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Everybody Hurts? Reality-Based Entertainment and Mediated Suffering in *Sweatshop: Deadly Fashion*

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This article explores how reality TV represents (distant) suffering, focusing on the first season of reality-based show *Sweatshop: Deadly Fashion*. Drawing from theories of media witnessing and mediated suffering, we analyze how reality TV negotiates working conditions in the global garment industry and reflects transnational power inequalities. Specifically, we critically dissect the multimodal strategies used to negotiate suffering and construct a story of transformation from privileged naivety to political mobilization. While acknowledging reality TV's good intentions, the analysis reveals the common pattern of downplaying the role of systemic issues in perpetuating labor exploitation in the Global South. Additionally, results highlight the importance of context-dependent readings of complex cultural documents that carry political and ideological ambivalence, as well as entertaining dimensions.

Keywords: reality TV, suffering, compassion, distant others, Global South, working conditions, Sweatshop: Deadly Fashion

Globalization has fueled the outsourcing of traditional manufacturing in and for transnational corporations (TNCs) to the Global South (Smith, 2016). This process has increased the geographical and emotional distance between (Western) consumers and producers (workers) who suffer the social and environmental consequences of these cost-cutting strategies. The media is fundamental in mediating distance and constructing proximity to events, people, and places that are geographically and culturally distant (Silverstone, 2007/2013), and therefore crucial for our perception of distant suffering (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006). This article investigates how reality TV negotiates (distant) suffering by analyzing the multimodal strategies mobilized to represent working conditions in the global garment industry in the reality-based show *Sweatshop: Deadly Fashion* (Kleven, 2014/2015).

Previous research reveals that media coverage of working conditions in the Global South often centers on individual behavior within a "consumer framework," overlooking systemic political and economic factors (Cotal San Martin, 2019, 2021; Greenberg & Knight, 2004), varying significantly across national contexts (Cotal San Martin & Machin, 2021; Guo, Hsu, Holton, & Jeong, 2012), and with most studies

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focusing on press representation. Additionally, distant suffering is often mediated (in the news) through episodic (peak crisis) events, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, wars, and famines (Chouliaraki, 2010), rather than established patterns of (labor) inequalities. Whether people react or remain passive after being exposed to distant suffering depends on a complex set of factors (Schieferdecker, 2021). While there is knowledge on how (peak) crisis coverage in (news) media might draw public attention and generate short-lived empathy, often leading to "compassion fatigue" and limiting viewers' ability to engage in sustained and reflective action, much less is known about the potential of entertainment TV to transcend such limitations (Scott, 2014). This article explores this *potential* while extending the research focus by examining the representation of working conditions in the Global South through a different format (television/entertainment) and genre (reality TV).

Television, through its visual impact and reach, raises awareness of distant suffering, potentially fostering global compassion and expanding viewers' moral awareness to include strangers (Höijer, 2004). However, while negotiation of distance, distant others, and distant suffering has been extensively examined in studies exploring (television) news narratives (Hill, 2019; Joye, 2011; Kyriakidou, 2015), photojournalism (Weikmann & Powell, 2019), celebrity culture (Scott, 2014), and cinematic representations (Arthurs, 2012; Hiltunen, 2019; Rovisco, 2013), little attention has been directed toward how such issues have infiltrated reality entertainment. Only a handful of recent studies have highlighted how reality TV transforms distant suffering into entertainment (Nikunen, 2016a, 2016b; Orgad & Nikunen, 2015; van der Waal & Böhling, 2021).

Situated in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama, reality TV has, arguably, "hardened into an entertainment-industry institution" (Berman, 2022, para. 9). In this article, we investigate how this popular, hybrid genre—and important pillar of contemporary entertainment—shapes and is shaped by representations of (distant) suffering and transnational compassion. Building on previous literature on the relationship between reality TV, suffering, othering, poverty, and empathy, and drawing from theories of media witnessing and mediated suffering, we aim to offer an empirically grounded analysis about reality TV's negotiation of distant suffering and compassion in the Norwegian/Swedish show *Sweatshop: Deadly Fashion* (Kleven, 2014/2015). Specifically, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways does reality-based entertainment evoke or obliterate the voice and suffering of people who are habitually underrepresented and unseen?

RQ2: How do multimodal strategies used to activate the viewer's compassion in reality-based entertainment reflect on issues of transnational power inequalities?

The World's Moral Superpowers

Despite being different countries with different national identities and internal regional, as well as individual, variations, Norway and Sweden share similar value systems, social and political structures, and several common identity characteristics (Sorensen & Stråth, 1997; Witoszek & Midttun, 2018). Both are internationally recognized for their progressive welfare policies, egalitarian societies, and commitment to

peaceful, ethical, and altruistic practices abroad (Musial, 2022; Witoszek, 2011). A key part of Norwegian and Swedish self-image is that they think of themselves as "peace nations" and "humanitarian superpowers," committed to promoting global good and advocating for the rights of "weak" actors and "small" states (Brysk, 2009; de Bengy Puyvallée & Bjørkdahl, 2021). Consequently, Norwegians and Swedes strongly believe that they have a vital role in making the world a better place.

