In this way of telling Jack about the neighbors he lives next to, Murray resorts to means of storytelling. The list of his co-residents reads like the cast of a thriller. Murray, it seems, perceives them like characters in a movie.¹⁵³ He even considers himself to have a role in his script of everyday life. However, neither Murray nor Jack comments on this approach of describing Murray's neighbors and himself. Jack could ask his colleague why he thinks of them in terms of a cast and why he thinks of himself to have the role of "the Jew." The text, however, does not offer such a kind of reaction. Thinking in terms of casts, the text indicates, is a naturalized way of thinking.

Jack's teleconsciousness is more convincingly enacted in a scene where Jack tries to kill Babette's seducer Mink (alias Dr. Gray), who provided her with the drug Dylar. He perceives himself as a TV character and experiences the situation as a scene he knows from watching television.¹⁵⁴ Jack watches himself preparing and committing the crime ("I watched myself take each separate step," WN 291) and sees himself from Mink's perspective ("I tried to see myself from Mink's viewpoint," 298). He even sees himself looming like a TV image: "I advanced into the area of flickering light, out of the shadows, seeking to loom. . . . I loomed in the doorway, conscious of looming, seeing myself from Mink's viewpoint, magnified, threatening" (297). Due to being reminded of similar television scenes, Jack thinks of himself as a looming magnified image. He seems to experience the zoom of a camera, and his perception simulates a close-up. Jack is so accustomed to watching television that his perception appears to have adapted to familiar filmmaking techniques and to how characters' perceptions are represented on the screen. Furthermore, through Jack's perspective, Mink also appears as a television or movie character. He sees Mink as something "glowing in the dark" (294),

¹⁵³ In this passage the text itself makes this allusion when Murray mentions the movies without offering a context or further explanation.

¹⁵⁴ This scene is concordantly considered to be taken from TV/the movies. Orr argues that Jack plots out the murder of Mink "as if he is writing a film noir script" (37); Osteen regards Jack's plot "implausible" and as coming "from a TV movie" (Introduction ix); and Freese argues that "Jack's world view is painfully upset by the sudden blending of his real life and his vicarious TV experience" ("High" 101).

like the TV screen in the middle of the dark room in which Mink is described as sitting. It seems as if Jack perceives Mink as “an unreal being who can be killed with a television character’s impunity” (LeClair 397).

The passage suggests that Jack takes the perfect murder – as seen on TV – as an example he attempts to imitate. Such an endeavor would mean that Jack is highly influenced by watching television, but the text proposes something even more fundamental: that Jack’s perception is filtered by his TV-experience. Television, it appears, has not only conquered the Gladney household; it has also invaded Jack’s cognitive center. Rather than simply imitating behavior as seen on TV, the narrator describes Jack’s perception as having adapted to how Jack typically sees people represented on television. Like Chance who thinks of himself as an image and experiences his whole being in the world as being like a TV show, Jack’s ways of perceiving, experiencing, and thinking are infused with how he perceives, experiences, and thinks about what he watches on television, with how a character’s perception is represented on the screen.

Jack, still trying to come to terms with the televisionization of everyday life, cannot fight TV’s influence on his consciousness. At the beginning of the story, Jack relates how he and his wife have decided to attempt to control their children’s television consumption:

That night, a Friday, we ordered Chinese food and watched television together, the six of us. Babette had made it a rule. She seemed to think that if kids watched television one night a week with parents or stepparents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it wholesome domestic sport. Its narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power would be gradually reduced. (WN 16)

This passage introduces Jack and Babette as responsible parents who reflect on their children’s exposure to television. In this part of the story, the novel still nourishes the critique of the medium typical of the time. The text suggests that the parents believe television to have a “brain-sucking power” and to endanger children’s intellectual development. I would like to note, however, that it is not Jack who complains about TV’s brain-sucking power. He only repeats Babette’s rule, stating that he “felt vaguely slighted by this reasoning” (16). Nowhere does the text state explicitly that Jack himself thinks of television as a threat. Again, he simply refers to someone else’s, here Babette’s, opinion.

At the end of the story, the last traces of father Jack’s suspiciousness seem to have vanished. Instead of bemoaning the negative effects television might have, he must realize that he cannot evade it, and that he cannot *not* adapt to it. One step in the process of Jack’s adaptation to living in terms of TV is described when he watches his daughter Steffie repeat TV phrases in her sleep:

She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

Toyota Celica.

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. . . . But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. . . . Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. (WN 148-49; original emphasis)

Jack, the passage suggests, is entranced by how his daughter repeats TV bits while sleeping. He experiences these sound-bites as televisual mantras with hypnotic effects (Freese, "High" 99). With regard to the enactment of the protagonist's teleconsciousness, the passage indicates two things at the same time. Firstly, consuming television even affects the subconscious; TV conditions consciousness as well as subconsciousness. Secondly, Jack greatly enjoys listening to TV voices. Jack is affected by witnessing his daughter in the same way TV affects Steffie; the same way Steffie is under TV's spell, Jack is under hers. Jack, in other words, experiences TV through his daughter, and he admits to feeling elevated. *White Noise* proposes that the televisionization of everyday life also affects those who are still unsure of how to deal with it or even fear the dangerous effects television is believed to have. Instead of depicting this development as human subordination to technology, the novel pinpoints in the above-quoted passage the fact that the character of Jack enjoys and appreciates TV. Jack does not complain or feel unease about relishing his daughter's repetitions of "these near-nonsense words." He is transported without questioning TV's capacity to allow for such a positive, elevating experience.

As shown above, at the beginning of the story, Jack's fascination with disaster footage confuses him. Here, Jack is entranced. He allows himself to re-feel what Murray explains earlier on: that the repetitions of TV are "like chants, like mantras" and that television "overflows with sacred formulas" (WN 51). At the beginning, Jack is still insecure and asks for others' opinions on television. Now, Jack experiences his being mesmerized by Steffie's repetitions of the repetitions of TV in positive terms. He allows himself to let go and enjoy TV (through Steffie) as an elevating experience. It seems that Jack, more suspicious of the medium at the beginning, needed permission to enjoy it without feeling guilty. After having heard his colleagues' explanations, he is finally able to indulge in its hypnotic power.

Jack's reliance, or rather dependence on others' opinions in relation to teleconsciousness, is addressed in the context of The Airborne Toxic Event during which the family is described as watching other characters' behavior and being watched by them. The Blacksmith residents are advised to evacu-

ate. On their way out of town, slowly driving through Blacksmith, the family members meticulously observe what happens around them. The description of the Gladneys looking out through the car windows evokes the idea of windowpanes replacing the television screen:

Heinrich kept watching through the rear window, taking up his binoculars as the scene dwindled in the distance. He described for us in detail the number and placement of bodies, the skid marks, the vehicular damage. (WN 119)

Imitating a TV anchorman, Heinrich reports on the happenings. The family members could of course observe for themselves, but Heinrich takes over the task of TV's commentating voice by telling the rest of the family what they are supposed to perceive. Through this the 'scenes' outside appear to be like scenes on television. The Gladneys are, as Randy Laist argues, "outside of this picture, as if considering the drama from the comfort of their living rooms" (76).

The family members enjoy this televisual narrative; at the same time, they constitute it. Driving by a home furnishing mart and a three-story motel, the Gladneys observe what is happening outside: "Well-lighted men and women stood by the huge window looking out at us and wondering" (WN 117).¹⁵⁵ While the Gladneys experience the well-lit men and women in the huge square windows as characters on the TV screen, the other characters have the same experience while watching the happenings outside. The motel thus functions as a screen upon which a movie is being shown: "Every room was lighted, every window filled with people staring out at us" (118). Ironically, both the Gladneys watching the other characters and the characters observing the Gladneys wait for the counterpart to show or act out the program and inform them about how this absurd situation is supposed to be understood and how one should behave. Ridiculing the privileged status of the mode of watching, *White Noise* indicates that the characters have started to rely on images that tell them how to behave and what to feel: "Mainly we looked at people in other cars, trying to work out from their faces how frightened we should be" (117). The Gladneys themselves have lost their ability to trust their own senses. Instead, they rely on television or television substitutes to offer them guidance; otherwise, they remain in a state of perplexity. Supporting the idea that *White Noise* suggests the characters' consciousness to be televisionized, Laist argues that "lived experience is perceived as a televisual phenomenon," and he concludes that, in the novel, television "is not something you watch or don't watch, it is a way of perceiving yourself and the world" (74).

By stating "I was advancing in consciousness," Jack makes clear that he experiences his televisionized consciousness as a superior form of con-

¹⁵⁵ With reference to another passage in *White Noise*, Laist also elaborates on the Gladney family as a part of the televisual narrative (74).

sciousness, implying that he sees things somewhat clearer: “With each separate step, I became aware of processes, components, things relating to other things. Water fell to earth in drops. I saw things new” (WN 291). The image of water falling down in drops seems to be taken from a feature film or a movie. Readers are acquainted with such images from their television and cinema experience, so that these images created by the text evoke the feeling that one has seen them before, on the screen. Again, the text enacts TV experiences DeLillo’s readers have become used to in the same way as the characters. The way in which the narrator describes teleconsciousness through Jack presents it as a kind of revelation. Jack speaking of a “heightened reality” (293) supports this impression. Through Jack, the text suggests that teleconsciousness is a superior form of perceiving and experiencing the world. It allows him to experience a different version of reality. In this passage, then, teleconsciousness has positive connotations as it facilitates a heightened form of being.

Thinking in Terms of Celebrity

Another way in which the novel addresses the phenomenon of teleconsciousness is by suggesting that the characters perceive, experience, and treat every situation in life like a televisual event and every person like a celebrity. The students’ arrival with their station wagons at the beginning of the term is described as a spectacle, the toxic cloud is not called a catastrophe but an event, and both Elvis and Hitler are treated as celebrities. The characters’ enactments of TV experiences indicate that they have adapted to the modes of television, meaning with regard to celebritydom as a TV phenomenon that they think in terms of celebrity and experience themselves as such. As far as other characters are concerned, the Gladneys experience human behavior in terms of patterns and achievements usually ascribed to or performed by celebrities. In other words, the text suggests that the Gladneys use their experience of watching success stories of celebrities as a frame for how to make sense of their own lives and actions. Celebritydom as a frame of thinking is enacted through Jack’s rather unconventional treatment of Hitler and his own status as an academic celebrity.

The equalization of Hitler with Elvis is but one example of how the characters seem to have become used to thinking in terms of celebritydom.¹⁵⁶ As professor of Hitler studies, Jack draws attention solely to Hitler’s aura and his power amplified by the medially constructed image, not, however, the extensive and fatal effects his politics and actions had. He explains that he wants to provide his students with a “mature insight into the continuing mass

¹⁵⁶ Other scholars who have investigated the novel’s treatment of Hitler as a celebrity are Paul A. Cantor and Joseph Dewey, both of whom stress Hitler’s “unconventional treatment” (Cantor 52) and his representation as “the blandest kind of celebrity” (Dewey 84).

appeal of fascist tyranny, with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms” (WN 25). Each term he arranges a screening of background footage:

This consisted of propaganda films, scenes shot at party congresses, outtakes from mystical epics featuring parades of gymnasts and mountaineers – a collection I’d edited into an impressionistic eighty-minute documentary. Crowd scenes predominated. Close-up jostled shots of thousands of people outside a stadium after a Goebbels speech, people surging, massing, bursting through the traffic. Halls hung with swastika banners, with mortuary wreaths and death’s-head insignia. Ranks of thousands of flagbearers arrayed before columns of frozen light, a hundred and thirty anti-aircraft searchlights aimed straight up – a scene that resembled a geometric longing, the formal notation of some powerful mass desire. There was no narrative voice. Only chants, songs, arias, speeches, cries, cheers, accusations, shrieks. (25-26)

“What is so striking about the way Hitler is presented in the novel,” Paul A. Cantor writes, “is its overall blandness” (52). Rather than offering his students a “moral sensibility or ethical critique” of Hitler, Jack shows “mesmerizing films” and “emphasize[s] the spectacle” (Dewey 84). Hitler and Goebbels are presented as icons celebrated by the masses, which makes Jack’s approach “an academic variant of the approach tabloids and fan magazines take toward celebrities” (Conroy 107). Still elevated by Goebbels’s speech, the crowds outside a stadium are reminiscent of scenes readers of the novel know from their TV experiences, scenes of fans that are still in a state of ecstasy after a rock concert.

In the world of *White Noise*, the characters do not see a difference between Hitler/Goebbels and Elvis, because “the mass appeal of the dictator and the rock star are alike” (Cantor 63). Explaining the reasons for this equation, Cantor writes that “Both touch similar chords in their audiences, both are in fact performers in the age of mass media, both fill a void in the everyday lives of common people, both appeal to primitive emotions . . .” (63). In the story world, the character of Murray affirms this notion; his scholarly aim is to do with Elvis what Jack does with Hitler (WN 12). *White Noise* suggests that, through its celebrification machinery, TV can turn everybody – even as cruel and condemnable as Hitler – into a celebrity.

Jack’s focus on this other side of Hitler – “I talked mainly about Hitler’s mother, brother and dog” (WN 261) – and the documentary tell us about how Hitler was made into a celebrity both by the masses and the media. Jack’s approach not only reflects Hitler’s celebrity status, it keeps on creating this image. Instead of criticizing Jack’s way of studying the Führer, his colleagues admire and try to imitate him. They do not regard Jack’s Hitler studies as a scandalous approach. For Jack and the other characters, treating Hitler like this is a normal way of dealing with Nazism. More precisely, the novel portrays Jack’s focus on Hitler as a celebrity as a naturalized way of approaching and understanding Nazism. It proposes that, due to watching

TV, the characters have become used to the mechanisms and strategies of celebrification.

In the 1980s, television was the central medium of celebrification that propels the human urge to appear on TV and make a career as a celebrity. Since then, television has constantly confronted the viewers with such televised success stories. Jack imitates thinking in these terms. As professor of Hitler studies, Jack is occupied with ascribing the status of celebrity to Hitler, a status he himself achieves as the inventor of Hitler studies. Jack is, in other words, an academic celebrity who tries to behave like and appear as a much-worshipped star. Entering a lecture hall, he “attempt[s] to loom” (WN 70), like the celebrity’s image on the screen. He fears to be replaced by his colleagues who could profit from being surrounded by his aura and, in the end, steal his thunder: “We all had an aura to maintain, and in sharing mine with a friend [Murray] I was risking the very things that made me untouchable” (73). Jack imagines himself as a looming figure on television with an untouchable aura, and his imagination is verified both by his colleagues and his students who treat him like a celebrity: “Murray made his way to my side and escorted me from the room, parting the crowd with his fluttering hand” (74). Murray acts like a bodyguard who cuts a path for Jack to walk through the masses of students, Jack’s fans. The parting crowd and Murray’s gesticulation are suggestive of pictures one knows from television: popular media personalities, surrounded by paparazzi and the masses, try to fight their way to the black-windowed limousine, the safe haven. Again, the text does not portray Jack as a critical authority warning his students of the celebrity hype facilitated by TV. On the contrary, he adapts to these mechanisms. He experiences and regards himself as a celebrated academic and is happy to be treated as such.

Jack, however, is not the only family member who gets his fifteen minutes of fame. Next to Babette, who goes so far as to appear on television, Heinrich achieves the status of at least being treated like a popular TV figure. During the evacuation due to The Airborne Toxic Event, Heinrich turns out to be the most knowledgeable person around. Spontaneously he gives “an impromptu lecture on Nyodene D” (Orr 25), the chemical considered to be responsible for the toxic cloud. Standing in the middle of an inquisitive crowd, Heinrich is adored both by his audience and his father:

What a surprise it was to ease my way between people at the outer edges of one of the largest clusters and discover that my own son was at the center of things, speaking in his new-found voice, his tone of enthusiasm for runaway calamity. . . . People listened attentively to this adolescent boy in a field jacket and cap, with binoculars strapped around his neck and an Instamatic fastened to his belt. (WN 126)

Through Jack’s consciousness, the readers of the novel imagine Heinrich being encircled by his fans. The crowd, thirsty for information, elevates Heinrich, who seems to “bloom” (128) under their attention. In this passage,

Jack and the other characters listening to Heinrich experience and respond to the young man in the same way fans respond to their TV idols.

In a passage where Babette appears on television, the text enacts once more the characters' televisionized perceptions of each other and themselves as celebrities. In contrast to both Jack and Heinrich, who are only reminiscent of celebrities but do not appear on television, Babette actually has a TV appearance. The family members experience her as becoming an image. Contrasting Jack's reaction with his children's, the passage makes clear that Jack is unsettled by this, whereas his children enjoy their mother's TV appearance with excitement. With regard to Jack, there is no critical position, only an ephemeral moment of fear immediately replaced by disorientation. The often-cited scene¹⁵⁷ emphasizes Jack's state of confusion and the children's instant adaptation to watching their mother on television. Coincidentally, the family sees Babette's posture class shown on television:

It was true, it was there. I hissed at the others for silence and they swiveled their heads in my direction, baffled and annoyed. Then they followed my gaze to the sturdy TV at the end of the bed.

The face on the screen was Babette's. Out of our mouths came a silence as wary and deep as an animal growl. Confusion, fear, astonishment spilled from our faces. What did it mean? What was she doing there, in black and white, framed in formal borders? (WN 102)

At first, Babette's black and white TV image in the all too familiar televisual framing seems unfamiliar. For her family, Babette's TV persona is alien, barely graspable. Certainly, the fact that it is black and white and not color television might contribute to the characters' feelings of alienation. More than that, the appearance of someone whom the family knows intimately from their everyday lives on the very screen usually solely dedicated to widely-known TV personae (or to ordinary people in the context of extraordinary circumstances) is in the first moment inscrutable. Jack's reaction is therefore confusion topped with a feeling of unease: "A strangeness gripped me, a sense of psychic disorientation." Brooding over this incident, Jack has difficulty understanding how Babette can turn into an image and appear on TV. He thinks of her "as some distant figure from the past," for her image is "animated but also flat, distanced, sealed off, timeless" (103). His conclusion "It was but wasn't her" demonstrates that Jack cannot grasp how television works, and this ignorance is the reason for his incapability of resolving his confusion.

¹⁵⁷ Mark Conroy focuses on Babette's empowerment achieved through appearing on TV (99). Laist's reading highlights Jack's perception of Babette's new televisual appearance as a transcendental and elevating process in connection to Jack's fear of death (80-81). Orr dedicates a number of pages to this scene and the general meaning of televisual appearances in *White Noise*, stating that it "takes on elements of the sacred, of an unworldly, out-of-body, perhaps even afterlife experience" (57).

In reference to Vilém Flusser, Deuze argues that people do not understand how media technologies like television work: “we know what goes into them . . . , and we can witness the impact of what comes out of the boxes – but we generally have no idea about what goes on inside” (*Media* 44). Jack, an intellectual, enacts this ignorance of media technologies to which *White Noise* draws attention. A discussion between Jack and Heinrich later in the story emphasizes that humans use media technologies without actually knowing how they operate. Challenging his father, Heinrich asks rather rhetorically “What is a radio? What is the principle of a radio? Go ahead, explain. . . . Explain a radio.” Jack’s scientific answer “There’s no mystery. Powerful transmitters send signals. They travel through the air, to be picked up by receivers” (WN 143) does not convince Heinrich. The character of the son makes clear that knowledge is a human construct, that it can be changed whenever necessary, and that it is just a form of make-belief and storytelling:

They travel through the air. What, like birds? Why not tell them magic? They travel through the air in magic waves. What is a nucleotide? You don’t know, do you? Yet these are the building blocks of life. What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything. (143)

Ridiculing his father and humankind in general, Heinrich points out that the so-called experts only think they know and that they only believe in having a superior position.¹⁵⁸ Jack wants to believe in the idea that one can fully understand how television operates, but his reaction to Babette’s television appearance makes obvious that he is deeply unsettled. Admitting his ignorance, he says: “I tried to tell myself it was only television – whatever that was, however it worked” (103).

Attempting to describe how he experiences his wife’s TV appearance, Jack resorts to his scientific knowledge, speaks of “Waves and radiation,” “electronic dots,” “electrons and photons.” These explanations, actually supposed to generate reassurance, seem to disturb Jack even more. Stating “We were shot through with Babette” (WN 103) indicates that Jack is alienated by seeing her on TV. Jack’s disquiet is not the result of his supposedly critical stance over television, but rather his confusion. Although he thinks that he knows how to explain things, he feels that this knowledge does not really help to understand them. On the contrary, the information he has only gives rise to feelings of unsettledness.

In contrast to Jack, his children are “flushed with excitement” (WN 103) to see their mother on television and consider her to be elevated out of the banal off-screen world. At the end of the program “the two girls got excited again and went downstairs to wait for Babette at the door and surprise her with news of what they’d seen” (104). Babette, an ordinary woman, wife,

¹⁵⁸ In the text, the volatility of knowledge is even addressed explicitly when Jack meets a physician who explains that “Knowledge changes every day” (WN 266).

and mother, has been awarded the extraordinary status of a television persona, a celebrity. As Leonard Orr emphasizes, appearing on the screen causes “a change of status,” for the characters conceive of it as “transformative and elevating” (58). In the world of *White Noise*, appearing on television is still very much bound to the notion of extraordinariness and thus to privileged TV personae only. The children’s reactions enact both Andrejevic’s and Couldry’s hypotheses that televisual appearances are believed to guarantee one’s uniqueness (Andrejevic 110) and are acknowledged as a special form of cultural prestige (Couldry 49). In the children’s eyes, Babette has achieved something extraordinary which is usually only possible for celebrities. The family members’ reactions, ranging from confusion to excitement and from disbelief to proudness, show that they consider Babette to have reached a new level of being. Jack’s description of his wife as a shining light coming into being on the screen implicitly ascribes this extraordinary status to her. She is not part of the ordinary, banal world anymore; she is elevated. The fact that she has reached a level Jack is still denied might be a reason for his non-appreciation, which is in contrast to the children’s feelings of pure happiness.

Babette’s being is validated anew through her television appearance, but this transcendence, as Orr describes it, is received in ambivalent ways. Whereas the children, representative of the TV generation, welcome and celebrate Babette’s TV appearance, Jack feels uneasy. This contradiction is in line with the characters’ attitudes in *Being There* towards television-induced celebritydom. In the world of Kosinski’s novel, the characters admire Chance for appearing on television. After his TV interview, Chance is therefore celebrated like a star. The characters in *Being There* are as excited about Chance as the Gladney kids are about Babette’s TV appearance. And yet, through Chance’s perspective, *Being There* addresses the uneasiness *White Noise* expresses through Jack. As has been outlined in the previous chapter, before his TV appearance, Chance wonders about the fact that he would be “seen by more people than he could ever meet in his entire life” (BT 52), but these people would only see his surface, not his true self. Sati- rizing a culture of permanent self-expression, *Being There* critically comments on self-validation through television. *White Noise* reinforces this critique, but a bit more hesitantly. When Babette appears on TV, Jack is confused, not excited, unsettled, and not proud. In *Being There*, Chance urgently wants to be validated through television and even longs for turning into an image; at the same time, however, he is conscious of the fact that others would only see his surface, not his true self. Similarly, Jack is disquiet when he sees Babette on TV and cannot be happy about the extraordinary status she has achieved; at the same time, however, he uses American Dream-like success stories advertised on TV as a frame of thinking when it comes to himself and his son, which indicates Jack’s contradictory experience of TV as a means of validation.

However, through its satirical flavor, *White Noise* ridicules the idea of self-affirmation through television. For instance, the characters experience reality in terms of television in the sense that only what is reported via television – and thus validated by TV – can be considered real. In the story, flight passengers, who have just survived a near-plane crash, are described as gathering around one of the passengers who tells Jack what happened. While telling the story, more and more of the other passengers join Jack and gather around “the narrator” (WN 92), as the man is meaningfully labeled by Jack:

They’d come back to listen. They were not yet ready to disperse, to reinhabit their earthbound bodies, but wanted to linger with their terror, keep it separate and intact for just a while longer. More people drifted towards us, milled about, close to the entire planeload. They were content to let the capped and vested man speak on their behalf. No one disputed his account or tried to add individual testimony. It was as though they were being told of an event they hadn’t personally been involved in. They were interested in what he said, even curious, but also clearly detached. They trusted him to tell them what they’d said and felt. (91)

Jack describes how the passengers need someone to tell them what just happened to them. The text suggests that they cannot believe in their own experience without having it affirmed by someone else. Listening to the man’s account, to his version of the story, makes them realize what they have been through. Like Jack, who does not have an opinion and needs others to tell him what to feel and experience, these passengers need someone to tell them how to react. The idea is picked up by Bee, the daughter of Jack who comes to visit, and connected to television news when she asks about where the media is. When Jack answers that there is no media, she is uncomprehending and confused: “They went through all that for nothing?” (92). *White Noise* indicates that surviving a near catastrophe and not having it validated by TV equals not having experienced it at all.

