

ARTICLE

Realism Bites! The Impact of a Fictional Teen Suicide on West German Public Debates in the 1980s

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In 2002 the American remake of the Japanese horror movie called *The Ring* (1998) made the hair of millions of viewers stand on end when an evil little girl crawled out of the television set and went on to murder innocent people. Even though a physical manifestation of this situation is impossible, the fear that something might come out of television and tear the fragile boundary between reality and fiction is a real phenomenon accompanying the ascent of this medium. However, to date this fear has not been systematically explored in research. This paper addresses this research gap by conducting a retrospective analysis of the fears and concerns aroused by a mini-series that was screened in West Germany in the early 1980s. The story of *Tod eines Schülers* (*Death of a Schoolboy*) depicts a pupil's growing problems during his final year at secondary school which eventually lead to his suicide. Based on press articles, psychological research and archive materials this case study will explore how the fictional interpretation of a pupil's tragic death caused and contributed to medial, political and scientific agenda setting.

Televisual fiction and reality – from pleasure to risk awareness and societal debates

A gagging order for *Ekel Alfred*, the German version of Archie Bunker during the 1976 electoral campaign (Gutermuth 1976) a lawsuit against an actress because the character she plays called a politician 'fascist' (Unknown 1990) and headlines such as 'Suicide Wave after *Death of a Schoolboy*' (*Mannheimer Morgen* 1981) all suggest that there were audience members in West Germany who agreed on one thing. The boundary between contemporary televisual fiction and reality is a fragile one and it is prone to be broken.

While historians increasingly discuss television's impact on societal trends and debates (Bösch 2011, Engels 2003: 297-323, von Hodenberg 2012: 24-48) the relationship between television narrative and societal discourse is still far from being explored to a comprehensive extent. In the case of West Germany, Christina von Hodenberg has pioneered in this field with a study on the 1970s sitcom *Ein Herz und eine Seele*, the German adaptation of the British popular comedy-format *Till Death Us Do Part*. While von Hodenberg (2011: 557-572) explores the programme's influence on the acceptance of new values in the wake of the 1968 movement in Britain, the USA and Germany, this article will turn to the role of another genre in the public debates of the early 1980s: realist social drama.

The number of mini-series dealing with contemporary societal issues increased in West

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Germany in the 1970s (Hickethier, 1998) and persists in serial formats on public television to present times. As reflected in extremely high viewing rates, some of these series had the potential to generate a high impact on German society throughout the entire 'era of limited choice' (Hodenberg, 2011) during which television was provided exclusively by the two public broadcasting stations ARD and ZDF and the ARD's regional branches.

Following Grodal's (2002) analytical approach to audio-visual realism, the above-mentioned television dramas can be considered 'realistic' in the sense that the audience experiences them to be so. He outlines that realism can be regarded as an evaluative feeling which is based upon perception, cognition and habituation. It therefore merely describes a relationship between representations and an exterior physical and social reality. Indeed the evaluation of realism depends on the relationship between the representation and the concept of what the 'real world' looks like. Variations between different viewers are based on several parameters rooted in both basic human and cultural perceptions. Considering the constant evolution of both the media themselves and their changing role in society each analysis of reactions to a particular programme has to be interpreted in the wider context of its historical period.

In contrast to the focus on pleasure and gender in Anglo-Saxon research on television series and soap opera (Newcomb 2006) this article will embrace John Tulloch's (2000) claim that a focus on risk perception is required in order to fully understand the impact of television series. In my assessment, it would furthermore be beneficial to consider the perception of positive effects that an audience may attribute to a series. Even though these effects are more difficult to reconstruct than public debates, sources such as audience letters, telephone protocols and correspondence to newspapers suggest that viewers appreciate the stimulating effect of televisual fiction on discussions of controversial topics.

Debates arising from fiction interpreting factual societal issues will be explored in the case study of Robert Stromberger's 1981 West German television drama *Death of a Schoolboy*. This programme was selected because it provides a striking example for the high impact of realist fiction on societal discourse. The debate about the series also illustrates fundamental mechanism in the evaluation of audio-visual realism. In order to accomplish the complex task of the historical reconstruction of the *Schoolboy* series' impact on West German society at a specific period of time, the following source genres were evaluated: audio-visual footage, internal documents from the ZDF, telephone protocols recorded during emissions, over 250 newspaper articles¹ collected at the ZDF (Unknown 1981, 1986) and the HFF's (University for Film and Television) press archives scientific research on the impact of the film, pupils' comments recorded by teachers and internet forums about the series.

