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Normal Death on Television: Balancing Privacy and Voyeurism

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Abstract

The television series *My Last Words* (*Viimeiset sanani*) is the first reality-based programme in Finland to concentrate on death and dying. The programme was broadcast by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) from April to June 2013. The topic raised a great deal of discussion of sensationalism, voyeurism, and the limits of television programming. However, the critical discussion largely took place before the broadcast; the viewing audience considered the series non-voyeuristic, tactful, and emotionally touching. In this article I will address the questions of voyeurism mainly at the level of television programme content, and I will analyse the narrative solutions that the series uses both to encourage and to discourage voyeuristic interpretations. An analysis of media coverage and audience reception of the show supports this analysis by providing the cultural context for the debate on the ways in which death and dying are socially acceptable subjects for television.

Introduction

The Finnish television series *My Last Words* (*Viimeiset sanani*) is a reality show that deals with real-life persons who are dying and with their families and friends, all of whom are trying to come to terms with the pending death. The prime-time miniseries was broadcast by the public Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) from April to June of 2013. The series is based on a Dutch television format and included five Finnish episodes and four Dutch episodes (*Mijn Laatste Woord*). All episodes follow the same basic idea in which a dying person is introduced who then shares his or her thoughts on their impending death. During the filming process the dying also record a video letter, which is revealed after their death. In these letters they leave their last words to their families, friends, or even to a general audience. Sari Isotalo (15 August 2013), the Finnish producer of the series, described the aim as being to present the normal death of ordinary people and thereby make death more visible in contemporary society.

Whenever a television series focuses on the emotional topic of dying, questions are immediately raised about the invasion of privacy. According to Mark Andrejevic (2004, 176), reality-based programming can be vulnerable to charges of an 'apparent excess of voyeurism', 'exploitation of emotional trauma', and 'television's moral decay'. In this article I will concentrate on questions of privacy and the public at the level of television programme content; to be more specific, I will analyse how the narration of *My Last Word*s encourages and/or discourages voyeuristic interpretations. The article focuses on the Finnish episodes in the series, although there will be some comparisons with the Dutch episodes. In addition the cultural context is taken into account with a short analysis of both the production and the reception of the series in Finland. I have interviewed producer Sari Isotalo and have analysed the media coverage and internet discussions about the series both before and after

its broadcast. The analysis of the cultural context addresses how death-related issues of voyeurism and privacy were debated.

The series and its topic generated lively public discussion in Finland. In 2008 when the programme idea was announced, the discussion was marked by fears that the privacy of the dying was being invaded and that the producers were taking advantage of human suffering for the sake of entertainment. However, five years later when the series was broadcast, the reception was largely positive. The programme was considered respectful and tactful and the topic itself worthy of television prime-time attention. Undoubtedly, the narrative solutions used in the series, which will be analysed in detail in this article, encouraged positive understandings of shared emotions instead of negative connotations of invasive voyeurism. Thus, the series succeeded in its aim of opening the subject of normal death to public discussion. This, I argue, is related not only to the increasingly visible role of death in contemporary Western societies (Staudt 2009; McIlwain 2005), but also to the emotionalisation of television programming. The emotionalisation process has prepared both the viewers and the real-life participants to show, interpret, and manage emotions, even negative emotions, and anxieties. Even controversial topics – such as the normal deaths of ordinary people – can be approached through reality-based programming (not only through news stories and fiction, which tend to concentrate on violent and unusual deaths) without charges of excessive voyeurism.

Emotional Television and Mediated Voyeurism

Since the late twentieth century the public and the media in Western societies have been charged with increasingly emphasising emotions (Pantti 2010, 168–169; Richards 2007, 30). Although emotionalisation has taken place in all media, television has been given special attention in media research, not least because of reality television and talk shows. John Ellis, for example, points out that in the beginning of television broadcasting, televised performances were often serious, both in fiction and on factual programmes, and the sincerity of a performance was not evaluated emotionally. This began to change when fictional television made emotions more familiar to viewers and recognisable by concentrating on the expressions of emotions, character development, and sincerity (Ellis 2009, 105–112).

In the wake of fictional programming, emotions became familiar material for factual programming. The cultural process of emotionalisation has affected all factual television programming, not only reality television. For example, Mervi Pantti's research on Finnish television journalists reveals that they justified increasing emotionalisation 1) by highlighting emotions as part of everyday life and thus, an aspect of the news; 2) by arguing that television is an emotional medium where emotions construct collective identities; 3) and by illustrating and making the news more interesting, understandable, and identifiable through emotions. However, although journalists considered emotions as part of their stories, they wanted to distance themselves from creating these effects and from accusations of using emotions excessively (Pantti 2010, 172–80). In other words, emotionalisation of factual television narration is acceptable, but the stigma of sensationalism is still feared, also in *My Last Words*.

The reality programming, in particular, addresses the traditional belief that a serious and high-quality documentary should follow the voice of reason and leave (sensational) emotions to entertainment (see also Murray 2009; Ellis 2009). Similar to the ways in which reality television has encouraged emotional expressions to become part of shared experiences, the Western cultural tendency to separate reason and emotion, information and entertainment, the public and the private is slowly changing. Previously, social rationalism overwhelmed theorisation of the public sphere, while emotions were considered part of the private sphere (Habermas 1992), yet the emergence of television and social media has widened the understanding of the nature of the public. For example, Jodi Dean (2001, 253) points out that internet discussion sites are not necessarily reasonable or rational, but 'at worst, a set of irrational and often demeaning rants'. Rational definitions of the public sphere have been forced to confront human nature with its emotional, embodied, and personal elements.

