

Travel, Writing and the Media

Contemporary and Historical Perspectives

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Chapter 7

Binge-Watching the World

Contemporary Travel Television
on Netflix

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7 Binge-Watching the World

Contemporary Travel Television on Netflix

Tanja Kapp

Introduction: The Travel Documentary in a Changing Media Environment

The opening image of the travel documentary *Dark Tourist* (2018) locates the destination of its host, David Farrier, on a map of Latin America. In a voice-over, Farrier explains: “On my first stop I’m down in Colombia, visiting the city of Medellin [...] infamous for drug lord Pablo Escobar and his cocaine empire” (*Dark Tourist*, “Latin America” 2018, 01:55–02:00). As soon as Farrier mentions the notorious name, there is a sharp transition from the map – a conventional element in travel documentation – to a camera shot more suggestive of film and television drama, focusing on the eyes of a round-faced man with sideburns, a thick black moustache and a birthmark under his right eye.

Everything in the scene is moving: the frame captures the man’s stern look through the rear-view mirror of the car he is driving (Figure 7.1),



Figure 7.1 Screenshot from *Dark Tourist*, Season 1, Episode 1, “Latin America”, 01:55.



Figure 7.2 Screenshot from *Dark Tourist*, Season 1, Episode 1, “Latin America”, 02:00.

while he gazes from left to right, as if on the hunt for something on the sidewalks. Farrier enters the frame when he is filmed in the passenger seat (Figure 7.2), his tall frame uncomfortably squeezed into the small car, and briefly meeting the driver’s stares with his own awkward glances.

While visually remaining part of the scene, Farrier finally upends the illusion of a fictional storyworld via voice-over, admitting that he is “on a narco fantasy tour, being driven around by a Pablo look-alike who’s doing a shady deal on a huge ’90s walkie-talkie” (02:05–02:10). This first sequence from *Dark Tourist* encapsulates a central aspect of travel narratives on streaming TV: the blurring of the fictional and the factual through juxtaposition of televisual content that is conventionally tied to different genres. While the content and aim of a travel programme may be defined as documentary – as it records the impressions of spaces that the host or presenter has really travelled to – here, *Dark Tourist* assumes filmic conventions that are commonly used in television dramas to evoke a sense of place and atmosphere. This is done by ‘quoting’ filmic strategies of popular fictional genres and programmes, and, specifically, by employing elements of the popular Netflix crime drama *Narcos*, which chronicles the rise and fall of Escobar and his drug cartel from the 1970s onwards, and remains one of the most watched original digital TV programmes in the United States.¹ *Dark Tourist* here ties in with the viewers’ pre-existing knowledges about depicted places, as mediated via influential media products such as *Narcos*. An amalgam of factual and fictional storytelling, the opening scene of *Dark Tourist* thus

encapsulates what this chapter seeks to examine with regard to streaming television: the blurring of genres.

My analysis will show how, as types of travel television have moved online and are exclusively produced for streaming platforms, the first-person narrative travel documentary has become more intertwined with its fictional contemporaries on platforms such as Netflix. Online libraries that host televisual content provide an infrastructure that allows for an alignment of their available content, integrating televisual and filmic texts that come from diverse sets of generic and formal conventions. Consequently, platforms like Netflix offer their products to heterogeneous audiences by blurring conventional lines of genre, including those that are situated across or alongside the fact–fiction divide. In particular, this chapter investigates the infrastructure provided by the Netflix streaming platform that makes these travel documentaries available in a new way. As media and media experiences continuously merge and evolve, their innovative convergence becomes visible in the way they are offered digitally. As a result, travel documentaries are initially chosen by recipients through clues that eschew traditional parameters of categorisation, experimenting with new ways of generic classification that call into question the lines between fact and fiction.

I will analyse how the Netflix interface predetermines the ways in which viewers encounter and contextualise its televisual content. The Netflix platform affords the juxtaposition of fact and fiction in travel representation in a way that is specific to streaming. Affordances, as first described by James Gibson, are most broadly defined as material properties of an object that offer a user a specific set of actions and usages: “The object offers what it does because it is what it is” (1977, 78). As will be shown, the streaming-platform-as-affordance can be examined as a paratext of the single televisual text, giving it shape and appearance both discursively and physically, and thus implicitly presupposing how it is to be watched (and understood).