In the world of *White Noise*, then, a non-mediated event is no event (Orr 59). Like Bee who wonders why there is no media after the near-plane crash, the evacuees of The Airborne Toxic Event realize that their evacuation has not been broadcasted. They interpret the news of this non-televisionization of their experience as a lack of interest. This provokes indignation:

‘There’s nothing on network,’ he [some man] said to us. ‘Not a word, not a picture. . . . No film footage, no live report. Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore? Don’t those people know what we’ve been through? Is it possible nobody gives substantial coverage to such a thing? Half a minute, twenty seconds? Are they telling us it was insignificant, it was piddling? Are they so callous? Are they so bored by spills and contaminations and wastes? Do they think this is just television? . . . Don’t they know it’s real?’ (WN 154-55)

The evacuees are outraged that their situation – which is not, but could have easily been a tragedy – has not been awarded with media interest. Paradoxically, without their situation reported on television, they consider the incident unreal. On the one hand, the characters fear that others might think the happenings are “just television;” on the other hand, they want their experiences to be broadcasted so that they and the world know it actually happened. The novel suggests that validation through TV is required, so as to be certain that what happened actually happened. “The real outrage DeLillo’s characters feel in *White Noise* is the absence of the TV camera,” Tichi argues. “Without it, their experience is invalid, their suffering unredeemed. They are not ‘as seen on TV,’ but snubbed, ignored, in effect nonexistent” (*Electronic* 145).

Mocking the idea that real is only what is filtered by TV *White Noise* presents characters that aspire towards appearing on television – with all strings attached. In addressing his co-evacuees, the same man quoted above asks rhetorically:

Shouldn’t we be yelling out the window at them, ‘Leave us alone, we’ve been through enough, get out of here with your vile instruments of intrusion.’ . . . What exactly has to happen before they stick microphones in our faces and hound us to the doorsteps of our homes, camping out on our lawns, creating the usual media circus? Haven’t we earned the right to despise their idiot questions? . . . Even if there hasn’t been great loss of life, don’t we deserve some attention for our suffering, our human worry, our terror? Isn’t fear news? (WN 155)

Acknowledging that their situation is not that serious (“Even if there hasn’t been great loss of life”), the man underlines that it could have been disastrous, and this fact alone should be enough to appear on television. More than that, he condemns the paparazzi-like behavior displayed by television reporters that he, contradictorily enough, longs for at the same time as bemoaning its absence. By underlining these contradictions in the character’s statements, DeLillo’s narrator, just like Kosinski’s, satirizes a society seeking for validation through TV. This reading is also offered by other scholars. Joseph Dewey, for instance, argues that, in the world of *White Noise*, “Television alone has come to validate experience” (85), and John N. Duvall writes that only the mediation of the incident makes it immediate for the characters, and that the disaster can only be validated through the electronic media (435, 436). As long as the media is not present and reporting on The Airborne Toxic Event, the characters feel their experience cannot be ‘real’ (438).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ See also Wise (“only by being reported . . . by the media does the event become meaningful;” “that power of an experience only exists if mediatized,” 9). Orr also considers the primary function of television to be the validation of human activity (“Events and people must be on television for it to acquire meaning, or even in order to exist,” 58).

White Noise anticipates the comment of the reality show contestant referred to in the theoretical part of my study: her TV appearance served the purpose of validating her experience. In order for her to believe and feel that what had happened on the show was real, she needed to know that her experience would be shown on TV. *White Noise* draws attention to this form of experiencing life by suggesting that the idea of ‘actual’ reality is connected to something shown on television. The characters strive to be broadcasted in order for them to be acknowledged and to have their reality affirmed. The character quoted above complains about not being broadcasted, asking rhetorically “Isn’t fear news?” This comment is representative of the critique also voiced by Kosinski that news has come to be treated in the same way as entertainment. Terror and suffering, the character’s comment implies, is equated with newsworthiness. It is a much-appreciated form of diversion. *White Noise*, in short, satirizes the experience of using television as a means of validation.

The Humachine: A Means of Deterrence?

In *White Noise* television is both friend and foe. The characters both personify TV and treat it like an entity hazardous to human health. To begin with, television seems to have become a proper family member. When Jack mentions the TV snippets he overhears in the house, he either refers to a voice or personifies the television set altogether. Talking about the sounds of television, Jack uses expressions such as “a woman’s voice said,” or “a British voice said” (WN 28-29, 56). One could assume that Jack regards television as a mere transmitter of communication, a channel, which establishes contact between him and the people whose voices he mentions. It rather appears, however, that Jack perceives the TV set as the voice’s embodiment, personifying it when he says “I heard the TV say” or “The TV said” (18, 61).¹⁶⁰ Moreover, television appears to be like a family member incoherently talking in one of the house’s rooms. The TV set seems to be wandering from one room to another, like a family member who inhabits the whole house instead of staying in only one space. Without a permanent place ascribed to it, such as the living room, the television set is located here and there, sometimes in the living room, sometimes in one of the children’s rooms. This becomes obvious when Jack wanders through the house, and mentions in passing that the TV set is temporarily located in Heinrich’s room (211). Television appears to have a life of its own, following its individual daily routine. Without

¹⁶⁰ The personification of television is further amplified when Jack mentions the “glow of blue-eyed TVs” (WN 267). This does also apply to other media genres and technologies such as movies and the radio. See, for instance, page 109 where the text says “The movie wasn’t sure what it does to humans” and “That’s what the movie said. What does the radio say?”

the text mentioning it explicitly, the family seems to accept TV's coequal status.

Then again, the novel challenges the harmonious notion that the family lives together with television in peace. Reflecting on the fatal impact of television on body and soul, Heinrich argues that catastrophes such as toxic spills are less harmful than the waves of household technologies surrounding the family:

The real issue is the kind of radiation that surrounds us every day. Your radio, your TV, your microwave oven, your power lines just outside the door, your radar speed-trap on the highway. For years they told us these low doses weren't dangerous. . . . Forget spills, fallouts, leakages. It's the things right around you in your own house that'll get you sooner or later. It's the electrical and magnetic fields. . . . Where do you think all the deformed babies are coming from? Radio and TV, that's where. (WN 166-67)

Here, Heinrich depicts television as an entity hazardous to human health and responsible for deformations of the human body. Pinpointing the dangerous effects of TV's accepted and unchallenged status in the household, Heinrich describes it as an intruder that, taking up space and insisting on its position, brings along notions of disease and death. The idea addressed by Heinrich that consuming and being with television is hazardous to human health is thus in contrast to the idea that it is experienced as yet another family member whose presence is much appreciated.

The ambiguous portrayal of TV as an apparatus accredited with human features is again reminiscent of *Being There*. Chance imitates its behavior and the behavior of characters it shows, thereby demonstrating how he relies on it. Chance needs television to become a part of society, or putting it differently, Chance becomes a part of society with the help of television. Then again, *Being There* equally emphasizes TV's alarming effects, as the novel also addresses the idea of television as a threatening humachine peeling the skin off people's bodies. The same is true for *White Noise*: TV brings the family together, creates a homely atmosphere and symbolizes trustworthiness. Through the character of Heinrich, however, it depicts television as an angst-inducing being harmful to human health.

The ambiguity of these experiences with television also refers to the human adaptation to television as enacted by the characters. In the aforementioned passage wherein Jack attempts to kill Mink, Jack perceives the latter as a being with TV-like features. Describing Mink as something "glowing in the dark" (WN 294), Mink appears, through Jack's televisionized perspective, as a TV set switched on in a dark room. Above I analyzed this scene in order to draw attention to Jack's teleconsciousness, but the passage also stresses the similarity of Mink to television. Interacting with the screen ("He tossed some tablets at the screen," 295), Mink carries out, not the action shown *on* TV, but *how* the action is presented on the screen: "As the TV picture jumped, wobbled, caught itself in snarls, Mink appeared to grow

more vivid” (295). Mink acts out what television dictates he do, feeling what the pictures on the screen transport. Unlike Chance, who imitates behavior of characters and personae he sees on television, Mink imitates the flickering lights of the televisual picture. Mink acts out the ‘behavior of TV,’ the way in which scenes are presented and, more importantly, transmitted on television. The text further emphasizes Mink’s resemblance to the apparatus through Mink’s repetitions of stereotypical TV slogans: “Did you ever wonder why, out of thirty-two teeth, these four cause so much trouble? I’ll be back with the answer in a minute” (297). Similar to Chance in *Being There*, Mink functions as a television substitute, mechanically repeating what the apparatus instructs.

Steffie and Wilder are equally depicted as humachines. As mentioned earlier, like Mink, Steffie co-speaks television slogans. Listening to his daughter, Jack experiences television through her and is struck by the TV names Steffie repeats: “Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable” (WN 149). Stressing that Jack considers these names to be computer-generated and universally pronounceable, the text produces the image of Steffie as a humachine that repeats the arbitrary and empty TV voices automatically and mechanically. Like Mink, Steffie appears to embody the apparatus of television. This is also true for little Wilder, the prototypical TV child. The text indicates his resemblance to the apparatus when he is unable to stop crying:

This was the day Wilder started crying at two in the afternoon. At six he was still crying, sitting on the kitchen floor and looking through the oven window, and we ate dinner quickly, moving around him or stepping over him to reach the stove and refrigerator. (75)

Jack’s description of how he experiences Wilder’s crying is contradictory. The father speaks of “exasperation and despair,” “a sound of inbred desolation,” and “rhythmic crying” (75-77). He experiences Wilder’s crying in the same way as Steffie’s TV imitations. For him, it is a moment of splendid transcendence. Rather than being annoyed, Jack seems to enjoy listening to his son and the sound he produces:

The huge lament continued, wave on wave. It was a sound so large and pure I could almost listen to it, try consciously to apprehend it, as one sets up a mental register in a concert hall or theater. He was not sniveling or blubbing. He was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness. This was an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony. Ululation. . . . As the crying continued, a curious shift developed in my thinking. I found that I did not necessarily wish him to stop. It might not be so terrible, I thought, to have to sit and listen to this a while longer. . . . I let it wash over me, like rain in sheets. I entered it, in a sense. I let it fall and tumble across my face and chest. . . . I let it break across my body. It might not be so terrible, I thought, to have to sit here for four more hours, with the motor running and the heater on, listening to this uniform la-

ment. It might be good, it might be strangely soothing. I entered it, fell into it, letting it enfold and cover me. (78)

Referring to “a mental register in a concert hall or theater” demonstrates that Jack compares listening to his son to listening to a concert, a play, a movie – or TV. He states explicitly that he does not want Wilder to stop. The father enjoys the sounds his son makes, and he wants to be washed over by them. Like TV’s aural landscape surrounding Jack in the house, the crying child in the car appears “strangely soothing.” For Jack, Wilder’s crying is like the force of a mantra which elevates him and carries him away.

In that sense, *White Noise* presents Wilder as a substitute for a kind of noise usually produced by media technologies such as television. Television, always switched on, produces a constant background sound in the Gladney home. Similarly, Wilder cannot be ‘switched off;’ neither his parents nor the doctor can find the right button. Jack sees no other option than letting the noise wash over him. He gets used to and starts enjoying this sound in the same way he adapts to and starts to appreciate the background sound of television. Wilder’s similarity to television is also stressed by the fact that he, similar to Steffie and Mink, repeats what he hears on TV. As if alluding to Kosinski’s comment that children want to watch and do not want to be spoken or talked to (Kosinski qtd. in Sohn 52), the text never portrays Wilder as speaking. The only time Wilder says something is when his mother appears on the screen. In contrast to his sisters who are all excited, Wilder does not seem to be emotional. Reminiscent of Kosinski’s benumbed protagonist, Wilder appears like a machine: “Only Wilder remained calm. He watched his mother, spoke to her in half-words, sensible-sounding fragments that were mainly fabricated” (WN 103). Never portrayed speaking to others in person, not even his parents, Wilder starts speaking only when he sees his mother’s televisual image. The text suggests that Wilder is ‘set in motion’ only when he faces his mother’s copy; he only reacts to indirect human contact filtered by television. It seems as if Babette’s TV representation is more real for the boy than her actual presence. Her image alone can activate the televisionized robot that remains calm in every other situation.

Through the depiction of Wilder as a television addict glued to the screen, the novel evokes the image of the humachine. Exemplary of the stereotypical television addict who turns into a zombie, Wilder is always in the mode of watching, just like Chance. The little boy is, indeed, so accustomed to this mode of being that he gazes at television substitutes if no television screen is around to stare at: “Denise was doing her homework in the kitchen, keeping an eye on Wilder who had wandered downstairs to sit on the floor and stare through the oven window” (WN 27; see also 75). Wilder seems to be glued to the oven window in the same way watchers are glued to the televisual screen. Depicted as a child that never speaks and only watches, he is a “silent observer” (Orr 27) “frictionlessly hardwired into the artifactual nature of television commercials and supermarket displays” (Laist 90).

The images of Mink, Steffie, and Wilder, who seem to have apparatus-like features and operate as TV substitutes, have positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, they appear as robot- or zombie-like beings that have undergone a process of de-humanization. On the other hand, through Jack's perspective, the readers of the novel learn that these humachines facilitate dream-like experiences, moments of transcendence also facilitated by television. Remarkably, however, the story never mentions Jack complaining about his children's addiction to and reliance on TV. DeLillo's narrator never describes the father as attempting to control or limit their television consumption. The protagonist neither comments on Wilder's dubious reaction to Babette's TV image, nor is he alarmed by his son's overall abnormal behavior. On the contrary, Jack apparently considers it normal. The same is true for Steffie's adaptation and resemblance to television. Instead of critically reflecting on it, the father enjoys Steffie's repetitions of well-known TV slogans. Whereas Jack reacts by not reacting at all, the readers are alarmed by the children's strange behavior and father Jack's indifference. The off-putting and alienating descriptions of the children as humachines are thus paired with the portrayal of Jack as a father who does not address the children's strange behavior. Apparently, the protagonist experiences their curious behavior as a normal, naturalized way of being. The text draws attention to how the characters get used to behaving like the apparatus, and the protagonist's indifference might be intended to operate as a warning: Is it not alarming that Jack's children turn into humachines? And is their parents' indifference not disturbing? *White Noise* suggests that the characters adapt to television, but the enactment of this adaptation is not devoid of bizarre, uncanny, and alienating connotations.

Conclusion

White Noise depicts a world of instability and unreliability that the characters discuss, but of which they do not seem to be afraid. Knowledge is ambiguous, information untrustworthy and constantly changing, and truth is subjective and open to debate. The readers learn through the protagonist's perspective that he adapts to these circumstances without much resistance because he is more passive than rebellious. At the beginning of the story, he has a discussion on the nature of truth with his son Heinrich. They debate whether it is raining outside. This is one of the rare passages where the text depicts Jack as a self-confident character who knows what to believe: "Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses" (WN 23). Jack mistrusts the radio and the information it provides, but he believes that he can trust his own senses. Heinrich's counter-arguments are supposed to convince his father that one's senses are wrong more often than one believes them to be, and that truth is subjective and

relative. Despite Jack's insistence, he cannot convince Heinrich of the opposite.

In the course of the story, Jack starts to realize that truth and reality are unstable. In the context of the toxic cloud for which scientists are trying to find an explanation, Jack comments on the ambiguity of knowledge and the fusion of different versions of reality:

Remarks existed in a state of permanent flotation. No one thing was either more or less plausible than any other thing. As people jolted out of reality, we were released from the need to distinguish. (WN 125)

Reality is contestable, Jack indicates, and the need to distinguish between 'actual' and 'non-actual' reality appears as a burden the characters are now released from. Differentiating between different versions of reality instead of accepting them in conjunction with each other is, the text suggests, an effort the characters are now happy not to have to make anymore.

Jack has this realization in a world of ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological change. The novel proposes that ways of being, knowing, and experiencing alter continuously and that one must adapt to these constant changes. Such a thing as 'actual' reality is denied and replaced by its copies. In the world of *White Noise*, the characters conceive of events as rehearsals for simulations, which take over the role and function of what they once believed to be 'actual' reality. Under these conditions and according to the worldview represented by Heinrich, Jack starts to mistrust his senses and judgment, but he does not seriously fight these changes. Instead, he indulges in this way of being, believing, and knowing. None of the characters seems to be alarmed. Heinrich, the novel's critical authority, offers self-assured and convincing explanations of all sorts of things, but the novel never describes him as being afraid. The only human anxiety enacted in the novel concerns the fear of death.

The novel's enactments of TV experiences through the protagonist's perspective are in line with the critique of television of the time. Instead of simply condemning TV's cultural dominance, however, the novel offers space for a more ambiguous response. The novel's focus is not on the negative effects television might have. It rather revolves around Jack's adaptation to the naturalization of television in a world characterized by a turning point of ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological thinking. The atmosphere the novel communicates is astonishment, confusion, and unsettledness, but it is equally marked by excitement, assimilation, release, and positive indifference. *White Noise* advocates televisionization as a new way of being which one does not have to fear; it suggests that the human adaptation to the televisionization of everyday life is a gradual process one cannot resist. It therefore surprises me that literary scholars have unanimously regarded *White Noise* as a novel in line with what McHale, referring to Boorstin and Postman, calls "the ongoing ritual denunciations of TV" (123). Pynchon's

Vineland and *White Noise* often come as a package, and McHale's comment about *Vineland* also applies to *White Noise*: that the readers of *Vineland* embrace a jeremiad reading too hastily. McHale warns the readers of missing Pynchon's fascination with television, arguing that it is "hard to avoid the conclusion that *Vineland* is fascinated with TV, and that Pynchon is, at the very least, equivocal about its value" (124; original emphasis). I would like to suggest that the same is true for *White Noise*. McHale laments *Vineland*'s misinterpretation as a text that simply adapts to and reiterates the well-known denunciations of its time. As for *White Noise*, I have the same objections. Overshadowed by jeremiad readings, scholars have proven incapable of seeing the novel's resistance to this simplified categorization.

White Noise is nevertheless a novel referring to the critique of TV's naturalization. Through ridiculing the approaches to television suggested by Jack's colleagues, it expresses a critical stance over the televisionization of everyday life. The colleagues' recommendation to accept TV's centrality in life symbolizes resignation and passivity. Legitimizing the adaptation to television by claiming that indulgence is the most clever and only possible way of dealing with the medium, they circumvent the well-known critique of TV. Equally, the novel expresses its critical stance through Jack's unstable nature. Instead of questioning and critically commenting on his colleagues' attempts to legitimize the pleasure facilitated by television, he accepts their attitudes without hesitation. Jack seems to be relieved that he does not have to fight it.

The enactments of TV experiences in *White Noise* hint at the growing governance of television in life, but *White Noise* is less straightforward in its critique than *Being There*. DeLillo's novel does not indicate that the effects of television on the characters are altogether harmful. The enactment of Jack's teleconsciousness suggests, for instance, that this is a new, but not necessarily fatal, way of experiencing life. Less biased than Kosinski's satire, the enactments of TV experiences in *White Noise* are highly ambiguous and, at times, contradictory. Jack's sober worldview and the characters' general indifference are satirized, but not denounced. By using satirical means, *White Noise* articulates concerns over the invasion of television; at the same time, it is indicated that the characters are on the way to changing their attitude towards television, and that the adaptation to TV is a naturalized way of experiencing life.

Chapter 5: The End of Reality and the Disappearance of Fear: Ben Elton's *Dead Famous* (2001) and *Chart Throb* (2006)

In 2010, Christopher E. Bell wrote that the casting show *American Idol* “is currently the Greatest Show on Earth” (196). In order to emphasize this statement, he refers to the show’s “more than 25 million viewers per episode,” which is, according to him, “a number of viewers equal to the entire populations of Missouri, Maryland, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Colorado combined, and more than the entire population of Australia” (8). Stressing this point even further, he explains that the show has a market share of more than 50 percent of reality television in the United States. Bell acknowledges that reality TV “has been a popular target for critics, who hail the format as a triumph of banality” (180). Nevertheless, he thinks of *American Idol* as “the biggest thing happening in America” (196) and explains:

It occupies the national consciousness, and in doing so, it tells us who we are, what we value, and what it means to be an American. *American Idol* universalizes, gives people something ostensibly innocuous to discuss – but in those discussions are imbedded narratives of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, patriotism, individuality and individualism, consumerism and democracy. It is the most salient, most constant of contemporary American narratives: the drive to be adored, to be adulated, to be attractive, to achieve. *American Idol* keeps alive the success myth, gives us our Adamic heroes to invest with our own hopes and dreams in the aspiration that one day, our dreams might too be fulfilled. . . . The narrative of fighting for one’s hopes and dreams resonates with Americans who have been deeply entrenched in the success myth. (197)

With regard to the German equivalent of the show, Pörksen and Krischke argue along the same lines in their 2010 publication, stating that the show proclaims the ideology of selection in the media: you can make it if you give everything and believe in yourself (“Casting” 23).

It is obviously impossible to deny the worldwide success of shows such as *Idol* or *Big Brother*. The televisual – and pop-cultural – landscape has been imbued with all sorts of reality TV formats that have by now come to be integral parts of cultural life. I therefore agree with Bell that this form of televisual entertainment dominates the cultural consciousness to a large extent. It is thus unthinkable, I believe, that contemporary novels about television ignore the global phenomenon of reality TV. Elton’s reality TV satires

Dead Famous and *Chart Throb* (abbr. DF and CT respectively)¹⁶¹ confirm this hypothesis. As fictional texts about shows such as *Idol* and *Big Brother*, they are utterly devoted to the rise of reality television in American culture and cultures worldwide.

Elton's novels differ from Kosinski's *Being There* and DeLillo's *White Noise* in many respects, and so do their enactments of TV experiences. As satirical critiques of reality TV, they focus on the producers' interest in making profitable television and the characters' participation in reality shows as a means of self-realization, self-empowerment, and validation. Whereas the critique expressed in *Being There* centers on notions of fear, the critique of Elton's novels expresses regrets about the realization of these fears. In other words, the human fear and confusion *Being There* and *White Noise* enact concern the human adaptation to the televisionization of everyday life, whereas *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* express regrets about the effects of this process. The earlier novels are characterized by the hope that TV's invasion can be stopped, or at least controlled. Elton's novels, in contrast, suggest that there is no way back and that hope has been replaced by the acceptance of television in one's everyday life. The satires do not question TV's dominance in culture, but they criticize the ways in which it is used. I would like to propose that *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* do not plead for a world without television; in their worlds, regrets and indifference substitute what *Being There* enacts as human anxiety and what *White Noise* enacts as confusion and insecurity.

Dealing with reality TV in a behind-the-scenes style, *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* seem to aim at explaining how reality TV shows, that is their production and consumption, work. Their agenda, it appears, is to make clear that there is no reality, only fiction, and that producers, contestants, and viewers alike are to blame for the celebration of human ordinariness and what Baudrillard calls the banalization of society. *Dead Famous* is about the show "*House Arrest*," a satirical allusion to the *Big Brother* format. Ridiculing both the format of *Big Brother* and reality TV as a form of low-standard entertainment, the novel does not simply reiterate what usually happens on the show. Taking the format of a murder mystery, the novel centers on a murder that takes place in the container house. Despite all the cameras and microphones installed in all sorts of places, there is no way to tell who the murderer is. All the contestants are indicted and everyone is believed to have a motive for having killed the former co-contestant. Instead of calling the show off, however, the producers decide to continue with it. The moral discussions the continuation provokes are overshadowed by the exceptionally high viewing rates the show has had since the crime. In order to find out who the murderer is, chief inspector Coleridge – highly critical of reality TV and

¹⁶¹ When I refer to the novel *Chart Throb*, I use italics. When I refer to the show of the same name in the textual world, I do not, although the term is, in Elton's text, written in italics. This differentiation shall help in terms of clarity.

the entertainment industry as such – watches every episode of the show from the beginning while the show continues until the end. This way, the text informs the readers about what happens in the house in real-time and what happened before the murder, or putting it differently, through leaps in time the readers learn what had happened before the murder and what has happened since.