The new approach to the public sphere emphasises emotionality, which opens the public to personal issues and presence (Gripsrud 2007; Richards 2009). In other words, as Annette Hill (2007, 11–14) argues, emotionally-driven reality programmes that concentrate on ordinary people have become part of the public sphere, and these programmes can reveal changing cultural attitudes. Indeed, despite or maybe because of the entertainment-related stigma reality television can raise public discussion on social issues, moral values, and the limits of acceptable behaviour (Ellis 2009, 111). The debates do not only consider topics related to sexual or romantic relationships, the typical examples of reality programming, but also shared understandings of socially acceptable emotional reactions to normal death, dying, and mourning.

The recognition of the role of emotions on television and in society has been connected to the rise of a therapeutic culture in which emotional expression is part of a constant process of self-discovery and self-fulfillment. Barry Richards (2007, 30, 34), for example, observes that the Western cultural atmosphere favours 'reflecting on and seeking to manage emotions'. The need to manage emotions concerns both television viewers and actors, as Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005, 101) recognise; they point out that for the viewer, emotional processing relates to social identification, while for the performer, emotions are part of self-monitoring and the creation of a public persona. This desire to reflect and manage emotions is emphasised in *My Last Words* wherein mediated encounters with the dying address the kinds of emotions that might be expected in facing death. In this television programme the shared emotions of real individuals construct a collective understanding of dying by creating a dialogue between mediated personal experiences and public interpretations of how to deal with death. However, because the emotional is still primarily connected to the personal and is only now emerging into the public realm, television's exposure of emotions is vulnerable to charges of voyeurism, such as whether it is socially acceptable to use intimate experiences in factual programming.

In this article the concept of voyeurism in (factual) television programming follows Clay Calvert's definition of mediated voyeurism, which 'refers to the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment but frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse, through the means of the mass media and Internet' (Calvert 2004, 2–3). Here the concept of mediated voyeurism is closer to social curiosity than to traditional psychiatric understanding of voyeurism as exaggerated erotic observing (Voyeurism 2008). Lemi Baruh (2010, 203–204) further emphasises this difference by arguing that in mediated voyeurism the interest lies in the intimacy of a situation rather than in its sexuality and furthermore that both viewers and actors are aware of the viewing process.

Indeed, reality television does not ride only on the viewer's voyeuristic pleasure, but also on the participants desire to make themselves visible, as Andrejevic (2004, 179–190) argues; he remarks that this pairing of voyeurism and exhibitionism is typical of contemporary consumer culture, which induces 'individuation and self-authentication' by making oneself seen. Consequently, the viewer is allowed to witness something that he or she would not otherwise have access to and can make social comparisons and evaluate not only the participants, but themselves as well (Baruh 2010, 206). In other words, despite the negative stigma of voyeurism as a psychiatric concept, mediated voyeurism is not necessarily a negative phenomenon in itself. Instead, it functions as part of the emotionalised therapeutic (television) culture where both viewers and participants desire to share and evaluate their emotions and experiences.

Although voyeurism can be seen as a viewer's personal trait (Bagdasarov et al. 2010, 303), in this article I will treat the questions of mediated voyeurism at the level of the programme content because the viewer's experiences are never disconnected from the broadcast text. A television programme can invite the viewer to read its texts in a certain way (including voyeuristically) by accentuating some preferred or dominating meanings (see also Ridell 1998). Because *My Last*

Words encountered extensive public debates on questions of voyeurism, it is important to examine the textual level of this series and determine whether it invites the viewers to read the text voyeuristically or whether the debate was primarily about negative prejudices towards reality television and social anxieties about death and dying.

Materials and Methods of the Study

I will look into the ways in which the narration of *My Last Word*s encourages and/or discourages voyeuristic interpretations. The principal material for this article consists of the five Finnish episodes of *My Last Words*. For my purposes here, I approach the content of the episodes through narrative analysis, which concentrates on the constructiveness of narration – its semiotic and discursive level – in order to answer questions about how the story material is deliberately arranged and how it addresses the audience (see, for example, Bordwell 1985, xi–xiv; Prince 2008, 115–22). However, narratives are also cultural and discursive phenomena, which participate in cultural and historical processes, and as such they provide models for making sense of experiences, such as dying (see, for example, Bal 1999). In the analysis of *My Last Words*, special attention is given to the visual elements, but the discourse and sound are also studied to determine how voyeurism and privacy are mediated in the death-centred narration.

The format is based on the Dutch series *Mijn Laatste Woord* (2007) produced by the public broadcasting company Evangelical Broadcasting, which highlights a Christian view of life. Whereas the Dutch series emphasises the meaning of religion for comprehending death and life, the independently-produced Finnish series was filmed by the media production company Susamuru, which does not represent any specific religious view or philosophy. The company produces mostly reality television programming for the Finnish broadcasting companies, including, the public broadcasting company which bought the series.

The Finnish Broadcasting Company is part of European public service broadcasting. The programming focus is on news, current affairs, documentaries, and educational programmes, especially on the YLE1 channel where the series was located. Thus, the reputation of the channel encourages connotations of high-quality documentaries. Furthermore, although *My Last Words* is the first Finnish reality-based series to focus on the dying, before the series was broadcast, some documentaries were occasionally shown on the same channel. The journalist Tiina Merikanto had filmed several programmes dealing with the dying, such as *The Last Months of a Cancer Patient* (*Syöpäsairaan viimeiset kuukaudet – uusi elämä tuntemattoman edessä* 2000), *The Journey of the Death of a Mother with Cancer* (*Syöpäsairaan äidin matka kohti kuolemaa* 2008), *Katja Kotikangas Passed Away* (*Katja Kotikangas nukkui pois* 2009) and *Long Goodbyes* (*Pitkät jäähyväiset* 2010). In each of these shows death was approached through the experiences and emotions of real-life dying people, who were given a voice, while the professionals of death were left out or placed in supporting roles. The focus was on the emotional encounter with death instead of on scientific descriptions of the process of dying. *My Last Words* follows this tradition with a similar narrative point of view.