I will analyse the programme from three different angles. First I will introduce the narrative and evaluate the historical relevance of the issues addressed. Secondly, the evolution of contemporary public discourse will be analysed touching upon the questions whether this series was perceived as realistic, by whom and for what reasons. Last, suicide scholars' discourses about the series will be discussed. I will conclude with an evaluation of the programme's perceived realism and the factual impact of Claus Wagner's fictional suicide.

***Death of a Schoolboy* – troubled German youth**

Death of a Schoolboy was written by the established television author Robert Stromberger. In agreement with the ZDF he emphasised that addressing teenage suicide was a necessity due to the fact that Germany had the highest teenage-suicide rate in Europe in the late 1970s (Stromberger 1981). Both the broadcasting station and the writer made clear that they intended to break what they

perceived to be a societal taboo about this tragic fact. While the statement that teen suicide was a taboo has to be considered somewhat of an exaggeration in the light of admittedly singular newspaper articles and publications on the issue during the 1970s², it can be said with certainty that there was no wide-ranging public debate about the issue. That was about to change. Stromberger commenced the project in 1978 and did extensive research referencing pupils, teachers, psychologists, the police and medical professionals (Stromberger 1981).

In the film's narrative Claus Wagner, the main protagonist, is exposed to typical challenges young people, their parents and teachers experienced in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The multi-layered nature of the conflicts leading to Claus' decision to end his life is meticulously reflected in the narrative's design. The series is particularly challenging to the viewer because of its experimental format: while the basic plot remains the same in every single episode, each film takes a different protagonist's perspective (Witt 1981). Starting with the police, followed by the parents, teachers, fellow students and Claus's girlfriend, the series concludes with Claus's own view. The director, Claus Peter Witt, steers the viewer's sympathy to different positions in each part and reveals new insights into the complex question of guilt. Stromberger emphasises that the film intentionally leaves this question unanswered (Stromberger 1981). Indeed, the programme explicitly refrains from providing an unambiguous answer because it wants to provoke reflection and debates among everybody who could be involved in the spiral towards a young person's suicide.

The series is set in the period following a reform of the educational system that affected the pupils in *Gymnasien* (grammar schools). While they had formerly been grouped in consistent forms until the final exams, the introduction of the *Kurssystem* (choice of subjects for the German Abitur) affected the pupils' learning environment

in two ways: on the one hand they gained more freedom to choose which subjects to study in depth for their exams, but on the other hand they were no longer part of a stable group of students. Furthermore, the establishment of a complex points system instead of grades contributed to an increased focus on results (Anweiler, 2008). The issues related to the introduction of the reformed system are depicted in a very convincing manner in the series. Being a pupil who wants to study medicine or psychology, Claus's anxieties are augmented by the scarcity of educational options after graduation. Increasing numbers of graduates from the baby-boomer generation were competing for training and this tainted the atmosphere in the final years of secondary school. (Hornstein 2008) The government addressed the increased demand for education by introducing a *numerus clausus* (a selective higher education system) for popular and prestigious subjects such as medicine or psychology, degrees that Claus is seeking to get. In spite of his professional ambitions Claus also tries to match his self-defined moral standards as class representative and exposes himself to the criticism of both the teachers and parents after leading a pupils' strike. While his critical approach to the circumstances at school is vigorously supported by his classmates and girlfriend, his parents urge him to mind his own business in place of the common good. After his fellow pupils let him down during the strike and his oral grades deteriorate in the wake of the protest, Claus leaves school before graduation and moves in with his partner.

In the late 1970s, vocational training in Germany was also increasingly allocated by grade and level of education. Claus Wagner's experiences when he leaves school without a qualification reflect the emotional challenges West German society posed to young people without a job. Especially the final episode includes scenes in which he is seeking employment unsuccessfully. The

cruel realities of standing on his own feet without complete training and the decreasing affection of his girlfriend contribute to breaking Claus's will to live. These negative experiences make him resume his education in another school and return to his parental home.