The notion of being "better" or exceptional emerged among Norwegians and Swedes mainly after World War II and during the decolonization processes (Andersson & Hilson, 2009). Sharing a sense of freedom from Europe's imperialist, colonialist, and exploitative past, they viewed themselves as champions of neutrality, international solidarity, and humanitarianism (Dahl, 2006; Østergaard, 1997, 2002). This self-perception fostered an identity centered around values such as compassion, human rights, and peacebuilding, inspiring a sense of global responsibility and shaping expectations for national and personal roles in world affairs. Seeing their nations as moral leaders reinforces citizens' dedication to ethical values, humanitarianism, civic engagement, and volunteerism. While not everyone inside or outside these countries agrees with the "moral superpower" label, the idea of being inherently "good" remains deeply rooted (Toje, 2010; Witoszek & Midttun, 2018). This identity is a significant social and ideological construct with political and practical implications, which is essential to consider when interpreting how the TV show's content might reflect the above.

Distant Worker Exploitation: The Fast Fashion Industry and Cambodia

The garment industry exemplifies modern global production trends, where TNCs rely on subcontracted supply chains to access low-cost manufacturing locations (Smith, 2016). Fast fashion brands like GAP, Zara, and H&M have reshaped this industry, driving rapid production cycles and offering affordable clothing weekly that primarily targets young (Western) consumers (Hoskins, 2014). While this business model has transformed the garment sector into a highly profitable multibillion-dollar enterprise, its success largely depends on exploiting environmental resources and low-wage labor in the Global South (Brooks, 2019). Numerous investigations have uncovered the garments industry's global supply chains as having poor, dangerous, unsafe, unhealthy, and exploitative working conditions (Köksal, Strähle, Müller, & Freise, 2017; Štefko & Steffek, 2018).

Cambodia reflects these global trends, restructuring its economy in the 1990s to attract foreign investment through export-driven manufacturing reliant on cheap labor (Salmivaara, 2018). Today, the garment sector accounts for 80% of exports (Franceschini, 2020) and employs around 800,000 workers, 85% of them young females, often internal migrants (International Labour Organization, 2018; World Bank, 2019).

Following a violent crackdown on striking workers demanding higher wages in January 2014, reports of exploitation and labor rights abuses have globally spread. Such stories highlight problems such as mass fainting in factories, low wages, unsafe working conditions, long working hours, lack of labor rights, and gender discrimination, drawing attention from human rights organizations and advocacy groups that call for reform and accountability in Cambodia's garment industry (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Reality-Based Entertainment: Between Stereotypical Repertoires and "Good Intentions"

Reality TV is a highly popular and controversial genre, often caught between heated discussions about its ethics and value for democratic societies. Scholars have illustrated reality TV's potential to raise awareness about social and moral issues, emphasizing, however, that this is often done in a contentious, highly sensationalized, manner; reality TV is commonly accused of commodifying and spectacularizing social and moral issues, to the extent that it promotes a "distanced and ultimately inert relationship of viewers to the spectacle of politics" (Volčič & Andrejevic, 2009, p. 9).

Reality TV, especially when involving celebrities, embraces a philanthropic façade dubbed "charitainment," where good intentions merge with commercial interests (Driessens, Joye, & Biltereyst, 2012). The rise of "charity TV" aligns with liberal governance ideals, promoting empowerment and citizenship through volunteerism and philanthropy, coined as "ethical entertainment" (Orgad & Nikunen, 2015, p. 232). The latter capitalizes on existing social realities and inequalities, morphing into forms that supposedly engage with others' suffering, especially within shows that fall under the label of "refugee reality TV," such as the German *Auf der Flucht—das Experiment* (Sheedy, 2013), the Dutch *Rot op naar je Eigen Land* (Maas, 2015–2016), and the Australian *Go Back to Where You Came From* (O'Mahoney, 2011–2018). Scholarship has questioned whether these programs truly combat "the structural foundations of inequality," despite their charitable themes (Nikunen, 2016a, p. 180) and whether they actually manage to promote citizenship, amplify marginalized voices, and mobilize humanitarian action (Nikunen, 2016b; van der Waal & Böhling, 2021). Such efforts are critiqued instead as mere "do-goodism," serving primarily as entertainment and profit ventures (Murray & Ouellette, 2019).