The series introduces five Finns and four Dutch persons as principals. It opens with Maria who has had a cancer for several years and refuses to be treated as sick or dying. The second episode concentrates on Manta, a religious woman with advanced diabetes. Episode three introduces the only Finnish male principal, Raimo, who has decided to remain positive to the end. Episode four introduces the oldest participant, Sirkka, who is living in a hospice. The last Finnish participant, Ilona, actually does not die during the filming process. When she signed up for the programme, she had cancer and a poor prognosis. Later, however, her cancer was cured. Instead of presenting her video letter, during the final section Ilona describes her feelings after the healing process. The Dutch episodes start with the carpenter Jan, who emphasises the meaning of community in his life. Then comes 23-year-old Naomé, who says her goodbyes to her family and a wide circle of friends. The third character, 70-year-old Hedwich, stays active until the end and volunteers at the hospice instead of signing in as a patient. The last episode tells the story of Grietje, who has accepted the fact that she is dying, while her family and

friends refuse to do so and seek help from God. Whereas the Finnish episodes centre on the family and occasionally bring in some close friends, the Dutch episodes are more communally orientated, and religion plays a more visible role.

As a television series, *My Last Words* reflects the general difficulty of categorising factual television programming where tendency to observe people's real lives has resulted in the contradictory, overlapping and wide range of genres, from documentaries to reality shows (Hill 2007, 1–5). *My Last Words* is a hybrid that shares elements of both (observational) documentary, which concentrates on the topical and the everyday in a casual style with the intention of commenting socially on human nature (Biressi & Nunn 2005, 63), and (documentary-style) reality television, which typically focuses on ordinary people in emotionally difficult situations (Hill 2007, 15). Susan Murray (2009, 67–68) points out that, with their interest in the personal, both formats are 'obsessed with the intimate'. As a consequence, both are often accused of taking voyeuristic approaches when they create a sense of looking in on the lives of other people (Andrejevic 2004; Baruh 2009; Baruh 2010; Bagdasarov et al. 2010; Biressi & Nunn 2005; Calvert 2004). Similarly, when the *My Last Words* was announced in Finland, the producers were accused of violating the intimacy of the emotional processes related to death and dying.

In order to acknowledge the public opinion about the series, I collected three additional materials for this study. Firstly, I interviewed the producer, Sari Isotalo, (on 15 August 2013) about the process of making the series and about its aims, and studied how the Finnish Broadcasting Company marketed the series. Secondly, I analysed the media coverage of *My Last Words* both before and after the series was aired. The coverage includes the major newspapers in Finland (*Helsingin Sanomat, Turun Sanomat*, and *Aamulehti*) and two major tabloid magazines (*Iltalehti* and *Iltasanomat*). And thirdly, I analysed online threads related to *My Last Words* both before and after the broadcasts. The following web-based discussion platforms were followed from January 2008 to May 2008, and from April 2013 to June 2013: viimeisetsanani.com, www.hs.fi, www.iltasanomat.fi, www.iltalehti.fi, www.suomi24.fi, www.vauva.fi, kaksplus.fi. The media coverage and the audience reception have been studied through content analysis in order to describe the public debates on *My Last Words* and draw conclusions about how voyeurism and privacy issues related to death and dying were understood. Before turning to the narrative analysis of the series itself, I will briefly discuss the changes in the public debates related to the programme.

The Production and Reception of *My Last Words*

The production team of *My Last Words*, including the producer Isotalo (15 August 2013) and the broadcasting company (*YLE TV1*, 15 April 2013), has emphasised that the series' cultural aim is to normalise death and mourning. Yet in the beginning public opinion was ready to chastise the show's concept as a violation of privacy and the kind of commercialisation that exploited the suffering of other human beings. In January of 2008, within a few days of a press release that sought participants for the programme, the major national media had eagerly commented on the topic. For example, the leading national newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, published nine articles on the subject within the first week after the announcement. Most news stories openly avoided condemning the programme, but they did assert that the topic was controversial. The media discussion heated up when the tabloid magazines began to sensationalise the coming series. In one story, for example, a distinguished and highly respected Finnish physician, Dr. Risto Pelkonen, took a stand condemning the very idea of the programme as repulsive (*Iltasanomat*, 16 January 2008). In response, the Archbishop of Finland, Jukka Paarma, defended the programme by arguing that a tactful approach to death could ease anxieties related to the nature of death as a taboo subject (*Iltasanomat*, 21 January 2008).

The discussion was not limited to articles and the news, but continued on internet forums and discussion pages of the news media. Three main areas can be seen in these debates: programme content, the limits of television, and the cultural role of death. The most heated topic revolved around the programme, its concept, and its imagined implementation. Those who opposed the programme's idea claimed that the concept was exploiting, voyeuristic, awful, distressing, or offensive. One

anonymous commentator (on *Vauva.fi*, 16 January 2008), for example, wrote that the programme was 'the worst kind of social porn'; another (on *Kaksplus.fi*, 10 September 2009) stated that it was incomprehensible that a television programme would 'play with suffering people like this.'