The relationship between late 1970s pupils and the generation of their *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) parents was often difficult and affected by deviating values of these generations. While many parents pursued the ambition of securing monetary prosperity for their children, young people were often more focused on individual goals, personal freedom and an aspiration to be different to their consumerist *Spießer* (petty bourgeois) parents. To a certain extent, inter-generational issues were also reverberations of the German 1968 movement (Jugendwerk Deutsche Shell 1982, Sieder 1998, Wehler 2008). Claus's multi-layered conflicts with his over-ambitious middle-class parents are the vehicles used by the author to explore family as a source for anxieties and pressure. Meanwhile, the application of Germany's past as an argument in disputes with teachers and Claus engagement as a pupil's representative can be seen as visualisations of the 1968 heritage (Gass-Bolm 2006). Finally, the boy's suicide stands for the tragic choice of 500-800 German children and youths who took their own lives annually in the late 1970s (Selbstmordstatistik Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1978).

All mechanisms applied in the realisation of the film project contributed to the series's high proximity to the *Zeitgeist*. It successfully captured the contemporary situation at schools and can be considered as a realistic interpretation of factual societal conflicts from a historian's point of view. First and foremost, Stromberger wanted to create public awareness for young people's anxieties in the consumerist West German *Ellbogengesellschaft* (a society where everybody fends for him or herself). The next paragraph will aspire to evaluate the degree of his success.

Public discourse about a fictional suicide: identification with and fear of Claus Wagner

In order to achieve the aim of generating societal reflection about Claus's situation, Stromberger and Witt had to create a programme that was *perceived* to be realistic by an audience of approximately 11 million German households per episode (Kain 2007). As outlined above, realism, in the sense in which it is used in this argument, is based on the audience's evaluation of the probability and credibility of a film. Viewers' reactions recorded in contemporary sources show that the audience regarded the *Death of a Schoolboy* as realistic, even though the degree of this attribution varied significantly across different peer groups.

The public discourse was most intense during and directly after the two initial broadcasts in 1981 and 1982. In accordance with Sauter's press analysis from 1981, two things have to be highlighted about the early debates evolving around the series. First, a wide variety of different societal groups voiced their opinions about *Death of a Schoolboy*. Second, the debate about the programme was unusual. In spite of a concentration on television criticism, the discourse expanded beyond film critique to factual societal issues including teenage suicide, educational issues and the downsides of a capitalist consumer society. Sauter's observations are valid for the entire period of both initial broadcasts. However, the debate around the repeat showing on the German satellite channel 3SAT in 1988 (Unknown 1988) and after the 1986 publication of research on the programme's impact on suicides (Finzen 1986) differed from the wide societal discussions in the early 1980s. It moved away from the factual problem and societal issues addressed by the series, instead concentrating on media responsibility and possible imitation-effects as well as on a potential prohibition of the 'dangerous' film.

The realism of the programme was initially debated by television critics in the press.

Their opinions were split between praise of the programme's potential impact and harsh comments talking about a failed experiment, lost opportunities and cliché-ridden interpretations of an important problem (Augsburger Allgemeine, 1981). Nevertheless, the series was highly acclaimed among professionals for the realistic depiction of a contemporary issue which is proven by the German media awards it received: BAMBI (1981), Goldene Kamera (1982) and the renowned Grimme Preis (1983).

A tendency towards a common perspective on the programme's realism can also be observed among Claus Wagner's 'fellow' pupils. Over twenty opinions recorded in the daily press and a compilation of twenty-eight handwritten statements sent to the ZDF by a teacher (Karin to Siegfried Braun 1981) show clearly that most pupils did not identify with Claus as a person. They rejected his drastic decision as a solution to the depicted problems. Nevertheless many young viewers still described the audio-visual interpretation of their learning environment and the society they lived in as realistic. Some commented that Claus was far too handsome for an average pupil and that it was extremely unlikely that an 18-year-old boy would have a romantic relationship with a 26-year-old attractive blonde (Junge Optik Redaktion 1981). However, many pupils emphasised that they did experience a decrease of solidarity among their peers at school, growing pressure to get good grades and a distance to their parents as depicted in the TV series. While fear of imitation effects was practically non-existent in this group, pupils frequently mentioned the difficulties they had in communicating with their parents. This can also be traced in comments from a parents' representative who mentioned that the series caused rows and unrest in many families (Engelfried 1981).