Elton's other novel is about the production of the casting/talent show "Chart Throb," an allusion to formats such as *American Idol* or *The X Factor*. It starts off with a prominent number of aspiring celebrities and accompanies them on their way through the different stages of the show. The focus is on the protagonist Calvin Simms who represents the hard-boiled television producer, talent show judge, and media personality Simon Cowell. Through his perspective, the readers learn that the show is both highly manipulated and authentic, because it works with "glimpses of authenticity" (Van Bauwel 21) in a carefully constructed environment. Seeing through the mechanisms of the show and being aware of what the audience wants, Calvin is able to control the show's outcome according to his will. Depicted as desperate dreamers, the contestants' only wish is to become much-worshipped celebrities. The other judges are Rodney Root, an unsuccessful manager in the music industry, and Beryl Blenheim. Beryl, an "ex-druggie, ex-alchie, ex-food addict, ex-sex addict, ex-rock star and, most famously of all, ex-man" (CT 22), has her own reality TV show called "*The Blenheims*." As an allusion to formats such as *The Osbournes*, the show is supposed to let the audience think that it portrays the 'real' everyday life of Beryl's family. Addicted to plastic surgery and endeavoring to keep up her image as the world's 'super mum,' Beryl is a television creation in the purest sense. The story ends with the prognostication: "At the current rate of expansion it is reckoned that by the year 2050 everybody in the world will be either a pop star or the subject of their own reality TV show" (464). As a dramatization of Baudrillard's claim that "*Loft Story* [the French version of *Big Brother*] is both the mirror and the disaster of an entire society caught up in the race towards meaninglessness" (*Telemorphosis* 28), both satires express regrets about the downfall of cultural values to which they offer no alternative.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Tichi points out a change of perspective in TV-era texts: "In the 1950s, the character was presented as a member of the audience; in the 1980s, the character becomes a TV participant, both videotaped and broadcast, and self-reflexive in watching the image of the self" (*Electronic* 138). With regard to Elton's reality TV satires, Tichi's realization proves truer than ever. In a behind-the-scenes style, the novels shift the focus away from the viewing audience to the audience as participants and to the TV producers. *Being There* and *White Noise* also represent viewers who appear on television and become televisual content, but both novels still center on the perspective of the audience as non-participants. Elton's satires, in contrast, do not focus on the viewing public. Mostly revolving around the show participants and producers, *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* provide

evidence for Tichi's claim that "TV-age texts mark the change in which the necessary point-of-view is no longer that of the audience but of the on-screen participant" (*Electronic* 137). Centering on the production of television, Elton's novels – that is their content, form, and structure – imitate those of the reality shows they satirize. The change of narrative perspective, and the fact that the level of content and discourse both focus on the production side of reality television, hint at the way in which the experience of appearing on television has turned into an everyday life experience equally so ordinary as sitting in front of the televisual screen.

Reality Television and the Banalization of Society

In the most straightforward fashion, Elton's satires express a critique of reality TV as an example of the banalization and trivialization of society. The satires offer (fictional) glimpses at what happens behind the scenes of the production of reality TV shows. Emphasizing that TV is fiction and that the edit stands between what is being filmed and what is broadcasted, they deny the readers the comfort of regarding reality television as a realistic documentary of ordinary people's lives. The show producers are depicted as morally corrupt businessmen solely interested in making profit. Indifferent to others' feelings, they neglect socially and culturally accepted moral standards and make what they consider to be good television at others' costs. Supplementing this one-sided critique, the novels indicate that the contestants and the viewers are as responsible as the show producers for the exploitation of many contestants' willingness to pursue their dream of becoming famous.

Dead Famous depicts the show *House Arrest* as a televisual product as fictional as movies or soap operas. In a conversation between Trisha, a detective constable, and Bob Fogarty, the editor-in-chief, the latter explains that reality TV follows the same rules of storytelling as other televisual types of fiction:

'*House Arrest* is basically fiction. . . . Like all TV and film. It's built in the edit.'

'You manipulate the housemates' images?'

'Well, obviously. We're not scientists, we make television programmes. People are basically dull. We have to make them interesting, turn them into heroes and villains.' (DF 43)

The passage indicates that reality TV producers rely on classic storytelling techniques in order to make a story worth following. The edit allows them to turn dull situations and everyday life occurrences into interesting stories. Ordinary people, it is proposed, are too "dull" to be interesting. Through the character of the editor-in-chief, the novel addresses the paradox that the audience longs to see ordinary people on television while considering them to be too ordinary to be good entertainment. In this context, the television cam-

era is not suggested to be a neutral transmitter but, as the text says, a “deceiving eye” and a “false friend” that is “so convincing, so plausible, so *real* and yet . . . so fickle and so false” (50; original emphasis).

By calling the protagonist of *Chart Throb*, Elton’s other novel, “the ultimate manipulator” (CT 13), the show producers’ control is even more satirized. Time and again, *Chart Throb* stresses that the whole show is “all complete fiction” (47). Reminding his employees in a team meeting of this obvious fact, which is, nevertheless, so easily forgotten, Calvin explains:

‘What is this show *not*?’

The answer would have surprised the show’s legions of fans but everyone in the room knew it.

‘A talent show,’ they all said in virtual unison.

‘That’s *right*. We are *not* a talent show. What are we?’

‘We’re an *entertainment* show,’ his people replied.

‘My job, your job, *our* job is to *entertain*. If dumping the best singer is more entertaining than keeping him then that is what we do because the public are *not interested in the singing*. The singing is a necessary evil. The public are interested in the *singers*. The *people* singing the songs. . . . He, she or they are worth more to me *before* they win than they ever will be after. . . . The *only* reason we need our winner to get a number one [single] is to validate the process, to give the show some semblance of meaning.’ (158; original emphasis)

The casting idea, it is proposed, is simply a hook which allows producers to humiliate contestants willing to play the game. The aim is to entertain, not to find musical talents; producers and viewers alike regard humiliation as better entertainment than good singing skills.

The manipulation of an interview is but one example the novel offers of how the editors steer the story to unfold in a particular way. Manipulating the statement of show contestant Graham, who is blind, alters the meaning of what he says radically:

I don’t like to think of Millicent not being here with me. If I’m honest, I truly believe she’s got the better voice, which makes me feel like a sad, selfish no-talent, like I don’t care about anybody but myself. Sometimes I just hate myself and don’t even want to win. I love Millicent and I always will. She’s always been my friend and respected me and not patronized me or treated me differently because I’m blind. (CT 423)

Graham, hopelessly in love with Millicent, is aware of his musical deficits and knows that his handicap is the only reason he has been chosen over her because “Blind was a *story*” (155; original emphasis). Seeing the manipulated version of the interview, Millicent starts crying in front of the camera. Beyond doubt, she believes in the manipulated version of what Graham allegedly said about his girlfriend. The text portrays the manipulated interview as an editing strategy that creates drama and keeps the level of entertainment high. The text proposes that the reality TV industry is merciless and disrespectful towards those it portrays.

Both novels seem to aim at making clear that reality television is anything but real. The producers are portrayed as following the principles of classic storytelling; in these portrayals of how reality TV is produced, the edit fulfils the function of making reality more appealing and entertaining. The critique both satires express is directed at a culture where even an authority like the Prince of Wales takes part in and is able to win a casting show. In a world like that of *Chart Throb*, everything works according to the standards of banal entertainment. By posing the question “What’s serious any more?” (CT 41), the novel hints at the prevalent concern over society’s “descent into a vast triviality” (Postman, *Amusing* 6), suggesting that this fear was, in fact, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Satirizing the worldwide success of reality TV, *Chart Throb* criticizes a cultural environment in which television viewers treat politics like a form of entertainment: “Politics isn’t serious any more, it’s showbiz” (CT 41-42). Calling the show both “the single most influential, ubiquitous and powerful cultural institution in the country” and “the most vapid and forgettable entertainment show in history” (44, 195), *Chart Throb* expresses regrets over what it implies to be the downfall of cultural values.

Although Elton’s satires have a strong focus on the producers and their responsibility for the banalization of society, they indicate that contestants and viewers alike are also to blame for turning reality TV into a televisual success worldwide. *Chart Throb* proposes that the contestants and viewers are as “morally compromised” as the producers (CT 323), and it draws attention to the idea that audiences today are well-informed about how reality shows work, because people are “so media-savvy these days, it’s like everyone’s a TV producer” (319). As meta-narratives on the production of reality TV,¹⁶² these shows seem to reveal how they are being made. The text implies that the distortion of reality is “*not even a secret,*” because everything is “glaringly obvious to anyone who wishes to see” (408; original emphasis). Interested in playing the game, however, the characters are willing to disregard this general knowledge, as the “audience is prepared to suspend its disbelief” (214). The novels’ critique concerns all parties involved in the proliferation of reality TV. Rather than offering hints at how humankind could still be saved from reality TV’s trivializing and banalizing impact, *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* stress a state of indifference.

Fictional Reality

Chart Throb stresses time and again that reality TV shows are as edited as any other fictional TV product. Explicitly referred to as fiction (“the central *Chart Throb* fiction,” 63), *Chart Throb* is depicted as a show about ordinary people whom the producers attempt to portray in the most entertaining way possible. And yet, Calvin Simms, producer and judge, is interested in main-

¹⁶² For an elaboration on reality TV as meta-television, see Hearn.

taining the illusion that reality TV is not at all scripted, therefore considering it his job to “*make the fiction real*” (19; original emphasis). The novel proposes that the show is a product of storytelling by emphasizing that the production team tries to sell the show as an objective documentary. The audience in the story is supposed to believe that the election of the final winner is the result of a fair and democratic selection process. Repeating several times that reality shows follow “Greek tragedy rules” (395), Calvin is portrayed as a ruthless judge who exploits the audience’s naivety. Reality TV, the text contends, is as fictional as any other kind of story: “You can’t fake hubris. . . First rule of drama. Before the hero falls he must first be exalted” (247).

The contestants are therefore treated like characters in a soap opera: “Our job is to find something, *anything*, on which to build, on which to hang our stories, to *create* our characters” (CT 159-60; original emphasis). They are regarded as raw material or plastic modeling clay which can be formed according to one’s imagination. The makers of soap operas, for instance, build their characters according to classic rules of storytelling, imagination, and collective taste. The contestants of *Chart Throb*, it seems, are also conceived of as products of imagination, not as personalities that should be treated with respect. Yet, the novel suggests that there are indeed differences between fictional soap opera characters and the show contestants. The contestants already bring along certain characteristics and stories that Calvin says the TV characters he wants to create can hang upon and be built out of. The novel proposes that the characters, which the show producers create, are hybrids of the contestants’ personalities, the producers’ creativity, and the latter’s sticking to the rules of classic storytelling; they are, as I call them, ‘contestacters.’ Reality TV’s hybridity is, *Chart Throb* makes clear, the result of treating contestants to a certain degree like television characters; they are people dissolved into their fictional selves without being aware of it.

The novel portrays the fusion of the contestants’ personalities with the personalities ascribed to them by the show producers as one of the show’s secrets. This I read as an indication that the narrator asks for a re-evaluation of the idea of ‘the real’ in the context of reality television. The rule, which Calvin is described as trying to hammer into his employees, is: “Fictional drama’s fine but real drama’s TV gold” (CT 298). “Real drama” in front of the cameras is therefore highly appreciated. Explaining that “Real rage beats fake rage every time” (279), Calvin indicates that the producers must try to manufacture situations in which “real” drama can unfold. By explaining that “A blind boy and a sighted girl is human drama” (155), Calvin stresses that certain qualities the contestants bring along must be exploited, further emphasized, and embellished. The novel argues that claiming reality TV to be fake is as incorrect as suggesting that it is real. With regard to the ‘contestacters,’ the satire underlines the fact that the contestants’ televisual portrayals are convergences that one cannot, and is not supposed to, anatomize. The idea of ‘actual’ or ‘real’ human drama refers to the characters’ ‘real life stories’ and the display of their ‘real’ emotions. Millicent’s crying in front of

the audience is not a staged performance but a genuine reaction to the fake revelation that her boyfriend is more interested in his career than in their relationship. By proposing that genuineness happens in a manufactured frame, *Chart Throb* questions the meaning of genuineness in the context of reality TV; it emphasizes how the lines between 'real' and 'unreal' are fading.

My use of inverted commas ('actual,' 'real,' 'real life stories') in the attempt to describe the novels' portrayals of how reality television is produced is indicative of the blurriness such ascriptions have undergone in the context of reality television. Representing and further complicating the dichotomy between 'real' and 'fake,' the satires challenge the idea of something being 'real' which, they suggest, is undergoing drastic change. Therefore, as far as the idea of something being 'real' is concerned, *Chart Throb* and *Dead Famous* do not take a stance. On the contrary, they propose that reality television is pure fiction while suggesting that genuineness plays a crucial role in the production process. Further complicating the question of what 'real' means, the satires imply that the state of hybridity and non-descriptiveness which they enact is as close as one can come to approaching the so-called 'real.'

In the same fashion as *Chart Throb*, *Dead Famous* stresses the inadequacy of thinking in terms of the reality-fake-dichotomy in the context of reality television. *Dead Famous* offers fictional insights into ordinary characters' everyday lives in an artificially constructed environment which imitates an ordinary domestic setting. Due to a murder that takes place in an environment of complete surveillance, the show turns into a "real life whodunit" (DF 16). Chief inspector Coleridge, who represents the novel's critical authority, comments discerningly on the continuation of the show regardless of the crime:

Coleridge still found it difficult to watch, even after numerous viewings. He had heard that the whole sequence was already available on the Internet and had been downloaded many tens of thousands of times. As long as he lived Coleridge did not believe he would understand how a single race of beings could include both Jesus Christ and the sort of people who would download a video of a young woman being murdered. (214)

Other characters also have moral objections against the show's continuation. Discussing the morality of the topic in a "live discussion programme," the character of a "distinguished broadcaster" calls reality television "a return to the gladiatorial arenas of ancient Rome" (277-78). This comparison has, in the public and academic discourse on reality TV, turned into a popular means of criticizing the downfall of cultural values through reality television. The broadcaster's satirical claim to be "astonished that it has taken so long for murder to become a tactic in these entertainments" (278) refers to voices such as Baudrillard's who condemns television audiences worldwide

for indulging in what they consider as low-brow entertainment.¹⁶³ *Dead Famous* responds to the fear that reality television is developing into a vulgar sort of entertainment which is awakening age-old desires humans were believed to have overcome. In doing so, it anticipates the critique that accompanied the case of Jade Goody, a British reality TV celebrity. Goody hit the headlines because of racist comments she made in the context of her participation in Britain's *Celebrity Big Brother 5*. During her participation in the Indian version of *Big Brother*, Goody was informed that she had cervical cancer – in front of the cameras. This public announcement caused agitated discussions on the ethics of TV entertainment, and so did Goody's decision to stay in the limelight. Instead of retreating from public view, Goody decided to allow the cameras to accompany her on her fight against cancer until her death. Goody, an ordinary celebrity, turned her 'real' life – and death – into a televisual event.

Dead Famous expresses concerns over reality TV as a sort of televisual entertainment which stops at nothing and walks over corpses, thereby joining in the critique of the industry and the audience by condemning moral indifference and profitmaking at all costs. More than that, however, *Dead Famous* enacts the dissolution of life into TV entertainment and the disappearance of formerly known boundaries. Calling *House Arrest* a "live whodunit" and a "nightly murder mystery with a *real live victim*" (DF 272; original emphasis) indicates that there is no clear separation between reality and fiction anymore. In the world of *Dead Famous*, however, the impossibility of making this conventionalized distinction does not pose a problem. The viewers of the show are both viewers interested in being entertained and detectives taking part in solving the murder case:

How could it be possible to get away with murder in an entirely sealed environment, every inch of which was covered by television cameras and microphones?

Eight people had been watching the screens in the monitoring bunker. Another had been even closer, standing behind the two-way mirrors in the camera runs that surrounded the house. Six others had been present in the room left by the killer to pursue his victim. They were still there when he or she returned shortly thereafter, having committed the murder. An estimated 47,000 more had been watching via the live Internet link, which Peeping Tom provided for its more obsessive viewers.

All these people saw the murder happen and yet somehow the killer had outwitted them all. . . . Everybody had a theory – every pub, office, and school, every noodle bar in downtown Tokyo, every Turkish bath in Istanbul. Hour by hour Coleridge's office was bombarded with thousands of emails explaining who the killer was and why he or she had done it. (39-40; original emphasis)

¹⁶³ Other novels that thematize the comparison of reality television with gladiatorial games and, therefore, death as a televisual form of entertainment are, for instance, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008 – 2010) and Chuck Barris' *The Big Question* (2007).

The audience treats the ‘real’ murder like a detective story. Instead of reacting in shock and displaying disgust, the viewers of *House Arrest* are described as actively participating in constructing the ‘real death story.’ It seems as if the broadcast of the ‘actual’ murder causes a form of fictionalization, which is why the audience experiences it like a fictional murder. Then again, the viewing public (“almost 80 per cent of the viewing public,” 280), glued to the screen and absorbed in the show, does not feel attracted by knowing that this is, simply speaking, good fiction. The reason for staying tuned is evidently the factuality of the case. The fact that the murder is ‘real’ and not staged contributes to the show’s appeal.

It is therefore impossible to say where the reality of both the show and the murder begins and where it ends. The novel proposes that the ‘actual’ murder is nothing but a TV scene. By portraying inspector Coleridge as watching the video of the murder on the screen, the novel indicates that the filming of the crime has turned it into a fictional story:

Coleridge looked at the time code on the video. They had pressed pause at 11.38. He knew that when he pressed play the code would tick over to 11.39 and Kelly Simpson would emerge from the sweatbox to take what would be the final brief walk of her life. (DF 207)

The taping of the murder, its broadcast, and its quality as a scene one can watch in endless repetition turns the ‘actual’ crime into a TV image, a sequence of a story. The fictionalization of the murder is further indicated when Geraldine, the character of the show producer, describes it as a cartoon murder (“It was all so weird, like a cartoon murder or something. . . . I swear with that knife hilt sticking out of her head she looked like a fucking Teletubby,” DF 244-45) and when Chloe, the *House Arrest* host, presents it as an integral, ordinary element of the show. Interviewing contestant David, who has been voted off, Chloe announces that the audience will be rewarded with the clarification of the case at the end of the series:

‘So come on, then, David. If you didn’t do it, who do you think did?’
‘Well, I don’t know. I’d have to say Garry, but it’s just a guess. I really don’t know.’
‘Well, we just have to wait to the end of the series to find out, won’t we?’ said Chloe, which was an outrageous and entirely unfounded statement, but it sounded convincing enough, such is the seductive power of television. (293)

Through Chloe, *Dead Famous* suggests that the dramatic murder is treated like any other element of the show. David is asked about the murder as if this is the most ordinary question ever posed, and David’s answer exemplifies the nonchalant manner in which the characters experience the dreadful murder case. Here, the narrator’s comment “such is the seductive power of television” implies that television is made responsible for the characters’ inadequate reactions to the horrible murder. Operating as the novel’s critical

voice, the narrator proposes that television seduces show producers, participants, and viewers alike, who become unable to grasp the meaning of reality. For them ‘actual’ reality is nothing but entertaining fiction.

The audience’s indifference towards knowing for sure what is real and what is not is further stressed when David, right after being voted off the show, is both celebrated and suspected to have murdered his former co-contestant Kelly. Although David is presented as an arrogant, narcissistic young man, the audience cheers when he steps out of the house, in front of which he is awaited by an enormous crowd. Not only unsympathetic but also suspected to have murdered Kelly, David is nevertheless “rewarded . . . with a redoubled cheer” (DF 291) instead of being punished with jeers. Put off by David’s self-conscious behavior, the audience is nevertheless excited: “The crowd whooped again while simultaneously observing that David was an even bigger arsehole than they had previously thought” (292). Although the contestants are convinced of David’s guilt and are anxious for finally being able to blame someone for the murder, they accuse him by chanting “Killer. Killer. Killer” (292). Only seconds later, when Chloe, the host, attempts to revive the atmosphere and continue with the show, the crowd enjoys the proceedings of the entertainment, seemingly forgetting about having suspected contestant David only moments before: “There were substantial cheers for this proposition, some without doubt coming from the same people who had only moments before condemned David” (293). The passage indicates that the audience is solely interested in being entertained, completely disregarding what is real and what is not. It seems as if finding the ‘real’ murder is not of importance. It only matters to the fans that the story continues; the show of life must go on.

In a context in which reality and fiction have merged, the meaninglessness of calling something ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ becomes apparent. Like *Chart Throb*, *Dead Famous* emphasizes that the reality show it portrays is scripted and that it is therefore pure fiction. At the same time, and again like *Chart Throb*, *Dead Famous* stresses that genuineness is a basic component which contributes to the show’s appeal. *House Arrest* is explicitly referred to as “drama” (DF 367), and the broadcasted lives of the contestants, which are their ‘actual’ everyday life experiences, are referred to as stories: “You’ll be the biggest story on earth day after day after day” (271). Like the narrator in *Chart Throb*, the narrator in *Dead Famous* reveals that genuine drama is more effective in terms of the show’s appeal and audience ratings than staged drama: “The rarest of all events in reality television seemed to be developing: a moment of genuine, spontaneous drama” (87). The novel depicts the appeal of “genuine, spontaneous drama” when one of the show’s contestants tries to commit suicide in the so-called confession box. Calling the broadcast of the suicide attempt, which viewers could watch live on the Internet, “a dramatic crowd-pleaser” (308), the novel stresses that non-staged action has a higher entertainment potential than staged behavior and that both are part of the reality *cum* fiction provided by reality TV.

On the one hand, the narrator's comment "the tiniest whiff of real reality" (291) in *Dead Famous* implies that there is such a thing as 'actual' reality one can detect. On the other hand, despite this comment, the novel keeps suggesting that the interpenetration of reality and fiction disallows the characters to uphold the dichotomy. Of all people in the world of *Dead Famous*, it is inspector Coleridge, the novel's sarcastic critic, who decides to trap the murderer with the help of 'authentic' or 'real' drama. It occurs to him that "what was required to trap his murderer was a bit of honest theatre" (352) – which is, of course, a contradiction in terms. Yet only acting out "honest theatre" can finally help to catch the murderer and reveal that the version of reality everybody believed to be the 'actual' reality was nothing but fiction.

The 'play' inspector Coleridge acts out at the end of the story reveals that the murder, which every viewer is convinced they have watched, never took place. In the last episode of the show and in front of the inquisitive and sensation-seeking audience, Coleridge informs the viewers about the existence of "*an exact replica* of the house," and he explains that Geraldine, the producer, made a video recording of a murder before the show "that *was yet to happen*" (DF 371; original emphasis). Clarifying how Geraldine simulated the murder in the replica house, filmed the performance, cut out the footage of the actual murder, and inserted the sequence she had filmed before into the footage of the show, Coleridge points out that the murder was completely fabricated: "So, a month or so before it actually happened, Kelly's final trip to the lavatory had been ... I can't say *reconstructed* – I'd therefore better say *preconstructed*" (371; original emphasis). The television audience was led to believe that the footage proved what had happened, but Coleridge manages to explain that what everybody believed to be 'actual' reality was nothing but fiction. In other words, the reality the whole world believed in turns out to be a fiction of reality: "The murder, like everything that happens on these so-called 'reality' programmes, was built in the edit, it was nothing more than television 'reality'" (376).

Coleridge's explanation that the 'actual' reality, in which everyone believed, was fictional is an attempt to establish the reality/fiction dichotomy anew. His revelation makes clear that TV fiction and reality are interchangeable, that one is destined to believe in whatever version of reality one is confronted with, and that 'actual' reality is, in fact, whatever is agreed upon. Nevertheless, although Coleridge is very convincing when he reveals the so-called truth and seemingly adjusts the real/fictional opposition, the audience is described as treating the newfound truth of what actually happened as a piece of fiction. When the inspector explains what has 'really' happened, he is portrayed as standing on a stage in front of a huge audience with all cameras pointing at him. The show does not continue as planned; Coleridge's clarification of the case substitutes the actual proceedings. Explaining the case to the world in the context of the reality TV format turns Coleridge's factual account into a form of entertainment. Chloe is therefore asked to

interrupt Coleridge's speech, reminding him of the rules of TV entertainment:

Excuse me, sorry to interrupt, babe. . . . They've asked me from the box to ask you to tell us how she [Geraldine Hennessy, producer and murderer] did it. I mean we've got as much time as you like, but the problem is that we're live and at some point we have to cut to an ad break, but we do all *really really* want to know. (DF 370; original emphasis)

Chloe's comment demonstrates that both the audience and the producers regard Coleridge's public clarification of the case as a part of the reality show. Instead of forgetting about commercial breaks and respecting the sensitivity of the issue, they enjoy his 'performance' in the same way they would have enjoyed the proceedings of the show as planned. The audience hails the inspector for every new piece of the 'true story' he presents. Like an audience in a theater that applauds after every act, the inspector's audience is described as applauding after every new fact he reveals. The audience perceives the brutal facts, which are supposed to establish what had really happened, as entertaining pieces of information in the context of a show. Thus, the novel suggests that the characters experience the 'actual' reality of the murder in the same way they experience the entertainment of the show.

In *Chart Throb*, two comments by the authorial narrator on what 'real' means in the reality TV context imply that the idea of reality is fragmented and therefore useless, and this is also true for *Dead Famous*. At one point, the narrator of *Chart Throb* mentions "the 'reality' of reality television" (378), implying that when it comes to reality television, there is only one reality: that everything is manufactured. Putting 'reality' in inverted commas demonstrates that one cannot speak of reality in the context of reality TV, because everything is staged, manipulated, faked. At another point, the narrator speaks of "the realities of 'reality' television" (137). Using "realities" in the plural and without inverted commas implies that there are different versions of reality when it comes to reality TV. Putting the label 'reality' in "reality television" within inverted commas suggests that the label as such is inapplicable. These two comments by the narrator go in the same direction: the first remark indicates that there is only one reality in reality TV, that is the reality that it is unreal; the second one implies that, in the context of reality television, one must think in terms of different realities, because reality TV has nothing to do with what is conventionally considered to be 'actual' reality. When it comes to reality TV, the novel proposes, calling something 'real' is nothing but a meaningless expression.