Similar concerns have been raised elsewhere in discussions of the role of public broadcasting. For example, Kevin David Kendrick and John Costello have discussed voyeurism and morality in connection with the BBC's reality series *Nurse*. They argue that reality-based shows dealing with sickness exploit human vulnerability and force the viewer into a voyeuristic position. Even in the name of public access or demystifying anxiety related to illness and death, moral questions and compassion should be more important than giving viewers an opportunity to witness the intimate last moments of others (Kendrick & Costello 2000, 16–20). Still, in the Finnish discussions, some people admitted to being curious about human fate. These people wanted to know what others think as death approaches. However, these commenters also demanded of voluntary participation in the programme and a tactful approach. Monica (*Suomi24.fi*, 17 January 2008), for example, thought that it would be 'interesting to know what a dying person is thinking, as long as the broadcast is in good taste and respects the bereaved.'

The role of television programming, and especially the limits of reality television, was also discussed. The opposing comments argued that television is and should be an entertainment medium, and therefore difficult issues such as death should be avoided. By contrast, the favourable reactions saw the programme as a brave and novel opening in Finnish television and welcomed programmes addressing a taboo. Furthermore, there was some discussion of the role of death in contemporary society. For example, Leena (*Yle.fi*, 19 January 2008) observed that 'death is as natural part of life as birth. It can and should be discussed.' This was the attitude that the producers wanted to encourage, but too often this cultural discussion remained on the sidelines (Isotalo, 15 August 2013).

Interestingly, the same arguments were used both for and against the television show. Death was seen as a private issue in contemporary culture and depending on the viewpoint, this was either desirable or something that should be changed. In particular, the argument of naturalising death by means of a television series was seen as having both a negative as well as a positive result. Hintriika (*Suomi24.fi*, 17 January 2008), acknowledged these two aspects, writing that 'it is true that death has become a taboo because dying doesn't take place at home as it used to. Everything death-related is hidden until the funeral. Therefore, we should talk more about it – but not with sensationalism.'

The producer, Sari Isotalo, admitted that in the beginning, the heated debate annoyed her because the discussion concentrated on matters other than the programme idea itself. Still, bearing in mind that the programme was intended to heighten emotions, she believes that it has succeeded. She also observed in time the discussion began to concentrate on death as she had hoped it would do (Isotalo, 15 August 2013). Especially after the series was broadcast, the reception was positive and the response concentrated on the cultural role of death. Compared to the discussion that took place before, the discussion during and after the broadcast was modest both in quantity and in intensity. Opposing comments similar to those mentioned above were heard, but often they were framed with arguments indicating that the commentator had not watched the programme. As an anonymous visitor (*Viimeisetsanani.com*, 24 April 2013) wrote: 'I won't watch it, I don't understand programmes like this, they just make you feel bad. I know I'm mortal, and I do not want to feast on someone else's death.' Such comments repeat the same old prejudices and reveal the problematic role of death in contemporary (television) culture.

Those who watched the episodes were pleased with what they saw and often felt it necessary to assure others that the series was not voyeuristic. Instead, the programme was seen as realistic, true to the topic and to the sincere participants. Also the cultural importance of the topic was highlighted. An anonymous visitor (*Yle.fi*, 17 April 2013) wrote: 'Really good and

touching programme. I cried throughout the whole programme; it brimmed with wonderful warmth and love. This will help people deal with the idea of death, and I recommend it to all. The filming is respectful to the main character and her beloved. Subtle and respectful approach by the producers.' On the whole, the series was mostly seen as emotional and touching without being sensational. Thus, although the series had the potential for voyeurism, thanks to its intimate, emotional, and observing relationship with the dying, it avoided being understood as such. I argue that the reasons for this change in debate can be found in the narrative structure of the episodes.

Narrative of *My Last Words*

In *My Last Words*, each episode includes three different encounters. In the first section the dying person is introduced to the viewers. The viewer gets to know the person's background, illness, and attitude to death. In this opening section other participants, such as family members or friends, are also introduced. In the second section the dying and the family/friends are revisited. During this second meeting questions of impending death return and possible changes in attitude to death and dying are discussed. The last section takes place after the death of the principal, when the video letter is revealed to the family and friends. After the reading of the letter the camera recedes, leaving the family and friends in mourning.

As my analysis will show, in *My Last Words* the narrative choices serve both to encourage and to discourage voyeurism. For example, the participants are carefully chosen. The discursive power to define the death-related experiences is given to the dying persons. Secondary roles are given to the family and friends, who give a voice to mourning, loss, and grief. The narrative and emotional perspectives are intentionally kept on the level of ordinary people who are facing death. By contrast, the professionals, whose voices are most often heard in the public discussions of death and dying, are excluded. There are no doctors defining the illness or explaining the dying process, no funeral industry representatives to explicate the practicalities of bereavement or any religious authorities, who through transition rites hold a great deal of practical power over death. Occasionally, a nurse or some other caregiver may be introduced, but even they are either part of the background or they share their own emotional take on death. Through this careful selection of real people as the dramatis personae, the series emphasises not only the private over the public, but also the emotional over the professional. The use of participants who share a private and emotional take on death invokes questions of intimacy, yet the generous use of interviews emphasises the consent of each participant.

In *My Last Words* the narrative discourse both hints at and avoids voyeurism: some images observe intimate moments, while others were openly designed together with the participant. Below I will further address voyeurism by analysing five recognisable scene types in *My Last Words*: interviews with the characters, illustrations, characters in space, the transition to death, and video letters.

Interviewing the Participants

My Last Words' essential and dominant programme content is the interviews. In the Finnish episodes the audio consists mainly of interview material, with background voices or music used occasionally in transitions from one interview to another. In the Dutch episodes voice-overs tell the background of those who are dying. It is intriguing that the Finnish episodes chose not to follow this aspect of the format. Instead, almost as a reaction to the accusations that the series was taking advantage of the vulnerable, the Finnish narration proceeds almost entirely from the voices of the participants, who are given full definitional power over the discourse. In this way, the narration demonstrates that the dying and his or her family and friends have participated in their episode from their own starting points, aims, and desires.