The aforementioned functions, shortcomings, and contradictions are also demonstrated in the subgenre of makeover reality TV, a format defined by processes of (self-)transformation and an orientation toward not only capturing reality but intervening in it and eventually remodeling it (Heller, 2007). From positive individual lifestyle choices to wider humanitarian makeovers, and from body to employee satisfaction (Dahlstedt & Vesterberg, 2022; Eriksson, 2022; Moseley, 2000), the makeover format has proven fruitful ground for examining the representation of social problems within the cultural and political economy of neoliberalism, which prioritizes corporate benevolence, individual volunteerism, and personal responsibility as solutions to them (McMurria, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

To understand how reality-based entertainment negotiates (distant) suffering, we must examine the mediation methods used in genres with elusive truth claims or "epistemologically unstable foundations" (Ellis, 2000, p. 115). Television, and other audiovisual technologies, have popularized the concept of witnessing, that is, systematically reporting the experiences of distant others to mass audiences (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009). Witnessing raises complex questions about communication, including "truth and experience, presence and absence, death and pain, seeing and saying, and the trustworthiness of perception" (Durham Peters, 2001, p. 707), while characterized by universalizing tendencies, that is, inefficiencies in capturing the diversity of audience experience and engagement with on-screen events (Ong, 2014). Media witnessing remains a valuable concept for exploring mediated suffering, as witnessing implies

empathizing with suffering and highlights the emotional process triggered by encounters with distant others; this perspective contrasts voyeurism, emphasizing empathy's fluid nature and the varied emotional responses it evokes (Ellis, 2012).

The above becomes particularly germane when considering the historically problematic portrayals of distant others by Western media, including representational strategies for depicting the Global South. Often underrepresented, the Global South is typically framed through the "coups, wars, famines, and disasters" syndrome, lacking deeper contextualization (Williams, 2011). These portrayals often perpetuate colonial stereotypes, depicting people from the Global South as irrational, uncivilized, innocent, hostile, and corrupt (Abalo, 2016; Lugo-Ocando, 2015; MacLeod, 2019).

These tendencies carry multiple ideological implications. First, inundating audiences with negative images can lead to detachment and compassion fatigue, fostering societal desensitization to social suffering (Moeller, 1998; Ong, 2014). Second, such representations perpetuate transnational power dynamics, emphasizing the viewer's comfortable position versus the sufferer's vulnerability and contributing to unequal power and privilege distribution (Chouliaraki, 2006). Third, they not only privilege spectatorship but also social action. They provide a voice to the suffering while prompting witnesses to alleviate it (Nayar, 2011), conveying ideas about "*how* the spectator should relate to the sufferer and *what* we should do about the suffering" (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 3; emphasis added) as well as *who* can or should do something about the suffering and *why*. This dimension necessitates negotiations about historical, political, economic, and moral motivations, as well as resources, for effective allyship and activism.

Scholars offer diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives on the effects of representational choices on audience engagement and identification, as well as strategies to combat compassion fatigue. While geographical and cultural distance can hinder connection with distant others (Hanusch, 2007), domestication processes, that is, framing distant events through national or local lenses, and discursive constructions of proximity can foster identification and engagement (Clausen, 2004). Some argue that portraying suffering individuals as active agents boosts identification (Chouliaraki, 2006), while others caution that too much agency risks diminishing Western audiences' sympathy (Orgad, 2008). In reality-based entertainment, the portrayal of suffering often reinforces moral distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor (Ouellette, 2017).

The Empirical Case

Sweatshop (Kleven, 2014/2015, 2016) is a two-season documentary series with 10 episodes. In Season 1, Norwegian fashion bloggers Frida, Ludvig, and Anniken explore the realities of fast fashion by working in garment factories in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. They confront the harsh conditions, low wages, and pressures of efficiency, gaining insights into the working and living conditions in the Global South. Season 2 follows Frida and Anniken, along with Swedish bloggers Sarah and Lisa, as they return to Cambodia to investigate changes in working conditions, invited by H&M. The series highlights the shock of the North European visitors as they confront their privileges and the systematic exploitation underlying them.

Originally available as a Web series on Aftenposten's Web TV, Norway's largest printed newspaper in terms of circulation, and later available through various streaming platforms (e.g., Vimeo, Amazon Prime), *Sweatshop* (Kleven, 2014/2015) managed to reach more than 20 million viewers worldwide (Hacienda, 2024). The Web series was re-versioned into an hour-long documentary and was showcased in several film festivals globally, winning prizes (e.g., Japan Prize Award, 2015; Karama Human Rights Film Festival, 2015). Within Norway, it won "Gullruten" (Golden Screen) in 2015, the annual award for "Best Reality" in the Norwegian TV industry, marking the first time a Web series had won the award.

Apart from attracting popularity, critical acclaim, and international attention, the analytical value of our case is manifold. It falls within a hybrid genre blending reality, documentary, and travel, exemplifying the "generic fuzziness" of contemporary reality TV (Kavka, 2012, p. 2). This makes it a prime example of repackaging factual content into infotainment while simultaneously aligning with the trend of "ethical entertainment" (Hill, 2007; Orgad & Nikunen, 2015) by highlighting the harsh working conditions in the Global South. Lastly, as it unfolds over multiple episodes, it provides an opportunity to explore how audiences are invited to engage with distant suffering "beyond 'peak moments' of television news coverage to include a focus on other factual television genres" (Scott, 2015, p. 4), enabling a nuanced analysis of mediated suffering.