By looking at two narrative travel docuseries produced by and for Netflix, I will show how the travel documentary is advertised as and brought into a context of media representation conventionally associated with popular fictional television. The 2018 docuseries *Dark Tourist* is a New Zealand production that follows the travels of journalist and actor David Farrier as he visits places associated with death, destruction and catastrophe. The series consists of one season of eight episodes, each of which is devoted to multiple dark touristic settings within one specific geographical region. Farrier narrates his travels to places all over the world, including the United States and Colombia, where he investigates the tourism around crime scenes, or Japan, where he goes on a tour through the radioactively contaminated area of Fukushima. Throughout the series, Farrier presents more or less touristically curated places and participates in situations that promise experiences eliciting feelings

of fear, awe and uncanniness. Rather than merely reporting on ‘dark’ places from the outside, he also takes part in the visceral experience of enduring place-specific feelings, immersing himself in re-enactments of war, illegal border crossings, or spiritual ceremonies. My second example is *Jack Whitehall: Travels with My Father*, which to date is comprised of four seasons aired between 2017 and 2020. During each of these seasons, the British comedian Jack Whitehall visits one continent and is accompanied by his father Michael. Comedy is generated by the tension between father and son, which in turn can be traced back to their conflicting notions about how and where their travel should be executed: Jack personifies the young, careless Western tourist on a budget, while his upper-middle-class father, Michael, wants to experience the foreign from a removed, privileged perspective that is indicative of colonialism. With no enthusiasm for culturally immersing himself in the places he visits, Michael seeks spaces, means of transportation and events that are known to be exclusive to elite and/or white people, such as when he travels in the presidential suite on the Eastern and Oriental Express, or when he swaps the youth hostel for an expensive hotel. Jack exhibits a different, yet similarly one-sided touristic viewpoint; he envisions, for example, his stay in Bangkok to consist of “beach parties, you know, going out, getting lashed” (I.1, 08:11). I will first look at the development of travel television by contrasting these contemporary programmes with older forms of linear, broadcast television, outlining the main continuities and discontinuities that characterise the medium’s development into a binge-watched product. Building on the differing patterns of viewing and producing, I will then closely analyse the paratexts that afford the reception of *Dark Tourist* and *Travels with My Father*.

Old and New Television: Changes, Convergences, Continuities

As a cultural phenomenon that is deeply entrenched in the media consumption habits and routines of a number of global audiences and societies, television has always undergone change and evolved through new technologies and modes of watching. When considering the medium’s history as it developed in the Western world, television “has proven remarkably flexible in accommodating technologies, industrial changes, or changes in the social practices in the history of the medium” (Jenner 2018, 7). As a medium so central to people’s everyday lives, television shapes and is shaped by ongoing cultural discourses and material realities. The converging of media through viewing and producing practices seems especially apparent when looking at television streaming services, of which Netflix at present remains to be the most prolific (see Armstrong 2020). Plothe and Buck highlight the seminal role of the company in providing televisual content to a global audience by acknowledging

its inherent media convergence. For them, Netflix is “a case study in the ways that digital media not only combine multiple analog media into one digital form, but also combine multiple industries into one company” (2019, 3). The phenomenon of Netflix illustrates how development in media formation and transition may not be adequately comprehended as isolated quantum leaps within the formal realm of single media or texts. Rather, media change ought to be understood as comprehensive and continual transformations that are at play in a variety of interacting fields, such as socio-cultural debates and habits, technological infrastructures and affordances, as well as economic and industrial interests. Crucially, then, the innovations in media representation and perception outlined in this chapter should not be considered completely novel. What is new in media and its consumption is not the isolated, sudden emergence of a new form, but rather the change in constellations brought about by technological advancements – a reshuffling of components and ideas that are already present into a new conglomerate.

Accordingly, the history of television as a medium does not exhibit a stringent chain of self-contained levels of development. Rather, different forms of television have emerged due to different societal and technological constellations, and have partly given way to new developments, while persisting within other, more traditional channels. Hence, streaming has not fully replaced former forms and habits of televisual consumption, but expanded the media landscape. Indeed, the co-existence of a multitude of ‘televisions’ must not be underestimated: different forms of television “neither chronologically follow, nor have they replaced each other. Rather, these concepts coexist and contrast one another in terms of production, distribution, and audience appeal, thereby shaping a global, highly heterogeneous television landscape” (Zündel 2019, 25).² When looking at new television, then, one has to pay attention to the minute shifts occurring in a highly diversified, heterogeneous field.

