

# Around the World in 45 Minutes: A Critical Reflection on the Processes of Meaning Making in Flemish Travel Shows

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### **Abstract**

While travel programmes enjoy widespread popularity, the way in which they represent destinations, cultures and populations remains largely understudied. Due to the declining interest in news, the influence of travel programmes on audiences' perception of cultures strengthens. This paper explores how meaning is created within the genre, and how these processes of meaning making unfold in Flemish travel programmes classified under the category of factual entertainment. As one of the first in the research domain, this paper employs a multimethodological research design. Insights from descriptive textual analyses and expert interviews were combined through a reflexive thematic analysis. Additionally, qualitative insights were supplemented using quantitative content analysis. The results revealed that the pressure which travel show producers experience to offer viewers entertaining stories, overshadows their ethical duties regarding the representational strategies they employ. Practices that generate othering were regularly observed. However, these processes were frequently obscured by style elements. Travel show producers employ an 'aesthetic of authenticity', which can be defined as a visual and narrative style that leverages the constructed nature of travel programmes to create an illusion of 'realness'. As a result of this aesthetic, stereotypical images appear to objectively describe host cultures. Although this unfortunate trend was occasionally contested by those depicted in the show as well as travel show producers, current production practices fall short in systematically addressing this issue. Therefore, this paper advocates the implementation of more representational responsibility within travel show production, as this enables critical reflection on the employed representational strategies.

Keywords: travel shows, othering, multimethodological research design, representation, visual anthropology

## Introduction

In 2017, Alketa Molla, a Belgian Albanian woman, expressed her disappointment with the portrayal of her country of origin in the Flemish travel programme 'Reizen Waes' to a newspaper. Alketa stressed that the programme presented a stereotypical portrayal: "Everyone still links Albania to violence and corruption. That image is totally outdated" (Salumu, 2017, paragraph 3). Alketa's critique uncovers an interesting paradox: while travel shows aim to accurately inform audiences about the world, their representations of populations, destinations and cultures are inherently partial and often tend to simplify the complexity of reality by fuelling stereotypes and focussing on differences (Brewer et al., 2003; Fürsich, 2002a; Hanusch, 2010; Palmer, 2013).

The travel programme, here defined as a hybrid documentary genre focused on travel (Waade, 2009), is widely popular in Flanders. Particularly, those programmes which fall into the factual entertaining category achieve high ratings (CIM, 2024). However, despite their popularity, these travel programmes and their potential in shaping audiences' perceptions of cultures, people and destinations, remain largely understudied. To fill this research gap, we propose a dual research inquiry. Firstly, we aim to understand how meaning is constructed in the travel show genre by examining previous studies in the domain, and secondly, we want to explore how these meaning making processes unfold within four Flemish factual entertaining travel shows.

In the context of travel shows, the process of meaning making should be understood as a constant struggle "where a collective version of the 'Other/We' is negotiated, contested and constantly redefined" (Fürsich & Kavoori, 2001, p. 167). Numerous studies have explored how meaning is produced in travel shows. However, this field of study remains fragmented. The majority of research highlights travel shows' complicity in antagonising and subordinating cultures through processes of othering (e.g., Hanusch, 2010; McKinnon, 2019; Sterckx, 2015). Less prevalent are studies which acknowledge travel programmes' potential in stimulating cultural dialogue (e.g., Fürsich, 2002b; Palmer, 2013).

To consolidate these scattered insights, the first section of this paper categorises previous findings into a typology using a literature review. Research specifically focused on travel shows is scarce. Therefore, this paper also includes studies which examine representational strategies in travel media closely affiliated with travel programmes, such as travel journalism, travel blogs, travel brochures and travel posters. In addition, we will discuss the travel show as a genre with specific attention for those travel programmes which adhere to the factual entertaining way of address.

In the second section of this article, the constructed typology is further enriched with, and validated by, a case study focusing on four Flemish factual entertaining travel shows. The small region of Flanders provides an interesting context for this study due to the high volume of locally produced content (Raats & Donders, 2020), and the popularity of travel shows (CIM, 2024). The selected travel programmes were examined using a multimethodological research design grounded within critical cultural studies and critical media industry studies. Data from descriptive textual analyses and semi-structured expert interviews were combined through a reflexive thematic analysis to generate a deep reading of the shows on both a textual and an industrial level. In addition, qualitative insights were quantitatively supplemented using the method of content analysis.

In summary, this article aims to offer three significant contributions to the scholarly discourse: a) a theoretical contribution by creating a typology which structures previous research efforts in the field, b) a methodological contribution by employing a multimethodological approach for the first time within the research domain, and c) an empirical contribution by presenting a deep reading of four Flemish travel shows and their production processes.

## **Literature review**

As outlined in the introduction, this section of the study will structure and consolidate the scattered insights regarding meaning making processes in travel media. First, this paper will define and contextualise the concepts of representation, stereotyping and othering, as they form the foundation of this research. Second, a typology will be presented which discusses previous academic insights on meaning making in travel media. Last, we will focus specifically on the travel programme as a hybrid and dynamic television genre.

### **Conceptualising representation, stereotyping and othering**

Media produce representations that play a significant role in the process of meaning making (Fürsich, 2002b; Fürsich, 2010). The definition of representation is twofold. On the one hand, it refers to a portrayal of something or someone through media. On the other hand, it alludes to the meanings embedded within these portrayals.

The representation of the ‘foreign other’ has been a popular research topic since the twentieth century (Beltrán, 2018). Structuralist scholars (e.g., de Saussure, 1916) argued that meaning is constructed through differentiation (Hall, 1997). Post-structuralists (e.g., Derrida, 1967; Foucault, 1966) shared the structuralists’ view that representation relies on binary oppositions. In addition, they proposed the idea that it is always interwoven with power. In other words, those who hold power, can establish a regime of representation that gives them the symbolic authority to subject ‘foreign others’ to their marginalising norms (Foucault, 1966; Fürsich, 2002b; Hall, 1997; Hall, 2001). These regimes of representations are frequently built upon the process of stereotyping which involves the action of attributing reductionist characteristics to an individual based on the assumption that these traits are an inherent part of a person (Hall, 1997).

In the 1960s, the politics of representation, which is an academic wave particularly engaged with the deconstruction of stereotypes in media images, gained popularity (Beltrán, 2018). Within the confines of this scholarly movement, postcolonial scholars examined the enduring influence of colonialism on the interactions with, and depictions of, nonwestern people (Caton & Santon, 2008; Echtner & Prasad, 2003; Thomas, 1994). The focus of these scholars on the dismantling of stereotypes and the portrayal of nonwestern people, ultimately led to the theoretical conceptualisation of the process of othering. The postcolonial academic Spivak (1985) was the first to explicitly define othering. She described it as a process wherein a powerful cultural group labels a less powerful one as inferior.