Method and Analytical Approach

Drawing on a multimodal analysis of factual television, we critically investigate how reality TV shapes and is shaped by representations of (distant) suffering. Our analytical approach focuses on the representation of social actors and their ideological underpinnings, utilizing various tools and levels of analysis:

Narrative structure, that is, how stories are constructed, whose stories are told, and the meaning assigned through narrative tropes, drawing from Joseph Campbell's model of *The Hero's Journey* (Campbell, 1949/2008).

Verbal and visual representation, that is, dialogue and multimodal choices like camera angles and settings, which guide viewers' interpretation of the story, shape their identification with characters, and prompt specific actions (Pollak, 2008).

Truth and authenticity claims, that is, ethical, emotional, and demonstrative proofs within factual genres aimed at persuasion or promotion, drawing from the Aristotelian rhetorical framework (Nichols, 1992).

Close analysis of frames, shots, scenes, sequences, and genre conventions, aimed at providing meaningful insights into the entirety of the work (Ledema, 2001).

Our analysis is additionally informed by the concept of "active choices," understanding the final product as resulting from numerous processes of selection and intervention. Finally, we read the text as a document of its time and production context (Pollak, 2008, pp. 79–80); we perform a reading sensitized to contextual and intertextual dimensions, such as the Scandinavian self-image of moral superiority (see

previous section "The World's Moral Superpowers"), in combination with genre-specific tropes prevalent in reality TV, such as transformation.

Analysis

The analytical section is structured around the hero's journey archetype, mirroring the departure, initiation, and return stages (Campbell, 1949/2008, p. 30) commonly seen in 20th-century literature, film, and reality TV, particularly in the "makeover" subgenre. We focus on the three Norwegian protagonists, framing them as the "heroes" of the story, and aim to reveal the show's complexities, character arcs, interpretations, representational patterns, and emerging fractures through a chronological presentation of on-screen events.

The Ordinary World (of Privilege)

The program opens with what looks to be a dictionary definition of "sweatshop," provided by the production as a necessary context for viewers to navigate the on-screen events. The definition, including a phonetic transcription of the term, appears in white font on a black background accompanied by the sound of a sewing machine and reads: "Textiles factory with low salaries and bad working conditions. Found in low-cost countries and makes cheap clothes for our fashion brands" (Kleven, 2014/2015, 00:01:02).

In addition to the audiovisual framing connoting an educational tone, the verbal choice of the possessive pronoun "our" is of particular analytical interest, as it establishes the intended (Western) audience through a familiar West-centric division of the world (Hall, 1992). Directly after this contextual information, the viewer is introduced to the three protagonists, Frida, Ludwig, and Anniken (in order of appearance), who, through short interviews and accompanying footage from their everyday life, give a glimpse into their "everyday reality." These interview scenes, known within reality TV production as "master interviews," are short clips taken from longer interviews conducted at the start of the show. Generally, they are used to complement and contextualize the participants' actions and emotions throughout the show. In this case, they provide background information about the participants, their personalities, interests, hobbies, consumer habits, and relationships with technology and social media. The interviews are enhanced with background music, photos, and self-filmed material, highlighting the participants' youth and passion for fashion through their blogging activities.

These sequences provide insight into the participants' familiar world, revolving around fashion, overconsumption, social media (and privilege), and the motivations behind their venture into the unknown. Frida uses clothing for self-expression, mixing fast fashion with secondhand items; Ludwig values fashion and shopping, particularly while traveling; Anniken has turned fashion into a profession through blogging. While these portrayals aim to familiarize viewers with the "heroes" and foster identification, subtle elements of ridicule and potential for viewer judgment and moral superiority are present (Tyler, 2008). For instance, footage of Ludwig among piles of clothes and Frida preparing out-of-context questions for local workers (such as where they see themselves in two years) may hint at this. However, these instances are not overly emphasized, and the protagonists' young age, particularly Anniken, who is 17, minimizes the potential for ridicule. The protagonists are depicted sympathetically, and their occasional irresponsible consumption

habits are attributed more to youth rather than privilege, in line with the typical initial ignorance that the "heroes" show, unaware of the adventure that awaits them (Campbell, 1949/2008).

The call to adventure, a crucial element in Campbell's model, is not explicitly included in the diegesis but occurs before shooting. However, the program includes the protagonists' reflections on what propels them to embark on this adventure: curiosity, parental encouragement, and a desire to understand local working conditions better. Thus, when viewers first meet the protagonists, the latter have already accepted the call to leave the privileged world and venture into unknown territory. Their quest becomes a challenge of personal growth, fostering viewer sympathy toward characters who seem open to learning and self-improvement—a trait valued in national self-perception as it fosters good citizenship.