Some technological advancements – such as the implementation of streaming – have warranted shifts in televisual reception that ought not to be underestimated. Jenner observes that “the media industry, and what we define as television, has changed with the increased possibilities of online streaming” (Jenner 2018, 2). The coming together of different media and texts within streaming television constitutes a vital characteristic of the ‘new’ television. The newness scrutinised in this chapter should thus be considered a symptom of remediation, which denotes “the representation of one medium in another” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 45). More generally, it is a refashioning of existing media characteristics in a new medium, and is thus inevitably part of the continual processes all media and media practices are governed by. Streaming television itself is remediated and continually remediates, as within it forms of media (including, for example, the ‘conventional’ television often defined as TV II, the DVD, desktop computers and YouTube) become entangled and “are involved in a struggle for culture recognition” (Bolter 2005, 14).³

In linear, conventionally scheduled television, the serialised travel documentary, with its physically present first-person narrator, has a set of formal conventions that characterise the way journeys are narrated on the small screen. These programmes aim to entertain as well as educate their audiences about geographical and cultural particularities of certain places, such as the many docuseries that follow British comedian Michael Palin around the world. Having gained fame and public recognition as part of the comedy group Monty Python, Palin began hosting travel documentaries in 1980 when he appeared in the BBC2 production *Great Railway Journeys*. In subsequent decades he became one of the most well-known travel documentarians within the British cultural context. Palin often chose unconventional routes, examining them from a British viewpoint and narrating them through a Western gaze as places of geographical and cultural Otherness. The programme was broadcast as closed episodes within the linear schedule of the BBC. All episodes are similarly structured: centred on the subjective experience of the host, their subjective narrations directly address the audience and serve to contextualise and string together individual impressions and segments. While the programme does emphasise the unique role and comedic persona of the host, these ‘personal’ experiences captured by the television camera are presented as authentic representations of foreign countries. The portrayal of travelled space in Michael Palin’s television documentaries thereby assumes a seemingly objective point of view, framing the host in his double role as outsider and participant, who humorously but accurately translates the rules and idiosyncrasies of his destinations. In doing so, Palin’s televisual journeys, as indeed many similar first-person travel programmes, are produced to be watched as non-fictional texts, with the central figure assuming the role of reporter, journalist or cultural ambassador interested in conveying the reality of their travel experience.

The travel documentaries produced for traditional synchronised television formally differ from their contemporary counterparts created for streaming, especially in regard to how they are accessed. *Pole to Pole with Michael Palin*, a particularly popular example from Palin’s travel television oeuvre, was intended to be viewed within a designated weekly timeframe, Wednesdays at 9.30 pm, commencing on 21 October 1992. The programme was produced to appeal to both dedicated viewers and those who casually tuned in.

With the shift of television into non-linear programming, the medium has expanded in regard to reception patterns, including the phenomenon of binge-watching, which has transformed viewing intervals from individual episodes to seasons. Binge-watching can more generally be defined by two interrelated characteristics of streaming TV: “nonlinearity” and “user specificity” (Lotz 2017, 5). This means that on-demand viewers – or ‘bingers’ – watch television according to their own time schedule and can choose from a seemingly endless supply of programmes. An

algorithm now presents them with content specific to their tastes, and they are free to watch series of their choice, starting whenever they want and for a much longer period of time than most scheduled programming allows. Seasons are intended to be streamed as one single viewing experience, and so changes in region and time happen at a much faster pace in streaming travel television than in traditional programmes, where the episodes are meant to be watched individually. This enables a longer and more immersive viewing experience, without formally dictated intermissions. Streamable programmes even provide the viewer with the opportunity to skip introductory passages and end credits of episodes so as not to interrupt the flow of binge-watching. While television channel marathons and DVD boxes were already inviting viewers to engage with content in a similar way, bingeing was not the expected primary way of consumption. By contrast, as Jana Zündel has shown for Netflix advertisement campaigns, this streaming platform “promotes binge-watching as the intended way to consume its in-house productions” (2019, 14). This serves, she argues, to bind viewers to content exclusively available on Netflix, and “to cultivate an audience of ‘media bingers’” (23).

Watching travel television in a non-linear fashion means that the resulting viewing experience prompts bingers to engage with the journey in longer, more immersive intervals. As in the case with *Dark Tourist* and *Travels with My Father*, one continuous sequence of reception can stretch multiple episodes, and, consequently, multiple destinations along the travelled route. The viewer therefore does not need to be re-introduced to the underlying circumstances, aims and ideas associated with the overall journey, but rather develops a literacy for these particular parameters over the course of the intense reception of the streamed travel programme. A travel docuseries watched on a conventional linear TV schedule does not require its viewers to know or remember the narrative details provided in previous episodes, as each episode could be watched as a self-contained unit. While flashbacks and repeated motifs may be used in these cases to remind viewers of earlier episodes, these elements provide a different ‘memory’ of the plot than binge-watching does, as the latter conveys a more detailed, immersive and affective experience that can be transported by a higher degree of non-verbal information. Streaming travel television is thus able to include a developing story arc that can be more complex than those of linearly scheduled television, as bingeing enables the watcher to refer back to a more immediately constructed knowledge about a given programme. In *Travels with My Father*, plot developments rely on a repository of insights into the tense relationship between Jack and Michael Whitehall, which accumulate through continual, committed binge-watching. For instance, the intergenerational tension between father and son is often triggered by recurring impulses of conflict, such as the presence of a doll that the father has bought in Thailand. Michael christens the toy Winston,

and Winston soon develops the status of a recurring cast member, as it comically demonstrates to Jack the fatherly love he never received himself. Even if absent from the plotline for a number of episodes, Winston is not reintroduced to the audience when he reappears. As viewers are expected to binge the series during a short amount of time, they are considered well acquainted to the interpersonal tensions underlying *Travels with My Father*, and in the know about the props and idiosyncrasies of the people involved.

