CHAPTER 15

Singing Altogether Now: Unsettling Images of Disability and Experimental Filmic Practices

Robert Stock

INTRODUCTION

Conventional representations of disability on factual television, in documentary films, talk shows and other formats mainly correspond to two dominant patterns. Often ignoring the everyday experiences of their protagonists, these productions either emphasise 'pity' or stage their characters as 'supercrips' (Shapiro 1994; Pointon 1997; Riley 2005; Jackson et al. 2015), thereby characterising disability mainly as a spectacle and deficit that has to be overcome. In contrast to dominant patterns of standardised television formats, a few productions provide alternative framings of disability. Challenging the supposed rigidity of categories like health, illness and disability, these films question related biases and unsettle the established knowledge about disability reproduced in medical, pedagogical and media discourses or spaces. Drawing on known filmic elements (disabled protagonists, particular setting and filmic technologies), these representational regimes initiate a process whereby the signification of disability is displaced, thus resulting in a kind of experimental system that, in Rheinberger's terms, is a

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'basic unit of experimental activity combining local, technical, instrumental, institutional, social, and epistemic aspects' (1997, p. 238).

The main feature of an experimental system concerns not its stability, but rather its variability and potential to produce unpredictable results. In this sense, the concept, which is originally used to explore and historicise laboratory experimental science and scientific cultures, can be adapted to artistic production and creative research (Schwab 2014). In this chapter I propose to adapt the concept of the experimental system to the analysis of experimental nonfiction film and video installation art. My starting point is the assumption that the productions to be analysed do not frame disability in a conventional manner as something to be overcome, but reject simplifying explanations, thus opening up the possibility for inquiry and negating 'traditional' answers.

The two case studies include *Singing Lesson* (Artur Żmijewski 2001, 2003), a video installation interlacing experimentally deaf singing and religious choirs, and *Freakstars 3000* (Christoph Schlingensief 2003), a TV docusoap that modifies conceptions of intellectual disability by mocking conventional television casting and reality formats. Both productions draw on singing practice as a form of temporal community building using site-specific enactments. They open up a space for media participation that creates ambiguity. The works thus challenge the tacit, conventional and even stereotypical representation of deafness and intellectual disability, while not being able to absolutely bypass stereotypical views after all. By doing so, the productions open up disparate perspectives and a space for unresolved questions and doubts, which is, for example, reflected in aesthetic elements, such as atonal music. Consequently, Żmijewski, Schlingensief and their protagonists also shift traditional boundaries that might inhibit inclusion or foster exclusion. The two case studies are characterised by a series of contradictions that refuse to give a simple answer to the question of how to integrate people with disabilities or how to model a concept of 'inclusive art' (Fox and MacPherson 2015). Instead, using the terms of Schillmeier (2007), the works function as a question mark and provocation to rethink disability as 'complex sets of heterogeneous practices that (re-)associate bodies, material objects, and technologies with sensory and other practices' (p. 197).

ŻMIJEWSKI'S *SINGING LESSON*

Towards the end of the 1990s, Artur Żmijewski moved from sculpture to video performance and installation art. Alongside addressing the legacy of the Holocaust and the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment, one of his

main concerns was how people who do not correspond to the dispositif of the 'normal' are represented (Żmijewski and Mytkowska 2005). Consequently, Żmijewski became involved in several projects that controversially question issues of normalcy, disability and their interrelation. For instance, *An Eye for an Eye* (1998) stages an encounter between persons with physical disabilities and able-bodied people which raises doubts about the nature and structure of our everyday practices.¹

Singing Lesson (2001) questions assumptions about who belongs to and can participate in the world of sound and hearing. Żmijewski invited and filmed a group of deaf children performing at the Holy Trinity Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Warsaw. In cooperation with a conductor and an orchestra, the children sang part of the *Polish Mass* by Jan Maklakiewicz, containing the confession of faith: 'In this holy place, in this holiest place, our voice rises to you as the sea roar from a deep abyss, O Christ, hear us, O Christ, listen to us!' The resulting film premiered as a video installation at the Manifesta 4 in Frankfurt in 2002. The following year, the project was repeated in Leipzig as a collaboration between the Leipzig School of Music and the Samuel Heinicke School for Deaf and Hard of Hearing,² which resulted in *Singing Lesson 2* (2003). As a form of inquiry, this artistic project not only aims to create a novel interpretation of the classical works, but also casts doubt on the assumption that only hearing people are able to take part in (religious) singing.