In the series, it is customary for the dying to assert that they are not afraid of death. Instead, they want to see death as a natural part of life over which they have no control. The dying also emphasise their need to talk openly with others about

death. Many know the difficulties others had in dealing with the dying, and they have experienced social alienation. All the principal participants express a desire to be part of society as long as they have the strength to do so. In turn, family members and friends discuss their feelings of the impending death. They express fears of loss, and many of them stress that, even though they are aware that their loved one is dying, they could not prepare for the final loss. For example, Manta's daughter is saddened when she thinks about her mother's approaching death. 'I've mourned the loss of my mother many times, but so far it has never been final. It can only be final once. You can't practice it, death I mean, or prepare for it. The fact that someone has been ill for a long time doesn't make you ready for the actual loss.' Despite their fears, the family and friends also emphasise the importance of positivity, everyday tasks and need to concentrate on the living as long as they still have a chance to be together. Although both the dying and other participants express a need and a desire to talk about death, they do not want to be defined by death alone.

Although the interviews are deeply personal, they appear to concentrate on the messages chosen by the participants. The interviewer is not shown on camera, yet her questions are sometimes audible, and in this way the role of dialogue is made apparent. This indicates that the ongoing discussion is not a private confession, but rather that the dying are willingly taking the leading role in the interviews and sharing their views on death. In Baruh's (2009) empirical research on the types of content that are considered voyeuristic on reality television the revelation of personal information or exhibition of private emotions did not invite voyeuristic experience unless the experience was later gossiped about or happened behind someone's back. Thus, willingly given personal information is merely part of public confession, whereas voyeurism appears to connect with an observational invasion of intimacy.

In *My Last Words*, the willingness to share emotions is further emphasised at the level of image. The participants are sitting down. They are concentrating. They are facing the interviewer and the camera as well. These scenes with 'talking heads', which are typical of television's factual programming, emphasise that the participants knowingly and willing are taking part in a television show. Indeed, when the camera's presence is visible, a sense of interacting with the participants is more likely to occur than sense of voyeurism (Baruh 2009). Occasionally, the participants are even allowed to look at the camera. The direct address acknowledges the existence of an audience and creates a sense of intimate and interactive relationship with the viewer, usually allowed only to hosts of a television show (Fiske 2011, 54).

While the interviews highlight the consent of the participants, the images used are constructed to be emotionally involving. The participants are most often framed in close-up, medium close-up, or medium shots, which emphasise their gestures and facial expressions, tearful eyes in particular. Close-ups especially invite identification and emotionality. In visual theory the human face is recognised as having a huge impact on creating empathy in the viewer (Gaut 1999; Plantiga 1999). The power of facial expressions (and bodily postures) lies in the recognition of the emotions that a person is going through. Emotions are also transmitted through mirroring effects and imitation. Thus, through various means, visual images may influence a viewer's emotions, increase identification with the programme participants, and teach emotional responses to a given situation (Gaut 1999, 213; Plantiga 1999, 239–43). Similarly, the emotions addressed in *My Last Words* help to create a sense of public encounters with death and foster a shared understanding of socially acceptable emotional reactions to death.

By concentrating on the facial expressions of the interviewees, *My Last Words* emphasises the emotionality of the theme and encourages the viewer to empathise with the participants' situation and their emotions. The emotionality of these scenes could be interpreted as sensational, yet the highlighted presence of the camera mediates emotions as being a natural and normal part of encountering death. Similarly, the emotional reactions of the dying and their relatives and friends highlight the sincerity of the participants. By allowing viewers to witness their fears and grief, as well as their warmth and positive attitudes, the participants share how death and dying affect people emotionally. They invite the viewer to share their intimate

moments, and although this invasion of privacy is voyeuristic by definition, Baruh's (2009) study shows that when emotional reaction is distinguished by an invitation, the viewer rarely recognises it as a voyeuristic moment. In other words, the willingness to participate and the possibility of addressing the viewer directly create the sense of a tactful approach, even when the emotional revelations are overwhelming.

Illustrations

Although the narration concentrates on the interview material, visually the camera does not stay with the interviewees all the time. The editing of different images imposes a rhythm on the narration. In the Finnish episodes the tempo is considerably slower than in the Dutch episodes. In the Finnish episodes every image stays with the viewer longer, prolonging the moment before the cut to the next image. The slow pace creates a picture of the need to calm down before death, to look back and evaluate one's life. In the Dutch episodes the idea is reversed. The need to evaluate exists, but in terms of tempo, the desire to live full and fast until the end is emphasized over the need to slow down.

These two realizations of the same format also use different illustrations to control the pace of the narration. The Dutch episodes tend to concentrate on photographs. Thus, while interviewing or voice-over narration continues, photographs of the dying person's life are shown. By contrast, in the Finnish episodes photographs are not used to create life stories of the dying. Only one episode introduces a specific photograph, and it come from the graduation party for Ilona's son, shown as part of Ilona's life story. Otherwise, photographs are almost entirely lacking, although in Ilona's and Raimo's episodes, the viewer see photographs in the apartment of the dying participant. Yet the camera does not concentrate on any particular photo, nor is the narration dependent on their presence. Instead, in the Finnish series, other illustrations help to personalise each episode. The camera seeks out objects in the dying person's home that somehow characterise the participant. The inserted illustrations often obscure the production techniques and create a sense of peeking into someone's life.