The strong focus on family dynamics in a travel documentary programme like *Travels with my Father* is also made possible through involving a wider set of recurring cast members – thanks to modern communication technology. While the protagonist Jack travels with his father Michael and most of the show’s narrative centres on their interactions and disputes, their father–son relationship is regularly examined and evaluated from afar by Jack’s mother and Michael’s wife, Hilary. Every other episode, she joins the narrative to talk to her husband via video chat on his smartphone. She helps him assess his role as a parent and reminds him repeatedly to keep an open mind about the foreign world. Rather than framing the conversation as an audio-only telephone call, the programme depicts the private sphere of the hotel room in which Michael is sitting, holding his phone, and thus highlights the material constellation of the scene in its technical and situational unfolding (Figure 7.3).

Here, contemporary travel is shown to entail the use of communication techniques via smartphone – a media device that has become



Figure 7.3 Screenshot from Jack Whitehall: *Travels with My Father*, Season 1, Episode 2, 15:49.



Figure 7.4 Screenshot from Jack Whitehall: *Travels with My Father*, Season 1, Episode 2, 11:50.

the traveller's constant, multifunctional companion. Michael's mobile phone translates the presence of the mother and wife into a travel situation. If watched on a smartphone, this scene in *Travels with My Father* has a *mise-en-abyme* effect, as it contains within its frame the same device used by the watcher (Figure 7.4).

Through the use of handheld devices that introduce other people who are not present on the journey, the travel documentary today and its family-related themes is able to implement conventions of the sitcom and comedy drama. Sitcoms and other comedic formats conventionally use “contextual cues” (Mills 2010, 130) to allow for the implementation of humour, while travel television programmes are traditionally perceived as a more serious, documentary genre, born of their claim to authenticity and factuality. *Travels with My Father* uses comic contextual signposts to encourage laughter, and also deliberately plays with the tension created by the blurring of generic lines. Many comedy performances are facilitated by the “physicality of comic acting, making the body a key site of comedy” (Mills 2010, 131). In the embodied act of comedy, which is a vehicle within television sitcom acting, an actor employs a more expressive repertoire of gestures, such as “larger movements, a wider vocal range, and more common stresses on the rhythms of language”, and a television programme with these techniques evokes “distinctiveness from [...] naturalist or realist performance” (ibid.). In *Travels with My Father*, the mobile phone represents the physical presence of a family member (see Figure 7.4). This heightens the sense of presentness, and gives shape to and translates the visual gestures of the mother's body,

thus creating comedic potential. In the contemporary travel documentary, the material presence of the smartphone thus to some degree assumes the physical presentness of another person, giving this non-fiction genre the potential to include elements of comedy that legitimise laughter. And because the spatial limits of the screen-within-the-screen can only show Hillary's face on the small scale of the phone, her face fills the entirety of the mobile device.

As this example illustrates, technological advancements in mobile communication and its adoption in daily (travel) routines has facilitated the implementation of more complex plot structures into the travel documentary that go beyond conventional generic lines. However, this shift is also brought about by the immersive way in which travel programmes are watched nowadays. Considering characteristics of bingeable texts, Jenner acknowledges that “[n]arrative complexity determines an idea of ‘bingeability’, the idea that a text gains from being watched in quick succession, partly so that audiences can ‘keep track’ of a series memory” (2020, 275). A travel documentary's existence as a streamable television text provides the genre with the possibility to develop narrative complexity, such as an overarching storyline and the mediated presence of additional characters. In this regard binge-watching has made it possible to complexify but also *specialise* television series. With the advent of streaming, “the two initially distinct understandings of the audience [mass and quality audiences] now appear to be merged” (Zündel 2019, 21). The success of Netflix can be attributed to this redefining of target groups, with programmes reaching “a global mass audience of dedicated serial viewers, possibly consisting of many different niche or ‘quality’ mini-audiences” (ibid.). The cross-section of different niche audiences explains why programmes like *Travels with My Father* and *Dark Tourist* are not only committed to travel experience alone, but are also focused on topics that are located at the intersection with other genres – such as generational conflict.