Clearly, the youths' evaluation of the film can be seen as an all-encompassing engagement with the interpretation of their living circumstances and issues. However, the problem of teen suicide was not central to their

interpretation. It was rather the alienation from their parents that took the centre stage in this group. The latter coincides with experiences recorded in the Shell study on German youth in 1981 (Jugendwerk Deutsche Shell, 1982).

It is surprising that none of the organisations representing parents criticised the series' topic publicly before its initial broadcast or after the first episode had been screened. However, the public debate took a turn on 14 February 1981, directly after the fourth episode (Sauter 1981). Several articles started to connect *Death of a Schoolboy* to a number of suicides that happened after the *Halbjahreszeugnisse* (mid-year school reports) were distributed in Bavaria (*Abendzeitung München* 1981). The station's telephone protocols from 15 February 1981 also recorded calls from concerned viewers referring to press statements correlating pupil suicides with the television series (Protokoll der Telefonredaktion 1981, 1982, 1994). Especially Bavarian parent representative Anneliese Fischer criticised the ZDF heavily. She did not like the fatalist ending of Claus's struggle and complained that the films were screened at a phase in which pupils are generally very vulnerable. She also demanded that the series should be cancelled after two suicides in Regensburg referred to the series in their farewell notes. At least the programme should be moved to a later time as it may be watched by younger children at 8 pm. As announced in a telephone call to the station she started a press campaign against the series (Protokoll der Telefonredaktion 1981, 1982, 1994). Consequently her concerns were quoted in the press all over Germany and were accompanied by tabloid press reports on assumed copy-cat suicides among the young. A closer look at the sensationalist tabloid press articles reveals that they carried highly suggestive headlines supporting the imitation hypothesis. The articles themselves only vaguely reference 'cases of imitation' and mostly quote anxieties related to school or family rows. While one father explicitly

accused the series to have caused his daughter's suicide, another bereaved parent even clearly denies a connection between the programme and the film in the same text (Eysen and Müller 1981). The above-mentioned parents' perception was clearly very selective in terms of the message Stromberger tried to get across in his film. Claus's suicide was neither shown nor verbalised as an intention by the boy. He did not even leave a note. However, the assumed link between factual suicides and the fictional model led to a widespread panic.

While the headlines suggested that parents were mainly concerned that television caused suicidal teens to kill themselves other sources indicate that *Death of a Schoolboy* induced concern for young people's anxieties among their mothers and fathers. Stromberger was approached by parents who said that the series improved communication in their families (*ZDF-Presse Journal* 1982). This statement is supported by newspaper articles highlighting the high level of empathy and reflection upon the issues depicted (Mannheimer Morgen 1981). This perception is also supported by a ZDF survey on the programme (Neumann 1981: 3–4) and in reports on activities such as discussions in schools that were organised in order to debate problems addressed in the series.

Meanwhile, educationalists often expressed that their experiences at work corresponded with the film. Especially the negative effects of the introduction of the course system as well as an increasing competition and lack of solidarity were mentioned regularly in critical statements of the young teacher's organisation ADJ (Michels 1981). The head of the Federal Organisation for Education (*Bundesverband Bildung und Erziehung*) Wilhelm Ebert explicitly interpreted the series as a call to create a more humane school (dpa 1981). The anxieties and fears of the contemporary generation of schoolchildren were also considered realistic by psychologists working with troubled youths (*Offenbach Post* 1981). While left-wing politicians such as the Bavar-

ian SPD politician Schmolcke considered the series a realistic warning about the state of education in Germany, conservatives such as the CSU member Otto Mayer argued that the series caused pupil suicides and not the educational system (*Abendzeitung München* 1981). The debate among educational politicians and teachers representatives shows that the perception of the film's realism as well as the evaluation of the real educational system depended on both experiences and political attitudes.