However, the foundational ideas of this process trace back to academics preceding Spivak (1985), such as Hegel, Fanon, and Saïd. Hegel, a nineteenth century philosopher, argued that identities are formed in contrast to what is perceived as foreign (Brons, 2015; Jensen, 2011). His concept of *self-other distanciation* served as a source of inspiration for twentieth century scholars, such as the psychoanalyst Lacan and the feminist philosopher de Beauvoir, who claimed that ‘the Self’ is constructed through its difference from ‘the Other’ (Brons, 2015; de Beauvoir, 1949; Jasim & Said, 2022; Lacan, 1966; Van Pelt, 2000). Over the years, the definition of othering has been expanded by many postmodern, feminists, and postcolonial scholars (Brons, 2015). The postcolonial scholar Fanon (1952) argued that white individuals possess the power to define black people as inferior (Fuss, 1994; Van Pelt, 2000). Building upon Fanon, Saïd (1978) stated that the West represents the East as exotic to materialise the East as ‘the foreign Orient’ (Brons, 2015; Fürsich, 2002b). This process, which Saïd (1978) named Orientalism, consists of three main components: 1) the reinforcement of western dominance over the Orient, 2) the establishment of a dominant western worldview, and 3) an academic discipline based on the distinction between the West and the East (Caton & Santos, 2008; Fürsich, 2002b; Jensen, 2011; Nurullah, 2010).

Over the past few decades, othering has continued to hold an important place in postcolonial research (Beltrán, 2018). More recently, it is regarded as producing problematic discourses and inferior identities (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011; Ziaee, 2024) which “define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way” (Jensen, 2011, p. 65).

### **Towards a typology of the processes of meaning making in travel media**

The following section of the literature review presents previous academic insights on meaning making processes in travel media and consolidates them via a typology. While it should be acknowledged that the concept ‘the Other’ is generally used in this field of study to refer to people depicted in travel media, who originate from different cultural groups than the involved travel media creators (e.g., Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Fürsich, 2002a; 2002b; Palmer, 2013) we argue that this term carries a negative and distancing connotation. For that reason, we use the term ‘hosts’. This concept is grounded within tourism research (e.g., Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003; Jaworski et al., 2003a) and denotes people who receive guests visiting their culture. Applying this term to travel media, ensures that we refer to those portrayed in travel media as active agents, rather than passive objects subjected to the lens or pen of travel media creators.

This paper shares the stance of Lisle (2006) and Sharma (2018) that travel media are positioned on a precarious balance between cosmopolitanism and colonialism. While they can stimulate acceptance of cultural differences through recognition and empathy, they risk “mimick[ing], their colonial forebears” (Lisle, 2006, p. 3) if they ascribe inferiority to cultural groups different from their own. Based on this delicate balance, the proposed typology distinguishes two mutually exhaustive categories: ‘Focus on Difference’ and ‘Focus on Dialogue’. The ‘Focus on Difference’ category uncovers how travel programmes can stimulate othering by defining hosts in a reductionist, static or even hostile way. By contrast, the ‘Focus on Dialogue’ category emphasises how travel programmes can foster intercultural dialogue and challenge

power imbalances through reflexive production processes and well-considered representational strategies. In the subsequent section of the literature review, each of the typology's categories will be extensively discussed in the order they appear in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Typology to analyse the processes of meaning making in travel shows*

Focus on difference	Focus on dialogue
Representational strategies	
Reinforcing othering through:	Stimulating dialogue through:
Marginalisation (Dickinson, 2011; Dunn, 2005; Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003; Hansefors & Mossberg, 2002; Hanusch, 2009; 2010; Hill-James, 2006; Jaworski et al., 2003b; McKinnon, 2019; Nichols, 1991; Palmer, 2013; Santos 2004; 2006)	Transparency about power imbalances and the construction of representation (Fürsich, 2002b; Palmer, 2013)
Silencing (Coupland, 2010)	Accommodating agency of hosts (Palmer, 2013)
Stereotyping, homogenisation, pejoration (Caton & Santos, 2008; Cocking, 2014; Coupland, 2010; Daye, 2005; Dickinson, 2011; Fürsich, 2002a; Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003; Hanusch, 2010; Kim, 2020; Nichols, 1991; Palmer, 2013; Tavares, 2004; Sharma, 2018)	Incorporating the perspective of hosts (Fürsich, 2002b; te Walvaart et al., 2016)
Racism (Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; Powell, 2002)	Mentioning shared colonial history (Palmer, 2013)
Sexualisation (Rothenberg, 1994)	Representing culture as dynamic (Fürsich, 2002b)
(Euro)-orientalism, exoticism (Caton & Santos, 2008; Cocking, 2009; Dickinson, 2011; Dunn, 2005; Fürsich, 2002a; Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003; Hanusch, 2010; Kim, 2020; Lutz & Collins, 1993; Sterckx, 2015)	Dismantling stereotypes (Kim, 2020)
Binarism (Cocking, 2009; Echtner & Prasad, 2003; Hanusch, 2010; Kim, 2020; McKinnon, 2019; Nichols, 1991; Nygren, 2006; Palmer, 2013; Santos, 2004; 2006)	Displaying liberalism (Coupland, 2010)
Mythification (Echtner & Prasad, 2003)	Considering the socio-political context of host countries (Dickinson, 2011; Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003)
Roles of hosts	
Decoration, peopescap, tourist attraction, servant, helper, expert (Jaworski et al., 2003a; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998)	Equal (Jaworski et al., 2003a)
Roles of presenters	
The critic, the cultural mediator, the information provider, the entertainer, the traveller (Hanusch, 2012)	

### Representational strategies in travel media

#### *Processes that stimulate othering*

The 'Focus on Difference' category demonstrates how travel programmes can foster othering through a plethora of representational practices. The literature review confirmed the presence of eleven othering stimulating processes in travel media, which we will discuss below.

First, a commonly used representational strategy in travel media is marginalisation, which signifies the overshadowing of hosts' perspectives by travel media creators (e.g., Dickinson, 2011; Dunn, 2005; Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003; Hill-James, 2006; Palmer, 2013; Santos, 2004; 2006). The underlying reason for this process is the commercial pressure to appeal to, and resonate with, a broad domestic audience (Hanusch, 2010; te Walvaart et al., 2016). Marginalisation is noticeable in travel shows when interactions between presenters and hosts are limited (Nichols, 1991), or when presenters distance themselves from hosts (Hanefors & Mossberg, 2002; Hanusch, 2009; 2010; 2012; Jaworski et al., 2003b; McKinnon, 2019). Although seemingly innocent, this may degenerate towards a second othering inducing process, namely silencing. Silencing can be described as, not, or very limitedly representing hosts with the aim of social exclusion (Coupland, 2010). One way to silence hosts is by portraying them as marginalised individuals working in tourism (Dunn, 2005; Hanefors & Mossberg, 2002).

A third widely used othering practice in travel media is stereotyping (e.g., Cocking, 2014; Daye, 2005; Dickinson, 2011; Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003; Hanusch, 2010; Kim, 2020; Palmer, 2013; Sharma, 2018; Tavares, 2004). Stereotyping can be defined as the attribution of reductionist characteristics to an individual (Hall, 1997). This practice is used in travel shows to create a sense of objectivity (Nichols, 1991) and to simplify the historic connection with hosts (Caton & Santos, 2008; Fürsich, 2002a). The fourth and fifth othering stimulating processes entail pejoration and homogenisation (Coupland, 2010) which could be considered specific forms of stereotyping. Pejoration denotes a practice through which hosts are portrayed as "incompetent, deviant or

instable” (Sharma, 2018, p. 3), while homogenisation refers to a process through which general traits are extended across a cultural group with the aim of obscuring individualism and uniqueness (Coupland, 2010). Considering cultural groups as homogenous and inferior can degenerate towards the sixth and seventh strategies that stimulate othering, namely racism (e.g., Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; Powel, 2002), and sexualisation (e.g., Rothenberg, 1994).