Crossing the Threshold, or Witnessing the "Other"

As the three fashion bloggers venture into Phnom Penh, they are portrayed as naive and inexperienced (tourist) travelers embarking on an adventure, emphasized by the adventurous music accompanying the initial scenes. They are uncertain about what awaits them, even unaware of Cambodia's location—one humorously suggesting it is near Egypt. Filmed mainly in airports and vehicles, these scenes convey the protagonists' transition from familiarity to the unknown. This sets the stage for a coming-of-age narrative, where their innocence, based on age and privilege, is revealed before encountering life-changing experiences. Typically, in hero's journey narratives, protagonists encounter a threshold marking the transition between worlds. In this case, the borders, both geographical and cultural, are easily crossed, corroborating the strategy of invisibilization of borders, shown through the little complications and low stakes involved when reality TV participants from the Global North cross borders (Aitaki & Carlsson, 2021). Upon arrival, they are greeted by 25-year-old guide Oudom, symbolizing the local guide figure.

During these first moments of encounter, both the protagonists and the viewers are mainly concerned with witnessing, in the sense of seeing, relaying, and putting words into what they are observing corporeally and visually, including hot weather conditions, dust in the atmosphere, and crowded streets and markets. While witnessing has been discussed as a decontextualizing and depoliticizing mechanism through reducing events to personal experiences and feelings (Pollak, 2008, p. 89), in this case, it is primarily used as a strategy to familiarize viewers with the local context: By mediating sensory experiences beyond the visual, the viewer becomes a witness as well (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009).

Specifically, the introduction of another local person and factory worker, Sokty, allows for closer firsthand contact with the working population. Sokty shows them around her humble one-room home and describes the working schedule: At the factory where she is employed, they work seven days a week, approximately 11–13 hours/day ("only" eight hours on Sundays, though), making $130 per month (50 of which goes to rent and utilities). Sokty therefore functions as "the mentor" who guides and provides the heroes with wisdom about workers' real lives and working conditions. The sequences of visual witnessing are complemented by some "decoding" scenes where the three bloggers sit together, trying to make sense of what they see with their own eyes and process their feelings, which in turn activates a "working-through" process for the viewer (Ellis, 1999). No specific actions are shown in these scenes; the focus is on the

dialogue between the three Norwegians analyzing Sokty's life from a position of detached observation, as illustrated in the following:

> I feel sorry for her, but then I think this is how she's lived all her life. For her, this is her home. She does not think it is bad. We're a bit spoilt, with double beds and rooms twice the size, so it feels really weird for us to come here [. . .] I didn't think it was possible. Our bathroom is bigger than her whole home. I bet she didn't plan on factory work and making clothes when she grew up. This is hardly her dream from when she was little. (Kleven, 2014/2015, 00:12:37–00:13:17)

Interestingly, Sokty is never directly asked about her thoughts or feelings, neither by the bloggers nor the production team. Sokty's exclusion from the narrative encapsulates the double face of media witnessing: the passive act of seeing and the active act of saying, which aligns with the dual nature of media witnessing: passive observation and active narration (Peters, 2011). The local voice is silenced, with the story told by partial witnesses rather than those directly affected. The focus shifts to how the visitors are momentarily impacted, neglecting the continuous effects on Sokty's life. As such, a mode of "distanced observation" is employed (Ellis, 2012, p. 124), which in principle does not accommodate identification or emotional engagement with the situation, except for some initial pity.

Experiencing the Living and Working Conditions in the Global South

The three bloggers progress from observation to full immersion, registering the living and working conditions in the Global South with their entire beings. Their journey begins to include specific tasks or challenges necessary for the "quest" to advance; these challenges help the heroes grow and develop new skills (Campbell, 1949/2008), while at the same time appearing to be nonnegotiable parts of the "game," in the same way that participants in reality competition shows participate in specific assignments before they can proceed to the next phase. First, they must spend a night in Sokty's one-room home, then endure a day at the garment factory, simulating the experiences of local workers. This segment mirrors the hero's journey, setting the stage for the protagonists' encounter with a "dangerous place," a pivotal experience for their development. The show visually emphasizes this shift with contrasting colors and dramatic quotes ("Get to work," "I'll keep going till I faint"), heightening the intensity of the challenges ahead.

In literature and film, the "dangerous place" often signifies a life-or-death moment, steeped in intense physical and psychological tension. Here, the significance lies in the settings: What is portrayed as dangerous and transformative for the privileged Norwegians is the everyday life of a local working-class young woman. Sokty's home and workplace become the backdrop for the protagonists and viewers to understand and empathize more deeply. However, this setup may lead to evaluative assumptions about living standards while neglecting discussions on privilege and reinforce the distinction between "us" and "them," accentuating differences through a colonial lens.