EXPLORING CHURCH SINGING

The video installations of the deaf choirs performing in Warsaw and Leipzig not only subvert the tonal aesthetic of the liturgical chant, they also question processes of inclusion that structure the practice of church singing (McPherson and Welch 2012, pp. 268–269 and 521–522; Jones 2010). Based on organ, choir and architecture, the musical arrangement provides the overall infrastructure to the temporary emergence of a religious community experience. Usually, (hearing) individuals singing slightly off-key in a mass choir will not attract much attention. Their voices will integrate with the choir and will not destabilise the whole experience, in which the participants form 'one voice' with their 'breath' (Kaspar 2002, p. 49). In *Singing Lesson*, however, contrary to conventional choirs, the deaf participants' voices were not only off-key but also disparate and asynchronous, and were

clearly perceived as such. For instance, a reporter who saw this video at the Manifesta 4 reflected that: 'In the beginning there is irritation about the choir members and their strange sounds that appear disrespectful towards the church setting' (Hoh 2002).

Against this background, *Singing Lesson* can be understood as a critical inquiry into religious routines, subverting expectations of traditional church singing. It confronts the normativity of the tonal musical system by putting together a clutter of asynchronous voices and tones whose relation to the organ melodies and string music is divergent. A reporter commented that the perception of the performance and its atonality changes throughout the viewing: 'Nevertheless, music arises through the superimposition of the most diverging aural stimuli that have little in common, yet share one and the same goal' (Hoh 2002).

Consequently, the performance suggests that participation in (church) singing and acoustically stabilised religious choirs can be detached from the ability to hear 'normally' and the tuning with a shared common basic musical scale. The destabilised interpretation (and perception) of tonality signals a different form of togetherness not based on identicalness, synchronicity and congruity, pointing to a temporarily emerging community characterised by contradictions. To quote Żmijewski, the aim is 'to recognise the virtues of difference' (Bielas and Jarecka 2005, p. 80). By doing so, the performance renders audible the ambiguity of inclusion processes, hence the deaf singers still bear the (auditory) mark of outsiders when included in the temporal and communal singing performance. What can be observed here is a constantly shifting boundary, through which inclusion and exclusion are perceived and processed at the same time (Moser 2000).

This experimental set-up modifies the architecture and institutional practices of church singing and provides a framework that furthers a sharing of musical experience for those supposedly alien to it, simultaneously labelling them foreign to the auditory sphere. In this sense, Żmijewski's project does not follow established ways of deaf musical practice where some initiatives encourage deaf and hard-of-hearing people to become involved with 'normal' singing in conventional choirs, whereas others only use sign language in their performances.³ By transcending the dichotomy of oral/deaf culture, *Singing Lesson* motivates the emergence of an experience that shapes a different encounter between deaf singing and church music. It allows a reflection about the way in which people with hearing disabilities are often excluded *a priori* from such settings.

RESHAPING ORAL EDUCATION

Singing Lesson 2 (2003) depicts not only the church singing performance in Leipzig, but also its preparation. This addresses an argument that contradicts the medical discourse about deafness by showing the absence of rehabilitative practices, such as speech therapy and oral education principles. Therefore, whilst the whole preparation and performance are indeed shown to depend on a particular kind of disciplinary pattern imposed on the participating youngsters, by avoiding the staging of repeated rehearsals, the film implicitly raises concerns about therapeutic approaches.

Thus, several scenes demonstrate the conductor Dariusz Łapiński and the young people rehearsing in a classroom. The constellation of roles is quite obvious as the pupils follow with respect the instructions of the conductor, thus conforming to a certain formal discipline. However, this also bears a certain ambiguity, as Łapiński does not intervene when the youngsters sing off-key or do not articulate the lyrics 'normally'. The conductor encourages the children and does not force them to repeat sections in order to correct their performance (Łapiński 2003). In this manner, choir, conductor and orchestra participate in a piece of music characterised by vibration, rhythm and asynchronous voices. Co-presence and embodied hearing seem to be the decisive factors in this aural space. According to Schmiederer (2010, p. 35), the artistic act of *Singing Lesson* would then consist of the arranged deployment of coincidence unsettling well-practised patterns of perception. This soundscape proposes a conundrum to the spectators and listeners because it explores the 'limitations of speech and musicality' (Żmijewski and Mytkowska 2005, p. 113), something which is also addressed in the second case study.