With Maria, the personalised illustrations include images of roulette (Maria used to work on a cruise ship), images of a computer, as she searches for articles about medications for life support. Although all of the episodes were filmed in co-operation with the participants, only this first episode reveals this process to the viewer. Tending the garden with her mother, for instance, Maria mentions that the watering can should be positioned towards camera for better effect. When Maria visits the Institute of Forensic Medicine to discuss donating her corpse to medical science, images of autopsy tables and skeletons are shown. The other episodes refer less openly to the topic of death and especially avoid such strong allusions to death's bodily side while the dying participant is still in life; instead culturally-recognisable metaphors are preferred. In Maria's episode these include the repeated images of clocks referring metaphorically to time, which is running out whether she wants it to or not.

With Raimo and Manta personalised meanings are highlighted. The inserted illustrations include pictures of Raimo's daughters in his living room, images of a record player (Raimo is an eager listener to music), and moments in his workshop where he repairs second-hand items. With the 52-year-old Manta, the inserts include both religious artefacts (in reference to her religious background) and handiworks or paintings (illustrating her desire to do things with her hands and her need to leave something behind). With Sirkka and Ilona personalised items are not used as frequently, although there are some decorative images, such as china angels. With these two women especially, however, the use of a second type of inserted illustration – images of nature – is highlighted. All of the Finnish episodes show nature images in abundance: forests, trees, flowers, birds, plants, sea, rivers and snow create a gentle pace for the narration, with the images functioning as transitions between the interviews, the locations, and times. At the same time, these images naturalise death. Death becomes part of the circle of life, with human mortality tied to nature.

Image series 1. Capture: Inserted nature images dominate the transitions in the Finnish narration of *My Last Words*.

Although the inserts function as visual repertoire and drive the tempo of the narrative, they are also given metaphorical dimensions in personalising and naturalising death. The personalised images often refer either to memories or to items with symbolic power, such as angel statues or candles, which are familiar from death rites. With nature images, the pictures are often stripped bare, as most of the material was filmed in winter when nature lies dormant. The pictures thus have the power to remind the viewer of death. Both types of images repeatedly depict shared and recognisable cultural references to death. Furthermore, by giving both human and natural meanings to death, the images create a bridge between culture and nature.

Dying Participants in Motion

Although interviews and inserted illustrations are largely static, each episode includes moments in which the dying participants are actively living out their lives. I call these images, in which the camera is allowed to follow the daily activities of the dying, 'characters in motion.' Such images clearly emphasise the voyeuristic position of the viewer: when compared to the emotional interviews, now the participants do not face the camera. Instead, the camera is hidden and observes from an apparently invisible position. Baruh's research shows that when the camera adopts a 'fly on the wall' perspective, which places the viewer in the position of a silent observer, the sense of voyeurism is heightened. The use of private spaces further highlight this voyeuristic appeal (Baruh 2009).

In *My Last Words*, a typical moment follows the dying person taking a walk outdoors or leaving to go from one place to another. The camera is positioned in the bushes, behind the trees, peeking through leaves and branches. In addition, often the camera is positioned at a distance, and the image does not concentrate on the emotional facial expressions, but on the participants' movements and their environment.

Image 2. Capture: When Sirkka take a taxi to visit her daughter, the camera is positioned on the hill, behind the trees, and distanced from the situation.

Occasionally, distanced images are used when the dying meet others. For example, when Sirkka meets her daughters, the camera is now and then at a distance, showing the composition of the group. This could be interpreted as the camera hesitating to invade moments of personal interaction. Yet this positioning also highlights the camera's observational role as an outsider. Moreover, the camera is constantly being placed outside windows and doorways from where it looks in, stretching the limits between private and public space. Also, by being observed through reflected and detached images, the dying characters appear vulnerable from the outsiders' point of view.

Image 3. Caption: The liminal spaces of *My Last Words*. 1) The camera uses a mirror reflection to show Ilona preparing her video letter – a message from beyond the grave. 2) The camera peeks in through the window of the workshop to observe Raimo.

In *My Last Words* images in which a reflective surface, such as a window or a mirror, pictures the dying highlight questions of threshold, liminality, and transgression. A window represents the borderline between private and public, interior and exterior, and can function both as a symbol of detachment and as a meeting point (Kaplan 2002, 162–66; Bruhn, Gjelsvik & Thune 2011, 11–12). In the series, mirrors are used in a similar way. For example, when Ilona, lying in bed, is preparing her last words, the camera shows her reflection in a wall mirror; when Manta moves through her apartment in a wheelchair, the camera follows, again through her reflection, this time in a hall mirror.

In these scenes, a reflective image highlights the status of being between life and death and places the dying in a liminal state, the term that cultural anthropologist Victor Turner calls the time between a person's death and society's adjustment to this death (through burial, for example). Such a state threatens the social order, but by definition it is a limited period during which society adjusts to the loss (Turner 2008, 94–95). In contemporary Western societies dying is an increasingly drawn-out process, and the liminal state can begin during the dying process itself. Through this process the dying are slowly marginalised from the active members of society (Koski 2010). Although *My Last Words* endeavours to normalise death and give social visibility to the dying in order to prevent their premature exclusion from society, the hidden observational position of the camera and the use of windows and mirrors appear to conflict with this cultural aim. Instead, these scenes increase the sense of voyeurism whereby viewers are reminded of their position as outsiders.