As is the case with this generic fluidity, the formal conventions pertaining to streaming television mentioned above are ultimately remediations of features from existing media forms. Yet, there is one crucial new component of streaming television that fundamentally influences the way in which television programmes are experienced today: the web-based platform that catalogues its streamable media in a user-friendly interface. Indeed, the streaming website, its interface, is often equated in colloquial speech to the company of Netflix itself, and thus considered to be its reification. While the website remediates attributes from older media products – such as other web-based libraries, television navigations, teletext or DVD menu pages – it can be considered a novel arrangement of televisual content in a digital repository, experimenting with new ways of offering TV programmes and film. This repository or library is available via an interface, which here denotes the web-based

space through which the watcher interacts with digital data. The following section will therefore address how the Netflix streaming library, via this interface, functions as a paratext that influences the consumption of its stored products.

Netflix as Paratext

While designed for the context of literature, Gérard Genette's concept of paratext is still useful for conceptualising the digital interface of streaming services. Genette defines the library-as-text as "enabl[ing] a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public" (1997, 1). Because it refers to all surrounding material that allows a 'main' media product to be received by an audience, the notion of paratext can be applied to other media beyond the printed book. Hence, paratext can be comprehended as a gateway for the reader or viewer to access media products in a certain way. Genette uses the word "threshold" to underline this in-between state of the paratext (2). However, just because a paratext can be conceived as situated on the fringes of one or more main cultural products, one ought not underestimate its importance: as signifiers that introduce and situate a text, paratexts determine if and how a text is read. In the context of new television, the streaming library can be considered one of the most fundamental innovations of accessing a television programme, as the platform influences the ways in which a viewer encounters and classifies its content.

Netflix embeds all television programmes it offers within its streaming library. This library is therefore a place where the boundaries between travel television and other genres and cultural discourses become blurred, and where the difference between fact and fiction get increasingly called into question in the process. The Netflix library is accessed via a homepage that looks similar on various devices, and which becomes, over the course of its continuous usage, more and more adjusted to the personal streaming preferences of the user through algorithms. The homepage is thus individualised and not a static repository that looks the same for everyone. The following analysis is based on a profile page that was set up for this specific case study. It is a Germany-based profile with an algorithm preferring English-language content. The two programmes *Travels with My Father* and *Dark Tourist* were continuously watched on this profile to simulate an interest in these travel documentaries. This interest provoked the system to offer *Travels with My Father* and *Dark Tourist* within the categories of "watch it again" and "continue watching", which are vital parts of any Netflix library in usage. Considering this profile page as an example, the following first categories are structuring the content on the page: "Watch It Again", "Continue Watching", "Trending Now", "New Releases", "Popular on Netflix", "Golden Globe Award-Winning US TV Shows", "US

Workplace TV Shows” and “Netflix Originals”. Rather than dividing its content via genre (comedy, drama, thriller, etc.) or original medium (television programmes, films), Netflix structures the first programmes it offers according to factors such as popularity, newness and originality. Only one of the mentioned categories used by Netflix refers to any subject matter (“US Workplace TV Shows”) but, even under this umbrella, both documentary and drama programmes can be found.

The two travel documentaries analysed in this chapter were produced exclusively for Netflix, which means that they are listed among what the platform calls “Netflix Originals”. Within the library, these Netflix Original programmes are presented in large, vertical tiles, with a main character, most often the protagonist, occupying the majority of the space, and their title featured on the bottom. Above the title, the programmes are further categorised as either series or film. Again, Netflix here does not distinguish between fiction and non-fiction, but rather between medium and sequentiality. The relevance of Netflix’s streaming television is characterised by aspects such as personal viewing patterns, recentness of release and popularity. In so doing, specific generic classifications pertaining to fictionality and genre recede into the background. This means that the televisual products are not primarily delineated along the lines of factuality and fictionality, implying that these specific generic characteristics should not be considered essential qualities of streaming TV.

By viewing the visual layout and structure of the Netflix library, it becomes apparent that this interweaving of generic markers happens so that a large number of diverse televisual products can be quickly and easily accessed and read. To achieve this, Netflix exhibits a pattern of structuring and visualising content in a particular way, here exemplified for *Dark Tourist*:



Figure 7.5 Screenshot of the Netflix streaming library with focus on the category “Netflix Originals”, 11 December 2020.