The eighth othering inducing process in travel media is orientalism (e.g., Cocking, 2009; Dunn, 2005; Hanusch, 2010; Sterckx, 2015). Orientalism concerns all practices in favour of the reinforcement of western dominance over the Orient (Caton & Santos, 2008; Fürsich, 2002b; Jensen, 2011; Nurullah, 2010; Said, 1978). Generally, orientalist representations are used in travel media to emphasise the ‘static backwardness’ of hosts (Cocking, 2009; Hanusch, 2010). When the process of orientalism is applied to the representation of Eastern Europe, scholars describe it as Euro-orientalism. Euro-orientalism denotes the action of focusing on stereotypical differences between Western and Eastern Europe with the aim of disadvantaging Central and Eastern Europe (Sterckx, 2015). Closely affiliated with the notion of (Euro-)orientalism, is the ninth othering stimulating practice of exoticism which alludes to the highlighting of a culture’s ‘strange’ elements. Many scholars have verified the use of exoticism in travel media (e.g., Canton & Santos, 2008; Dickinson, 2011; Fürsich, 2002a; Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003; Kim, 2020; Lutz & Collins, 1993).

As previously mentioned, othering relies on the accentuation of differences between powerful groups and subordinate groups (Jensen, 2011). In line with this, a tenth commonly used strategy in travel media entails binarism which refers, in the context of postcolonial studies, to placing an emphasis on differences between the colonisers and the colonised (Frenkel & Shenha, 2006). It is argued that western travel programmes adopt the strategy of binarism to reinforce existing power imbalances (McKinnon, 2019) and to allow audiences to observe hosts from a safe

distance (Nichols, 1991). The most frequently deployed binary oppositions in travel media include: natural versus unnatural (e.g., Nygren, 2006), present versus past (e.g., Cocking, 2009; Echtner & Prasad, 2003; Kim, 2020; Santos, 2004), developed versus underdeveloped (e.g., Hanush, 2010; Echtner & Prasad, 2003; Santos, 2006), independent versus dependent (e.g., Echtner & Prasad, 2003), rich versus poor (e.g., McKinnon, 2019), centre versus periphery (Santos, 2006), male versus female (Santos, 2006), good versus bad (Nygren, 2006), and dynamic versus static (Echtner & Prasad, 2003).

Mythification is noted as the final othering inducing strategy. Echtner and Prasad (2003) distinguish three myths that are implicitly conveyed in travel brochures: 1) the myth of the unchanged which characterises hosts as static cultural groups, 2) the myth of the unrestrained which portrays destinations as paradises wherein hosts are slave, and lastly 3) the myth of the uncivilised which emphasises the cruel and wild nature of hosts (Caton & Santos, 2008; Echtner & Prasad, 2003).

#### *Practices that enable dialogue*

The above-mentioned studies emphasise rather negative aspects of travel media. However, some scholars indicate that it is possible to generate intercultural understanding within the confines of travel media through representational strategies (e.g., Coupland, 2010; Dickinson, 2011; Fürsich 2002b; Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003; Kim, 2020; Palmer, 2013). The most cited dialogue enabling practices include: dismantling stereotypes, incorporating the voice of hosts, displaying liberalism, acknowledging shared colonial history, and considering the sociopolitical contexts of destinations (Coupland, 2010; Dickinson, 2011; Galasiński & Jaworski, 2003; Kim, 2020; Palmer, 2013).

Fürsich (2002b) argues that in order to stimulate cultural dialogue, travel show producers should adopt principles originating from the field of visual anthropology. According to her, four key principles emerge. First, transparency is needed to deconstruct the inherent power

imbalances that accompany representations of hosts. Second, culture must be presented as dynamic, rather than static. Third, counterrepresentation created by hosts must be considered, which implies that travel programmes should feature diverse perspectives. Finally, travel show producers need to be reflexive about the constructed nature of travel programmes (Fürsich, 2002b).

The last-mentioned principle refers to travel shows' ability to reconstruct and remediate reality to create a recognisable narrative. However, due to the aura of truth, generally ascribed to documentary genres, this underlying bricolage is often obscured and presented as an objective image of reality, rather than a subjective account of events (Bernard, 2007; Fürsich, 2002b; Lopriore, 2015). This raises questions about the authenticity of travel shows.

Within the field of visual anthropology, authenticity is a much-debated topic. Most visual anthropologists (e.g., Banks, 2012; Dutton, 2003; Garland & Gordon, 1999) perceive it as a dynamic idea that exists in multiple forms (Theodosopoulos, 2013). We argue, inspired by visual anthropology, that authenticity, in the context of travel shows, should be perceived as a characteristic attributed by audiences to depictions of hosts when they perceive these images as honest reflections of reality. In other words, authenticity is ascribed to representations based on a subjective 'perception of realness'. This makes it prone to (unconscious) cultural bias.

We agree with Barker (2024) that documentary genres can generate the 'feeling of authenticity' using creative techniques. However, this raises the need to make audiences aware that the representations that they perceive as 'real' are ultimately subjective and constructed. Fürsich (2002b) proposes the practice of *verfremdung* as a solution. She defines it as a collective of "strategies that break viewers' expectations" (Fürsich, 2002b, p. 74). These strategies may include employing intertextuality or showing unexpected reactions from hosts (Fürsich, 2002b).

*The roles of hosts, presenters and journalists in travel media*

Besides practices that enable dialogue or that reinforce othering, social roles adopted by, or ascribed to, hosts, presenters, and journalists deeply influence meaning making in travel media. In the following paragraphs, various categories of roles will be discussed.

Based on the studies of Morgan and Pritchard (1998), and Jaworski et al. (2003a) six roles can be distinguished that are often assigned to hosts: 1) decoration, 2) peoplescape, 3) tourist attraction 4) helper, 5) expert, 6) active equal. When hosts take on the roles of decoration, peoplescape, tourist attraction, helper or expert they are depicted as servants whose only use is to provide aesthetics, resources or information. However, more agency empowering roles do exist. Some scholars state that hosts can be represented as active equals alongside presenters or journalists (Palmer, 2013; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; Jaworski et al., 2003a). Occasionally, hosts even actively resist subordinated roles ascribed to them, for instance by refusing access to their personal sphere (Jaworski et al., 2003a). Such acts of defiance challenge dominant forms of representation and enable identity negotiation (Sharma, 2018). The processes of self-exoticism and self-orientalism could be considered good examples of identity negotiation. They refer to the ways in which hosts use exotic or orientalist representations ascribed to them to reconstruct their self-identity and to create profitable brands (Fürsich & Robins, 2004; Sharma, 2018; Yan & Santos, 2009).

Nonetheless, these agency empowering instances are rather scarcely found in travel shows since presenters frequently have more speaking and screen time than hosts (Jaworski et al., 2003a). Presenters of travel programmes are generally portrayed as authentic celebrities and trustworthy travellers (Healy, 2013) who guide audiences throughout a journey (Waade, 2009). Hanusch (2012), inspired by Lischke (2006), described five roles for travel journalists in newspapers that we believe can be extended to travel show presenters: 1) the cultural mediator who brings audiences closer to hosts through education and cross-cultural understanding, 2) the

critic who sceptically evaluates destinations, 3) the information provider who gives useful facts about destinations, 4) the entertainer who amuses audiences, and lastly 5) the traveller who motivates audiences to travel themselves. Unfortunately, this categorisation does not consider the fact that presenters can also take on a more reflective position, for instance by being aware of power imbalances and deconstructing them through humour or the acknowledgement of their limited knowledge (Palmer, 2013).