Transitions to Death

During the latter parts of each episode, the passing away of the main participant is announced with a death notice that includes the person's name, birth date, and death date. Before the reading of the video letters there is a short transition scene, which includes the last images of the dying person. In the Finnish episodes the transition to the death notice is often a transition to light. The final images of Maria are taken with her family while they are enjoying a barbecue. The camera pans skyward and after light has filled the image, the death notice appears on the screen. A nearly identical scene takes place in Manta's episode; she is making a painting when the camera pans to the light coming from the window. Sirkka is reading a

poem with the words 'this memory can't be taken away from me' when the image focuses on the window and the light. Raimo is the only exception to the association of the death notice with light (as is Ilona, but she does not die during the series). Although Raimo is standing by a window listening to music, the camera does not focus on the light, but on an extremely close-up shot of his fingers, which are tapping in keeping with the rhythm.

The repeated use of light reminds the viewer that each participant has denied being afraid of death as such. Death may intrude into their lives, but death itself is not a bad thing; thus light and the sky are the images chosen rather than darkness. In addition to the theme of death and light, all of these transitions start from the participants' favourite everyday activities as these were introduced in each episode. This technique highlights the normality of death for ordinary people, placing emphasis on remembering persons as they were in life.

After the transition to the death notice, some death rituals are shown, depending on what the participant and the families have consented to. In the case of Maria, the transition rites are limited to an image of the grave and flowers. With Manta and Sirkka, images from the funeral are shown, although the camera is positioned at the back of the church so that only glimpses are given of mourning family members, with most of the images concentrated on candles, flowers, and the coffin. Once again Raimo's episode has a different solution. The viewer is allowed to see Raimo lying in his coffin with a white cloth placed over his face.

The camera witnesses all of these brief glimpses from afar. These images of transitions are not detailed, nor does the camera linger on them. Here the tempo of the cuts from one shot to the next is faster than elsewhere in the episodes. Although these techniques highlight the voyeuristic position of the viewer, the camera's invisibility to the mourners and the pace of the shots show consideration and empathy. The narration does not allow the viewer to intrude on the intimate moments of death rituals, at least, not for too long. In this way, despite the voyeuristic position, the sense of a tactful approach is created.

Video letters

Each episode of *My Last Words* ends with the reading of the video letters written by the dying and addressed primarily to family members and friends, who are invited to the showing. The parts of the letters shared with the viewers emphasise messages of love, pride, and the continuity of family traditions. Whereas the Finnish letters concentrate on personal messages to loved ones, the Dutch episodes are once again more community orientated: these letters may contain general messages on living and dying well and are directed to the television audiences as well as to loved ones.

Whereas the audio track focuses on the extracts from the letters, the images concentrate on the family members more than on the video letter. Thus, an important narrative task of the mourners is to provide emotional reactions to the letters. At this point the camera is facing those who have gathered in front of the television for the reading of the letter. The situation is reminiscent of the interviews because attention is drawn to the camera's presence. Here, the focus changes from the thoughts of the dying person to the mourners and their reactions.

Image 5. Caption: Raimo's daughter reacts emotionally to her father's video letter. Her reaction captures both her grief and loving memories.

Just as the dying wanted their dying process to be not only about sadness, but also about the continuation of life, so too the reactions to the video letters include both sorrow and happy memories. In this way, the series depicts a variety of emotional reactions to death, which affect not only the dying, but also their loved ones and, through the public eye of the camera, the society around them as well.

Conclusions

My Last Words mediates intimate moments and the emotions of those who are dying and mourning. It thus follows the definitions of mediated voyeurism in which intimacy is willingly and knowingly shared with a general audience. Although before the television series was broadcast, public opinion was doubtful and ambivalent about questions of privacy in relation to dying, the programme's actual reception was positive, with viewers judging the series as non-voyeuristic. Indeed, many of the programme's narrative solutions support an interpretation of a respectful approach to death: the interviews and the reading of the video letters of the dying stressed the sincerity and willingness of the participants, and the camera's reluctance to linger on death rites and funerals showed respect for privacy. From this perspective, the episodes refrained from prying more deeply into the participants' lives than was already freely shared with viewers. However, the illustrations, the dying in motion, and even the transitions to death tend to conceal the camera's presence and emphasise the viewer's role of peering in on the most intimate moments of other people's lives.

What the comparison of the narrative solutions with the audience reception indicates is that viewers tend to have a different understanding of voyeurism than do media researchers; voyeuristic content and voyeuristic interpretations are thus not necessarily the same thing. For viewers, the concept still appears to carry a negative stigma, invoked whenever they consider transgressing socially acceptable limits in observing the lives of others. Yet an open invitation to share even drastic emotional moments is not interpreted voyeuristically if the approach is tactfully executed and the viewer is not forced into an excessively voyeuristic position. Even when certain narrative techniques encourage a voyeuristic gaze, the audience tends to overlook these moments and concentrate on the interaction with the programme's participants. Yet the same content can be

interpreted as voyeuristic from the point of view of narrative analysis, because the series by definition shares the intimate emotions of individuals with a public audience. However, in television research, mediated voyeurism does not refer only to negative social phenomena. Instead, mediated voyeurism can be part of an emotional public sphere in which socially shared understandings of dying, death, and mourning are created, and voyeuristic content can prove to have (positive) social power.

When the differences in conceptualising processes are set aside, *My Last Words* and its reception reveal Finnish audiences' increasing familiarity with dealing with emotions, including anxieties about death, in television programming and viewing. The producer Sari Isotalo (15 August 2013) commented on this cultural change, saying that when the project began, normal deaths of ordinary people were almost entirely lacking on television; when the series was finally broadcast, openness to discussions of death in public had increased. Thus, the emotional topic of death shown in connection with ordinary people going about their daily lives does not necessarily or automatically equal sensationalism. Instead, observing privacy can be interpreted as a tactful and meaningful experience. In this view, despite the project's rocky start, *My Last Words* managed to focus viewers' attention on the series' main topic, death and dying, and succeeded in its aim to promote normalising and naturalising death as part of contemporary life.