Determined by the individual preferences and viewing history underlying the profile used in this example (Figure 7.5), *Dark Tourist* is listed in the same category as other Netflix productions, such as *Virgin River*, *Room 2806: The Accusation*, *Over Christmas*, *Big Mouth* and others. Juxtaposed with these programmes, *Dark Tourist* becomes entangled with serialised romantic drama, crime documentary, comedy drama and animated sitcom, respectively. The Netflix platform, through the design and layout of its online library, stocks and presents all products of a category in a similar fashion, visualising each televisual product via thumbnail. Netflix Originals exhibit preview pictures that are three times as big as those of other categories. Reminiscent of film posters, these thumbnails consist of a promotional picture that elicits affective markers through heightened facial expressions, movement, colouring and expressive costume. They are designed to offer exaggerated or stylised visual clues to communicate information about their content, and to tease the viewer into engaging with them. Importantly, in the process of accommodating each televisual product into this visual scheme, Netflix eschews generic classification of content on its landing page in favour of an easily accessible visual-verbal grammar of displaying and listing its programmes. It is only when users actively search for topics or genres, and/or come to the Netflix platform with a specific idea in mind, that the page reveals, via its menu or search function, more genre-specific categories. To the indecisive user, Netflix provides an array of symbols and highly stylised signs that utilise the visual language of colour, movement and contrast to communicate a repertoire of basic emotions that characterise the programmes advertised. Netflix thus harnesses a visual vocabulary that encodes affective information about a given programme, sensitising viewers for a selection process that transports thematic and generic tendencies through images.

As shown above, the Netflix homepage juxtaposes and blurs generic distinctions and aligns documentary with drama content. However, the first-person travel documentary also has a legacy that links travel writing with the communication of authentic, autobiographical experience. Netflix signals an awareness of this legacy by using conventions of truth claiming in its interface. In both travel programmes discussed here, the hosts, Jack Whitehall and David Farrier, authenticate their life narratives via an autobiographical pact: they fashion themselves as witnesses of truth by the act of naming themselves prominently on the outward canvas of their programmes. Following Philippe Lejeune,

(a)autobiography (narrative recounting the life of the author) supposes that there is identity of name between the author (such as *s/he* figures, by name, on the cover), the narrator of the story and the character who is being talked about.

(1988, 12)

Lejeune anchors this in the commitment of the autobiographical pact between writer and reader, which denotes “the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the name of the author on the cover” (14). To that effect, Farrier and Whitehall proclaim that they are actual people witnessing reality, either in the title of their programme (*Jack Whitehall: Travels with My Father*), or by giving their name in the trailer sequence: in *Dark Tourist*, David Farrier introduces himself in the second sentence of the trailer (as well as at the beginning of each episode). The title of his show can also already be considered an act of naming, as the travel host can be quickly identified as the eponymous dark tourist. Importantly, however, the travel programme’s act of naming and its claim to factuality is intertwined with Netflix’s aforementioned strategies of visualisation that juxtapose it with fictional narratives. As outlined above, in the tiles in the Netflix interface (Figure 7.5), Farrier and Whitehall are represented similarly to the protagonists of fictional storyworlds, such as the female protagonist of the romantic drama *Virgin River*. Thus, while the streaming library embeds visual-verbal features that assimilate factual programmes to fictional ones, it continues at the same time to hail the travel host’s remarks as authentic testimonials of true experience. The paratext leading to the streamable travel documentary thus situates cultural products claiming autobiographical fact within an environment of fictional representation.

Ultimately, the way in which this interface-as-paratext advertises autobiographical and/or documentary programmes such as travel television aligns with the ambiguity between fact and fiction that has for a long time characterised the genres of travel and life writing. Claims to authenticity via truthful witnessing have been part of texts produced throughout the history of travel literature, and, since the eighteenth century, both autobiographical and travel accounts developed a subjective lens that acknowledges the individual’s point of view. Travel writing – used here as an umbrella term to encompass media beyond the book – leans on the autobiographical form to mediate experience, which makes the genre analogous to life writing. Thereby, varying degrees of fictionalisation must be seen as necessary to the process of transforming information into a representational product. Indeed, the tension between fact and fiction is a crucial component of autobiographical works, as the act of narrating – of assimilating (a chain of) real-life events into a medium – inevitably imposes narrative elements of structure and coherence that do not necessarily originate from factual events (see Löschnigg 2005, 35–36). Likewise, procedures involved in reconstructing an event inherently influence the narrative in a subjective way that forgets, selects or expands on the events witnessed (see Wagner-Egelhaaf 2018, 2).