SCHLINGENSIEF'S *FREAKSTARS 3000*

Christoph Schlingensief, a controversial artist, theatre director, filmmaker and activist, started making films in the early 1990s and worked in parallel at the Volksbühne theatre in Berlin. His interest in the intersection of performance and film production led him to produce various projects that criticise contemporary television and its popular formats, as well as mainstream culture and society (Gilles 2009, pp. 61–70; Forrest/Scheer, 2010, pp. 5–22; Forrest 2015, Chapters 3–5; Maubach 2015). The show *Talk 2000* (Kanal 4, 1997) offers a satirical reflection on the talk-show format

and its rhetorical practices through discussions with guests like Harald Schmidt, Beate Uhse, Lilo Wanders and Rudolph Mooshammer. The eight-episode series *U 3000* (MTV 2000) comprised a subversive attack on several TV formats and Schlager music (Schulze 2013).

Freakstars 3000 (VIVA 2003) was broadcast on the music channel VIVA as several episodes, and a shorter version was released on DVD in 2004. In this project, Schlingensief worked with people with intellectual disabilities who he had met since directing *Rocky Dutschke 68* at the Volksbühne in 1996. The show is mainly set at the Thiele-Winckler-Haus, a home for people with intellectual disabilities near Berlin. For one week, the director and his crew worked with the residents in an experimental casting process resembling, but also satirising, popular talent show formats. In the end, they had a selection of contestants who would form the band *Mutter sucht Schrauben* (Nut Seeks Bolts)⁴ and perform a live event at the well-known theatre venue Volksbühne in Berlin.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE THIELE-WINKLER-HOUSE: CASTING AND KARAOKE

During the auditions, the film shows the contestants singing their favourite songs: folk songs or hits such as 'Der Mai ist gekommen' ('May Has Arrived') or 'Heidenröslein' as well as 'White Roses from Athens' by Nana Mouskouri or 'Einmal um die ganze Welt' ('Around the World') by Karel Gott. This choice of music goes back to the preferences of the contestants. It sheds a different light on conventional TV talent shows where modern hits are covered and the voices of stars like Whitney Houston, Tina Turner or Joe Cocker serve as an ideal (Holmes 2004). *Freakstars 3000* hence tries to mock the commercialising strategies of the music industry (Jenkins 2006; Bachmair et al. 2008).

In the scenes of the performances, the contestant's off-key singing suggests a challenge to the idealised world of commercial Schlager and folk songs. Oscillating between karaoke spectacle and trash television, this staging of disability might allude to the casting phenomenon that ubiquitously penetrates contemporary social life and media representations. Yet a strong tension emerges between the ambiguity that this specific production of disability produces and the cultural critique of capitalist media production.

Additionally, *Freakstars 3000* creates a site-specific performance by leaving the professional space of the theatre stage. During the casting process,

the action is staged in different facilities within the home. Recreational rooms and kitchen facilities are transformed to enhance the artificiality of the action unfolding in front of the camera. The trash aesthetic of the set-up is emphasised by the use of glittery material, the logo of *Freakstars 3000* and the old analogue intercom systems for communication between jury and contestants during the rehearsals. Thereby, a hybrid space between TV studio, music recording setting and theatre stage emerges, which parodies the overacted professionalism of talent shows in terms of crew and cast. By blurring the boundaries between the spaces of (capitalistic) cultural production and institutional medical caring, the project opens up an ambivalent framework that offers a transgressive framing of disability.

The transformed facilities of the institution provide the setting where the candidates' ability to sing while being filmed is tested. Most of the candidates manage to complete their segment; they enter the stage or vocal booth and create their version of their favourite song. In this sense, the casting in *Freakstars 3000* goes beyond the neoliberal quest for self-optimisation. Whereas candidates in television casting shows are under constant pressure to improve their performances and endure knockout rounds (Holmes 2004, pp. 153–154), *Freakstars 3000* conveys that its contestants remain quite relaxed until the final round: no one is reproved and no one is promised a fabulous career (Fricke 2003). Instead, what matters most here is the potential to perform. In the *Making of* video in the DVD edition (2009), Schlingensief explains that he is fond of the way in which theatre performance functions – one is not able to 'zap' (change channel) as in the case of watching television – and that he learned to withstand creative and 'unstoppable' performances by participants, even when they lasted for hours. The project and the film can hence be seen as an inquiry into the contradictory conundrum of participation by exploring potentials and possibilities, yet at the same time facing the contradictions as well as the impositions that processes of inclusion might offer for those to be included. Arguably, media participation understood this way depends equally on promises and impositions that complicate binary conceptions of social integration in an often unpredictable manner.