Scripts of Life

The well-known concern regarding television centers on people's incapability of distinguishing between 'actual' and televisual versions of reality. *Chart Throb* does not respond to this strand of criticism. Proposing that the characters treat life like a dream or a script, which can constantly be written and rewritten, it rather evades thinking according to these dichotomies. The satire ridicules the fact that more and more (young) people consider their participation in reality shows as a career option and becoming a celebrity as a lifelong dream that they nowadays have a good chance of realizing. One example of how *Chart Throb* hints at this phenomenon concerns the character of a mother who is interviewed when she accompanies her daughter to an audition: "She's been dreaming of this. . . . It's all she talks about. It's her life" (245). By supporting her teenage daughter to become a celebrated singer, the mother explains that her daughter's dream has become her life. Putting dream and life on the same level means that life – and thus reality – is nothing but a dream. Another character affirming this equation is Shaiana. Like every other contestant, she is desperate to become famous. Before her televisual appearance, she meditates: "For dreams are the harbingers of reality and what is reality if not a dream" (229). With regard to these characters, *Chart Throb* suggests that ideas like dream, life, reality, and fiction are, in times of reality TV, inextricably linked and therefore interchangeable.

Confusing established ontological and epistemological ways of thinking, *Chart Throb* challenges well-known dichotomies through the character of Calvin. Depicted as a manipulator, he controls the show, its outcome, and his and other characters' lives. In a dispute between Calvin and Emma, Calvin's former employee with whom he thinks he has fallen in love, accuses him of manipulating her life: "You're a manipulator; you think you can write the stories, *all* the stories, and now you want to write mine" (CT 194; original emphasis). By reproaching Calvin for attempting to talk her into a relationship, Emma calls her life a story she compares to the stories Calvin creates for the show. Life is, as Emma's statement implies, like one of the scripts that determine the course of the story and which the producers prepare and execute. Calling life a story means that everybody's life can be written, rewritten, and, indeed, controlled. When Emma voices the same concerns another time ("You really think you can fix anything, don't you? . . . Manipulate any story, even your own?"), Calvin does not bother to defend himself: "Well, don't you think it's a good thing to take responsibility for one's life? To assume control?" (179). Indicating that it is natural for Calvin to think of life in terms of a script, the novel indicates that the comparison of 'real' life with a story is an acceptable way of dealing with one's 'real life.' In other words, the suggestion is that 'real life' is perceived, experienced, and treated like a story in times when appearing on TV has turned into an everyday experience.

Chart Throb plays around with the idea of different versions of reality that turn the characters' lives into fiction. The text informs, for instance, that Rodney Root, one of the judges, had an affair with show contestant Iona in the previous season of *Chart Throb*. Iona was in the spotlight, and Rodney enjoyed the public interest the couple provoked. Shortly after the show, however, the item sank into oblivion. Not interested in Iona anymore (who, without all the media attention, suddenly seemed so ordinary), Rodney brought the liaison to an end. This season, Calvin brings Iona back into the show. The story the producer wants to create is about Iona, her being brave enough to come back, and her being treated unfairly by Rodney who keeps voting against her. The public is supposed to feel sorry for Iona who, it shall become clear, was utilized by the judge and is here again being given a hard time. Due to the success Iona has with (apparently) fighting her way from show to show, and because of the media attention she receives, Rodney starts to be interested in her again: "Suddenly Rodney wanted to see Iona, he was attracted to her again, the fact that she was all over the papers being routinely described as 'ravishing' was very sexy to him" (CT 371). Iona, however, is far from feeling the same way. Still offended by the humiliation Rodney caused her previously, she wants to pay him back by telling the papers her story. Unaffected by this threat Rodney replies: "What story? Everybody knows the truth about our affair. We never denied it." Iona's reaction, "Everyone knows the truth, Rodney, . . . but wait till I tell them the fiction" (372) intimidates Rodney. More than that, however, it demonstrates that in the world of *Chart Throb* reality and fiction are exchangeable.

Iona, the text keeps on explaining, comes up with a plan that sounds like a story in soap opera, but in the textual actual world of *Chart Throb*, she succeeds in realizing her idea 'made for the movies' to blackmail Rodney into proposing to her in the final show. Her plan is, she lays open, to stay married for three years, get a divorce and receive half of his fortune. If he is not willing to cooperate, she threatens:

I'm going to announce on television that you told me you loved me and you promised to marry me while all the time you were trying to molest Mary [Iona's band's bass player who was still under age at the time], and she'll swear you did it and the others will swear that she told them about it at the time. Everyone will believe us. Let's face it, you look like a fucking pervert anyway. (CT 373-74)

According to Iona's explanation, truth and fiction are dangerously close to one another. The image the reality show presents of Rodney, Iona assumes, is so negative that the story will be as credible as reality. Based on the character Rodney has in the context of the show, Iona is convinced that the public will believe in her fiction, which fits perfectly to Rodney's image. The description of Iona's plan of revenge implies that, in the context of reality TV, one cannot separate between fiction and reality anymore; they are ideas used interchangeably.

Neither able to assess his 'real' feelings, nor capable of understanding the truth of the situation in which he is entangled, Rodney is prepared to cooperate with Iona's plan. He informs Calvin that he intends to propose to Iona live on the show. Still attracted to her, Rodney believes that he can win her back once she gets to know his 'real' self: "She thinks I hate her but once the show's over and we get married I'll show her a different side of me" (CT 429). Rodney appears to be so immersed in the world of the reality show that he proves unable to realize how much he hurt Iona in the past. Taking the TV stories from soap operas or reality shows as examples, he honestly thinks that he can *make* Iona love him. He believes that he has the power of a scriptwriter who can change a character's feelings from one moment to the next. Calling Rodney and Iona a story, Calvin emphasizes that their relationship has never been and will never be real. The couple, his comment implies, has never existed. Their love was pure imagination – and this is especially true for Rodney who, back then, imagined himself to be in love, and who now falls for the same delusion. Rodney attempts to create stories to which his feelings can adapt. Like a character, he can change his way of thinking and feeling in accordance with what the script prescribes. Rodney's TV experiences have merged with his 'real life' experiences.

Iona's act of revenge exemplifies how, in the story world of *Chart Throb*, the fiction/reality dichotomy is invalid. When Rodney asks Iona in the final show to marry him, she brings her game to a head by informing the public that she blackmailed Rodney into proposing to her: "Rodney Root is asking me to marry him because I have blackmailed him into it" (CT 441). In order to make the public understand her motives, she says that Rodney broke up with her shortly after the last season and that he did not keep his promise to act as manager and support her band. Declining his proposal she announces: "I don't want your money, never did. I set you up simply so that I could humiliate you on *Chart Throb* the way you humiliated me" (442). This passage presents realities as fiction and fiction as reality. Iona's plan seems to be taken from a reality show, a soap opera or a movie, but it is a plan she executes in the textual actual world. The novel's textual actual world, however, resembles the world of the show. The characters' 'real' lives are comparable to the stories the reality show creates, and their 'actual' lives *are* as scripted and entertaining as the talent show. Rodney's 'actual' reality is so tightly interwoven with the fiction of TV that he does not know what he really feels. *Chart Throb* indicates that the characters' lives are blends of different, interchangeable versions of the real.

The fusion of different versions of reality enacted in *Chart Throb* reaches its peak at the very end of the story. After the final show and yet another plastic surgery, Beryl wakes up in disorientation. At first, she thinks she hears her daughter speaking, but it turns out that it is Shaiana, an ex-contestant voted off the show in one of the earlier stages, who is obsessed with becoming a star. As the producers do not see lots of entertainment potential in her, Calvin votes her off in his usual merciless manner:

Shaiana, you're what I call an almost act. . . . You're almost pretty, you can almost move a bit and you can almost sing. You've even almost got a personality but I'm afraid rock 'n' roll's a tough business and 'almost' just doesn't cut it live. Never did, never will. . . . I'm sorry, Shaiana, but the dream ends here. You just can't sing well enough. You'll never be a star. (CT 347-48)

Since Shaiana strongly believed in realizing her dream of becoming a star, she is startled by Calvin's assessment and answers in disbelief: "Where am I supposed to go? . . . I didn't make any plans beyond now. . . . I told you, if I can't do this there isn't anything else for me to do" (348). Shaiana is a teenage girl so determined to become famous ("I think I'd be prepared to die for it," 328) that her wish seems to have become an obsession. When Beryl wakes up and learns that it is Shaiana's voice she is hearing, not her daughter's, she is assured of being "caught in the clutches of a psycho fan." Shaiana makes Beryl believe that she has kidnapped Beryl's daughter Priscilla, because her dream was ruined by being voted off the show: "So don't talk to me about ruining my life, it's been ruined, you ruined it already. You told me to dream the dream and then you took the dream away...." Trying to convince Shaiana that the show is not about finding and supporting talented singers, Beryl explains that "*Chart Throb* is an *entertainment* show," that nothing is serious, and that "it isn't about fulfilling your dreams" (450-52; original emphasis).

Shaiana then accuses Beryl of ruining not only her dream but also that of Beryl's daughter Priscilla. Furiously, she explains that Priscilla's fame in the context of the family's reality show *The Blenheims* is not the sort of fame Priscilla had hoped for: "Famous for what? For nothing. For swearing? For whining?" The pretended psycho fan then reveals that she is not Shaiana but Priscilla: "I am Shaiana and I am also Priscilla. Priscilla is Shaiana and Shaiana is Priscilla" (CT 453-54). She tells Beryl that she has made everything up in order to know whether Beryl really thought that she, her daughter Priscilla, was a talented singer. She continues to explain that she has taken revenge by employing another former show contestant, the veterinary student Damian, to take care of Beryl's plastic surgery on behalf of the professional plastic surgeon. Priscilla alias Shaiana has cooperated with another disappointed former show candidate to make Beryl pay for what she did to them. When Beryl can finally look in the mirror to see how she has been blemished, she is shocked to the bones: "The reflection she saw in the mirror was of a face mutilated, red, bloody, criss-crossed with scars and stitches, livid with bruises and scabs." As if this is not enough, Priscilla proceeds to inform her stepmother, who is still benumbed, that they have put back the fat Beryl had been cutting off over the years: "You've spent half your life sucking it out, cutting it off and stapling it down! Well, guess what? It's back! Damian has put it all back!" (458)

When Beryl is finally too shocked to speak, Priscilla has another revelation: "It's a fat bodysuit, Mom. I got it from the BBC, from one of their

sketch shows. Damian and I painted the wounds and bruises on you” (CT 459). Priscilla clarifies that neither Beryl’s body nor her face are actually blemished. Her intention was, she says, to scare her stepmother, to punish her for what she, Priscilla, had to endure. Beryl, now relieved that it was all just a joke does not have much time to recover from the shock. Priscilla attends upon her with yet another revelation. Declaring that Beryl has not yet paid the full price for her behavior, she announces that everything has been filmed and that this footage is going to be the first – and final – episode of the new *The Blenheims* season: “And we just made the first episode of the new series. . . . For the first time in the history of TV we’re going to put the ‘real’ into reality and you are going to be seen as you truly are” (461).

By depicting how one version of ‘actual’ reality replaces another and yet another, this last part of the story calls the idea of such a thing as ‘actual’ reality into question. Beryl believes – and so do the readers – that the version of ‘actual’ reality acted out by Priscilla/Shaiana is what is true – and therefore real – in the textual actual world. Beryl experiences the reality she is currently confronted with as the ‘actual’ reality, and she changes her beliefs according to the changes Priscilla makes in her scripted story. Priscilla confronts Beryl with different realities, which all turn out to be fiction, thereby turning Beryl into a victim of her own beliefs. Priscilla manipulates what her stepmother experiences and considers real, but since Beryl thinks she can trust her senses, she cannot see through Priscilla’s game. The daughter’s declaration that everybody will finally know the truth about their family is ridiculed by the fact that even this ‘reality’ is staged and will be presented on TV. The ‘real’ Priscilla attempts to put into reality turns out to be interchangeable with all the other kinds of fiction she has created.

The ‘real’ that the *Chart Throb* characters experience is satirized by being revealed as a meaningless label. Instead of dreading the inconsistency of reality, however, the characters play around with it. They are satisfied with believing in different and interwoven realities, thereby challenging the critique usually directed at television, namely that it is a medium endangering perceptions of the real. The way the characters deal with reality is satirized, but the critique does not aim at the human fear of living, perceiving, and thinking in terms of television. A comment such as “Keep it real” (CT 152) further underlines the idea that ‘reality’ has turned into an empty expression. “Keep it real,” the novel seems to suggest, is an expression without meaning. Rather than experiencing this loss of meaning in terms of fear, however, the characters are, simply speaking, indifferent towards not being able to uphold the real/fiction dichotomy. Their ‘real life’ experiences are televisionized, but this is, *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* indicate, what ‘actual’ experience is like in times of reality-based televisual entertainment.

To Be or Not to Be – on TV

In the worlds of *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb*, being on television and becoming a widely known celebrity is everything that counts and that makes life worth living. Becoming famous through appearing on reality TV seems to be the only way for the impressively huge number of contestants to make sense of their lives and themselves. In the world of *White Noise*, appearing on television is regarded as something extraordinary; in Elton's novels, it is an aim shared by millions of reality show contestants which can easily be achieved. In *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb*, the characters do not want to appear on television to set themselves apart. As mentioned in chapter 2, Turner states that appearing on a reality show has become a possible career option ("Mass" 162). Elton's satires enact this phenomenon. *Dead Famous* depicts the characters as young contestants who want to make a career in TV, thereby introducing appearing on television as a reasonable aim in life: "No wonder all young people wanted was to be on television. What else was there to do?" (DF 20). This ironic question suggests that being on TV is a legitimate career path. The text informs us that one of the contestants of the show "hopes one day to be a television presenter" (38), whereas another hopes to get noticed and make a career in comedy:

Jazz may have been a trainee chef, but that was just a job, not a vocation. It was not what he wanted to do with his life at all. Jazz wanted to be a comedian. That was why he had come into the house. He saw it as a platform for a career in comedy. (58; original emphasis)

Being asked whether she wants to be an actress, yet another contestant claims to be in the house to "get noticed," admitting "I'd do anything to get to be an actress" (83). And David, the devoted actor who has not had an acting job in a very long time, cannot imagine anything other than becoming a celebrated star:

Because there was only one thing in David's life that really mattered to him and that was his acting. All he had ever wanted, all he ever would want, was to be an actor, a celebrated actor, of course, a star. . . . All he needed was a break, and that was why he had applied to join *House Arrest*. He knew, of course, that it was a pretty desperate final gambit, but he was a pretty desperate man, a *completely* desperate man, in fact. (229-30; original emphasis)

Likewise, *Chart Throb* describes how millions of aspiring celebrities send their applications to the show producers, which the novel characterizes as "desperate pleas from desperate people asking to be saved from the lives they were leading and which they hated so much" (CT 56). In comparison to the televisual representations of celebrities' lives, the characters' own existence appears ordinary, dull, and meaningless.

In this context, appearing on TV equals being alive, while disappearing from the screen is comparable to not existing anymore. *Chart Throb* introduces the previous winner of the show, Christian Appleyard, as a non-existent entity that has vanished from collective consciousness:

But of course somebody had died. Christian Appleyard, pop star, had departed this earth and what was left was a pathetic creature indeed. Christian Appleyard, sad act, loser, joke. The distance between fame and notoriety, between adulation and derision, cannot be measured in feet and inches; the tipping point is merely a moment, a moment when suddenly the consciousness of the public changes. . . . Christian's fifteen minutes were well and truly up. (CT 84-85)

Previously celebrated as a hero, Christian Appleyard is now no longer worth talking about. In this regard, he is but one of many celebrity aspirants who have the possibility to shine for a brief while and must learn, only a short time later, that they are not interesting enough to uphold their own celebrity status.

The example of another contestant makes clear that the well-known proverb 'bad press is better than no press' holds true in the fictional world. Standing in the limelight one second and being ejected from the show the next, teenage girl Georgia suffers from the negative experience of being publicly humiliated. More than that, however, she suffers from having become indifferent:

The comments in the street went from support to pity to contempt and finally to indifference, and it was the last that seemed to hurt Georgia most. For a moment she had imagined that she meant something and then she had discovered that she didn't. (CT 67)

Georgia's worst experience in the context of the show is not to appear on television and not to be awarded with public attention. This indifference is, the novel suggests, even worse punishment than bad media coverage:

What you've got to realize is that whatever we do to these people and however we misrepresent them, they are *still* getting on the telly and that is always better than not getting on the telly. (129; original emphasis)

Connecting her TV appearance with the notion of meaning something, Georgia concludes that her existence does not carry any meaning anymore. In order for her to be convinced that her life means something, she needs reality TV to attest to her being.

The feeling of being somebody is, *Chart Throb* implies, connected to appearing on and being validated through reality TV. Thinking along the same lines as Georgia, Shaiana intends to show the world – and herself – that she is not a nobody: "Everyone thinks I'm a nobody. . . . I'm going to prove to them all that I'm a somebody" (CT 114). The urge to validate her existence

through television is the reason for Shaiana's obsession and her bewilderment when she learns that her dream will not come true. Her explanation that she is prepared to die if she only had the chance to prove her talent on the show is of course exaggerated. Then again, the extreme way in which Shaiana emphasizes her desire to become a celebrated media person brings to the fore how strongly she feels about staying in the spotlight. Seeing her dream shattering into pieces makes Shaiana realize that she will forever be a nobody in the public eye. The possibility of being denied living her life through TV as a famous singer is something she has not been able to even imagine. The characters of Christian Appleyard, Georgia, and Shaiana allude to reality show contestants in the non-textual world who desperately attempt to become publicly known through television, and who describe their TV appearances as what DeLillo's protagonist calls "a moment of splendid transcendence" (WN 149). *Chart Throb* indicates that talent show contestants, who are desperate to experience validation through television, must be acknowledged as a contemporary phenomenon which hints at a new way of approaching and understanding one's sense of self, or what McHale calls "TV-shaped selfhood" (118).

The characters of both these reality TV satires enact the idea that appearing on television is a means of getting to know oneself and becoming better people. *Dead Famous* informs us about the contestants' incentives:

'To really stretch myself as a person...' 'To explore different aspects of who I am...' 'To discover new horizons and life adventures...' 'To provide a goal, and to be a role model.' (DF 270)

Chart Throb also picks up the idea of self-discovery and personal growth and ridicules how it has turned into an empty thought in the reality TV context. A duo that is about to be ejected from the show desperately tries to convince the judges that they have worked hard and that they have grown, which is why, the girls conclude, the judges should have a heart:

We've grown. . . . We've worked so hard and we've learned and we've grown. We've taken on board all the things you said to us last year and we've really, really thought about them and worked hard and tried to grow. (CT 309)

The girls, who are on the show for the second time, believe that they deserve to be the final chosen. *Chart Throb* ridicules the girls' and other contestants' naivety, emphasizing again that the show is not about the advancement of talent.

Both novels enact the idea of personal growth through television as a means of validation, suggesting that the contestants want the public to see on television that they have learned and grown. For them, the texts indicate, it is not enough to know for themselves that they have achieved something. The contestants rather think in terms of reality TV, meaning in this context that they have seen how others validate their success by appearing on a reality

show and consider it to be a naturalized way of coming to terms with one's self. Displaying one's learning process on television turns it into a moment of growth – whether or not there is a learning process is of course irrelevant. Not having grown in front of the television audience is like not having learned anything at all. The characters intend to validate their experiences through television, which is why they are willing to discuss the most intimate topics under observation and for all the world to see. In *Dead Famous*, *House Arrest* contestant Moon reveals self-consciously that she has had plastic surgery:

And third, I've had a boob job, right? I was dead unhappy with my self-image before, and my new tits have really empowered me as a person in my own right, right? Which at the end of the day is what it's all about, in't it? Quite frankly, at the end of the day, I feel that these are the boobs I was supposed to have. (DF 29)

Admitting in front of the other contestants and, more than that, the television audience that her breasts are not real, the female contestant addresses a sensitive issue whose discussion might guarantee higher viewing rates. Apart from that, Moon is presented as a woman who feels the urge to share her opinion on television. It seems as if she wants to express her thoughts on the show in order to put more emphasis on her decision and make it more meaningful.

By alluding to reality show participants of the non-textual world who feel the need to share their thoughts with the public through television, *Dead Famous* portrays yet another contestant willing to open himself up on the show. Explaining that “it helps to talk about it” (DF 142), contestant Gazzo talks about his past as a drug addict, pretending that his little son was the reason for him to stop taking drugs. The contestant, the text indicates, is conscious of the rules of the game. He knows that the image he creates of himself provokes sympathy from the audience. The passage also suggests, however, that Gazzo enacts the human need to show emotions on the screen. It appears that telling his story on live television convinces Gazzo that it is true. He can finally believe in the version of reality he has proposed, as this is the version which has been validated through television. Connecting notions of reality, truth, and credibility to appearing on reality television implies that access to these fundamental ideals is only possible through televisual representation. Since Plato it has been assumed that representation leads humankind further away from the real, and Kant explains that humans, bound to the being human, are forever denied the ability to grasp the real and absolute, pure truth. Through their enactments of TV experiences, *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* imply that humans come closer to these ideals through television. Paradoxically, TV representations do not lead the characters away from the real; they bring them closer to it.

This is equally true for the fundamental notion of ‘being’ that seems to be inextricably linked to appearing on television. For her reality show, Beryl wants her daughter Priscilla to be with the family in the final episode of *Chart Throb*. Priscilla, however, seems to have vanished in the crowd, so that Beryl complains that she is not visible for the cameras and thus not visible at all:

‘She’s supposed to be here to support me!’ Beryl fumed to her wife, Serenity. ‘We’re a fucking family, we fucking support each other.’
‘She is here, darling,’ Serenity mumbled through her vast lips.
‘Visibly here! On the fucking camera,’ Beryl barked. ‘There’s no fucking point her being here if she isn’t *seen* to be here. She might as well *not* fucking be here.’ (CT 427; original emphasis)

Beryl’s outburst lays bare the fact that the life of the Blenheims is completely staged. Beryl, the text passage suggests, is not seriously interested in her family supporting each other; she only wants the world to believe this to be the case. Beryl’s comment also suggests that, in her life, being is being seen by others on television. Most important for her is to have everything recorded for the show, because only what is being broadcasted can be true. It seems, however, that Beryl is not strictly interested in the audience believing in the myth of the ideal family where everybody supports each other; she lives through this idea herself. For her, the image created for the audience is the image she also wants to believe in, which indicates that being visible in life means being visible on the screen. Priscilla’s not being there at this moment is as if she does not exist at all.

The Self as Selves and the New Authentic

In the worlds of *Chart Throb* and *Dead Famous*, where the idea of ‘actual’ reality is meaningless and where the characters believe they can only ‘be’ when appearing on television, the notion of ‘the real me’ appears to be equally porous. The characters are described as honestly believing in finding their real selves whilst competing on a reality show. In *Dead Famous*, for instance, David argues that he came into the house to show the world his true self (“I came in here to get the chance to show the world who I am,” DF 130). The characters of both satires are disoriented. They strive to find their ‘real selves,’ but the novels make clear, at the same time, that such a thing as a ‘real self’ does not exist. Satirizing the human urge to ‘get real,’ or what Biressi and Nunn call a “new horizon of contemporary self-realisation” (99), *Chart Throb* suggests that even the Prince of Wales, a cultural authority, believes in the idea that one becomes real through television. By complaining “If only people knew the *real* me” (CT 34; original emphasis), HRH (His Royal Highness) is portrayed as a man dissatisfied with what he believes the public thinks of him. Scenting the chance to convince HRH to compete on

the show, Calvin explains: “Your problem, sir, is that nobody knows the *real you*” (42; original emphasis). The producer indicates that the public will learn what HRH is really like, although Calvin knows that the prince’s televisual portrayal will only be a half-fictional version of him. HRH, however, believes in Calvin’s offer. Asked about why he wants to participate in the show, he says proudly and equally naively: “I want people to get the chance to see *the real me!*” (123; original emphasis).

Represented as an innocent and naïve contestant unacquainted with reality TV as a contemporary cultural and televisual phenomenon, the Prince of Wales is not the only authority in the story who is convinced of the show’s potential to find and publicly share one’s real self. Rodney, who as a judge of the show should know better, is also determined to show the world his real self and explains to Calvin what he thinks his real self to be like:

‘I feel I need to show the public more of the real me,’ he [Rodney] said.
‘The real you?’ Calvin enquired.
‘Yes, I think the public’s ready for it.’
‘Ready for it?’
‘Yes.’ . . .
‘Exactly which bit of the real you do you think the public’s missing out on?’
‘The tough bit. The two-fisted, straight-talking hard man with the rapier-sharp putdown bit.’ (CT 86-87)

Dissatisfied with the role he plays as the fifth wheel, the judge who is constantly made fun of, and who could easily be replaced, Rodney wants to change his public image. This, however, is not what he says. Rodney is described as truly believing that he is the version of himself he describes in his conversation with Calvin. He does not realize that the version he imagines himself to be is basically the role that Calvin has already inherited as the ruthless judge. Rodney wants himself to be, and experiences himself as, someone he is not. He is convinced that the version he describes to Calvin is who he really is. As a character who believes to be someone he is not, Rodney draws attention to the idea that a person does not have one self but different selves, suggesting that people are whoever they believe themselves to be.