The aforementioned strategies confirm the conceptual distance between "voyeurism" (dominant in visual expressions such as "poverty porn" and "slum porn") and the subsequent experience of pleasure or satisfaction on the one hand, and "witnessing" on the other hand (Ellis, 2012, p. 132), as the latter revolves

predominantly around suffering. In this context, Sokty is given more space to share her experience when asked about her dreams, ambitions, and whether she is happy in life:

> [. . .] I dreamed of becoming a doctor. But I had to quit school at primary level [. . .] No, I am not happy because there are so many things my family is without. We struggle along. We can hardly afford proper food. (Kleven, 2014/2015, 16:13–16:37)

This is a revelation for the three Norwegians, who are genuinely surprised to hear Sokty acknowledge her challenging life. Sokty's testimony serves as "emotional" proof (Nichols, 1992), deepening the emotional connection for both the Norwegians and the viewers. Another significant scene unfolds when Anniken, Frida, and Ludwig enter the workspace. Close-ups intensify their emotions, transitioning from curiosity to shock, fear, and anxiety as they confront the harsh realities of the job. Suspenseful music heightens this shift from their playful attitude to a serious mindset. Their struggles to cope with the labor's tempo and demands are portrayed realistically, conveying frustration, stress, and physical exhaustion, providing further emotional proof of the tasks' difficulty. From an intertextual point of view, such situations appear often on "swap lives" reality TV, where a spectacularization of poverty is common as the more privileged side experiences poverty (Hill, 2007; Mylonas, 2012). In these cases, poverty is often framed as the result of individual irresponsibility or cultural flaws, whereas the sequences in question (including the three visitors entering the premises, being assigned tasks and failing to complete them, and spending time with the other workers) seem to be sharing an understanding of the "other" as "deserving poor," they are, in other words, viewed in a sympathetic light as caught in circumstances beyond their control (Ouellette, 2017).

Additional "decoding" sessions reveal that the three Norwegians find the tasks particularly challenging, feeling that they are unaccustomed to such demanding work, unlike the locals. This focus on the heroes' struggles and assumptions about others' hardships carries significant ideological implications. The program not only shapes viewers' perceptions of suffering and responses to it (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 3) but also prompts a discussion about who is suffering more. The participants' suffering is depicted through visuals of exhaustion and poignant quotes about their living and working conditions. For example, when discussing Sokty's modest living conditions, the bloggers make an uncomfortable observation:

> I feel bad for her in a way, but maybe she has always slept like that. [. . .] She is used to it. She has probably never slept on anything better. And maybe she does not know what that is like. (Kleven, 2014/2015, 00:18:50–00:19:04)

Along the same lines, when asked to comment on the working conditions at the garment factory, one of the bloggers utters the following:

> This is something they do every day. They probably have a sort of rhythm. I've never in any job experienced such time pressure. It is different for me compared to them. They see it as an ok job. A job at least! But I wouldn't do it [. . .] It is tougher for our bodies than theirs, because they are used to it. (Kleven, 2014/2015, 00:25:41–00:26:13).

In this phase, the emotional impact on the three Norwegians is more pronounced as they are directly immersed in a distressing situation crafted through various elements like dialogue, physical reactions, and somber piano music. Their responses may initially appear lacking in compassion but can also be seen as a way to cope with and gradually comprehend the severity of the situation. These moments are emotionally and ideologically intricate, almost tragicomic, as the privileged visitors seem to struggle to empathize with the locals and instead turn inward to process their own pain. They verbally highlight the divide between "us" and "them," emphasizing the difference in struggles.

The Road to Empathy: Money Struggles and Money Shots

As the narrative progresses, the three protagonists engage with local workers and activists advocating for living wages and better working conditions. Archival footage showcases local workers' protests for wage raises, including confrontations with police and testimonies from activists detailing their challenges and death threats. Footage from contemporary demonstrations provides viewers with a sense of being present in these events (Ellis, 2000), while older material in black and white emphasizes the historical background of the struggles (Machin & van Leeuwen, 2004). Additionally, such footage positions viewers as "accomplices," making them aware. Alongside the bloggers, viewers are educated on the history of labor movements and efforts to raise the minimum wage to $160 a month. This material also empowers local workers, portraying them as active participants in social protests and conflicts with authorities (i.e., police) and major industry players (i.e., the garment industry).

Furthermore, the program features face-to-face interviews between local workers and the fashion bloggers, providing insights into the locals' experiences and emotions. To address ethical concerns, the workers' faces are blurred or obscured through camera angles that focus more on the bloggers, thus protecting the workers' identities, as indicated by an intertitle. This shifts the focus to the bloggers' reactions, promoting relatability. The privileged bloggers' faces serve as a proxy through which viewers engage with the struggles of others, fostering emotional resonance with the topics and experiences explored.