### **The travel show as a genre**

When conducting a study on travel programmes, it is valuable to conceptualise this category of television shows as a genre. However, this genre is notably broad (Waade, 2009), and lacks an accepted scientific definition. Inspired by Waade (2009), the travel show is here defined as a hybrid documentary genre focused on travel, encompassing a variety of different formats. To get a grip on this variety, we categorise travel programmes based on two format characteristics: the tourist gaze they employ and the way in which they address audiences (Waade, 2009).

The tourist gaze is defined as the perspective through which a travel programme portrays a destination (Urry, 2002). Jansson (2002) was the first scholar to apply this concept to travel media, and he distinguished two kinds of tourist gazes: the symbiotic and the antagonistic tourist gaze (Jansson, 2002; Waade, 2009). Waade (2009) asserts that both gazes are relevant in the case of travel programmes. Travel programmes adopting a symbiotic gaze focus on establishing a close connection with hosts, while those embodying an antagonistic gaze maintain a certain distance (Jansson, 2002; Waade, 2009). For example, the use of panoramic views is generally associated with the antagonistic gaze, and the use of snapshots and camcorder images is frequently linked to the symbiotic gaze (Dovey, 2003; Jansson, 2002; Waade, 2009).

In addition to the tourist gaze, the way in which travel shows address audiences can be used to classify different travel programme formats. Waade (2009) defined three approaches of address

which often alternate within a single programme. The first is the documentary manner, whereby the presenter, who is generally an authoritative man, uses journalistic practices to educate viewers. In addition, audiences can also be addressed in a factual entertainment manner whereby the presenter treats the audience as equal travel companions who need to be entertained, or in a commercial manner whereby they are viewed as potential consumers who seek advice (Waade, 2009). It is important to note that while we believe that travel shows are always positioned within the overarching category of documentaries, we do not want to imply that they always adopt a documentary way of address.

Due to the decline of hard news, infotainment programmes are becoming increasingly popular (Fürsich, 2002a; Savolainen, 2022). While some scholars argue that infotainment makes the broader population more informed about social and political matters, others state that this leads to negative processes, such as dumbing down, decontextualisation and trivialisation of hard news (Savolainen, 2022). As a result, travel show producers who employ a factual entertaining way of address, are continuously pulled between two opposing forces: the pressure to lure in audiences by crafting engaging stories and the duty to make a difference by seriously and truthfully calling out what goes wrong in society (Eitzen, 2018).

As a solution for this challenge, Eitzen (2018) advocates the motto: “carry one carefully crafting stories” (p. 109). This alludes to a tendency in documentary filmmaking to entertain through stories, while being open to facts, incorporating various perspectives and promoting empathy. It also refers to the ethical responsibilities infotainment documentary makers have regarding the audiences they cater to and the subjects they represent (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Eitzen, 2018). Documentary creators should acknowledge the limits of their own understanding and allow participants to actively contribute to their film with the aim of creating “representation without subsuming the other under the filmmaker’s totalizing vision” (Nash, 2011, p. 237).

### **Conclusion literature review**

The first section of this paper delved into previous research findings regarding the processes of meaning making in travel media. A typology was constructed that exemplified the fine line travel media balance between cosmopolitanism and colonialism. While the majority of scholars state that travel media frames hosts as 'foreign' and 'inferior' (e.g., Fürsich, 2002a; Hanusch, 2010; Jensen, 2011; McKinnon, 2019), some academics also demonstrate how these othering tendencies can be contested (e.g., Fürsich, 2002b; Jaworski et al., 2003a; Palmer, 2013).

The literature review pointed out that textual research on the employed representational strategies in travel shows is scarce, and that travel show creators operating within the factual entertainment genre are confronted with some ethical difficulties. As such, it becomes relevant to empirically investigate how meaning is constructed in travel shows, specifically those that adhere to a factual entertaining way of address.

### **Methods**

A multimethodological research design consisting of four research components (RCs) that built upon each other, was utilised to explore the research topic. Triangulation (Varpio et al., 2017) was not implemented to enhance credibility or validity but rather to gain an in depth understanding of how meaning is produced on both a textual and an industrial level within the analysed Flemish travel shows.

1. In RC 1 a descriptive textual analysis of four Flemish travel shows was performed. Twelve episodes were analysed based on five parameters to explore the shows' manifest meanings.
2. In RC 2 four semi-structured expert interviews (Natow, 2019) were conducted with people involved in the production of the selected Flemish travel shows. The aim was to examine travel show producers' perceptions of their production methods and their portrayal of

hosts.

3. In RC 3 the data from RC 1 and RC 2 were combined using a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019). An iterative coding approach was employed to symbiotically generate a nuanced and rich reading of both data sources on a manifest and latent level.
4. In RC 4 a quantitative content analysis (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2015) was employed as an auxiliary method to examine the reoccurrence of certain code groups originating from the RTA (e.g., the narrative themes of sequences, the roles of presenters, the roles of hosts) with the aim of supplementing the qualitative insights.

### **RC 1: A descriptive textual analysis**

In the initial stage of the research, a descriptive textual analysis was performed. This implied that only the manifest meanings of the selected travel shows' episodes were explored. To sample relevant cases while ensuring the feasibility of the broader research, six selection criteria were composed by the researcher (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Criteria for case selection*

Criteria	
1.	The cases meet the definition of the travel show genre, as described earlier in this paper: a hybrid documentary genre focused on travel, encompassing a variety of formats
2.	The cases are produced for Flemish audiences by a Flemish production company.
3.	Cases are produced between 2018 and 2024.
4.	Cases are part of the lists of the most-watched programmes in Flanders, distributed by Centrum voor Informatie over de Media (CIM).
5.	Cases are not focused on Flanders as a cultural region, or those which share a strong cultural affinity with Flanders.
6.	Cases adhere to a factual entertaining way of address.

The sampling process resulted in the selection of four travel shows: 'Reizen Waes Europa'

(RWE), ‘Reizen Waes Wereldsteden’ (RWW), ‘Dwars door Oceanië’ (DDO), and ‘Dwars door de Middellandse Zee’ (DMZ). Since these cases were selected based on relevant criteria (see Table 2), each individual episode met the necessary conditions for analysis. Therefore, a random sample of three episodes per show was drawn (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Selected travel shows and analysed episodes*

Reference	Title of travel show	Season	Selected episodes
RWE	Reizen Waes	Season 4	1, 5, 9
RWW	Reizen Waes	Season 7	3, 5, 6
DDO	Dwars door Oceanië	Season 1	1, 2, 5
DMZ	Dwars door de Middellandse Zee	Season 1	1, 2, 7

Each of the selected episodes was structured into sequences, which are: “narrative entities in which a specific act or event takes place” (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2022, p. 283). Subsequently, each sequence was described in detail using the following analytic parameters: kinesics, proxemics, mimics, dialogue, and paralinguistics.