In *Dead Famous*, the characters take part in *House Arrest* to create the versions of themselves they want to be and in which they want the world to believe. David, an ambitious and equally desperate actor, wants to hide his identity as a porn star. Aiming to convince the world of his being a devoted actor who would never waste his talent, David presents a constructed version of himself as a serious young man with principles. Discussing with his co-contestants how everybody in the house is acting and that nobody cannot *not* act in life, David’s explanations address the question of whether such a thing as genuine, real, or authentic behavior can ever exist:

‘It’s interesting what you said yesterday about wanting to be an actress, Kelly. Because actually everybody in here is acting. . . . This house is a stage and all men and women merely players.’

‘Not true,’ Jazz replied with his customary abundance of self-confidence. ‘I’m being my true self, guy. . . .’

‘Oh, what nonsense. Nobody is ever truly themselves. . . . I can assure you, Jason, that we are all actors in life, presenting ourselves as we wish others to see us. That is why those of us who actually *are* actors, like myself, understand our world and the people in it more fully than ordinary folk do. . . . We recognize that we live in a world full of performers. Some of us are subtle, some are hams, but every one of us is *acting*.’ (DF 97-98; original emphasis)

Philosophizing about the impossibility of truly being oneself, David challenges the idea of a ‘real’ self.

In a later part of the story, the novel suggests that David is right in his diagnosis. The text proposes that, in times of reality television, staged behavior is authentic behavior and that the idea of authenticity is, therefore, in need of reevaluation. From the perspective of inspector Coleridge, David’s behavior after being voted off the show is described as staged behavior:

There was something mannered about his [David’s] expressions of grief; not that this meant he wasn’t sorry [about Kelly’s murder], but it did mean he was conscious of how he was presenting his sorrow. The pauses before he spoke were too long, the frank manly eye contact too frank and manly. He smoked a number of cigarettes during his interview, but since he clearly did not inhale it struck Coleridge that the cigarettes were props. He held them between his thumb and forefinger, his hand cupped around the burning end which pointed towards his palm. Not a very practical way to hold a cigarette, Coleridge thought, but it certainly gave an impression of anguish. (DF 260-61)

Through the focalizer of Coleridge, the passage reveals that David acts instead, playing a role he thinks is appropriate, which might indicate that he is not his true self in this conversation. The text emphasizes, however, that David cannot *not* act. In this conversation, David is not on the show; he is not under camera observation anymore, but he still feels the need to adapt his way of being to the situation. The character of David connects to the patients mentioned in the theory part of the study who suffer from the Truman Show delusion. This is also true for Garry who realizes that he acts although no camera is around:

‘I’ve been in a lot of bogs with blood on the floor,’ he [Garry] said, thinking to himself that this comment would play rather well on the telly, before he remembered that he was outside the house and for the first time in a month there were no cameras being trained on him. (DF 269)

It seems that both David and Garry constantly imagine being filmed – whether there is a camera pointed at them or not. Imagining being observed is, the novel implies, a normal way of behaving. Paradoxically enough, then,

in the case of David, acting as if he is being filmed equals his authentic behavior, or in other words, to act for him is to behave authentically.

Chart Throb also brings up the idea that staged behavior is the new authentic. Beryl is, the text emphasizes, “the creation of her editors and production teams” (CT 92). Beryl does not have such a thing as a genuine, true, actual, authentic, or real self; she lives through her television creations. In the world of *Chart Throb*, this way of being, the idea of existing through one’s television version, is the norm. The novel proposes that life through reality TV is the new standard of life, as much as existing through television constructions has turned into a naturalized way of being. Staged behavior, *Chart Throb* indicates, is not less real; it is the new authentic.

Conclusion

This change of perspective, from the viewers in front of the TV set to the viewers on the screen and the producers behind the scenes, supports the hypothesis that the experience of appearing on television has turned into as much of an everyday life experience as watching television. Given that Elton’s satires are not the only contemporary novels dealing with reality television and performing this change of perspective, the argument proves even more persuasive. There is a whole market for literary fiction on reality shows, which is why Henry Jenkins asks for the acknowledgement of the new emerging micro genre of reality television fiction. In his blog entry from 2006, Jenkins draws attention to the increasing amount of reality TV fan fiction. In this context, he also mentions Carolyn Parkhurst’s *Lost and Found* from 2006, a novel alluding to the American reality show *The Amazing Race*. Somewhat in passing, Jenkins mentions Parkhurst’s choice to focus on the mechanisms of the production (Jenkins, n.p.), thereby pointing at the significant change of focus I have investigated. Very similar to *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* in approach, *Lost and Found* pretends to offer glimpses at what happens behind the scenes of reality TV production, which has also become a characteristic of many other novels about reality shows. Whereas *Lost and Found* centers on the production mechanisms of an adventurous game show in *The Amazing Race*-style, Sarah Mlynowski’s *As Seen on TV: Sex, Lies and Reality TV* from 2003, offers a fictional account of a young woman’s experiences as a participant in a reality show. Tawnya Wicker-Cooke’s *The Swan Diaries: Dirt behind the Scenes of Reality TV* from 2009 reads like a novel of exposure. It informs the naïve audience-as-readers what being a contestant on the American make-over or self-improvement show *The Swan* entails. In the form of a diary, the former contestant, who actually participated in the very first season of the show, documents her experiences in what she feels is quite a dirty business. These are but a few examples of what Jenkins calls an emerging micro genre. Demonstrating the change of perspective from the viewer in front of the TV set to

the viewer as an agent in the making of television, these narratives enact the naturalization of appearing on the television screen.

By centering on the show participants and the reality TV producers, Elton's novels do not respond to the fear of TV's invasiveness discussed in the previous analysis chapters. Limiting the story to the production side of television, *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* rule out the possibility of offering the perspective of those who are, more often than not, described as dreading the evil power of TV. The enactments of the viewers' experiences with television in *Being There* and *White Noise* are bound to the angle of the – sometimes more, sometimes less – critical television consumer distanced from the power of those who can decide on the production outcomes. In contrast to the viewers in the earlier novels, whom these novels suggest to be completely powerless, the characters in Elton's reality TV satires take part in making the fiction real. *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* imply that there is a hierarchy in the business, proposing that the viewers-as-participants are dependent on the merciless producers. At the same time, they indicate that producers, contestants, and viewers alike are equally responsible for the success of reality television and the naturalization of becoming televisual content. Highlighting the interdependence of all parties involved in the phenomenon, the novels do not leave any space for fear. The fictional look behind the scenes contributes to the demystification of the medium. Elton's satirical portrayals criticize the downfall of cultural values, but the complex web of the assignment of guilt forbids these enactments of TV experiences to leave space for mystification and non-transparency as sources of anxiety.

As for terms such as 'real,' 'reality,' 'authenticity,' or 'truth' in the context of reality television, *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* emphasize that these ideas have finally lost their meaning completely. In the world of reality television, the idea of something being real is ambivalent, translucent, and, therefore, unfeasible. Instead of dreading the loss of clear-cut ascriptions and categorizations, the characters play around with different versions of reality; they are indifferent to an environment in which fuzziness rules. The convergence of the characters as personalities with the roles attributed to them by the show producers is, the novels propose, part of the deal, and living through their television selves is how TV life is portrayed to be. Thinking of one's life in terms of a dream or a script indicates that the characters have adapted to treating life as fiction.

The novels' representations of TV culture, and their enactments of TV experiences, prompt the readers to reconsider the idea of 'actual' reality and 'authentic' behavior. The article about the case of Nick Lotz introduces his way of experiencing life as a deception. The Truman Show delusion is a mental illness, a phenomenon categorized as abnormal. Whereas one considers patients like Lotz to deviate from the norm, Elton's novels suggest that televisionized experiences and thinking in terms of reality TV are naturalized ways of being and of understanding the world. The characters constantly behave as if they are being watched, which turns staged behavior into

normal and authentic behavior. Instead of portraying the characters as a marginalized social group like those suffering from the Truman Show delusion, they are, the texts make clear, representative of today's TV audience. The satires do not contrast the characters' behavior and televisionized consciousness with what they could have suggested to be 'normal,' 'should-be' behavior, because they describe living in terms of television as the ordinary, non-exceptional way of life.

Evidently, the satires ridicule this way of being, but they do not depict the characters as abnormal beings *à la* Kosinski's Chance. Denouncing the phenomenon of reality TV and blaming those involved for the trivialization of society, *Dead Famous* and *Chart Throb* do not make use of the cautionary rhetoric against the medium which suggests that the parties involved are metamorphosing into machine-like beings. The satires depict the societies they present as being made up of superficial, profit-oriented, and unscrupulous human beings who would benefit from re-establishing a more reasonable value system and recuperating a more honest sense of themselves. Conventionally enough, Elton's satires are built on the popular critique of television as a medium of low standard entertainment. Yet, their enactments of TV experiences do not revert to the image of the zombie- or the machine-like viewer, and neither do the novels describe the characters' televisionized consciousness and experiences in terms of deviation or anomaly. Complaining about the cultural fall in value, they are free from anxieties.

As already addressed in the introduction, *Dead Famous* is the only novel of the ones selected for my study which comments on the media gap between the novel as a conservative cultural form and television as a pop-cultural, and rather trivial, medium. Inspector Coleridge is the novel's cultural critic who alludes to and, indeed, enacts opinions and attitudes like those of Postman. Representative of the denouncing TV-era litany, the character of the chief inspector condemns the banalities of reality shows like *House Arrest* and contrasts this low-standard entertainment with high literature by Shakespeare which is, according to him, capable of educating the audience on a much more sophisticated level. Through the character of the law-abiding chief inspector, the satire suggests that reality TV is a low cultural form further endangering the importance of elite fiction in a culture of televisionization.

Then again, through this character, the novel also builds a bridge between these two cultural forms, thereby proposing that reality television can, just like Shakespeare's plays, turn into a sort of entertainment critics will eventually accept. It is widely known that Shakespeare's contemporaries were critical of the entertainment provided by his plays. People enjoying *Macbeth* were not representative of the higher social classes; Shakespeare's plays were rather popular amongst and made for ordinary, uneducated people. *Dead Famous* portrays Coleridge as a critic who starts to enjoy his fifteen minutes of fame in the context of a reality show, and who connects reality TV with his obsession for Shakespeare. Through this portrayal, *Dead Fa-*

mous implicitly comments on the discussion of literature vs. television, suggesting that these different cultural forms and their well-known reputations cannot but dissolve into one another.

Throughout the story, Coleridge complains about the low standards of television entertainment, wondering “if he was the only person in the world who felt so completely culturally disenfranchised” (DF 25). His complaints, it seems, do not resonate in an environment of complete televisionization. On the contrary, even a political authority like the Minister of Culture underlines the value of reality TV, explaining that it offers a platform for reaching out and connecting to the younger generation (78-79). Determined to dedicate his free time to more sophisticated leisure time activities, Coleridge has been a member of the local amateur dramatic society for years. On the one hand, the text manages to make clear that Coleridge’s interest in Shakespeare and Dickens underlines his critical attitude towards reality television; on the other hand, it manages to point out that his passion for elite fiction and his wish to finally get the lead in the next play are comparable to the younger generation’s longing to take part in a reality show and become publicly known. Elton’s other novel, *Chart Throb*, describes how thousands of hopeful teenagers (and young adults) take it upon themselves to queue for hours to get the chance to perform in front of the three judges and be allowed to participate in the talent show. *Dead Famous* evokes the same image when the inspector auditions for *Macbeth*: “Coleridge sat in the larger of the two halls in the village youth centre awaiting his turn among all the other hopefuls” (DF 276). After his audition, he is not offered the lead but the role of Macduff. Coleridge accepts in disappointment.

In the last part of the story, the inspector has the idea of trapping the murderer with “a bit of honest theatre” (DF 352). Similar to Heinrich in *White Noise* who stands in the middle of an inquisitive crowd and evokes the image of a celebrated star in his father, Coleridge is described as standing in front of an audience giving him their fullest attention:

Something rather strange was happening to Coleridge. He could feel it deep in the pit of his stomach. It was a new sensation for him, but not an unpleasant one. Could it be that he was *enjoying himself*? Perhaps not quite that. The tension was too great and the possibility of failure too immediate for enjoyment, but he certainly felt ... exhilarated. If he had had a moment to think, he might have reflected that circumstance had granted him that thing which he most craved and which his local amateur dramatic society had so long denied him: an audience and a leading role. (357; original emphasis)

The man who laughs at and despairs of a generation longing for an appearance on television enjoys his fifteen minutes of fame in the context of a reality show. At the end of the story it becomes obvious that the novel’s cultural critic has the same dreams and needs as the generation of reality TV viewers and participants he despises. Due to his “moment of theatre” (381), which is, in fact, a moment of television, Coleridge is finally offered the

leading role in *Macbeth*: “He knew that he had only got the part because he had been on television. But why not? If everybody else could play the game, why couldn’t he? Fame, it seemed, *did* have its uses” (382; original emphasis).

Dead Famous satirizes reality television as a low cultural form. At the same time, however, it calls into question both the critical attitudes towards this sort of televisual entertainment and the conventional critique of the medium as such. The character of the chief inspector worships Shakespeare, the epitome of high literature.¹⁶⁴ Then again, through him, the novel creates parallels between a reality show and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Doing so, the satire implies two things: (1) cultural attitudes change; (2) cultural products, which are conventionally conceived of in terms of the dichotomy of high vs. low, offer comparable experiences. Elton’s *Dead Famous* does not explicitly comment on the functions of literature in relation to television and its capacity to discuss the medium of television self-reflexively. Implicitly, however, it suggests both that the gap between the two media – literature vs. television – is and is not closing. On the one hand, the satire emphasizes the low standards of reality TV; on the other hand, it indicates that established cultural opinions and well-known debates on the value of literary vs. televisual products are, by now, obsolete. Elton’s satires stick to the image of the novel as a conservative cultural form, but they also question this understanding.

¹⁶⁴ The text refers to the well-known reputation of Shakespearian plays as sophisticated dramatic works. When the show participants talk about their encounters with the plays at school, Garry joins the conversation by saying: “We did it at school. . . . Believe me, nothing is as bad as *Hamlet*” (DF 104). This dismissive comment brings to mind the reputation of Shakespearian literature amongst younger generations who feel repelled by its richness and its high level of sophistication.

Chapter 6: Anxieties Reloaded and Fears Overcome: Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010)

In March 1998, ten year old Natascha Kampusch from Austria was kidnapped and from then on held captive in a secret bunker. More than eight years later, on 23rd August 2006, she managed to escape. Since then, Kampusch has been the focus of intense media attention. She confronted the public in various television and newspaper interviews, created her own website, published an autobiography and hosted her own talk show. The movie *3,096 Tage (3,096 Days)*, a film adaptation of her memoirs, was released in February 2013. In April 2008, the world was informed about what has become known as the Austrian Fritzl case. In 1984, Josef Fritzl lured his 18-year-old daughter into a trap. Elisabeth was held captive in a cellar for 24 years where her tormentor, her own father, abused her. In that period, she gave birth to seven children. Just as in the case of Kampusch, the story provoked enormous media interest; unlike Kampusch, the female victim and her children decided not to make a public appearance. The incestuous family successfully escaped the public eye while Fritzl's photograph travelled around the world. In January 2012, the French author Régis Jauffret published the novel *Claustria* that retells the story of the Fritzl case. Set in the year 2055 and using the children's perspectives, Jauffret's novel was widely praised and equally strongly criticized in the French feuilletons. With regard to the Fritzl case, the author explained that he was fascinated by the fact that human beings were born into the world and could survive without ever having seen the reality of this world, and who still knew everything about it, because they had watched it on television (Jauffret qtd. in *Wiener Zeitung*).

I suggest that Donoghue's *Room* (abbr. R) is, like Jauffret's *Claustria*, a novel that deals with the question of how humans come to terms with a world they have only learned about through television.¹⁶⁵ Through the perspective of a five-year-old, *Room* tells the story of a young mother who is held captive in an old garden shed where she gives birth to Jack, her and her rapist's son. The first part of the novel, which I call "in confinement," focus-

¹⁶⁵ In contrast to Jauffret, however, who declares that he was entirely inspired by the Fritzl case (qtd. in *Wiener Zeitung*), Donoghue says in an interview with Jonathan Derbyshire that she is even "disappointed by how large the Fritzl case has loomed in discussions of the book." Also, when asked about references to the case of Kampusch, the author notes that Kampusch's memoirs, published at about the same time as *Room*, offer a different kind of literary experience (qtd. in Derbyshire).

es on Jack and his mother's life in the shed and culminates in a successful attempt to escape. Thus, in the first five years of his life, Jack only knows "Room," that is the world of the small shed in which he and his mother are trapped.¹⁶⁶ The second part, which I refer to as "after confinement," portrays their life after the escape. Like in the case of Natascha Kampusch mentioned above, *Room* describes how the two victims turn into – or rather, are turned into – media events. Mother and child not only have to cope with their traumata, but they also have to deal with the public's deep interest in their 'real life story.'

With regard to the novel's enactments of TV experiences, I would like to make two suggestions. Firstly, I argue that the novel's enactments of TV experiences are much more positive than the other novels' enactments. Through Jack's perspective, the perspective of an innocent child, *Room* presents television and the TV environment in a new, different light. Jack's world, of which television is a fundamental element, is a magical world full of enchantment, not a world dominated by human anxieties. Through Jack's perspective, the novel seems to neglect – but does not completely erase – the concerns conventionally associated with television. Instead, it focuses on the protagonist's positive bonds to the apparatus, but also his confusion about its connection to reality. At the same time, the novel's setting mimics the American TV culture of the 1960s and 1970s, thereby alluding to the fear of television typical of the TV era. By contrasting the protagonist with the character of his mother, *Room* draws attention to a generational gap. The character of the mother, representative of the pre-TV-era generation, expresses her concerns about the negative impact of television consumption on the viewer, thereby responding to TV-era critics such as Postman or Kosinski. Jack, however, represents the generation that grows up with television and does not know life without the medium. Therefore, as a twenty-first century novel, *Room* both highlights and counters the anxieties surrounding television. Donoghue's contradictory enactments of TV experiences both affirm old fears and suggest they are long overcome.

Therefore, in the analysis of *Room*, I will use the 'both...and-approach' on two different levels. One level concerns Jack's contradictory TV experiences. Although Jack experiences television mainly in positive terms, his experiences are – in and outside of the shed – quite ambiguous. Still in confinement, the mother teaches her son that the worlds displayed on television are fantasy, pure fiction. He does not learn that it represents such a thing as an outside world. In that time, a 'real' outside world does not exist for Jack. At the age of five, however, he starts asking questions, because things start to no longer make sense to him. Intending to escape, the mother finally reveals to him that there is an outside world to which they are denied access, a world represented on television. Up to this point, television confused the boy

¹⁶⁶ Jack refers to the shed, his home, as "Room." I will therefore use the same designation. When referring to the novel as such, I will use italics.

to a certain extent, but more than that, it offered security and stability. When he learns about TV's ability to represent such a thing as an outside world, the boy's confusion increases, and it increases even more when he finally becomes a part of this world. Thus, after confinement, Jack still has difficulty grasping the meaning of reality in relation to television. In that period, television even disappoints him with regard to 'actual' reality. At the same time, however, it helps him to acclimatize and get along in the outside world. Thus, in confinement, television operates as a substitute for attachment figures other than his mother, but it also puzzles him with regard to its relation to such a thing as reality. After confinement, the boy is even more confused and disappointed by the promises that television makes about reality. At the same time, however, the knowledge of the world he has gained through watching TV helps him to understand 'real' life outside of Room.

On another level, the 'both...and-approach' concerns the novel as such and the opposing enactments of TV experiences through the character of Jack and the mother. As just outlined, in the case of Jack, television is a source of confusion before as well as after the escape, but his TV experiences are nevertheless mainly positive. Jack's bonds to television help him to survive in and outside of Room. Jack's mother, however, is afraid of TV's narcotic power, which she fears is turning her into a zombie and rotting her and her son's brain. In contrast to Jack's joyful TV experiences, his mother's TV experiences are full of prejudices, suspicion, and anxiety. In what follows, I intend to elaborate on these conflictive enactments of TV experiences.

Before doing so, I would like to note that the characters' relations to and experiences with television develop in the course of the story. In the shed and in the period right after their escape, television supports Jack. Towards the end of the story he does not depend on it any longer; with the help of TV he learns to be independent from it. With regard to the character of his mother, it is clear that her TV experiences also develop. During her time in Room before and after her son's birth, the young woman's connection to television changes from rejection to reconciliation, but her suspicion seems to last until the end of the story.

After its publication, *Room* was praised extensively, but little academic attention has, so far, been devoted to it. Discussions with the author about the book very often focus on the extraordinary relationship between mother and son as portrayed in the novel.¹⁶⁷ Scholars and critics have so far hardly paid attention to the function of television in the son's upbringing. In this chapter, I attempt to close this gap in research by showing that *Room*'s enactments of TV experiences dissociate themselves from the well-known critical academic and public discourse on television.

¹⁶⁷ See Tom Ue's interview with Donoghue in the *Journal of Gender Studies*. By stressing the mother's important role in her son's upbringing under exceptional conditions, the article centers on gender-specific education and socialization.

TV in Confinement: Savior and Source of Confusion

The first part of the novel depicts Jack and his mother's situation in the shed, where television plays a crucial part in the boy's life. On the one hand, Jack is confused about its relation to such a thing as reality; on the other hand, the apparatus as such and the characters that television depicts prevent him from feeling isolated. Taught by his mother that television is fiction and not real, he has difficulty distinguishing what is "only TV" and what is not. Since Jack has never seen an actual dog, for instance, "dogs are only TV" (R 8). Spiders, in contrast, are real to him, as he has already encountered one. The novel portrays Jack as a boy who attempts to differentiate between his reality in the shed and the realities of television:

Cats and rocks are only TV. . . . Bunnies are TV but carrots are real, I like their loudness. . . . Mountains are too big to be real, I saw one in TV that has a woman hanging on it by ropes. Women aren't real like Ma is, and girls and boys not neither. Men aren't real except Old Nick, and I'm not actually sure if he's real for real. Maybe half? (17-18)

Things that exist are unreal to him, because he has never seen them himself, only on television. The mother teaches her son that "The persons in TV are made just of colors." Jack comprehends that 'TV-women' are not comparable to his mother, and yet, they seem to be real. Many things do not make sense to Jack, because they do not properly fit in the two categories suggested by his mother. In order for her son to comprehend the meaning of something being real in Room, the mother must have taught him that the term 'real' applies to them: "I thought the word for us was real" (13). In his small world, Jack understands that something being real applies to things he can see for himself and that he can touch. When it comes to television, however, this categorization does not always make sense to him.

The novel provides an example of Jack's confusion when he meditates on the actual existence of beaches and the ocean. As an escape attempt, the young mother writes letters and flushes them down the toilet, in the hope that someone will find them and come to their rescue. Obviously, she must have told Jack stories about these letters: "Beaches and sea are TV but I think when we send letters it turns them real for a bit" (R 40). Jack is puzzled: he and his mother send letters so that they finally reach a real beach, so that actual people can read them. However, at the same time, he only knows beaches, the sea, and 'TV people' from watching television, which leads him to the conclusion that they are unreal. With good reason, Jack is bewildered; his mother's explanations do not fit together: "Ships are just TV and so is the sea except when our poos and letters arrive. Or maybe they actually stop being real the minute they get there?" (54). For Jack, his mother's approach to the meaning of reality in relation to television falls short. Clearly, Jack is confused, but his confusion does not exasperate him.

Before his mother tells him that there is an outside world to which television relates, Jack's puzzlement also results from his incomprehension of how television operates. Like the protagonist of DeLillo's novel who does not understand what television is ("I tried to tell myself it was only television – whatever that was, however it worked," WN 103), Jack seems to be unsure about how it operates, which is indicated by his language use. Instead of saying something is (shown) *on* TV, Jack continuously speaks of something being *in* TV, for instance, "Stores are in TV" (R 23). The protagonist's word choice brings to the fore the fact that Jack's idea of television is delusive. Since he does not know that there is an outside world to which television refers, the TV set is only a box for him, a box filled with imagination. As far as Jack is concerned, the television characters have no connection to anything, and yet, they are similar to his mother and himself. The idea of television as a box filled with stories, unrelated to anything but imagination and completely self-contained, proves challenging for Jack to comprehend.