A DIFFERENT VIEW ON WORKING CONCEPTS

Another important aspect of *Freakstars 3000* concerns the way it deals with the aim to reintegrate people with disabilities into working life. Throughout the twentieth century, the rehabilitation of this social group for economic reasons has been an important topic (Harrasser 2013; Ott et al.

2002). This is also the case in documentary films that strongly conform to a medical model of disability and stress efforts to 'normalise' their clients by demonstrating how these subjects are integrated into working routines and non-profit activities, mostly restricted to sheltered workshops (Ochsner et al. forthcoming). Unsurprisingly, *Freakstars 3000* proposes going beyond such a restrictive discourse, while simultaneously refusing to demand the improvement of particular social circumstances (Stastny 1998, pp. 76–79).

For instance, although Bernhard, one of the participants, describes his activity as a gardener at the Thiele-Winckler-Haus during casting, neither he nor any of the other participants is actually shown doing any kind of work. Moreover, neither the institutional facilities nor the garden is portrayed as places of charitable work. Instead, the institution is re-signified as a hybrid space through the connotations to music video scenarios and theatre performances. For instance, several scenes use the garden as a site where the contestants perform karaoke in costume, imitating, for instance, Greek singer Nana Mouskouri or German trumpeter Stefan Mross. There is also an absurd, staged hostage drama in front of the entrance of the institution, from where the director has to escape. Considering these scenes, it seems obvious that *Freakstars 3000* is not interested in showing medical treatment and rehabilitation or criticising the institution of the Thiele-Winckler-Haus for its methods.⁵ Rather, it creates a space for media participation that does not aim at an undisputed result or efficacy, but enables creativity and destabilises views about working concepts for people with disabilities.

OUTLOOK

As the above analyses have shown, the artistic approaches in *Singing Lesson* and *Freakstars 3000* experimentally – and controversially – discuss models of representation concerning disability. Both projects raise questions of how to deal with people with disabilities and media participation, while not providing definitive answers on how to definitely resolve these issues. Rather, they provoke an encounter with their protagonists in order to transcend the figures of the pitiful disabled or the supercrip. In doing so, they challenge the preconception which often lies at the root of media representations of disability and urge the audience to think about the possibilities of participation and ways to express creativity.

Therefore, it does not seem adequate to characterise *Singing Lesson* as an artistic experiment that only conveys cacophony.⁶ On the contrary, it is all about creating an experimental atonal harmony. As Żmijewski argues: 'My

films are not so much about failure as about accepting its constant presence... In fact, they are a helpless quarrel' (cited in Chichocki 2003, p. 107). By going beyond the limits of tonal harmony, the performance thus raises doubts about the category of disability, even if one has to admit its controversial character (Johnson 2009). The space of the church is temporarily transformed by this piece of video art, which blurs the boundaries between religious, medical and pedagogical ways of conceiving deafness.

Moreover, through its experimental set-up, *Singing Lesson* encourages reflection about the ambivalence of a normative praxis of inclusion that aims to render differences invisible (Moser 2000). Żmijewski conversely emphasises the demand to *recognise* differences instead of perpetuating a model where people with disabilities have to conform to able-bodied people's way of life (Żmijewski and Mytkowska 2005, p. 113). Such a way of conceiving disability while situating it at the margins of the social, medical and medial leaves the respective phenomenon ambiguous. The experimental set-up and its contradictory effects again pose the question of how an encounter between a deaf person and musical practice might eventually be realised. In the end, the questions about whether people with hearing impairments can or should participate in (religious) singing, and the resulting effects on them and the spectator remain unresolved.