All selected shows fall into the category of the factual entertainment way of address. Each of them was broadcast by VRT, the Flemish public broadcaster. This is not surprising as VRT is legally bound to invest in documentaries that contain informational, educational, and cultural elements (VRT International, 2024). RWE (2018) and RWW (2022) are part of the widely popular franchise ‘Reizen Waes’ which revolves around Flemish celebrity Tom Waes who brings audiences along on adventurous trips. In RWE Tom travels to ‘the unknown’ side of Europe, and in RWW he visits several metropolises around the globe. Both seasons were produced by De Mensen and were distributed in the Netherlands, as well as Flanders. DDO (2019) is a travel miniseries which is part of the human-interest format ‘Iedereen Beroemd’ produced by Het

Televisiehuis and De chinezen. The show follows presenter Wouter Deboot as he cycles 7000 kilometres across Oceania. DMZ (2021) was produced by De chinezen and follows presenter Arnout Hauben and his crew's journey across the Mediterranean to investigate the history of the surrounding islands and the lives of their inhabitants. The show has had several reruns since its release and was also broadcast in the Netherlands. The destinations which were featured in the twelve analysed episodes are listed in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Featured destinations in the analysed episodes*

Travel show title	Number of episode	Featured destinations <sup>1</sup>
RWE	1	Spain
RWE	5	Northern-Ireland (Dublin)
RWE	9	Azerbaijan
RWW	3	Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar)
RWW	5	Mexico (Mexico City)
RWW	6	India (Mumbai)
DDO	1	Australia
DDO	2	Australia
DDO	5	New-Zealand
DMZ	1	France (Corsica)
DMZ	2	Italy (Lampedusa) & Malta
DMZ	7	Greece (Crete & Santorini)

## **RC 2: Semi-structured expert interviews**

<sup>1</sup> If a specific city or island is added between brackets next to a country, the episode primarily focused on that particular city or island.

In the second stage of the research, four semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts (see Table 5) who were closely involved in the creation of the selected shows.

**Table 5**

*Information about the interviewed experts*

ID	Travel show	Function	Duration interview
1 <sup>2</sup>	DDO	Presenter, producer, researcher, director	1u26m
2	RWE & RWW	Director, showrunner, researcher	54m
3	RWE	Showrunner, researcher	53m
4	DMZ	Executive producer	30m

Inspired by the critical media industry studies perspective (Havens et al., 2009), the microlevel production processes performed by the experts were examined with the aim of generating transactional knowledge formation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Insights from the literature review and a preliminary vision were used to inform the topic lists. Before the interviews, the respondents were made aware of their confidentiality. The adequacy of the data sample was evaluated by the information power it held (Malterud et al., 2016). This entailed that, after transcription, each interview was critically evaluated based on the typology, performed descriptive analyses, and content of the other interviews, concerning its relevance for the broader study.

### **RC 3: Reflexive thematic analysis**

To combine data from RC 1 and RC 2 a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019)

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<sup>2</sup> Due to logistic problems with the recording equipment during the interview with participant 1, the researcher had to rely on the notes taken during the interview rather than a detailed transcription. As for the other interviews, no similar logistic problems arose, and the researcher could fall back on detailed transcriptions for analysis.

was conducted in an iterative way using Nvivo. Textual insights and productional knowledge were compared, structured and interconnected through iterative coding to generate thick descriptions. Throughout the coding process, a critical cultural studies perspective (Havens et al., 2009) was employed to investigate how the constant power struggle that takes place in media industries constructs and negotiates the representation of hosts. Coding resulted in the emergence of 91 codes, which were grouped into three overarching themes. An overview of this process can be found in appendix A.

RTA perceives meaning as arising through an interpretative coding process influenced by the researcher's subjectivity and reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to address my positionality. My role as a student and relatively inexperienced researcher, as well as my previous experience with some of the selected episodes, have undoubtedly shaped my coding. Moreover, my position as a white woman could render my insights on the representation of hosts patronising and even imperialist (Vanner, 2015). Especially, as it may prompt the perception that I am speaking for hosts instead of with them. In an effort to continuously reflect on my positionality during research, I implemented some self-reflexive strategies.

First, a research diary was maintained in order to consider the wider coding context and to limit personal revelations to their usefulness for the broader study. Dialogue with my supervisor as a 'critical friend' enabled further reflection on my choices (DeVault, 1997; Nadin & Cassell, 2006). Moreover, the predefined research objectives and the theory-driven typology facilitated the opportunity to reflect on, and account for, the power connected to my positionality during coding (Vanner, 2015). Finally, regarding the impression that I would want to speak for hosts instead of with them, I would like to discuss the insights of Alcoff (1991) who argued that while speaking for others may stem from a desire for mastery, it can also lead to the overthrow of existing hierarchies. She advocates a nuanced approach: "It is not always the case that when we speak for others they end up worse off. Sometimes (...) we do need a 'messenger' to advocate for

our needs” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 29). Considering the lack of academic attention to the subject, I believe it is pertinent for me as a researcher to advocate for the representational rights and interests of hosts.

#### **RC 4: A quantitative content analysis**

After the coding process, a quantitative content analysis (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2015) was performed to examine the reoccurrence of certain textual codes. Three textual code groups and their subcodes were considered for analysis: the narrative themes of sequences, the roles of presenters, and the roles of hosts. By calculating the reoccurrence of the different subcodes within these three overarching code groups, weighted percentages could be generated per category. As a result, distributions were generated of the different narrative themes and roles ascribed to, and adopted by, presenters and hosts across the analysed travel show episodes.

### **Results and discussion**

RTA revealed three paradoxes in the data, which exemplify the continuous struggle of meaning making within the analysed travel shows.

#### **Balancing entertainment with cultural depth**

The first paradox alludes to a dilemma with which the contemporary documentary maker is continuously faced: they must deliver a nuanced image of the world, while keeping audiences entertained (Eitzen, 2018). The interviewed Flemish travel show producers admitted that they are also confronted with this challenge:

We're TV creators, so our aim is to produce enjoyable episodes that captivate the audience (...) However, I do believe it's valuable to add depth to episodes (...) It's a

challenge; ideally, I'd delve deeper but we have to cater to a broad audience. (3)<sup>3</sup>

According to the interviewed professionals, a compelling story is necessary to entertain audiences. However, 'good' storytelling involves making choices. The interviewees make decisions based on two criteria. First, they consider whether the narrative fits the persona of the presenter: "It is a programme that very much revolves around Tom [the presenter], whether people like it or not" (2). Secondly, they ensure that every episode consists of a selection of narrative themes that complement each other in a manner that captivates the audiences' attention throughout the entire show: 'It's like making a dish: you cannot put in too much pepper or too much salt and you have to make sure everything is well cooked" (4).

Nonetheless, this approach presents some challenges. In line with previous research (e.g., Coupland, 2010; Hanusch, 2010; Hill-James, 2006; Palmer, 2013) the present paper argues that the dominance of the presenter's western perspective and the focus on entertainment marginalise hosts by suppressing and silencing them in favour of an engaging narrative. The interviewed experts acknowledged this danger and emphasised their efforts to insert informational depth into their programmes: "We look for depth in every scene. If we go to Albania, we will not just go to the beach to show how pretty it is. Some travel shows do that, we don't. We have chosen an active role" (3). For them, this active role entails the investigation of alternative world views with the aim of stimulating cross-cultural understanding.