By looking at the digital interface of Netflix and how users access the programmes, it becomes evident that this paratext makes use of trailers to narrativise autobiographical travel. The process of translation from

spatial reality into the medium takes the factual circumstances of the travelled space and puts them into a narrative form: the trailer. The trailers of streamable television programmes influence the user's navigation from paratext to text by establishing a condensed first impression of the programme. An often-used step through the gateway of the paratext that can lead to the travel programme – next to clicking directly on the selected content – is via the trailer: with default settings, the trailer starts playing automatically when the cursor hovers over the programme's tile in the streaming library, and presents a first audio-visual impression of the series. In *Dark Tourist*, the trailer converts travel documentation into a stream of sensational, affective vignettes. Using hand-held camera shots to simulate subjectivity and cinematographic camera angles and movements borrowed from fictional television, the trailer shows David Farrier as a character within a storyworld that translates reality into a dramatic narrative through travel experience. Thus, the travel host assumes a variety of roles in short succession within the trailer, including as a co-passenger of Jacqueline Kennedy in the presidential motorcade her husband was killed in (Figure 7.6), as a Second World War soldier running low through a war zone (Figure 7.7), or as a participant in religious-spiritual rituals (Figure 7.8).

The trailer casts historical and cultural realities in a form that recounts not their objective unfolding, but Farrier's affective witnessing into dramatic storytelling. The trailer thus suggests that travel programmes are comprised of elements of both documentary and drama. While all autobiography to some degree “leaves generic borderlines blurred” (Schwalm

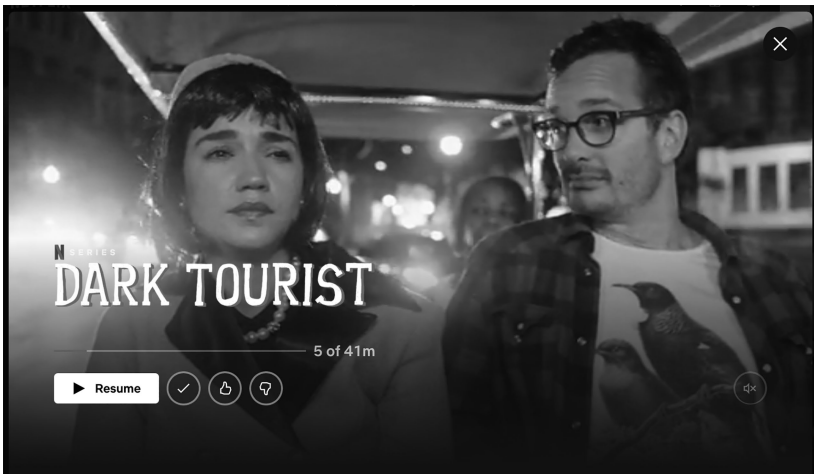


Figure 7.6 Screenshot from the trailer to *Dark Tourist* on the Netflix streaming library, 00:51.

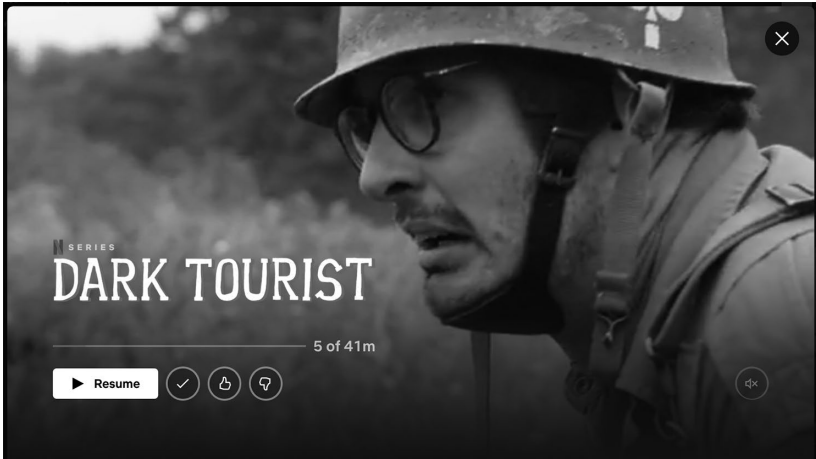


Figure 7.7 Screenshot from the trailer to Dark Tourist on the Netflix streaming library, 00:27.

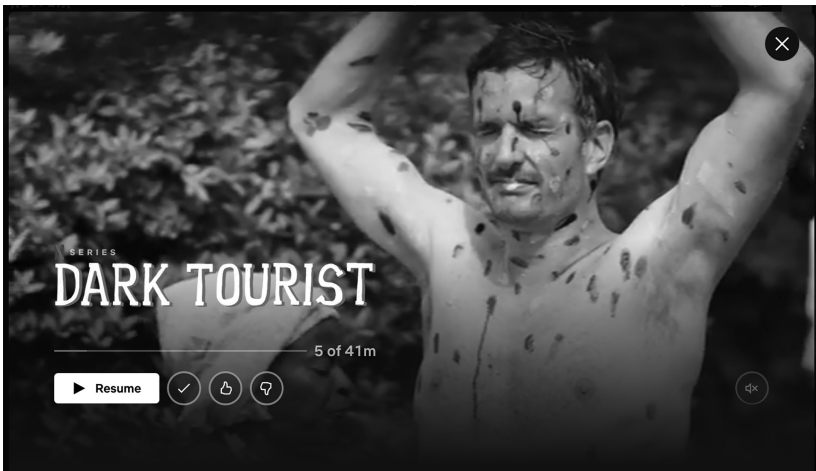


Figure 7.8 Screenshot from the trailer to Dark Tourist on the Netflix streaming library, 01:14.