At the age of five, then, Jack keeps asking questions his mother is no longer able to satisfactorily answer. Because of that, and because the mother plans to include Jack in an escape plan, she decides to reveal to her son that there is such a thing as an outside world. The boy learns that "What we see on TV is . . . it's pictures of real things," which is for him "the most astonishing thing I ever heard" (R 59). He learns that the idea of something being real has an additional dimension which further complicates – but also enriches – his conception and understanding of the world and the role and function of television in this world.

After having heard the news, which is both disturbing and fascinating, Jack starts to reassess the explanations he has come up with so far to understand the difference between the reality of their world in Room, the 'actual' reality of the outside world, and the realities of television:

Dora is a drawing in TV but she's my real friend, that's confusing. Jeep is actually real, I can feel him with my fingers. Superman is just TV. Trees are TV but Plant is real, oh, I forgot to water her. . . . Skateboards are TV and so are girls and boys except Ma says they're actual, how can they be when they're so flat? . . . Grass is TV and so is fire, but it could come in Room for real if I hot the beans and the red jumps onto my sleeve and burns me up. I'd like to see that but not it happen. Air's real and water only in Bath and Sink, rivers and lakes are TV, I don't know about the sea because if it whizzed around Outside it would make everything wet. . . . Room is real for real, but maybe Outside is too only it's got a cloak of invisibility on like Prince JackerJack in the story? (R 63)

The passage suggests that Jack is faced with apprehending that television works through representation. He always thought that real can only be what he can touch and feel, such as his Jeep toy. When it comes to the images of people, the flatness of their representations disturbs him. The five-year-old is conscious of the discrepancy between a flat drawing and an object or a per-

son he can touch, but he has never learned about the possibility of photographing or filming them. More than that, since he cannot imagine that there is something like an outside world, the idea of facing its representations cannot occur to him. Thus, he knows that “Room is real for real,” but the concept of “Outside” – although having seen it on TV – is, while still trapped in the shed, unintelligible.

By introducing the young protagonist as a child in search of clarity and clear-cut ascriptions in relation to television and the concept of reality, *Room* makes contradictory suggestions. The readers of *Room* might want to consider the boy’s confusion as designed to be in correspondence with the conventional anxieties about TV’s negative influence on children. Due to the novel’s emphasis on Jack’s attempts to distinguish between television and ‘actual’ reality, one may be inclined to interpret the novel’s enactments of the boy’s TV experiences as a reinforcement of concerns such as those expressed by Kosinski, Postman, and others. In their view, viewers must be suspicious of television, especially with regard to its presumed negative influence on children. They fear it lures children into living in two different worlds: the world of television and the ‘actual’ world. According to them, television blurs boundaries that one ought to be aware of in order to avoid losing sight of what is real. With regard to this line of thought, I would like to object that the text only describes Jack as being confused; he is not unsettled. He wonders about television and its connection to reality, but he does not despair of his lack of knowledge. Also, later in the story when Jack is outside, he manages to understand the meaning of reality – not *despite* but *with the help of* TV; I will come to that later.

Thus, when living in the shed, television does give Jack a hard time, but it also saves him. It replaces attachment figures and friends that Jack cannot have in the small world of Room. The boy regards television characters as his “TV friends” (R 40) to which he writes letters: “I write a letter to SpongeBob with a picture of me and Ma on the back dancing to keep warm” (78). His best TV friend is the character Dora from *Dora the Explorer*, an animated television series. In this show, the little girl explores the world, and, while travelling, she encounters riddles and has to solve problems. Children watching the show are invited to participate: they are supposed to engage in activities such as counting something or spotting things Dora looks for. The show is designed in a way that makes children feel they are being addressed directly; they appear to be asked questions and requested to be active. For instance, when summoned to watch out for something, the show’s conception includes enough time – breaks in which the plot does not advance – so that the young viewers can search the screen and come up with a guess. While watching *Dora the Explorer*, Jack explains:

Dora always says she’s going to need *my* help, like can I find a magic thing, she waits for me to say ‘Yeah.’ I shout out, ‘Behind the palm tree,’ and the

blue arrow clicks right behind the palm tree, she says, ‘Thank you.’ Every TV person else doesn’t listen. (R 10-11; original emphasis)

The breaks incorporated in the story of *Dora*, which are part of the plot, offer Jack enough time to find the right answer. Dora’s “Thank you” supports the feeling of Dora interacting with him. Jack, the text suggests, has the impression that Dora speaks to him in the same way as his mother, Jack’s only ‘proper’ attachment figure.

Jack imagines doing with Dora what he would do with other children – if there were any:

I walk with Dora and Boots, holding their hands, I join in all the songs especially with somersaults or high-fives or the Silly Chicken Dance. We have to watch out for that sneaky Swiper, we shout, ‘Swiper, no swiping,’ . . . Sometimes we catch the stars and put them in Backpack’s pocket. . . . (R 11)

The boy imagines being part of the world presented on television, which is indicated by his use of “we.” Rather than staring at the screen and simply absorbing the information it offers, he is active both mentally and physically. Jack’s experience of watching television does not therefore attest to the culturally-established image of the couch potato of which parents and critics conventionally disapprove. On the contrary, his is an active mode of watching that involves him and even forces him to think and act.

However, although this passage indicates that Jack imagines Dora, a cartoon, to speak to him, it equally proposes that Jack is somehow aware of the impossibility of establishing communication with television personae. Stating “Every TV person else doesn’t listen” reveals that he must also have tried to talk to other television personae, and realized that communication with them did not operate in the same way as with Dora. Unable to generalize his conclusions concerning the failed conversation with TV personae other than Dora, Jack is convinced of the factual reality of his communication with the cartoon character. At the same time, however, he understands that “Dora is a drawing in TV but she’s my real friend, that’s confusing” (R 63). The text implies that Jack is both aware and unaware of his genuine relation to the cartoon girl.

As for Jack’s belief in Dora’s (non-)fictionality, *Room* implies that it connects with his feelings towards the cartoon character. Despite knowing that she is “a drawing in TV,” his feelings towards her are, the text makes clear, as real as feelings towards proper human friends could ever be. For Jack, cartoons are not only entertainment; they are substitutes for human attachment figures. The novel’s enactment of TV experiences through Jack is in line with a comment by a teenager cited in Gaunlett and Hill’s study, wherein a 16-year-old boy explains that he would miss the entertainment, the enjoyment, and the emotions TV provides, and he would also miss the company, because TV is, he emphasizes, “like a good friend” (115). Corresponding to this comment, *Room* portrays Jack as trying to establish physical contact

with the cartoon characters. Running to the screen he even intends – or pretends – to touch them: “There’s *Bob the Builder* and *Wonder Pets!* and *Barney*. For each I go up to touch hello. Barney and his friends do lots of hugs, I run to get in the middle but sometimes I’m too late” (R 61). During a power breakdown when the television does not work, Jack declares: “TV doesn’t work too, I miss my friends. I pretend they’re coming on the screen, I pat them with my fingers” (76). Next to cartoon characters, Jack also establishes close bonds with objects in Room. He calls his toys “friends” (“Ma won’t let me bring Jeep and Remote into Bed even though they’re my friends,” 46), refers to pieces of furniture as if they were people (“Ma leans out of Bed to switch on Lamp, he makes everything light up *whoosh*,” 3; original emphasis), and treats them in the same way his mother treats him when he hurts himself: “I stroke Table’s scratches to make them better . . .” (6). His relationship to these items suggests that objects are substitutes for social contact in the same way as the cartoon characters. These passages demonstrate that Jack’s sense of something being real is fully determined by the genuineness of his feelings.

Therefore, although television is a source of bewilderment for the young boy, his positive TV experiences outweigh the moments of confusion he encounters. Television helps him not to feel alone and to be active both mentally and physically. In the end, television even helps mother and child to escape from the shed and become part of the ‘real’ outside world. With the help of TV fiction, the mother is capable of making clear to Jack why and how to escape.¹⁶⁸ Understandably, Jack is afraid of going out without his mother. She therefore has to convince him that “It’s the only workable plan” and that he is “the only one who can do this” (R 109). By using the American movie *The Great Escape* (1963) as a template, she manages to explain her plan to the five-year-old: “Remember how they crawled through the dark tunnel away from the Nazis? One at a time. . . . What I’m saying is, the prisoners had to be really brave and go one at a time” (R 109). Jack is supposed to take the television characters’ brave behavior as a good example. The mother also refers to Jack’s favorite TV shows to help her son understand when to do what: “Look, it’s like on *Dora* . . . when she goes to one place and then a second place to get to the third place. For us it’s *Truck, hospital, Police*. Say it?” (110; original emphasis). So as to explain that Jack has to run as fast as he can once he jumps off the truck, she says: “You have to run along the street, away from the truck, super fast, like – remember that cartoon we saw once, *Road Runner?*” (130). TV helps the mother to allow Jack to comprehend the procedure of the plan and how to behave in situations

¹⁶⁸ The plan is to convince Old Nick of Jack’s death after an illness. He is then supposed to carry Jack – supposedly dead and wrapped in a rug – to his truck, put him down, drive through and then out of town to “Find somewhere nice” (R 137) to bury him. While driving, Jack is supposed to unwrap and jump off the truck once it stops at a traffic light and look for help.

which will be completely new to him. Although she emphasizes that “this is not a game,” (110) she conceptualizes the plan in reference to TV shows with which Jack is familiar. These references support Jack in understanding the procedure and feeling more secure. It is with the help of television that mother and child are finally able to escape.

TV after Confinement: Feelings of Disappointment and Trustworthiness

In *Being There*, Chance gets along in the outside world by using television as a template, and the same is true for Jack. In order for him to understand how to act and what to do, he relates his experiences to what he knows from watching television. In confinement, television saves Jack from feeling isolated; after confinement, it helps him to get along in the outside world. The boy explains, for instance, that life outside is like being inside of a cartoon but messier (R 139). Also, looking out of a window, Jack is reminded of his TV experience: “But I’m looking out, it’s like TV. There’s grass and trees and a bit of a white building and three cars, a blue and a brown and a silver with stripey bits” (171). He does not describe situations, things, and people in their own terms, but applies his TV knowledge to comprehend these new experiences. A person he meets “Looks like a TV person but nearer and wider and with smells, a bit like Dish Soap and mint and curry all together” (143), and seeing a car that reminds him of “a cop car from TV” (145) tells him that the police are coming.¹⁶⁹ Jack’s TV experiences help him to make connections, draw conclusions, and understand new situations. Jack knows, for instance, about social, conventionalized behavior through watching television:

Persons in books and TV are always thirsty, they have beer and juice and champagne and lattes and all sorts of liquids, sometimes they click their glasses on each other’s glasses when they’re happy but they don’t break them. (65)

These are things Jack’s mother could not have taught him without the help of television (and fiction in general).¹⁷⁰

Similarly to Chance, Jack gets along by resorting to his TV experience, and similar to Chance’s, Jack’s consciousness is highly affected by television. When he describes what he perceives, he uses expressions such as “I’m

¹⁶⁹ There are many passages in the novel where Jack compares his new experiences in the outside world with his TV experiences. See, for instance, pp. 145, 148, 149, 163, 186, 187.

¹⁷⁰ The text makes clear that Jack not only watches cartoons but also sports and fitness programs, quiz, talk, and cooking shows, and the news (R 34, 41). Once he knows that television represents an outside world, he deliberately decides not to watch cartoons but reality shows and the news: “I don’t watch the cartoon planet this morning, I choose a bit of a gardening and a fitness and a news . . .” (66).

zooming along in the truck for real for really real” (R 138). By applying the same terminology he uses to describe what he sees on television (when he sees footage of Old Nick on the news, for instance, he describes it by saying “Old Nick zoomed off in his truck,” 165), Jack appears to experience his own perception in the same way as a zoom of a camera. In contrast to the other novels’ protagonists, however, *Room* indicates that the reasons for Jack’s televisionized consciousness are physical in nature. Captive in a small room all his life and used to TV’s two-dimensionality, Jack has not been able to develop his senses completely. The novel makes clear for the readers that Jack has physical problems with spaciality (“difficulties with spatial perception,” 182). The boy is unable to “gauge distance” (182) and perceive the world in the same way as others (“Dr. Clay says my eyes are super sharp but they’re not used to looking far away yet, I need to stretch them out the window,” 181). In the case of Jack, then, teleconsciousness has more fundamental implications than suggested by the other novels. *Room* proposes that television affects Jack’s perception physically in detectable ways that have medical reasons. Although the text does not explicitly make television responsible for Jack’s drawbacks, it relates the description of Jack’s teleconsciousness to the conventional fear of its fatal impact on conceptions and perceptions of the real.

However, the novel instantly breaks away from these concerns again by suggesting that Jack’s teleconsciousness is, for him, a somewhat safer way of perceiving and experiencing the outside world. For him, looking out of a window is similar to watching television; the outside world is, for him, like TV pictures “but blurrier” (R 241). The passage indicates that Jack is used to the mode of watching. Jack prefers looking *at* outside through a window, rather than being directly confronted with it: “My favorite bit of Outside is the window. It’s different every time. A bird goes right by *zoom*, I don’t know what it was” (190; original emphasis). Stating that the image of outside Jack sees through the limited angle of a window is different every time implies that the views Jack sees are, for him, comparable to scenes on television. The continuously changing sequences of televisual images are as real and fascinating to the boy as the parts of outside he sees through the frame. Jack’s ‘in-between experience’ relates to a viewer’s comment again cited in Gauntlett and Hill’s study. There, a retired woman explains that she does not like to go out, which is why she appreciates television as a source of information, entertainment, and companionship: “TV not only provides me with ‘company’ but it also causes me to react mentally, and, therefore keep emotionally active, without having to face any consequences” (Gauntlett and Hill 115). This explanation implies that the woman connects watching television to staying “emotionally active” and to feeling secure through the distance it allows. Gauntlett and Hill elaborate:

Television allows her to see the world without having to actually travel ‘out there,’ a place outside the home that is not perceived to be as safe or as familiar as the world she sees on her television screen. (116)

Jack enacts this need to be emotionally involved while remaining physically uninvolved. Although he keeps his distance, he feels that he is a part of the world he watches through the window. The woman in Gauntlett and Hill’s study connects watching television with feeling secure, and the same is true for Jack. In a highly difficult period of his life, television offers him security and shelter. Right after the escape, everything is new to Jack, and he is afraid of and shies away from new, unknown experiences. With the help of television, he learns to adapt to life in the outside world at his own pace.

In confinement, Jack is confused about television and its relation to reality, because he experiences moments when these spheres seem to overlap. When Jack is finally outside, however, he is still confused. The problems the child has in disentangling different versions of reality cannot be resolved once he is outside. On the contrary, Jack must realize that not everything is real in the ‘actual’ reality of outside: “Now I’m in Outside but it turns out lots of it isn’t real at all” (R 277). The readers’ assumption that the child’s confusion about the relation between television and what he is supposed to accept as ‘actual’ reality would vanish into thin air as soon as he becomes a part of the outside world proves false. Finally outside, Jack is irritated by the fact that the so-called ‘real’ world is populated by innumerable imitations of the real, just like on television. When on a playground for the first time, for instance, Jack has a disillusioning lesson with wide implications, because he learns that the fireman’s pole is “just a play one” (277). *Room* emphasizes that the so-called ‘real’ world consists of simulations, making clear that one is, more often than not, denied original experiences. Close to the end of the story Jack wonders: “Lots of the world seems to be a repeat” (292). This comment implies that ‘real’ life is very much comparable to television.

“Human kind cannot bear very much reality” (R 274) is one of the rare explicit comments the novel offers on the question of how to make sense of reality. Hanging in the air, not embedded in a meaningful and informative context, this nonchalant statement by one of the novel’s minor characters suggests that humans are incapable of dealing with reality in its purest form. The fear of facing ‘actual’ reality directly causes the individual to turn to its televisual copies. According to this apparent side note, televisual representations serve the function of distracting humankind from itself. Reminiscent of Calvin’s comment in *Chart Throb* that people want to live in fairy tales (CT 320), *Room* proposes that they turn away from reality in order to be able to deal with it. Through Jack’s discovery that ‘actual’ reality “isn’t real at all” (R 277), the novel addresses the question of whether one can ever access such a thing as ‘actual’ reality. In this sense, *Room* responds to Baudrillard’s explanations in *Telemorphosis*: no matter how hard we try, we will never experience absolute raw reality.

Jack's confusion about television and its relation to reality cannot immediately be resolved once he is outside. Nevertheless, television remains a constant and reliable point of reference for the boy after his first five years of life in the shed. When Jack is afraid of being exposed to sunlight and spending time outside a building, his television experiences help him to endure this unfamiliar, uncomfortable situation. Feeling that Jack is afraid, the nurse advises Jack to imagine watching television: "'Pretend you're watching this on TV. . . . Just try it.' She does a special voice: 'Here's a boy called Jack going for a walk with his Ma and their friend Noreen.' I'm watching it'" (R 210). By reminding Jack of his TV experiences, the nurse manages to appease the boy and enable him to overcome his fears. In confinement, and without knowing so for up to five years, Jack learns about the world through television. After confinement, he keeps getting to know and becoming a part of the outside world in reference to TV. Conclusively, television not only saves the boy during his time in confinement, but it also saves him during the first weeks of his 'real' life outside.

The Humachine in a New Light

Room portrays a protagonist that treats objects (such as pieces of furniture) and television characters like human beings. While personifying objects and cartoons, he also objectifies himself. Jack considers himself to be either switched on or off, just like television. Saying things like "I nearly switch off but not actually" or "I try to switch off again but I'm all on" (R 19, 73), he appears to imagine himself to be like the apparatus. The same is true for how he talks about his mother. Playing a game in which Ma or Jack hum songs the other is supposed to guess, she asks "You've chosen such a tricky one. . . . Did you hear it on TV?" (6). Jack's answer "No, on you" (7) indicates that he objectifies his mother in reference to television, both of which – at least as far as Jack's understanding is concerned – can either be on, that is awake, or off, that is asleep. By objectifying his mother and himself, he obviously also personifies television. Through Jack's perspective, the novel implies that the boundaries between objects such as television and human beings are blurred and insignificant, which attests to Jack's televisionized consciousness. More than that, however, it shows that Jack places himself and other humans on the same level as the apparatus.¹⁷¹

The categories applied by Jack to make sense of his small world in the shed are thus highly influenced by the things and minor phenomena immediately surrounding him – of which the television set is a major part. The ways

¹⁷¹ Jack's difficulty in coming to terms with the category of the human becomes clear in a conversation between the boy and his mother. When Jack imagines "I'll get bigger and bigger and bigger till I turn into a human," his mother corrects him by saying "Actually, you're human already. . . . Human's what we both are" (13).

in which television operates, like through the on and off-switch, are directly visible to him and can therefore serve as an example to explain processes and human conditions. For instance, when his mother feels depressed and does not want to get out of bed, Jack explains her behaviour to himself in relation to a watch working on batteries: “When I was small I thought her battery was used up like happened to Watch one time, we had to ask for a new battery for him for Sundaytreat” (R 23). Due to living with an apparatus that constitutes a central part of his life, Jack adapts to its mode of being. Television has accompanied him ever since he was born, and it has therefore become his proper friend. Experiencing the apparatus as a reliable friend that substitutes proper social contacts, Jack identifies with television by applying its mode of operation to himself. Children learn by way of imitating the people surrounding them in their everyday lives. For that purpose, and since Jack’s only role model is his mother, he is encouraged to use human substitutes such as television.

By imitating the apparatus, Jack is reminiscent of Chance in *Being There*, who – mechanically switching on the television set – is a character with features reminiscent of the apparatus. Similarly, in *White Noise*, Steffie echoes television commercials in her sleep. With a press of a button, it appears, she repeats typical television slogans. The prototypical TV child Wilder also reproduces television sounds, causing the father – suddenly reminded of the (white) noise of television – to equate his son with the apparatus. However, in contrast to these enactments of TV experiences, the example of Jack is less deterrent. Whereas the other novels’ characters – enacting robot-like beings – evoke feelings of alienation, Jack is a humachine in a much more positive way, a humachine with which the readers of the novel can more easily identify.

The readers’ sympathy with Jack as a humachine is not even threatened by the fact that the other characters perceive him as a “Poor little freak” (R 73). One example is Old Nick’s first and only point of contact with his son. Since the mother keeps hiding her son in a wardrobe whenever her tormentor enters the shed, Old Nick has never seen the boy. The young woman wants to make sure that Jack’s biological father never sets eyes on and never speaks to him. One time, however, this separating wall breaks down for a short but significant moment:

‘Looks tasty.’ Old Nick’s voice is extra deep.
‘Oh, it’s just the last of the birthday cake,’ says Ma.
‘Should have reminded me, I could have brought him something. What’s he now, four?’
I wait for Ma to say, but she doesn’t. ‘Five.’ I whisper it.
But she must hear me, because she comes close to Wardrobe and says ‘Jack’ in a mad voice.
Old Nick laughs, I didn’t know he could. ‘It speaks.’
Why does he say *it* not *he*? (35-36; original emphasis)

Sarcastically referring to Jack with “it” demonstrates that, from Old Nick’s viewpoint, Jack is comparable to a made-up, imaginary being. Since he has never seen the boy with his own eyes, Jack is as real to him as an illusion. Shutting Jack away in a wardrobe evokes the idea of an animal trapped in a cage, for safety reasons. So as to express his sarcasm – and perhaps also regret – about the mother’s refusal to let him see Jack, Old Nick addresses his own son not as a boy but as an indefinable, grotesque being whose status has yet to be determined.

The novel’s portrayal of how the media treat the boy after confinement enforces Jack’s status as an illusion or a being in-between also evoked through Old Nick’s perspective. With his subliminal characterization of Jack, Old Nick does not intend to attest to the boy’s status as a half-human being. He rather wants to express his regrets or hurt the mother’s feelings. The media, in contrast, take part in actively shaping the image of Jack as a human-to-be. Jack and Ma’s escape, their ‘real-life-story,’ becomes a media spectacle which turns them into celebrities. Interested in the condition of the five-year-old, the media call him “Bonsai Boy,”¹⁷² due to his outer appearance (for example his long hair) and the fact that he “still goes up and down stairs on all fours like a monkey” (R 215, 216). Humans are considered to have developed from the primitive state of an ape to more intelligent beings. Apes are therefore often regarded as not meeting the standards yet. Comparing Jack to a monkey demonstrates that he is perceived – and further depicted – as an animate creature on its way of becoming a proper human being.

Through the protagonist’s implicit self-characterization as a boy who thinks of himself as resembling television, and through the media’s portrayal of Jack as a human-to-be, the novel suggests that Jack is some kind of humachine. Brought up by television, Jack must have had the opportunity to learn how to imitate other persons’ behavior, readers might assume. Still, the novel stresses that he has not been fully humanized. Comparing Donoghue’s with Kosinski’s protagonist, one must wonder why *Room* does not describe Jack as imitating the behavior of characters or media personae on television. *Being There* depicts Chance as a half-human being that has adapted to and thus turned into the apparatus. At the same time, however, the satire suggests that Chance imitates the behavior of television personae, which is why he can easily become a member of society.¹⁷³ *Room*, in contrast, does not portray Jack as imitating television characters’ behavior. He completely adapts to the apparatus, and yet, *Room*’s depiction of Jack as a being in-between does not have an alienating effect on its readers.

¹⁷² This association implies that the media think of Jack as a small and undernourished child, but the text does not indicate whether or not Jack is actually undernourished in medical terms.

¹⁷³ Although Chance, living in isolation much longer than Jack, can easily adapt to the outside world and is welcomed by society with open arms, it must be considered that the society portrayed in *Being There* is highly satirized – which, in turn, ridicules the simplicity of Chance’s social integration process.

Jack, a blend of animal and apparatus, is a humachine without alienating implications. The text, however, keeps challenging this positive portrayal, because Jack is denied his existence. By referring to Jack as “it,” the character of Old Nick implies that Jack is comparable to a made-up being that is as real as an illusion. Other characters, too, who know Jack from television, similarly treat him like a non-existent, imaginary entity. After their escape, the public perceive and treat Jack and his mother like celebrities, not simply as a mother and child who have just managed to escape their confinement. The lawyer speaks of “fans” (R 199) instead of the compassionate public, and two characters who recognize Jack ask him for an autograph, just like a celebrity:

‘Oh my go—you’re that boy! The one – Lorana,’ she shouts, ‘get over here. You’ll never believe it. It’s the boy, Jack, the one on TV from the shed.’
Another person comes over, shaking her head. ‘The shed one’s smaller with long hair and tied back, and all kind of hunched.’
‘It’s him,’ she says, ‘I swear it’s him.’
‘No way,’ says the other one. . . .
‘This is unreal. Can I have an autograph?’ (295)

Calling the situation “unreal” implies that, for them, Jack is like a television character. Directly facing the two women, Jack is not addressed by them but spoken about, as if he is not physically present but still on television. The women’s treatment of the boy is reminiscent of Jack’s treatment of the personae on television who, to him, are both real and unreal at the same time. Asking the boy for an autograph indicates that the two women want Jack to validate an experience that is “unreal,” because for them, Jack’s physical appearance is “unreal.” He is not a human being standing in front of them but “Jack, the one on TV.” The only time they address Jack directly is when they ask him the stereotypical question “Can I have an autograph?”. After all, besides taking a picture, asking for an autograph is the culturally-conditioned reaction to meeting a celebrity. The two women do not know how else to respond to Jack’s “unreal” status.