However, it seems that their efforts fall short. Our textual research revealed that culture was generally represented in the analysed episodes as a static set of traditions, historic stories and problems affiliated with a broad collective of people (see Graph 1), rather than a dynamic collective of goods, beliefs, traditions and ways of life, as emphasised by various scholars (e.g.,

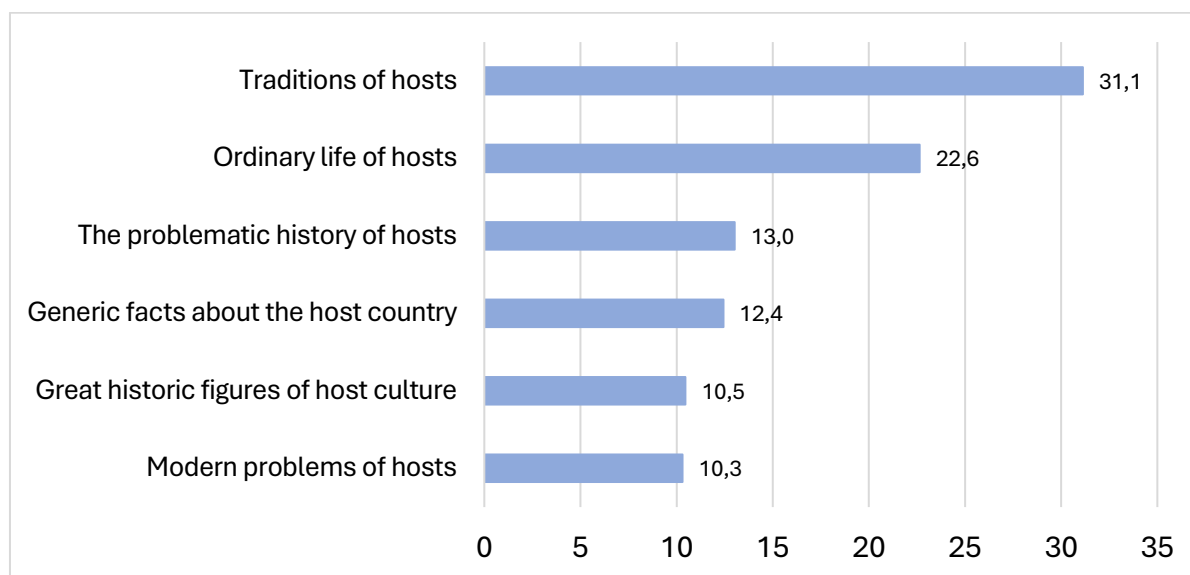
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<sup>3</sup> Each interview quote is translated from Dutch to English by the author. The number displayed after each quote corresponds to the numbering of experts in Table 5.

Sowell, 2008) and institutions (e.g., UNESCO, 2022).

### Graph 1

*The representation of culture in the analysed travel shows examined through sequence themes*



The most frequently observed practice to depict the hosts' culture was the showcasing of traditions (e.g., traditional sports, dances or events). This distinct thematic focus on the past was further extended by the reoccurrence of sequences that centred around problematic histories (e.g., war, colonialism) or great historic figures (e.g., Napoleon, Genghis Khan). When culture was framed in a more modern way, hosts were generally depicted as a homogenous cultural group characterised by their current societal problems (e.g., drug crises, migration) or by generic facts (e.g., geographic location, local foods). While we did find instances in which culture was portrayed as more dynamic, for instance when the ordinary life of an individual host was shown, culture was still predominantly depicted as static in the analysed episodes.

The observed static representations of culture may arise from the narrow perception of culture to which the interviewees pertain. The interviewed professionals romanticise the

assumed collectiveness of hosts' cultures and describe them as ancient predecessors of their own: "The Mediterranean is the cradle of civilisation. (...) it's the basis of our European society, our institutions, our democracy, our culture" (4). These perceptions reinforce the idea that hosts' cultures are static and stuck in the past.

This paper points out that the dilemma between entertainment and information with which interviewed travel show producers are faced, results in their inclination to craft compelling yet superficial stories that oversimplify hosts' cultures. Even though they try to compensate for this tendency by adding cultural depth to the programmes, their rather narrow perception of culture results in static representations that reinforce the myth of the unchanged (Echtner & Prasad, 2003) and accentuate binary oppositions between the 'modern us' and the 'ancient them' (Hanusch, 2010; McKinnon, 2019; Nygren, 2006; Palmer, 2013). This can degenerate towards the strengthening of orientalist stereotypes.

### **Being authentically inauthentic**

A second observed paradox pertains to the authenticity that is often ascribed to the genre of travel shows. While these programmes appear to give unmanipulated access to reality, many scholars (e.g., Fürsich, 2002b; Lopriore, 2015) argue that these shows present constructed versions of reality. This raises the question of how and why 'a feel of authenticity' is generated within these programmes.

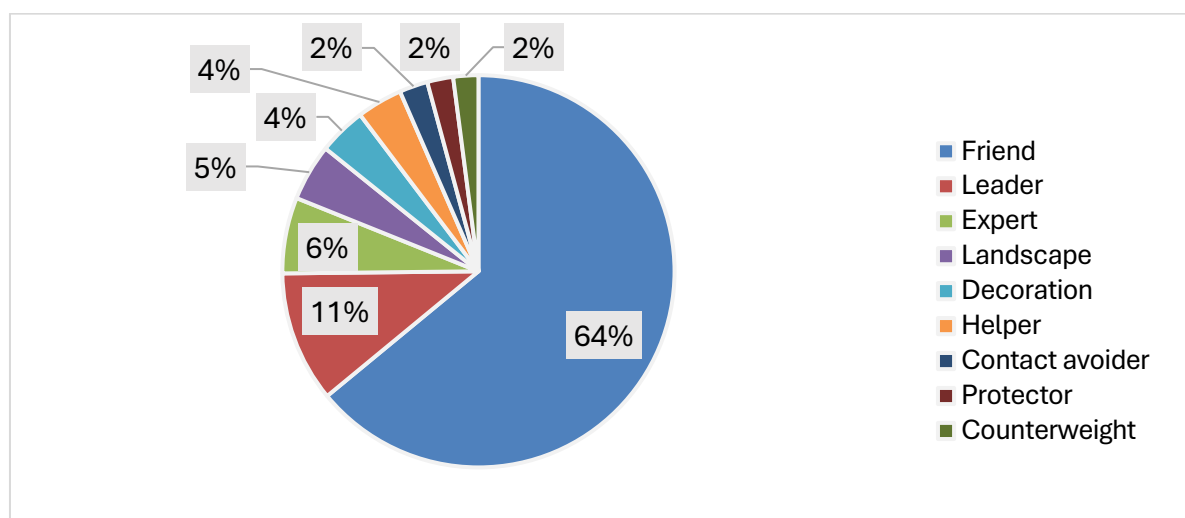
We argue, inspired by visual anthropologists (e.g., Banks, 2012; Barker, 2024; Dutton, 2003; Garland & Gordon, 1999; Theodossopolous, 2013) that authenticity in the context of travel shows is a characteristic attributed by audiences to depictions of hosts when they perceive these images as honest reflections of reality. Echoing Barker (2024), the interviewed professionals asserted that 'a perception of authenticity' can be achieved by implementing a number of creative techniques, for instance avoiding staging, not doing site visits, engaging in messy handheld

filming, and showcasing backstage footage. In addition, they state that these techniques are necessary to create an entertaining storyline: “If someone is disappointed to see him [the presenter], then that reaction is real and authentic. In that case, we won't say, hey, let's do this again because you looked a bit weird. No, that's part of the story (3).