The emotion-based representations discussed earlier serve another crucial function: paving the way for empathy through the stage of the "ordeal" (Campbell, 1949/2008) and the symbolic death of the Norwegians' previous, innocent selves. As the show, much like the documentary genre broadly, takes on the task of representing the (distant) other—mediating their suffering and making their voice heard and their struggle seen—eliciting empathy becomes a primary goal. Considering the production context, engaging audiences to raise awareness and activate compassion aligns with Norway's moral values. As well-meaning as these intents to create empathy can be, this is an ambiguous strategy that can result in representational shortcomings and uncertain audience impacts (Nåls, 2018). In this context, the scene where a 19-year-old local worker narrates her story about her mother dying of starvation to Anniken is particularly powerful. The story overwhelms Anniken and the local worker ends up comforting her as she sobs. This marks the first time a blogger cries over someone else's pain, signaling a deep, empathetic connection. In reality TV, on-screen crying, described as "the money shot," goes beyond mere emotion to emphasize the loss of control and raw feelings (Dubrofsky, 2009; Grindstaff, 2002). Crying scenes serve as

"authenticity markers" (Hirdman, 2011, p. 25), enhancing audience engagement and potentially fostering political consciousness and action.

A final observation about gendered representations of reactions toward suffering is necessary. While Anniken seems to be completely overtaken by emotions, even during the interview with the producers later (especially when she imagines herself in the position of the aforementioned worker), the male blogger Ludvig is targeting the system:

> The main thing I've learnt is that the world is unbelievably unfair. This is also what we say in Norway. And "unfair" is really the correct word. It isn't fair that anybody should sit sewing 12 hours a day until they collapse of dehydration and hunger. I can't find the words. It's just so extremely unfair. And the truth is that we are rich because they are poor. We are rich because it costs us 10 euros to buy a t-shirt at H&M. But somebody else has to starve for you to be able to buy it. (Kleven, 2014/2015, 00:49:36–00:50:30)

Transforming, or Joining the Regime of Goodness

Toward the program's conclusion, a phase of transformation takes over. This phase, drawn from the hero's journey, involves acquiring new skills, wisdom, or knowledge, and the protagonist's symbolic rebirth into a better version of themselves, destined to return to the ordinary world. In reality TV scholarship, transformation—whether of the body, psyche, home, or family—is a central theme, particularly in the makeover subgenre. These transformations are often suspenseful, spectacular, and accompanied by therapeutic and cathartic undertones (Ouellette, 2014). After facing numerous challenges, including pressure, survival, and exposure to expert judgment, the reality TV participant is expected to emerge as a more responsible individual, a rational consumer, and a better citizen.

Anniken, Frida, and Ludwig develop increased sensitivity to injustices in the fast fashion industry and form stronger emotional connections with Cambodian workers. They also confront their own privileges and realize their potential to effect change by becoming politically active and advocating for social causes. This transformation is crystallized when Ludwig gets a tattoo of the workers' rallying cry, "We need 160 dollars." This scene could be seen as comical or ridiculing, contrasting the blogger's tattoo with footage of actual workers protesting. Although not explicitly portrayed as contradictory, this visual irony serves as metacommentary on outsiders' empathy and support. However, it also symbolizes engagement and allyship, with the rallying cry permanently marked on Ludwig's body, reflecting a transformed soul. The following quote, representing the bloggers' transformed mindset, shifts focus from their personal experiences to issues of (corporate social) responsibility:

> I can't understand why the big chains, like H&M don't do something? H&M is a big company with massive amounts of power. Do something! Take responsibility for your employees. Don't just sit on your ass and take everything for granted. These people work for you [. . .]. (Kleven, 2014/2015, 00:50:31–00:50:50)

What is special about this quote is that it taps into discourses of responsibility and accountability that go beyond individual awareness and shopping behavior. By naming key players in the fast fashion industry and issuing calls for action, the quote encourages viewers to reassess their relationship with these companies and join the fight against exploitation.

Returning and Re-embarking

In Campbell's (1949/2008) model, the hero's journey concludes with the transformed hero's return to the ordinary world. In most cases, the hero returns with an "elixir"—whether love, wisdom, or simply the experience of life-transforming events—which is shared with others to heal wounds or solve problems that seemed impossible before the journey. In *Sweatshop* (Kleven, 2014/2015), the elixir that the heroes bring back is knowledge and awareness about a social problem, as well as the motivation to do something about it. The elixir takes the form of a well-organized plan by the fashion influencers-turned-activists to raise awareness. In the final sequences, they use their social media expertise and influence to start a campaign highlighting the detrimental consequences of fast fashion, particularly the exploitation of garment industry workers in the Global South, emphasizing the surplus value and exploitation of labor—that is, the foundation of capitalist profit. They address Western audiences, symbolically returning to their world despite being physically in Cambodia.