In *Freakstars 3000*, the setting of the institution for people with intellectual disabilities is re-structured into an experimental set-up through the camera and trash theatre aesthetics.⁷ By executing several singing tests, karaoke on stage and in recording settings, as well as interviews, the show reconfigures the space of caring as a space for artistic inquiry. *Freakstars 3000* addresses issues of disability and singing practices, and also formulates a particular critique of capitalist-competitive casting culture. As Achim, one of the main protagonists of *Freakstars 3000*, asks Schlingensiefel:

Was the filmic view of disabled people in conjunction with the unstaged expression of joy uncomfortable for you? ... Do you really intend to violate the dignity of disabled fellow humans? Or is the issue rather that you have been comfortable in your own human dignity and refuse to tolerate any challenge of your own canon of values? (Cited in Ort 2004)

The experimental set-ups of both projects test conventional perceptions of disability and generate ambivalences, while proposing a rethinking of modes of creativity and participation in different media formats. By drawing on practices from the fields of atonal music and popular media culture,

both projects explore different ways of looking at singing abilities and reflecting about the integration of people with disabilities. Żmijewski, Schlingensief and their protagonists hence push the boundaries that affect processes of inclusion and exclusion.

However, one has to consider that experimental approaches to participation like those discussed above might gain a different shape when adopted by a capitalist logic. Since 2003, a significant number of people with disabilities have participated in media productions like casting shows, which does not necessarily mean that media inclusion is both possible or without contradiction, since contestants normally have to fit the pattern of the pitiful disabled or the supercrip. It seems that reality TV franchises increasingly exploit diversity concepts when commissioning scripted reality or casting shows, such as *American Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars* or *The Glee Project*.⁸ Rather than indicating a goodwill or civic engagement, this commercial strategy tries to ensure a continuity of high audience ratings⁹ while reproducing stereotypical conceptions of disability.

NOTES

1. An overview of Żmijewski's work can be found at <http://culture.pl/en/artist/artur-zmijewski> (accessed 29 March 2017). Other projects involved people with intellectual disabilities (*Ogród botaniczny*, ("Zoo") 1997), paraplegics (*Na spacer* ("Out for a walk") 2001) or a woman with osteoporosis (*Karolina*, 2002) to tackle the exoticisation and spectacle of disability and death. Such video installations question the representation of the other (Żmijewski and Mytkowska 2005, pp. 168–181; Kley n.d.).
2. There, musicians and pupils worked together in order to rehearse and perform the cantata BWV 147 'Heart and Mouth and Deed and Life' by Johann Sebastian Bach at St. Thomas' Church in Leipzig (Żmijewski and Mytkowska 2005, pp. 113–123; Felderer 2006, pp. 238–241). 'Artur Żmijewski: Singing Lesson' in Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig, <http://www.gfzk-leipzig.de/?p=714&lang=en> (accessed 29 March 2017).
3. The latter is a vital expression of deaf culture, as opposed to the oralism of mainstream culture. For instance, *In the Land of the Deaf* (1992) by Nicolas Philibert discusses issues of the deaf minority in France. In the long introduction scene, a concert of a deaf choir is shown. Thereby, the importance of the deaf choir as a unique and distinct form of cultural expression is emphasised (Baker 2006, p. 33).
4. The band's name connotes a dating idea where the men get the bolts and the women the nuts, and they have to see who they match up with.

This is a subplot in the show where some of the contestants begin love affairs.

5. The early films by Wiseman are a good example of documentary practice as institutional critique. See Grant (1992); Snyder/Mitchell (2003).
6. See the comment about Żmijewski's *Singing Lesson* at <http://culture.pl/en/artist/artur-zmijewski> (accessed 29 March 2017).
7. They are present not only in the sense that they gather images and voices for television and film; one also often sees camera men and sound technicians. It is a means of reflexivity that reminds us of the artificial nature of the material and challenges the observational mode of documentary filmmaking that pretends to provide an objective vision of the processes filmed. For the different modes of the documentary film, see Nichols (1991) and Bruzzi (2006).
8. See, for example, the contributions by Katie Ellis and Heath A. Diehl in Mogk (2013).
9. In Germany it was above all show host Dieter Bohlen – former member of the band Modern Talking – who tried to become a distinct 'Behindertenfreund' (friend of the disabled) in *Supertalent*. See various entries about Supertalent and Dieter Bohlen on *Rolling Planet*, <http://rollingplanet.net/category/themenschwerpunkte/behindertenfreund-dieter-bohlen> (accessed 29 March 2017).

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