We propose the concept ‘aesthetic of authenticity’ to describe the way in which the constructed nature of travel shows is used by travel show producers as a visual and narrative style to make these programmes appear ‘real. However, by obscuring travel shows’ inauthenticity and replacing it with an illusion of authenticity, this aesthetic gives the false impression that stereotypical characterisations and practices of othering objectively describe ‘the real host’. In other words, it only shows acts that fit the travel show’s narrative and frames these acts as ‘authentic’. This can have disconcerting implications, as our textual research revealed that within the analysed travel show, hosts are generally portrayed as subordinated means for information, help or aesthetics (see Graph 2).

## Graph 2

*Roles of the hosts*



In line with studies of Jaworski et al. (2003a) and Morgan and Pritchard (1998), we observed that hosts are frequently pushed in roles in service of the travel show. These

subordinated roles include **the polite friend** who shares personal life stories, **the expert** who gives information about their culture, **the protector** who guards the crew's safety, or **the helper** who provides food, water or directions. In addition, hosts are occasionally depicted as part of the programme's background aesthetic, either clearly visible as **decoration** or less observable as **part of a peopescap**. By portraying hosts as means and depicting this as 'real' through the aesthetic of authenticity, existing cultural stereotypes are reinforced.

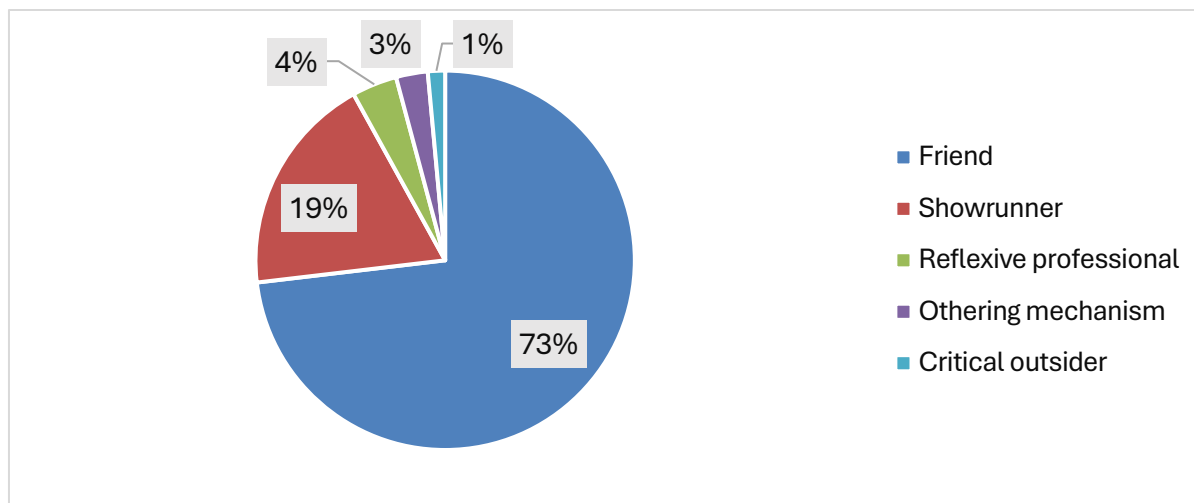
However, our textual research did also uncover instances in which hosts were represented as ends in themselves rather than means in service of the travel show's narrative. Such ambiguous instances of *verfremdung* break the narrative expectations of the travel show (Fürsich, 2002b), and deconstruct the regime of truth (Foucault, 1966) established by the aesthetic of authenticity. We observed three agency empowering roles in the analysed episodes (see Graph 2): **the contact avoider** who does not allow a crew close to their personal sphere (e.g., their home, their body), **the counterweight** who acts in defiance of the existing power imbalance by debunking the presenter's false assumptions, and **the leader** who pushes the crew into a role of service rather than be pushed in themselves. The importance of hosts' agency in travel shows, can be exemplified by excerpt 1 in which DDO presenter Wouter travels to Coober Pedy, a small town in the Outback, to visit a Belgian who lives there. He decides to ask for help at a local restaurant.

### Excerpt 1

*Example of hosts' agency (Dwars door Oceanië, episode 2)*

- |    |           |   |
|----|-----------|---|
| 01 | Customer: | How are you?  |
| 02 | Wouter:   | Good! You sell Belgian waffles?                                 |
| 03 | Customer: | Why are you filming?  |
| 04 | Wouter:   | I'm making a documentary about my journey.                      |
| 05 | Customer: | You must tell people in advance if you are filming them, out of |





In most cases, the presenter is portrayed as **a friend** or as a **showrunner**. The role of friend entails a presenter who engages in personal communication and physical contact with hosts. The role of showrunner is a combination of the roles of information provider and entertainer described by Hanusch (2012) and involves a presenter who is characterised as an adventurous educator who makes viewing the show worthwhile by adding personal commentary. When presenters only embody the role of friend or showrunner travel programmes retain a superficially positive atmosphere.

We argue that this superficial lightheartedness enables presenters to create a space of neglect in which instances of othering and stereotyping are tolerated because the entertainment value of the show obscures their hurtful nature. This seems to convey the message that it's okay to be stereotypical, because it's all fun and jokes. Under exceptional circumstances, the space of neglect can be stretched to its limits, to the point where the presenter can take on the role of an **othering mechanism** (see Graph 3) who explicitly judges or ridicules hosts, without being scrutinised. In this case, the presenter explicitly enables stereotyping, exoticism, (Euro)-orientalism, and marginalisation (e.g., Cocking, 2009; Dunn, 2005; Fürsich, 2002a; Hansefors & Mossberg, 2002; Lutz & Collins, 1993; Nichols, 1991; Sterckx, 2015). Within this space of neglect, processes of othering are disguised by humour, and thus characterised as innocent and normal. This can be exemplified by excerpt 2 in which presenter Tom visits a bathing place in Azerbaijan.

## Excerpt 2

### *Example of the space of neglect (Reizen Waes Europa, Episode 9)*

01	Tom (Voice-over in Dutch) <sup>4</sup> :	Believe it or not, but Naftalan is a petroleum
02		spa. This is the place if you want to take a bath
03		in raw petroleum.
04	Ayten:	If you have pain somewhere. They apply
05		petroleum on it.
06	Tom (Voice-over in Dutch):	It doesn't sound very inviting, much like the
07		atmosphere, upon my arrival.
08	Tom (to the crew in Dutch):	What is this place? I feel a neck shot coming (laughs)

In excerpt 2, 'the foreignness' of the bathing place is accentuated through Tom's awkwardness and the explicit link to the common Eastern-European stereotype of violence. Tom's choice to make the statement in Dutch deprives the host (in this case interpreter Ayten) of a response. As such, a space of neglect is created in which humour obscures hurtful statements and in which hosts are denied agency.

Fortunately, our textual research demonstrated that presenters can also take on roles that offer a space of dialogue rather than a space of neglect. These roles (see Graph 3) include **the reflexive professional** who critically evaluates their own behaviour and power status, and **the critical outsider** who in line with the role of critic described by Hanusch (2012), takes on a neutral position in disputes and criticises problematic traditions or events, all while actively involving host.

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<sup>4</sup> When quotes are translated from Dutch to English by the author, this is mentioned in brackets next to the name of the speaker.