2014), streaming travel television, through positioning the trailer as a key paratextual feature, is able to emphasise this generic ambiguity.

Formal circumstances like this strategic narrativisation may complicate the consumer's ability to discern fact from fiction during the

process of reception. Of course, the paratext exhibits elements of travel documentation that are both real *and* imagined. Yet, the co-existence of fact and fiction here should not be conceptualised as two forces trying to negate each other in a tug of war. Rather, the way in which the paratext affords the access of non-fiction programmes such as *Dark Tourist* and *Travels with My Father* points to what may be the representation's true aim: not to ascribe fact and fiction as absolute, dualistic categories of authenticity and deception, but to playfully oscillate between documentation and creative composition. Digital visualisations like the Netflix interface, which juxtaposes and assimilates comedy/drama and documentary, as well as fiction and non-fiction, can be thought of as fashioning a feeling for "autofiction", a work of art that deliberately combines elements of both autobiography and fiction. Rather than being confused over this divide, the reader of autofiction is able to balance the two diverging strategies of reception, slipping in and out of the autobiographical and the fictional pact when needed (see Zipfel 2009, 306). In navigating the Netflix paratext, bingers reconcile the existence of both realms. Users of streamable content accept differing genre claims, gaining perceptions about the traveller and his experiences via contrasting creative processes.

Conclusion

Through the introduction of digital streaming services like Netflix, the phenomenon of television has broadened and increased its potential to experiment with ways of making available televisual content. Because streaming services give users the possibility to watch any programme at any given point in time, audiences of committed and specifically interested viewers can be formed. As this chapter has shown, this affects the established form of the travel documentary by opening up intersections with topics and genres familiar from fiction programmes, thus creating a hybridised kind of documentary. The paratext of streamable television plays a major role in this development. As is the case with any paratext, online interfaces require watchers to develop strategies of access and reception that help them make sense of the underlying representational premises. Embedding travel narratives within a library that eschews clear generic boundaries between works of fact and fiction, streaming platforms like Netflix present and make available their content in ways that require watchers to reconcile these contrasting signals through individual reception experience. As a result, experienced Netflix users naturally navigate generic fluidity. As was illustrated within this chapter, it is via the paratextual embedding of travel docuseries within the streaming library and the affective encoding of generic information therein that generic ambiguity is signposted, even before its actual reception. While visually assimilating to their fictional counterparts, documentary

programmes nonetheless lay claim to truthfulness, exhibiting features of their autobiographical nature within the paratext without negating fictionalised narrative elements.

The television industry and the reception patterns for televisual products will continue to evolve, and so will the practices of travel – not least because they increasingly incorporate media and media practices. The smartphone in particular has become *the* device that accompanies most travellers today (as reflected in *Travels with My Father*) and affects the way they travel – including watching Netflix programmes on the road. As Mark Hansen observes, “by changing the conditions for the production of experience, new media destabilise existing patterns of biological, psychical, and collective life even as they furnish new facilities”, and vice versa (2010, 173). As technological-cultural innovation continues into the future, the nexus and dialectic between travel and televisual representation will remain a field of productive research.

Notes

- 1 *Narcos* is comprised of three seasons, which were released yearly on Netflix between 2015 and 2017. Based on a measurement that evaluates a variety of expressions of demand by costumers, a 2017 report showed that it was the most popular show on Netflix to that time (see Klein 2017).
- 2 When looking at travel television, older documentaries have now found their ways onto streaming platforms. However, as they have not been conceptualised for this form of distribution, some formal features diverge from productions made for streaming and bingeing. This chapter thus focuses on travel programmes that were produced with their contextualisation on the streaming page in mind.
- 3 Periodisation of television, with a focus on the medium’s development in the United States, has divided up the history of the medium into the following eras: TVI, which continues into the 1980s, is characterised by “channel scarcity, the mass audience, and three-network hegemony”. The subsequent TVII, which stretched to the late 1990, sees the expansion and branding of networks and the inauguration of “quality television”. The now existing TVIII is known as the era of “proliferating digital distribution platforms” (Pearson 2011, 107).

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