The denial of Jack’s very existence offers another parallel to the world of *Being There* where the narrator indicates that Chance is an image that floats away. Having the impression of seeing images of himself but not himself as actually ‘being there,’ Chance seems to experience himself in the same way he is described to experience characters on television. He sees two images of himself, Chance the Gardener and Chauncey Gardiner, but he does not feel identical to either version. The protagonist’s existence, *Being There* suggests, switches off at the end of the story. The same is true for Jack. The text implies that the public do not assign the status of a human being to the young boy. They deny Jack’s existence, as they only believe in his televisual version. In their view, Jack does not have a genuine self; for them he exists only as a televisual image. Thus, at the end of the story, it turns out that five-year-old Jack is not the only character struggling with differentiating between

different versions of reality. The public, too, cannot grasp that someone they are only accustomed to seeing on the screen can physically exist. They perceive and treat him like a famous actor or singer and think of him only in terms of television, in the categories provided by TV, for this is where they know him from.

In contrast to *Being There*, however, *Room*'s implication of Jack's non-existence is less alarming for the readers. Although the women's reaction to meeting Jack is a satirical comment on celebrity worship, the novel does not describe their treatment of Jack as an incident that provokes anxiety. *Being There* portrays a society narcotized by television; the equation of Chance with a television image is a critique directed at a society of the banal. Chance's realization that he is not there, that he is neither the one version of himself nor the other, is against this background an alarming phenomenon symbolizing the descent of humanity. With regard to *Room*, however, it seems as if the novel's satirical comment on celebrity culture and TV as celebrification machinery does not attempt to evoke distrust and fear. The novel ridicules characters for worshipping assumed television heroes, but it does not suggest that the readers are supposed to fear the dissolution of life into television and television into life.

Room's unconventional enactments of TV experiences clearly distance the novel from the critique expressed in *Being There* and (partly) *White Noise*. However, *Room* does not free itself completely from the well-known discourse on TV's fatal impact on the viewer. Written in times of the Internet and other media technologies, which appear to have replaced TV's avant-garde status, *Room* enacts the same anxieties as the TV-era novels, and it does so especially through the character of the mother. Early on in the story the readers learn through Jack's perspective that his mother experiences television as a threat to human health. The young woman feels that television turns viewers into zombies if they do not control their viewing habits. Jack keeps stressing about his mother's rationing of their television consumption, and he regrets that he cannot watch television "all the time" (R 11). In order for her son to understand why she is so strict with him, she explains:

When he finally brought the TV, I left it on twenty-four/seven, stupid stuff, commercials for food I remembered, my mouth hurt wanting it all. Sometimes I heard voices from the TV telling me things. (95)

In these days, Ma longs for food she cannot have, and she equally longs for "it all," to actually experience not only food but life itself instead of only being offered its representation. This short passage shows that the young woman feels hunted by the reality she is no longer a part of and haunted by TV's promises of pseudo-experiences.

Like DeLillo's *White Noise*, *Room* alludes to the image of the zombie. Doing so, it addresses the human fear of TV's dangerous effects on the audi-

ence. Having watched television twenty-four/seven, the mother remembers that she felt like the half animate, half inanimate being evoked by the characters of Wilder and Steffie. With the help of Jack's perspective and focalization, *Room* informs the readers of the way in which the young woman conceptualizes her relationship to television:

I'd love to watch TV all the time, but it rots our brains. Before I came down from Heaven Ma left it on all day long and got turned into a zombie that's like a ghost but walks *thump thump*. So now she always switches off after one show, then the cells multiply again in the day and we can watch another show after dinner and grow more brains in our sleep. (R 11; original emphasis)

By interpreting Jack's version of what his mother told him about her early days in confinement, it becomes clear that Ma, watching television "all day long," considered her television consumption to be an addiction and to have made her insane. Conceptualizing the habit of watching television as an addiction expresses a well-known fear also articulated by a young female viewer interviewed in the context of Gauntlett and Hill's research. They explain that watching television did not make the young woman happy, and that it, in fact, increased her sense of isolation and despair (119). Through the character of the mother, *Room* enacts a similar experience. Aiming to distract herself from her reality which, by then, solely consisted of the shed, she decided to immerse herself in the worlds offered on the screen. However, these televisual copies of reality turned her into a zombie – which is her choice of words, not Jack's. The text makes clear that she felt like a zombie, a ghost, a copy of herself wandering around but not actually 'being there' anymore. Dissolved into television, she felt eaten up by an apparatus that causes brain damage.

Through the mother's simple explanation to Jack, an explanation appropriate and graspable for a five-year-old, the novel proposes a conception of television that responds to the well-known human fear of the medium. Explaining that "the cells multiply again in the day and we can watch another show after dinner and grow more brains in our sleep," the young woman develops the idea that watching television causes the loss of brain cells. This figurative explanation in combination with the description of her zombie-like behavior evokes another image also evoked in Kosinski's *Being There*: the image of television as an apparatus that eats up its willing prey, the viewer. The notions brought up here are reminiscent of the passage in which Chance is invited to a television talk show. In the television studio, he faces the "big, sharp nosed cameras" rolling around the stage and "licking up the image of his body," "recording his every movement" (BT 51-52). Chance, *Being There* implies, perceives the cameras as inhuman objects with animate features that evoke notions of the monstrous and the animalistic, and are therefore considered to be something in-between animate beings and machines. *Room* indicates that the mother experiences television in a similar fashion.

She somehow feels eaten up by it, or at least, she feels it takes something away from her. TV absorbs her brain cells, makes them diminish, and causes them to rot. The young woman senses that consuming television robs her of her brain cells, as if it literally steals parts of her body – a robbery causing both physical and mental loss.¹⁷⁴

The indication that television penetrates the human body is reminiscent of the impact of X-rays. Jack explains that his mother “mutes the commercials because they mush our brains even faster so they’d drip out our ears” (R 11). By using this explanation to make it plausible to Jack why watching too much television is dangerous, Ma thinks of television as a threat, a threat also connected to getting x-rayed. X-rays have the capacity to commit actions humans themselves are unable to perform, actions that help to restore health, but getting x-rayed must be treated with care. Through the character of the mother, *Room* suggests that the same is true for television. Analogous to the dangerous effects of X-rays, the novel describes TV as irradiating and invisibly destroying both body and soul if one consumes too much of it.

The mother’s choice of words implies that she makes television responsible for her imagined transformation, her metamorphosis: instead of saying the mother turned into a zombie, Jack says she “got turned” into a zombie. The text leaves open whether Jack misquotes his mother accidentally or whether he repeats her choice of words correctly. Still, the aftertaste of this childish explanation suggests that the apparatus has the capacity to ‘telemorphosize’ those who devote themselves to it. Ma fears the metamorphosis with television. She dreads turning into a half-human, zombie-like being. Through the mother’s perspective, then, *Room* enacts and, in doing so, nourishes the television-phobia expressed by TV-era critics who propagate the view that television is nothing but a medium of addiction.

It seems, however, that the young woman overcomes her anxieties over time by way of using and watching television ‘more wisely.’ Because of her son she is forced to deal with the medium and consider its possible advantages. In this way, television helps her, not only to educate Jack but also to structure her and her son’s daily life. The text mentions this very function of television for the small family when the mother tells Jack that “It must be time for TV” (R 45). Rationing their television consumption and sticking to particular times of the day when watching certain programs is allowed supports the mother’s decision to offer her son a well-structured daily rhythm, a rhythm which guarantees security and transparency. Against the background of her bad TV experiences, the mother manages to establish a new connection to the medium and seems to appreciate its support in educating and en-

¹⁷⁴ It is indicated that the young woman connects her fears to commercials in particular: “When the commercials come on Ma asks me to go over and press mute” (R 58). This passage suggests that the experience of watching commercials is a specific form of TV experience with a paralyzing effect on the viewer. With regard to the character of Steffie and her repetitions of TV “mantras,” *White Noise* makes the same suggestion.

tertaining her son and structuring their life in a highly limited living environment.

Conclusion

Through the characters of Jack and his mother, *Room* offers conflicting conceptions of, ways of relating to, and experiences with and through television. In confinement, the text describes Jack as having a strong connection with the apparatus and the cartoon characters. The boy perceives some of them as his “TV friends,” although he knows that they are “just drawings.” Although the boy is somewhat aware of their fictionality, the characters still serve the functions usually fulfilled by human beings. Likewise, the apparatus itself fulfils the function of an attachment figure other than the child’s mother; Jack regards the apparatus and other pieces of furniture as social contacts. Although Jack is to a certain extent conscious of the inconsistency of his treatment, and the conception of and experiences with both his fictional friends and his object-friends, he does not draw a line. *Room* suggests, however, that this contradictory knowledge does not disturb the young boy. The text makes clear that there is no need for him to distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ friends. Jack feels that things do not make sense and contradict one another, but he is unable to find satisfying explanations. It is clear, however, that television saves him from feeling isolated and lost.

At the same time, the novel indicates that television makes promises it cannot keep. After having heard that television *represents* people just like him and his mother, Jack has high expectations and is full of anticipation when finally freed. Once he is outside, however, the boy is frustrated and disenchanted with a reality less real than expected. Disappointed and even more irritated than before, Jack turns away from that newfound ‘real’ world and chooses to distance himself from it again. He decides to experience ‘actual’ reality in the same way he is used to experiencing its televisual representations. Instead of becoming a part of the world and taking on a role within it, Jack, sitting in front of the window-screen, watches it as an observer. Outside of the limited world of the shed, the boy’s former cave, television offers shelter from ‘actual’ reality. The novel proposes that television symbolizes security and stability, something Jack proves unable to find when he gets to know the outside world.

The enactments of TV experiences through the character of Jack are therefore highly contradictory. On the one hand, *Room* indicates that Jack feels betrayed by television, because ‘actual’ reality is not as real as its televisual representations suggest. On the other hand, Jack feels soothed. Despite all this confusion and disappointment, the protagonist turns back to television, his shelter. Thus, in face of these contradictions, the text suggests Jack’s bond with television to be solid. His conception of television is confusing, but nevertheless, he appreciates its protective aura and its capacity to

imitate human closeness. Preferring to experience, not ‘actual’ reality but its televisual copies, Jack demonstrates that television is easier to understand and to deal with than ‘real’ reality. Through Jack’s perspective, the novel proposes that ‘actual’ reality “isn’t real at all.”

In contrast, the young mother’s experiences with watching television, especially during her first months in captivity, affect her connection to and conception of television negatively. In black despair, she takes refuge in television and devotes herself to its continuous flow 24/7. Using television to distract herself from the restricted world of her cave, she immerses herself in the realities offered by television. Rather than feeling distracted or soothed, however, she feels betrayed and lonelier than before. Compared to her son, who, when turning to television, finds consolation, the mother feels agony. Watching television, the young woman soon begins to realize, makes much too clear what she is so desperately missing. Thus, a medium made for distraction, as Ellis argues, mutates into a medium of self-torture. The text indicates that the character of the young woman subliminally equates television consumption with drug consumption, as she suffers from not only mental but also physical pain. Feeling seduced, betrayed, maltreated, drained, and tortured, the mother pictures television as a monstrous, evil entity that is transforming her into a zombie – if she fails to resist its allurements. The enactments of Jack’s and his mother’s experiences are contradictory, but the novel proposes that they can coexist.

Room makes clear that both characters, Jack and Ma, ascribe a certain power to television from which neither of them can easily escape. In both cases, it is a power that encircles, captures, and invades them, but they experience it in different ways. In the case of Jack, it generates a state of fulfillment and peace of mind. In the mother’s case, it results in pure horror and the loss of one’s self. For a long time, these two conflictive readings exist side by side. It seems as if *Room* does not prioritize one of these two readings. In contrast to Kosinski’s TV satire, with which it otherwise so closely relates, Donoghue’s novel does not criticize, moralize, judge, or pinpoint. Instead of guiding its readers, *Room* leaves them alone in making sense of this arbitrary story. Paradoxically, by countering and affirming the typical critique of television, *Room* argues that it is both overcome and still up-to-date.

Room responds to the well-known TV-era litany concerning the fatal impact of watching television on the viewer through the character of Jack’s mother, but other characters’ comments also contribute to enforcing the critique of television as a medium of harm. When Jack lives with his grandmother for a while, she does not want him to watch television all day long: “You are not spending another entire day in front of the goggle box” (R

260).¹⁷⁵ Also, when she wants to relax, she wants to do so while or by watching television: “I’m not sleepy, I just need to watch TV and not think for a while” (257). This comment implies that watching television does not challenge viewers intellectually, that it in fact forces them to ‘switch off’ and do nothing except for enjoying the distraction.¹⁷⁶

Although the novel draws links to such TV experiences and, therefore, the medium’s well-known bad reputation, it distances itself from this conventional public and academic discourse on TV: rather, it emphasizes its central position in Jack’s life, and it stresses the boy’s positive experiences with it. During, as well as after, his confinement, television saves Jack from feeling isolated and helps him to understand and get along in the outside world. Also, Jack’s mother is highly suspicious of the medium, but due to her responsibility as a young mother, she learns to deal with it.

Towards the end of the novel, the role of television in the story becomes smaller; it shifts from a central to a marginal position both in the narrative and in Jack’s life. In the end, television is not even mentioned anymore. With regard to Jack, this loss of meaning indicates that he does not need it any longer. Throughout the story, television helps Jack; finally, it also enables him to live independently of it.

¹⁷⁵ Here it becomes clear that Jack’s mother must have learned about the presumed danger of watching too much television from her own mother, a representative of the generation who did not grow up with the medium.

¹⁷⁶ This conception of television consumption is, as outlined in the theory part of the study, conventional and typical of the public and academic discourse on television of the TV era. However, in times of reality TV and televisual quality entertainment, author Steven Johnson, to whom I refer in the introduction, argues that “it is in today’s reality shows that some of the greatest brain-workout complexity can be found” (qtd. in Hilmes 456).

Chapter 7: Final Conclusion

By portraying the naturalization of television in culture and the human adaptation to living with and through television, the novels selected for my study enact TV experiences to which the readers can connect. Earlier novels of the TV era focus on notions of anxiety and well-known concerns intertwined with the medium, concerns which are characteristic of the public and academic discourse on television during the TV age. In contrast to these earlier works, novels published more recently both reinforce and counter these fears. Although the collected literary texts suggest that the human anxieties connected with television are vanishing slowly over time, they propose, at the very same time, that the medium is still handled with care. The novels therefore deal with television in ambiguous, even contradictory ways. They make suggestions they simultaneously seem to deny.

Kosinski's *Being There* warns against the human adaptation to the televisionization of everyday life. The character of Chance – a “videot” in the narrator's and author's eyes – suggests that the adaptation of humans to television cannot but result in the horror scenario of a world peopled by humachines. The readers are complicit with the narrator, who uses the example of Chance as a means of deterrence. The satire does not invite its readers to empathize and identify with the protagonist; they are rather supposed to experience repulsion and alienation and share the critique expressed through the narrator's highly satirical depiction. *Being There* alludes to the TV experiences of critics who condemn the medium and its trivializing power, and it relates to the experiences of concerned adults worrying about the dangerous impact television is suspected to have on their offspring. In this sense, Kosinski's satire is a literary response to and reinforcement of what Wallace calls “this well-known critical litany about television's vapidness, shallowness, and irrationalism” (156).

In comparison, *White Noise* is less one-dimensional in its approach to television, and its enactments of TV experiences are much more complex and ambiguous. DeLillo's narrator does not lure the readers into complicity. As a reader of *White Noise*, one feels that the narrator's voice shines through at some points, but he manages to hide behind the protagonist's consciousness. The world of *White Noise* is dominated by: discomposure and putative knowledge; rejection and acceptance; agitation and indifference; denunciation and enjoyment; guilt, shame and indulgence. In an artistic way, the novel engages in the established critique of the medium, and like *Being There*, it satirizes a society under the spell of the apparatus. At the same time, howev-

er, the readers are invited to empathize, not with Jack, but with his feelings of insecurity. The novel not only focuses on negative TV experiences. It enacts the undecidedness about how to deal with television and what to think of it.

Elton's novels are as straightforward in their critique of the banalization of society as *Being There*. They condemn: contemporary viewers for watching the low-standard entertainment of reality TV; reality show producers for exploiting people too dull to escape the allure; and participants for their willingness and naivety in exposing their private lives in front of the camera. The satires' focus on the participants and the show producers is a change of perspective which does justice to recent developments in TV culture. Reality TV is meta-television (seemingly) informing the audience about the production of television shows. In this context, viewers not only have easy access to the making of television, but they also have a good chance of appearing on the screen. Enacting these contemporary TV experiences, Elton's novels suggest that the human adaptation to television has progressed significantly. The novels neglect the position of the viewer in front of the television set, thereby demonstrating that attention is now paid to TV experiences other than that of the uninvolved viewer. Moreover, by ridiculing reality TV as a primitive form of entertainment, and furthermore a new life style of the lower social classes, the satires draw attention to the meaninglessness and emptiness of the idea of the real. In a world where the characters play around with different versions of televisionized reality and selfhood, where they conceive of life as a script, and where they think of authenticity in terms of performance, fear cannot occupy a space.

In *Room*, anxieties return, but they do not prevail. By contrasting the mother's negative impression with the son's much more positive TV experiences, Donoghue's novel presents ambiguous, even contradictory, enactments of TV experiences. As a twenty-first century novel, *Room* attests to the naturalization of the medium. Through the character of Jack, it suggests that the generations growing up with television, as well as newer media technologies such as computers, do not think in terms of anxieties; for them, living TV life, or rather media life, is a natural way of growing up and experiencing the world. At the same time, however, the novel contradicts this approach to the contemporary media environment and TV's position in it. Although it refers to contemporary (originally American) TV shows (for example, *Dora the Explorer*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*),¹⁷⁷ it equally refers to archaic fears connected with the medium. Through the character of Jack's mother, and also her mother, the text reinforces the critique of the medium as expressed in *Being There*. Moreover, written in 2010 and, therefore, in times of the Internet, *Room* hardly acknowledges the worldwide web and devices

¹⁷⁷ Notably, it also mirrors the American television landscape of the TV era. The text refers to the American movie *The Great Escape* from 1963 and the cartoon character *Road Runner* from *The Road Runner Show*.

such as laptops or smartphones. The text informs us that Jack knows about computers through television (“I know, it’s a computer, just like in TV,” R 163), and the Internet and Google are mentioned only in passing (see pp. 205, 280, 306). Interestingly, when Jack gets to know the Internet and uses it himself for the first time together with his mother, who shows him how to do it, he compares the experience with his TV experience:

She moves the mouse a bit and suddenly there’s a picture of Dora. I go close to watch, she shows me bits to click with the little arrow so I can do the game myself. I put all the pieces of the magic saucer back together and Dora and Boots clap and sing a thank-you song. It’s better than TV even. (R 219)

In contrast to the Internet, television turns into a less interactive and thus less attractive medium. Then again, the text does not further comment on Jack’s relation to television, which seems to change once he gets to know other media technologies. *Room* is therefore both a novel enacting TV experiences of the TV age and a novel challenging these TV-era experiences. Notably, as a twenty-first century novel, it broaches new media experiences in contrast to TV experiences, but it does not further comment on the subject.

Looking at the TV novels analyzed here from a diachronic perspective proves that the ‘both...and-mindset’ helps to understand the portrayals of TV culture and their enactments of TV experiences. In themselves, the novels are ambiguous and at times contradictory. They represent and confirm the critical attitudes towards television adopted by TV-era critics, but they also break away from these voices, providing instead a more multi-faceted insight into the ongoing, culturally relevant discussions referred to in this study. The ambiguities and contradictions the readers encounter do justice to the complex net of different experiences with, relations to, expectations of, and attitudes towards television.

Taken together, the novels equally do justice to the changes of television over time. The thematization of reality TV as a contemporary televisual and cultural phenomenon, and the change of narrative perspective from the domestic viewer in front of the television set to the viewer as an active participant as well as the maker of television, are but two examples which attest to the changes of TV over the last few decades. If we consider how critics now agree that we have reached the end of the age of television, and if we agree that television has been replaced as the most dominant medium, it comes as a surprise to realize that humankind has not yet overcome the denunciation and, even more importantly, the fear of television. This is, at least, what the novels indicate. Whereas Elton’s satires exemplify the negation of human anxieties, Donoghue’s novel brings back to mind the television-phobia that critics experienced when TV entered the stage in the middle of the twentieth century. The fictional contribution to the public and academic discourse on television is thus ‘both...and:’ it enriches the discussions and strengthens marginal(ized) opinions, as well as affirms conventional attitudes. The nov-

els' engagement in the discourse on television challenges and emphasizes the critical TV-era litany of criticism, thereby both acknowledging and disregarding historical and cultural change.

What I have offered in my study is a selection of close readings of what I claim to be representative TV novels. In this last part of my study, I would like to address whether or not these novels are as representative as I suggest them to be. To do so, I will take a look at another novel published in 2002, but I will also briefly discuss how a recently published novel from 2013 does or does not enact TV experiences which respond to television culture today.¹⁷⁸ I would therefore like to draw attention to Thomas' *Going Out* from 2002 and Eggers' *The Circle* from 2013. Both novels will help to discuss the issue of whether the texts selected for my study are, as I claim, representative, in addition to how other contemporary novels deal with television and enact TV experiences.

Let's Check: A Brief Look at Scarlett Thomas' *Going Out* (2002)

The selection of novels my study draws on suggests that the idea of the 'TV cave' has been on people's minds since the beginning of the TV era. In the analysis of *Room*, I quote Jauffret who says with regard to his novel *Claustria* that he is fascinated by the fact that human beings can survive in a world they have only known about through television. Jauffret is obviously not the only one fascinated by this idea. Kosinski and Donoghue also express their fascination with this possibility in their novels, thereby pointing to a wider human interest in the question posed by Jauffret. As 'Kaspar Hauser plus television' myths, *Being There* and *Room* deal with television as a means of education and socialization, discussing whether TV experiences can prepare an individual for becoming a part of society and the world to which television refers. Literary fiction, it seems, offers the perfect space for such a thought experiment, a thought experiment also carried out by Thomas in *Going Out* (abbr. GO). One of the two protagonists of this novel, Luke, is allergic to the sun, which is why he has never been outside. As a young adult, when he decides to meet a healer, he is prepared to take the risk and leave his 'cave.' The novel describes the protagonist's relations to and experiences with television within and outside of his room.

¹⁷⁸ I shall call on my readers to bear in mind that searching for novels which enact TV experiences is, in itself, a challenge for everybody interested in the research question at hand. Although there are, most probably, many novels on the market whose analyses would have proven invaluable for my study, it was very difficult to find such literary works. A directed search for these fictional texts, in for example databases, did not provide me with a wide selection of narratives out of which to choose.

Today, in times of the worldwide web, the title *Going Out* in itself provokes cutting edge questions: Is not 'going out' also possible without literally going out? Has not 'going out' become unnecessary in times of comprehensive Internet access worldwide? Through the Internet, one can order food, clothes, and all sorts of other things that service providers are eager to deliver. As for education, there are multiple offers for online education by diverse high-ranking institutions. Moreover, as we all know, online social networking services such as Facebook are a means of social interaction that have started to replace direct personal encounters. In times of globalization and worldwide Internet access, then, the world is both more public and more private than ever. Today, the idea of 'going out,' as suggested by the novel's title, is quite paradoxical, because 'going out' means going out while staying in.

With regard to this development, the novels analyzed in my study focus on television. Whereas Kosinski could not have widened his perspective by including the Internet, simply because in 1970, the Internet as we know it today did not exist, Donoghue made the conscious decision not to include it into her story 'properly' (as I said, she mentions it rather in passing). In her 2002 novel, *Thomas*, in contrast, equips her entrapped character with both a TV set and a computer with Internet access. *Thomas*' contemporary tale of confinement responds to the development of media technologies and changes in cultural life. Luke, the protagonist, is either occupied with watching television or being on the Internet. He is and is not isolated: unable to leave the house, he is in contact with the outside world. Through the Internet, he makes friends, some of whom even come to visit him, and through the Internet, the text suggests, characters become aware of his peculiar situation and are eager to learn more about it. One hypothesis could be, then, that contemporary tales of confinement, which account for the Internet, offer portrayals and enact media experiences that create an atmosphere less dark than suggested in *Being There*.