The space of dialogue can be exemplified by excerpt 3 in which presenter Tom visits the lighting of a bonfire in a Protestant neighbourhood in Dublin with his fixer Brendan. When Tom criticises violent behaviour, he actively engages Brendan in the conversation, which generates cross-cultural understanding.

### Excerpt 3

*Example of the space of dialogue (Reizen Waes Europa, episode 5)*

01	Tom:	They're guarding it, because otherwise the Catholics will the
02		light the bonfire?
03	Brendan:	Yeah, but it's a bonfire not a person. The violence now is
04		nothing compared to the past.
05	Tom:	So, because there's less violence, you think all of this is okay?
06	Brendan:	Well...
07	Tom:	They are blocking the road (...). That's what I meant. If there was
08		peace, they wouldn't have to block the road.
09	Brendan:	The only thing I can say is that young people from both
10		communities have relationships and children. There's much
11		more positivity going on than what David said earlier. People
12		aren't getting wounded or murdered anymore.

The interviewed professionals emphasised that they make efforts to create a space of dialogue, rather than a space of neglect: "You might not feel or notice this, but we really want to know what people think and what they are sensitive about" (3). In line with the insights of Eitzen (2018) and Fürsich (2002a), they strive to implement strategies that hold them accountable for their part in constructing and distributing representations of hosts.

A first reported strategy is hiring a fixer or an interpreter. A fixer functions on the one hand, as a guide to the crew by navigating the practicality of filming in an unknown destination, and on the other hand, as an educator for audiences. In addition, when the presenter does not speak the

native language of the hosts, the interviewees argue that they also collaborate with an interpreter. According to the interviewees, fixers and interpreters are asked to evaluate the episodes: “We have actually always provided the footage to our guides and they are generally satisfied with it.” (2). Moreover, the interviewees also consider the establishment of a diverse crew: “Our production company stimulates diversity on the work floor. Men, women, and people with a disability work here. This teaches me to look differently at the programmes I am making” (2). On top of that, the interviewed professionals stated that they try to adopt the hosts’ perspective to assess whether their representation is ‘good’: “Just because there are a lot of white people working on the programme doesn't mean we shouldn't try to see things from someone else's perspective” (2).

Although the implementation of these self-reflexive strategies can be considered as a positive trend, some critical notes need to be made. Obviously, considering the diversity of the crew is beneficial for the representation of hosts. However, it is crucial that diversity goes beyond surface level characteristics. A truly diverse crew encompasses a variety of identity axes (Fürsich, 2002b; Nichols, 1991). Only considering gender and disability is not enough. Moreover, while taking over the perspective of hosts seems to be a good way to evaluate representational practices, travel show producers should not mindlessly speak or think on behalf of hosts, as this denotes a desire for mastery (Alcoff, 1991). Instead, they should try to engage with hosts to allow their input. If travel shows can be evaluated by fixers and interpreters, this should be preferred over the appropriation of hosts’ perspectives. Unfortunately, the contribution of fixers and interpreters was frequently downplayed by the interviewees. They were generally perceived as means to get connection with ‘the real’ host, for instance by being a gateway into a closed community or by acting as a translator. We suggest that casting them in more high-profile roles would strengthen and deepen representational practices.

Despite the above-mentioned criticisms it should be pointed out that due to the complex

logistics of travel shows, implementing these strategies is not easy (Fürsich, 2002b). The interviewed experts argued that they do not always have control over the representations they produce: “It is always easier from the outside to say that a TV programme makes choices, but it's not always a choice. (...) people don't know everything that has played out behind the scenes” (3). According to interviewees, various factors hinder ‘good’ representation, such as the fixers’ dubious motives, the need to ensure the fixers’ safety, or bad luck while filming.

Some experts explicitly shift their responsibility, for instance by blaming the non-diversity of Belgian audiovisual professionals: “The team around Tom [the presenter] is often composed of white men. And you can question that. Should it be like that? No, of course not. (...) But it also has to do with the fact that 90% of the camera and crew members in Belgium are men” (2). A second cited excuse for ill-considered representation is the perceived difficulty of establishing a diverse crew due to the cultural sensitivities of some of the visited countries: “If we're heading to Afghanistan, having women in the crew is a huge challenge (...) You can't go inside half of the places, she must be veiled. I don't mind telling that story, but you must make the decision if it is worth the trouble” (2). A third excuse that is used to dodge responsibility, is the fact that interviewees view themselves as television workers rather than travel journalists. They perceived travel show producers as being able to delve into the personal aspects of hosts while having less responsibility to be critical. As a result, the interviewees exempted themselves from taking on the role of the critical outsider. A last excuse stated by the interviewed experts is that they are too involved in the production process to accurately assess the nature of the representation: “Since you have seen the episode, maybe you can respond better. I am on the wrong side” (4).

We state that these practices of representational responsibility dodging neglect the power and impact of travel shows. These programmes can create liminal spaces in which the audiences’ perceptions of hosts are continuously constructed. Therefore, television workers, and

travel show producers more specifically, have ethical responsibilities to deliver a nuanced image of reality not only towards the people they depict, but also towards their audiences (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Eitzen, 2018). Travel show producers should be made more conscious of their representational responsibilities, which we define as the ethical duty to critically reflect on representational strategies. If critical self-reflection lacks, the symbolic power of travel show producers upholds reductionist regimes of representations and processes of othering (Foucault, 1966; Fürsich, 2002b; Hall, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

This study found that the interviewed Flemish travel show producers struggle to find a balance between entertainment and information. To create an engaging narrative, they employ an 'aesthetic of authenticity' which is a visual and narrative style that uses the constructed nature of travel shows to make these programmes appear 'real'. However, this aesthetic gives the false impression that stereotypical characterisations and practices of othering objectively describe hosts. As a result, the subordination of hosts is legitimised and the main characterisation of the presenter is not questioned. This upholds a space of neglect in which stereotypical statements and othering practices are obscured by the entertainment value of the program. Luckily, these negative processes can also be counteracted, for instance when hosts are allowed to break narrative expectations or when a space of dialogue is built by the presenter.

We argue that even though the interviewed travel show producers were superficially aware of their ethical responsibilities, current production practices are not sufficient to deliver a nuanced portrayal of hosts. Therefore, this paper advocates for the implementation of more representational responsibility within travel show production, as this enables critical reflection on the employed representational strategies.

Furthermore, this study is a call for action directed towards researchers. Insights focused on the processes of meaning making in travel shows are scarce and scattered. This paper made a theoretical, methodological, and empirical contribution to the field by consolidating previous research into a typology and by using a multimethodological approach to generate a deep reading of four Flemish factual entertaining travel shows. However, this research can only be considered the tip of the iceberg, since the sample of both interview participants and analysed travel shows was rather limited.

Future research should consider adding to the existing research by questioning a larger group of experts, and examining a broader sample of travel shows, for instance by including programmes produced by international streaming services (Korte & Sennefelder, 2022) or nonwestern travel show producers (Yan & Santos, 2009). Moreover, it could be relevant to investigate the Flemish context in more detail, due to its high volume of domestically produced content (Raats & Donders, 2020) and the popularity of travel shows within the region (CIM, 2024). Finally, while the multimethodological approach already incorporates expert interviews and textual research, a closer examination of the way in which audiences actively interpret and negotiate representations of hosts in travel shows would make an interesting contribution to the field.

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## Appendix A