The first cycle of the hero's journey concludes, but like with many stories, multiple calls can occur. Two years later, the second season follows Anniken, Frida, and two Swedish bloggers, Sarah and Lisa, as they try to access garment factories and reconnect with workers and activists. Titled *The Hunt for a Living Wage* (Kleven, 2016), it focuses on their emotional turmoil and struggle to hold H&M accountable. It emphasizes their quest for better working conditions and living wages, continuing the development of compassion. The show highlights their mission to advocate for workers' rights, promote ethical principles and humanitarian values, and foster engagement in civic activities, solidarity, and volunteerism.

Conclusion

This article adopts a multimodal approach to analyze verbal, visual, and narrative strategies used by *Sweatshop: Deadly Fashion* (Kleven, 2014/2015) to navigate suffering and depict a transformation from privileged naivety to social activism. It follows the "hero's journey" trope, portraying personal growth akin to a reality TV "makeover," characterized by heightened emotional engagement and awareness of exploitative working conditions. Throughout this transformation, we highlight how specific multimodal strategies construct the suffering of "others" by focusing on the experiences, decoding strategies, and emotional reactions of privileged outsiders.

In relation to existing literature, we analyzed our case as an example of "ethical entertainment" or "TV of good intentions" (Murray & Ouellette, 2019; Orgad & Nikunen, 2015). Our study reveals both positive and unsettling interpretations. People are mostly invested in those they feel connected to (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, & Cottle, 2012), and focusing on bloggers' emotional reactions, like crying from exhaustion and compassion, can enhance viewer relatability. The program raises awareness of important issues and counteracts compassion fatigue by using relatable young protagonists, reflecting a national self-image of

advocacy for the vulnerable. However, this domestication strategy risks diverting attention toward pity for others and guilt in oneself. While the "others" are given voice and agency, strategic narrative and visual strategies—such as close-ups, monologues, and crying scenes—centralize the experiences and feelings of the Western outsiders.

Read from an ideological perspective, the potential consequences of these strategies include tendencies to reproduce power inequalities (and colonial hierarchies), where the pain of some seems to count more than the suffering of others; the Western experience is once again forefronted (Nikunen, 2016b) and marginalized voices take a back seat (van der Waal & Böhling, 2021). As Nikunen (2016b) contends, engaging with emotions and directing them toward action is not inherently bad; however, the particular moral and aesthetic frameworks used to do so in reality TV are problematic and tend to perpetuate inequalities rather than eliminate them. One key finding is therefore the need to embrace ambiguity and view such programs as complex cultural documents with political and ideological ambivalence, in line with findings presented by similar studies in Europe and beyond (Nikunen, 2016b; van der Waal & Böhling, 2021).

In terms of theoretical implications, this study reaffirms the fluid nature of empathy (Ellis, 2012) and reality TV (Kavka, 2012), while highlighting the underexplored question of reality TV's potential to inspire social action, calling for further research on the topic. At the same time, one has to recognize that reality TV chooses to engage with difficult topics, challenging audiences' perceptions and actions. Most Western consumers are unaware of the working and living conditions of Global South workers when purchasing from brands that perpetuate these conditions. We have shown that *Sweatshop* (Kleven, 2014/2015) addresses structural inequalities and the relationship between privilege and suffering, emphasizing accountability and systemic exploitation involving well-known TNCs. This approach differs from the "wrong choices" discourse in other reality TV shows about poverty. However, *Sweatshop* does not sufficiently explore or critique the systemic factors within capitalism, such as corporate profit motives and regulatory shortcomings.

Interestingly, *Sweatshop* (Kleven, 2014/2015) makes strides in raising awareness and has pedagogical aims. It is used in Norwegian and Swedish high schools to educate young people on ethical consumption. However, it emphasizes neoliberal values like self-responsibility and conscious consumption, reinforcing Norwegian/Swedish moral superiority and a regime of goodness (de Bengy Puyvallée & Bjørkdahl, 2021). As our analysis is only based on a single empirical case, we cannot draw any general conclusions about how such associations materialize in contemporary entertainment. However, the present study should be viewed as a case of "ethical entertainment" (Orgad & Nikunen, 2015) centering on the underresearched topic of work exploitation rather than the typical focus on poverty, migration, and disasters. In light of the overall dominance of U.S. reality TV in existing literature, this study is envisioned as a springboard for future comparative research that could further explore how imaginaries of "others" and their suffering are informed by contextual ideals of benevolence.

A final reflection concerns the reliability of our analytical approach, considering our critical perspective and the specificity of our material. We acknowledge that *Sweatshop* (Kleven, 2014/2015) is a selectively and actively constructed narrative, not a neutral portrayal of reality. Our aim is to question the potential impact of these active choices, denaturalizing the narrative to reveal its contingent, partial nature

and underlying ideologies. Our critical enquiries are not directed toward the involved individuals' actions, reactions, and behaviors. We recognize that the power to represent lies with the producers, as they maintain ultimate control over the story.

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