The evidence suggests a high level of perceived realism among all groups described above. Which elements and impacts of the series were to be realistic depended on many factors such as generation, experiences, personal fears, political agendas and film-aesthetic categories. However it is certain that the series had created a stir in West German society in the early 1980s in many respects.

Did Claus Wagner kill anybody? Facts and fictions

While discussions about humane school models continued without any further references to the series, the debate about the so-called *Werther-effect* sprouted anew in regular recurrences whenever news related to the series became public. The term dates back to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and suggests that fictional suicide may cause a copycat-effect. Examples for the persistence of this thesis in the public debate about Claus Wagner occurred during the series' 1982 repeat showing as well in relation to a rerun on the ZDF's satellite channel 3Sat in 1988. In fact the groups who considered the series a danger to the wellbeing of the young, such as conservative politicians and parent representatives, were most persistent in their appearance in the press throughout the 1980s.

A scientific dispute about the impact of fictional suicides on reality contributed to a hostile climate towards the series. Two psychologists, Schmidtke and Häfner (1988:

665–676), conducted an experimental survey during the programme's first two emissions, which was initially published in 1986. They tested whether the number of railway suicides among young people rose during the broadcast of Claus's suicide and came to the following conclusion:

Our findings have therefore shown with a sufficient probability that a fictional story presented in a nationwide televised film led to a clear and absolute increase in the number of suicides by imitating the model. The size of the increase and the duration of this imitation effect depend on the degree of similarity and between the model and the imitator with respect to age and sex (Häfner and Schmidtke 675).

The newspaper articles written after the publication of their results no longer disputed the role of the series but attacked the ZDF for a lack of responsibility (Finzen 1986) although the station conducted two independent studies that refuted a causal correlation between the series and teenage suicides (Jörns 1986, Ringel 1986).

The effect that Häfner and Schmidtke (1988: 665–676) noted reflects that people may have chosen the same way to commit suicide as a fictional peer. However, does this really confirm that a television series caused the wish to die? Firstly, the contested *Werther*-effect is still being discussed among suicide scholars today (Reinemann and Scherr 2011: 624–634). Furthermore, both independent surveys commissioned by ZDF emphasise that the decision to commit suicide is by far more complex and non-spontaneous than Häfner and Schmidtke (1988: 665–676) suggest. Historical sources also indicate that their proof of a real *Werther*-effect is to be questioned. Some suicides notes and motives from the period they analysed were quoted in the press. They expressed mainly school issues and fears of an uncertain future. An analysis of Grashoff's anthology (Grashoff,

2004) of German suicide notes also underlines the very private and complex nature of the decision to end one's own life. None of the texts refers to fiction as a motive for this decision.

For the analysis of the impact of televisual realism on suicide, Pirkis and Blood's (Pirkis and Blood 2001) comprehensive analysis of former research provides an interesting theory to be considered in the evaluation. They concluded that it is more likely that a suicide documentary leads to imitation rather than fiction. This constellation is particularly interesting considering the more general question of perceived realism of the series' setting in Germany. As we have seen, the audience attributed it with a high level of partial recognition of its own circumstances: hence viewers were familiar with the audiovisual interpretation of the culturally determined environment shown. Meanwhile such a degree of recognition was missing among the audiences in foreign countries where the series was broadcast. *Death of a Schoolboy* was also screened in Australia, Denmark and Switzerland at the beginning of the 1980s. Even though the sources available for these cases are patchy at best in comparison to the vast material on the German reception, the few available documents nevertheless indicate that the series did not cause anything like the public debate and the fears about imitation as expressed in the documents from Germany. The correspondence from the Australian SBS and Danish television does not refer to any public debates about the series. Danish statistics (DR Danmarks Radio 1986) on suicide rates remained stable throughout the broadcast and several Australian articles about the series emphasise the 'exotic' character of the German programme (Krause 1983, *Sunday Telegraph* 1983, Tedeschi 1983, Oliver 1983, AGE 1982, Dark 1982). However, articles attached to the Australian correspondence (Horwitz and Williams 1986, Weiniger, Williams 1986) and Swiss newspaper coverage (Strech 1981) indicate that there was an issue of youth suicide or drug