Apart from the motif of TV confinement, *Going Out* overlaps with the novels analyzed here in many other regards, which again allows me to generalize my findings. Luke, entrapped in his room, uses television as a point of reference, has teleconsciousness, and seems to be suffering from the Truman Show delusion. Once outside, "He pretends he's on TV. 'That went well,' he says to himself in a low voice, as if there's an audience" (GO 294). He experiences life in the same way he experiences television: "Everything's TV again. All he can manage all the way up the stairs are TV responses" (295). He thinks in terms of television, in the sense that life, for him, is like a televisual story. He therefore has difficulty understanding 'real life stories' others tell him, as they do not follow the classic rules of storytelling: "Her story wasn't neat enough for Luke, and when she finished it, he'd said something like, 'Is that it? Didn't anything else happen?'" (128). Like Jack in *Room*, Luke's TV experiences affect him physically. Outside for the first time, "Luke's head spins" (266), and like Donoghue's protagonist and Wil-

der in *White Noise*, Luke seems to be used to the mode of watching: “He wasn’t looking at anything. He was just looking” (6).

The present selection of TV novels offers contradictory enactments of TV experiences, and *Going Out* aligns itself with this selection. For Luke, like for Jack in *White Noise*, television is both comforting and difficult to deal with. On the one hand, television entertains and soothes him; on the other hand, he feels betrayed and lost. As the analyses prove, novels dealing with television are inclined to broach questions about reality in relation to television, and this is equally true for *Going Out*. Luke feels betrayed, because he knows that television seems to mirror ‘actual’ reality, but he knows, at the same time, that it does not. Like five-year-old Jack in *Room*, Luke cannot understand that television works through representation. With regard to its relation to reality, television is, for Luke, a source of confusion. Out of confinement, little Jack is frustrated with the so-called real world, and so is Luke. He expects to experience absolute pure reality, but when he experiences raw life in unfiltered form, he wonders:

This experience feels like actually being inside the television, which isn’t what Luke wanted. Luke wanted to go into the world – the real world that everyone else experiences – but to him it feels like the inside of a TV, like the glass has sucked him in and now he’s banging around in this box, trying to get out. (GO 263)

Unlike Chance who wants to be sucked in by the screen, Luke is, similar to little Jack, disappointed by ‘actual’ reality.

To sum up, then, *Going Out* affirms many of my findings. For me, this poses a crucial question: Where are they hidden, the more innovative TV tales that consider the contemporary cultural moment and are independent from the well-known archaic litany of criticism? As discussed earlier, in *Media Life*, Deuze argues that media have disappeared, in the sense that people have accepted and started to simply overlook their presence in everyday life. Deuze calls media “the primary definer of our reality” (*Media* xiii) and requires his readers to be at peace with them. Experiences in such an environment, he indicates, do not have to be depressing. I am therefore waiting to finally stumble upon a novel which pays tribute to the media environment Deuze describes. I believe that many people’s TV experiences today are not experiences that are governed by feelings of threat; I am sure there are novels out there that enact TV experiences which respond to the cultural moment of their time. In this spirit, I would like to discuss Eggers’ *The Circle* from 2013 and the question of whether it enacts Deuze’s idea of media life. As a novel about a company highly reminiscent of the American corporation Google, *The Circle* deals with what I believe are cutting-edge questions of the twenty-first century: How do the Internet and the invasion of all sorts of media technologies change American society and the world at large? What are the social and political implications of an increase of public sur-

veillance and total transparency? And how does the human adaptation to media life connect to totalitarianism? In the very last part of my conclusion, I introduce the story of *The Circle* and connect it to my arguments, because in my view, it is and is not a continuation of the literary discourse on television.

Outlook: A TV Novel without Television?!

The title of Eggers' novel, *The Circle* (abbr. TC), refers to an imaginary company of the same name that clearly, but not explicitly, hints at the global corporation Google. The story revolves around the protagonist Mae Holland, a young woman in her mid-twenties who is, she makes clear, lucky enough to start working for a company that "had been voted the world's most admired company four years running" and is "the only company that really mattered at all" (TC 2-3). Through her perspective, the readers learn about Mae's commitment and loyalty to the company, her fast-paced career and the Circle's ideology. In line with dystopian narratives like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*, *The Circle* is a novel about a society of technological advance heading towards complete transparency and, as an inevitable consequence, totalitarian control.

The company is known and celebrated for revolutionizing the Internet with the invention of "TruYou – one account, one identity, one password, one payment system, per person" (TC 21). The narrator explains:

TruYou changed the internet, in toto, within a year. Though some sites were resistant at first, and free-internet advocates shouted about the right to be anonymous online, the TruYou wave was tidal and crushed all meaningful opposition. (21-22)

The company's ideology is subsumed under catch phrases like "communication should never be in doubt;" "Understanding should never be out of reach or anything but clear" (47); "all that happens should be known" (67); "*We don't delete at the Circle*" (203; original emphasis); "Secrets are lies" (297); "sharing is caring" (301); and "privacy is theft" (303). The story revolves around the Circle's development from incompleteness to completion, that is from incomplete transparency to total transparency and absolute control.

Mae falls prey to the company and its vision of a world without secrets where everyone knows everything. On behalf of the mission of the Circle, she does what is labelled "going transparent" (TC 304). Wearing a camera around her neck all day long, everything she does and sees is recorded for the world to watch online. When under constant public observation, one of the company leaders makes clear to Mae, people are forced to behave morally correctly. Since such a strategy prevents crime, going transparent and

having access to every piece of information must lead to a world of perfection:

But my point is, what if we *all* behaved as if we were being watched? It would lead to a more moral way of life. Who would do something unethical or immoral or illegal if they were being watched? . . . Mae, we would finally be compelled to be our best selves. And I think people would be relieved. There would be this phenomenal global sigh of relief. Finally, finally we can be good. In a world where bad choices are no longer an option, we have no choice *but* to be good. (TC 290; original emphasis)

Responding to this view, Mae becomes an advocate of the Circle's transparency ideology. And she is not the only one. Politicians, too, 'go transparent' and propagate the worldview of a company whose power is, throughout the story, increasing inexorably.

The spread of this ideology worldwide provokes anxieties only in a small minority. The narrator contrasts the majority of American society – and the world – with marginal voices that try but fail to rebel against complete surveillance. Representing the voices of the suppressed, the character of one of the company creators attempts to convince Mae that this development is dangerous and must be brought to an end:

Mae, I didn't intend any of this to happen. And it's moving too fast. This idea of Completion, it's far beyond what I had in mind when I started all this, and it's far beyond what's right. . . . Completion is the end. We're closing the circle around everyone – it's a totalitarian nightmare. (TC 480-81)

The narrator clearly intends the readers of the novel to agree with the voices of those characters who are being silenced. As the hero of the story, Mae therefore functions as the novel's anti-hero. Too enmeshed in the Circle's beliefs, Mae proves incapable of understanding the dangers of a state of total transparency. In the spirit of a dystopia, the story ends with the indication that the Circle is, finally, on its way to completion.

In *The Circle*, television does and does not play a role. On the one hand, the text says right at the beginning that television is "a medium stuck more than any other in the twentieth century:" "It's the last place where customers do not, ever, get what they want. The last vestige of feudal arrangements between maker and viewer. We are vassals no longer!" (TC 17). The characters use devices such as computers, laptops, tablets, smart phones and other technology even more advanced than these. Their lives are therefore dominated by screens in different sizes; with the help of and through screens, they take part in the (online) lives of others. The novel's setting thus mirrors the setting of today's media society and Deuze's idea of media life where everyone has access to and makes use of devices with an Internet connection, and where television has been replaced as the most dominant medium at hand.

Then again, television does play a role. In the introduction to my study, I bring to mind that, today, the experience of watching television entails watching TV (and other footage) online. Watching television is therefore possible without television. If one considers this phenomenon to be a part of TV's evolution, that is if watching things online on devices other than television is still considered as watching TV, then *The Circle* is a novel that enacts contemporary TV experiences. The characters watch a significant amount of real life footage, which they enjoy as a form of entertainment. Very quickly, it becomes clear to the readers that the environment created in the novel is dominated by cameras in all sorts of places from which it is becoming more and more difficult, and in the end impossible, to escape. Cameras in "the shape and size of a lollipop" with "incredible image quality" that work wirelessly via satellite are positioned in all, even the remotest, parts of the world. In places more challenging to cover, footage is transmitted with the help of drones.¹⁷⁹ Every character's life is therefore potential live footage for the worldwide audience to enjoy.

Instead of but similar to watching a reality show on television, the characters in *The Circle* watch real-life footage of other characters' everyday lives. When a leading political figure is described as "going clear" (TC 239), her transparent life turns into an online entertainment experience:

When Santos had first announced her new clarity, there was media coverage, but not the kind of explosion anyone at the Circle had hoped for. But then, as people logged on and began watching, and began realizing that she was deadly serious – that she was allowing viewers to see and hear precisely what went into her day, unfiltered and uncensored – the viewership grew exponentially. . . She was so frank, asking the questions she would have asked behind closed doors, that it made for riveting, even inspiring viewing. (238-39)

I would like to suggest that the characters' experiences of watching this kind of footage on devices other than television are comparable to the TV experiences of the other novels' characters. The experience of watching a senator's everyday life situations equals the experiences of consuming and being a part of a reality show as enacted in Elton's satires, or the experience of watching the news as enacted by the characters in *White Noise*. Like the family in DeLillo's novel from 1985, the viewers mentioned in the above passage are fascinated by "unfiltered and uncensored" footage which offers behind-the-scenes glances.

Reminiscent of the viewers portrayed in *Dead Famous* who enjoy the experience of watching a live murder, the characters in Eggers' novel indirect-

¹⁷⁹ Against the background of this dystopian vision, the news that Google has acquired Titan Aerospace is even more disturbing. As the *Forbes* magazine informed readers of its website on April 14, 2014, the company makes drones which can stay aloft for extended periods of time and which are, therefore, a means to bring Internet to remote parts of the globe (*Forbes*).

ly participate in committing a real life murder for the world to watch online. When Mae's ex-boyfriend Mercer, who is highly critical of the Circle and its agenda, attempts to escape from the Circle's surveillance apparatus, which the vast majority of citizens are helping to build up and expand, Mae and viewers worldwide try to track him down. Intending to prove that social media can help to "create a safer and saner world" and that "fugitives from justice can [no longer] hide in a world as interconnected as ours" (TC 446), Mae and her viewers interact online and use cameras and drones to locate the "fugitive from . . . friendship" (452). Determined not to be found, Mercer keeps on driving, desperately trying to escape from the observers. His worldwide audience, however, "was cheering, and the comments were piling up, a number of watchers saying this was the greatest viewing experience of their lives" (460). Finally, the communal online chase ends in the fashion of an action movie:

His [Mercer's] right arm spun the steering wheel, and he disappeared from the view of drones, temporarily at least, and when they regained their lock on him, his truck was crossing the highway, speeding toward its concrete barrier, so fast that it was impossible that it could hold him back. The truck broke through and leapt into the gorge, and, for a brief moment, seemed to fly, the mountains visible for miles beyond. And then the truck dropped from view. Mae's eyes turned, instinctively, to the camera on the riverbed, and she saw, clearly, a tiny object dropping from the bridge overhead and landing, like a tin toy, on the rocks below. Though she knew this object was Mercer's truck, and she knew, in some recess of her mind, that there could be no survivors of such a fall, she looked back to the other cameras, to the views from the drones still hovering above, expecting to see Mercer on the bridge, looking down at the truck below. But there was no one on the bridge. (461)

In this passage, Mae and her viewers create their own online reality show as active participants, an online reality TV chase. It seems as if they are unaware of the factuality of what the screens imply is actually happening. Filtered by cameras and screens, the live happenings appear as footage one can fast forward and backward. Mae, it seems, would like to press the rewind button, but this sort of online experience is irreversible.

The Circle is, as I intended to make clear, a novel about TV experiences in the twenty-first century which are no longer necessarily connected to television. The experience of watching television is, to some extent or in one form of expression, turning into an online experience, and reality-based TV programming is not, as we all know, solely limited to the medium of television. I therefore suggest that *The Circle* does and does not enact TV experiences. If one expects TV experiences to relate to television as an apparatus, *The Circle* cannot be called a novel dealing with TV. However, if one acknowledges the changes of television, especially since the spread of the worldwide web and devices with Internet access, and if one regards new forms of watching experiences as a continuation of TV experiences facilitat-

ed by the TV set, then *The Circle* must be categorized as a novel enacting contemporary TV experiences.

To conclude, I would like to come back to the questions posed in the introduction and further discussed in the conclusion of chapter 5: Based on my findings, does the novel as a conservative, perhaps even archaic, cultural form comment on the medium of television self-reflexively? In relation to television, are the novels analyzed here self-reflexive about their potential loss of cultural currency? According to my analyses, they are not. *Dead Famous* might be something of an exception, yet it does not clearly present itself as a novel reinforcing the discrepancy between reality television as a low and literature as a high cultural form. I would therefore like to propose that Deuze's argument about the disappearance of media also applies to the ways in which the selected novels deal with television. In these narratives, the gap between the two media – literature vs. television – is a non-issue. They indicate that the importance of this gap has disappeared. They criticize television and particular genres, but they do not comment on their own capacity to draw attention to and discuss the 'alien' medium. For them, it seems, commenting on TV culture and enacting TV experiences is a legitimate topic of interest, because television has become and remains a part of the cultural environment upon which they draw. In short, the novels suggest that the gap between the two media has disappeared from consciousness.

In the introduction to my study I make clear how literary scholars who wrote about TV novels in the 1980s and 1990s placed emphasis on the media gap between the novel and television. Freese's statement that "the 'high' medium of serious literature increasingly finds its raw material in the 'low' realm of popular media-made fantasies" ("High" 79) brings to the fore what his contemporaries considered worthwhile arguing: that "elite fiction" (Freese, "High" 77) is more and more referring to the low cultural forms of television. In their analyses, Freese and others regarded it necessary to highlight the appearance of television in literary fiction. In my view, the novels selected for my study suggest that the appearance of television in fiction is a research interest that is disappearing from the agenda; the texts indicate that it is a topic not any longer worthwhile discussing. Once television is ubiquitous, and once the worldwide web is part of people's everyday lives, writers incorporate these media (technologies) in their writings, regardless of the media gap they – consciously or unconsciously – overlook. The media gap Freese and others focused on and around which their analyses were built is, in my view and in accordance with Deuze, disappearing. By not making the media gap an issue, by not reflecting on it in a self-reflexive manner, the novels chosen for my study support this argument.

One could of course argue that making something a non-issue is also a way of making a point, and I would be more than happy to pick up this line of thought in any discussion that might be following. Such a discussion could also dwell on questions I have not been able to address here, for example: why do the novels published more recently not address the quality

TV movement mentioned in the introduction to this study? As I make clear in chapter 5, there are many novels published since the millennium which deal with reality TV (Mlynowski's *As Seen on TV: Sex, Lies and Reality TV* from 2003; Parkhurst's *Lost and Found* from 2006; *Reality TV Bites: A Novel* by Shane Bolks from 2006; Wicker-Cooke's *The Swan Diaries: Dirt behind the Scenes of Reality TV* from 2009). Others dealing with television but not included in my study focus on the genre of TV news (*Cleaver* by Tim Parks from 2006; *Rise and Shine* by Anna Quindlen from 2006; *Morning Glory* by Diana Peterfreund from 2010), TV sports (*TV: A Novel* by Brian Brown from 2001), quiz shows (*Q&A* by Vikas Swarup from 2005; Barris' *The Big Question* from 2007), or address the making of television in more general terms (*As Seen on TV: An Off-Beat Novel about TV Reality and (in) Action Heroes* by Chris Kerr from 2005). Although critics and scholars alike agree that quality television characterizes TV culture today, I have not been able yet to find a novel addressing this phenomenon or even enacting the experience of watching such televisual products. What does the lack of this televisual phenomenon in contemporary novels signify?

On the basis of my analyses, I would like to suggest that thinking about TV culture and, thus, TV experiences today is still framed by the critical public and academic discourse on television typical of the TV era. Television is still regarded as a low cultural form, and it has so far been proven incapable of freeing itself from its bad reputation. Accordingly, novels about reality TV such as Elton's satires or Mlynowski's *As Seen on TV: Sex, Lies and Reality TV* are known as pop-cultural novels that literary scholars are hesitant to take seriously. Swarup's *Q&A*, whose film adaptation *Slumdog Millionaire* was released in 2008 and won eight Academy Awards in 2009, is, of course, an exception. Then again, the novel uses the Indian version of the quiz show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* solely as a structural device,¹⁸⁰ without commenting on it in any way. It is therefore difficult to draw assumptions from its analysis which would support or counter my hypotheses. Nevertheless, inspired by Swarup's bestseller, I am waiting for novels that pick up and comment on quality TV series such as Beau Willimon's American political drama *House of Cards*. As referred to in the introduction, Hilmes speaks of contemporary American television in terms of the rise of an art form. Accordingly, one can only assume that there are novels which pay tribute to these new – and positive – forms of TV experience. My assumption is that such novels would no longer enact experiences that are dominated by anxiety and disgust. They would highlight experiences which do not connect to the reputation of television as a medium of harm. The neglect of positive TV experiences in novels from 1970 to 2010 and their focus on television of the TV era misrepresents the breadth of TV experiences that viewers are nowadays able to have. Even Donoghue's novel, which shows television in a better light, does not free itself from the critical TV-era litany.

¹⁸⁰ For further reading, see Vogt.

The novels one might encounter within the next years might pay tribute to the fact that experiences of and with contemporary television are not mandatorily intertwined with notions of fear.

I still believe that the 'both...and-mindset' could be helpful with regard to the analysis of such novels. Novels published within the last couple of years would have to consider the development of television both as a medium and as a technology. The experience of watching television is nowadays an experience also facilitated by media technologies such as computers, tablets, or smart phones with Internet access. As enacted in *The Circle*, the experience of watching television is no longer limited to the TV set. Contemporary novels about television, which I am sure exist somewhere, must acknowledge the development of a medium that is now merging with other media technologies. I therefore hope to stumble upon novels that enact good experiences of, with, and through television, but I am still convinced that the 'both...and-approach' will keep on helping the readers to analyze such texts. While critics agree that the quality TV movement is a development that increases the value of television, we cannot forget that new developments go hand in hand with new fears. An article in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* informs its readers about the dangers of smart TV, that is TV sets with Internet connection. In reference to Orwell's *1984*, the author of the article, Hilmar Schmundt, claims that reality today is perhaps even creepier than Orwell's dystopian vision suggests. Smart TVs, Schmundt makes clear, are a means of spying for everyone interested in taking a closer look at a viewer's living room. Smart TVs offer the chance to spy on someone without their being aware of it. With the help of a USB stick and a code, Benjamin Michéle, a security researcher from the Technische Universität Berlin, explains that it is easily possible to remote control every smart TV currently on the market. According to Michéle, Smart TVs are comparable to disguised computers with a bigger screen, but they do not meet even the simplest security standards such as firewalls or anti-virus software (Schmundt 128).

Television was and still is 'both...and.' Like other media technologies, consumers treat it with care, and like other media technologies, it entertains and educates. As I was hopefully able to demonstrate, novels published between 1970 and 2010 that enact TV experiences pay tribute to notions of cultural pessimism. Once the readers free themselves from these by now traditional negative public and academic discourse on television, however, they are able to detect the novels' enactments of more positive experiences. Televisionization is 'both...and:' it is human anxiety about technological progress and adaptation to developments formerly met with skepticism. Contemporary literary-fictional enactments of TV experiences might put more emphasis on the naturalization of a medium millions of people cannot now imagine living without. They might consider the many changes of a medium that critics have kept making responsible for the banalization of society. At the same time, contemporary novels might still acknowledge that technological advance has gone, and will probably keep on going, hand in hand with

human respect, insecurity, and defensive attitudes. Televisionization is 'both...and,' and I hope that the novels published since 2010 have paid and will pay tribute to the contradictory nature of this techno-cultural phenomenon.

Swedish summary

Televisionens intåg i det amerikanska hushållet mellan 1940- och 1960-talet gick hand i hand med kritiska diskussioner om TV-tittandets förödande konsekvenser för tittaren. Än idag förknippas TV-tittande med farhågor om trivialisering och banalisering av samhället. Samtidigt uppskattas televisionen som både informations- och nöjeskälla. Televisionen är därmed 'både och': nöje och ångest, distraktion och lockelse, gemenskap och intrång. Om televisionens kulturella roll och ställning är tvetydig så är de personliga relationerna och attityderna till den, samt upplevelserna av den, lika klivna, ibland även motsägelsefulla, medan de allmänna och vetenskapliga diskurserna om televisionen tenderar att vara ensidiga. De fokuserar på TV-tittandets negativa effekter på tittaren och bortser därmed från eventuella positiva upplevelser.

Genom analys av ett urval romancer undersöker denna avhandling hur berättande texter som publicerats mellan 1970 och 2010 framställer tvetydiga TV-upplevelser och därigenom berikar de allmänna och vetenskapliga diskurserna om televisionen. Undersökningen påvisar att de utvalda verken gör både och: de både uppmuntrar och avskräcker läsarna från att uppleva det som här förutsättningslöst kallas "vardagens televisionisering".

Avhandlingens första kapitel syftar till att bekanta läsarna med ämnet. De teoretiska implikationerna och övervägandena utgör fokus för kapitel 2, där romanerna kontextualiseras i förhållande till TV-historien, och där läsarna informeras om centrala debatter och dominerande kritiska röster som kan relateras till särskilda kulturella tidpunkter. Läsarna ges därmed en överblick av både TV-teori och -kritik i och med att denna kunskap är grundläggande för förståelsen av romanernas skildringar av TV-kulturen och TV-upplevelser.

Övriga kapitel ägnas åt de valda romanerna i kronologisk ordning. Kapitel 3 presenterar Kosinskis *Being There* (1970) som en satir över tv-kulturen som bekräftar den urgamla rädslan för televisionens ödesdigra inverkan på dem som hänger sig åt den. Genom att beskriva televisionens ackulturation förutser romanen vardagens televisionisering, dvs. människors anpassning till televisionen. Samtidigt som den uttalar sig satiriskt om denna naturaliseringsprocess fördömer den dock denna idé, och betonar därmed televisionens katastrofala inverkan på samhället.

Det fjärde kapitlet består av en analys av DeLillos succéroman *White Noise* (1985). Likt *Being There* är denna roman känd som en satir över televisionen. Analysen visar att *White Noise* är representativ för den skepsis som råder gentemot televisionens naturalisering, men den innehåller även en opartisk läsning som går emot kategoriseringen av romanen som typisk TV-kritik. Utöver att svara på rädslan för televisionens intrång framhäver *White Noise* känslor av osäkerhet och likgiltighet. Samtidigt som DeLillos roman går på linje med annan kritik under samma tid så framställs vardagens televisionisering på betydligt mer tvetydiga och motsägelsefulla sätt.

Kapitel 5 hoppar fram till det nya årtusendet och studerar Eltons popkulturella satirer över reality-TV, *Dead Famous* (2001) och *Chart Throb* (2006). I och med att oron för televisionens intrång saknas i dessa romaner kritiserar de inte TV som en integrerad del av kulturen, men de gör satir över hur den används – och för vilka ändamål. Genom att förlöjliga reality-TV:s globala framgång och de all dagliga kändisar den skapar framställer romanerna framträdandet på TV som ett normaliserat, inte exceptionellt, sätt att vara. Deras fokus på karaktärer på och bakom TV:n istället för framför markerar en viktig förändring i hur romaner skildrar TV-kulturen och framställer TV-upplevelser. Denna förändring i den berättande framställningen avslöjar förändringar i TV-upplevelser i en tid präglad av reality-TV.

Den sista analysen i kapitel 6, av Donoghues *Room* (2010), reser framåt i tiden – med hänvisning till både publiceringsåret och romanens frigjorda framställningar av TV-upplevelser. I många avseenden är *Room* mycket lik *Being There* och *White Noise*, men trots likheterna domineras inte *Room* av föreställningar om rädsla. Mot denna bakgrund hävdas att romanen belyser en pågående förändring i dagens TV-upplevelser. Därför är det ännu mer paradoxalt att *Room* samtidigt står för den förlegade kritiken mot TV som ett skadligt medium. Genom att presentera två motsatta framställningar av TV-upplevelser visar *Room* att kollektiva farhågor är både övervinnbara och ihärdiga. Romanen antyder att man inom TV-kulturen både övervunnit och håller fast vid sina farhågor om televisionen.

Huvudresultaten sammanfattas i den avslutande delen. Kapitel 7 ger en översikt över hur de utvalda romanerna framställer motsatta TV-upplevelser som läsarna kan relatera till. När romanerna analyseras i följd antyder de att människor fruktar anpassningen till TV-livet, men de antyder också att människor samtidigt har övervunnit denna rädsla. Detta är förstas en motsägelse – eller är det det? Genom att anlägga ett diakroniskt perspektiv på de utvalda romanerna blir det tydligt att vardagens televisionering har både fortskridit och inte fortskridit.

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