abuse in these countries but neither was linked to the film³. This observation supports Grodal's (2002) reflections about the cultural factors contributing to perceived realism: even if programmes from foreign countries do address issues familiar to the home society, they may be experienced with more distance, less interest and a smaller impact on contemporary debates than stories set at home. Considering the highly ambiguous nature of the *Werther*-effect I would refrain from concluding that the series *Death of a Schoolboy* was more likely to cause imitation when broadcast in West Germany. In terms of causing identification processes it certainly had a stronger effect on the public at home in comparison to other societies with similar issues but a different cultural environment.

It can be said with certainty that the series caused a wide public debate about a real problem in West German society. While teenage suicides had been previously perceived as tragic single incidents, the public debate about *Death of a Schoolboy* placed them within a more general context of a troubled youth. This argument is supported by an analysis of memories about the series. In a recent internet discussion of the series only one person within a group of sixty-four discussing the series on the internet refers to a sibling's suicide that may have been triggered by the programme. Meanwhile the others recollect that they were either deeply moved, finally felt understood or identified with the issues addressed in the programme (*Tod eines Schülers* online forum 2012).

Nevertheless Häfner and Schmidtke's (1988: 665–676) study was rarely contested by German journalists after publication, granting their study a momentum of truthfulness. This certainly had an impact on public opinion about the *Werther*-effect. The series also contributed to debates on a more humane school system and on fundamental societal issues, albeit its impact being less intense in these fields than in the debate about teenage suicide. However, the extent of comments and the different levels

of discussion as well as its longevity into the present proved that the author's central aim to shake up society and cause an awareness of teenage suicide was successful despite all criticism.

Conclusion

In this paper, Grodal's thesis (2002) about the experience of realism has been explored empirically in a historical survey of the public response to the German television series *Death of a Schoolboy*. The fragmented nature of the debate caused by the fictional suicide of a pupil illustrates the break between different generations' perceptions. While many parents were deeply irritated about the fact that children might commit suicide, most young viewers did not pay much attention to this option. They instead concentrated their attention on societal issues that their parents obviously did not perceive as existential threats. Whereas teenage suicide and societal change had already been publicly discussed in the times of the Weimar Republic (Föllmer 2009, Sack 2009), the case presented here also reflects a significant change in the creation of public debates. While real suicides and the upsetting fact of a death-wish among the young were used as part of an anti-republican political agenda by both left- and right-wing extremists in Weimar, the factum of teenage suicides could not take centre stage by itself in the 1970s. In contrast to sensationalist cases like Weimar's 'Steglitz Pupil Tragedy' it was a fictional narrative interpreting facts in a realistic and highly empathic manner that caused wide public awareness for a contemporary issues in West Germany. This crucial difference clearly demonstrates the powerful impact of televisual fiction in societal discourse of the late twentieth century.

While the prominently debated thesis that televisual suicide may cause imitation among the audience remains contested until today, the fear of the *Werther*-effect significantly influenced the perception of the series' threats and benefits. The reality of this

fear can also be interpreted as an indicator supporting the realism of the series' audiovisual interpretation of contemporary issues.

Furthermore, the exploration of the film's impact from a global perspective suggests that domestic fiction has a completely different effect on foreign audiences than on the public at home. A certain level of immunity or at least a distance to issues addressed by imported drama seems to be prevalent even if the programme engages with shared societal issues.

Considering the fact that this analysis evolved around a brief mini-series, the programme's intense and long-lasting impact on various fields of society such as families, politics and education highlights the necessity to include televisual fiction and audience reactions into the canon of traditional sources used in historiography as suggested in recent research on television history.

Notes

- 1 For reasons of space limitation only the public discourse will be represented by exemplary articles.
- 2 An exemplary analysis of the weekly newspaper DIE ZEIT for the 1970s showed that suicide was addressed both in literature, research and in articles such as 'Werner Sonntag, Die letzte Antwort: Tod?', *Die Zeit*, 5 January 1973.
- 3 As the Australian and Danish sources were attached to correspondence sent to the ZDF by mail, many of them lack full information on the publisher.

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