1. All translations from Finnish to English (including show title, captions from the programme, Finnish media and internet discussions) are mine.

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Normal Death on Television: Balancing Privacy and Voyeurism

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Abstract

The television series *My Last Words* (*Viimeiset sanani*) is the first reality-based programme in Finland to concentrate on death and dying. The programme was broadcast by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) from April to June 2013. The topic raised a great deal of discussion of sensationalism, voyeurism, and the limits of television programming. However, the critical discussion largely took place before the broadcast; the viewing audience considered the series non-voyeuristic, tactful, and emotionally touching. In this article I will address the questions of voyeurism mainly at the level of television programme content, and I will analyse the narrative solutions that the series uses both to encourage and to discourage voyeuristic interpretations. An analysis of media coverage and audience reception of the show supports this analysis by providing the cultural context for the debate on the ways in which death and dying are socially acceptable subjects for television.

Introduction

The Finnish television series *My Last Words* (*Viimeiset sanani*) is a reality show that deals with real-life persons who are dying and with their families and friends, all of whom are trying to come to terms with the pending death. The prime-time miniseries was broadcast by the public Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) from April to June of 2013. The series is based on a Dutch television format and included five Finnish episodes and four Dutch episodes (*Mijn Laatste Woord*). All episodes follow the same basic idea in which a dying person is introduced who then shares his or her thoughts on their impending death. During the filming process the dying also record a video letter, which is revealed after their death. In these letters they leave their last words to their families, friends, or even to a general audience. Sari Isotalo (15 August 2013), the Finnish producer of the series, described the aim as being to present the normal death of ordinary people and thereby make death more visible in contemporary society.

Whenever a television series focuses on the emotional topic of dying, questions are immediately raised about the invasion of privacy. According to Mark Andrejevic (2004, 176), reality-based programming can be vulnerable to charges of an 'apparent excess of voyeurism', 'exploitation of emotional trauma', and 'television's moral decay'. In this article I will concentrate on questions of privacy and the public at the level of television programme content; to be more specific, I will analyse how the narration of *My Last Word*s encourages and/or discourages voyeuristic interpretations. The article focuses on the Finnish episodes in the series, although there will be some comparisons with the Dutch episodes. In addition the cultural context is taken into account with a short analysis of both the production and the reception of the series in Finland. I have interviewed producer Sari Isotalo and have analysed the media coverage and internet discussions about the series both before and after

its broadcast. The analysis of the cultural context addresses how death-related issues of voyeurism and privacy were debated.

The series and its topic generated lively public discussion in Finland. In 2008 when the programme idea was announced, the discussion was marked by fears that the privacy of the dying was being invaded and that the producers were taking advantage of human suffering for the sake of entertainment. However, five years later when the series was broadcast, the reception was largely positive. The programme was considered respectful and tactful and the topic itself worthy of television prime-time attention. Undoubtedly, the narrative solutions used in the series, which will be analysed in detail in this article, encouraged positive understandings of shared emotions instead of negative connotations of invasive voyeurism. Thus, the series succeeded in its aim of opening the subject of normal death to public discussion. This, I argue, is related not only to the increasingly visible role of death in contemporary Western societies (Staudt 2009; McIlwain 2005), but also to the emotionalisation of television programming. The emotionalisation process has prepared both the viewers and the real-life participants to show, interpret, and manage emotions, even negative emotions, and anxieties. Even controversial topics – such as the normal deaths of ordinary people – can be approached through reality-based programming (not only through news stories and fiction, which tend to concentrate on violent and unusual deaths) without charges of excessive voyeurism.

Emotional Television and Mediated Voyeurism

Since the late twentieth century the public and the media in Western societies have been charged with increasingly emphasising emotions (Pantti 2010, 168–169; Richards 2007, 30). Although emotionalisation has taken place in all media, television has been given special attention in media research, not least because of reality television and talk shows. John Ellis, for example, points out that in the beginning of television broadcasting, televised performances were often serious, both in fiction and on factual programmes, and the sincerity of a performance was not evaluated emotionally. This began to change when fictional television made emotions more familiar to viewers and recognisable by concentrating on the expressions of emotions, character development, and sincerity (Ellis 2009, 105–112).

In the wake of fictional programming, emotions became familiar material for factual programming. The cultural process of emotionalisation has affected all factual television programming, not only reality television. For example, Mervi Pantti's research on Finnish television journalists reveals that they justified increasing emotionalisation 1) by highlighting emotions as part of everyday life and thus, an aspect of the news; 2) by arguing that television is an emotional medium where emotions construct collective identities; 3) and by illustrating and making the news more interesting, understandable, and identifiable through emotions. However, although journalists considered emotions as part of their stories, they wanted to distance themselves from creating these effects and from accusations of using emotions excessively (Pantti 2010, 172–80). In other words, emotionalisation of factual television narration is acceptable, but the stigma of sensationalism is still feared, also in *My Last Words*.

The reality programming, in particular, addresses the traditional belief that a serious and high-quality documentary should follow the voice of reason and leave (sensational) emotions to entertainment (see also Murray 2009; Ellis 2009). Similar to the ways in which reality television has encouraged emotional expressions to become part of shared experiences, the Western cultural tendency to separate reason and emotion, information and entertainment, the public and the private is slowly changing. Previously, social rationalism overwhelmed theorisation of the public sphere, while emotions were considered part of the private sphere (Habermas 1992), yet the emergence of television and social media has widened the understanding of the nature of the public. For example, Jodi Dean (2001, 253) points out that internet discussion sites are not necessarily reasonable or rational, but 'at worst, a set of irrational and often demeaning rants'. Rational definitions of the public sphere have been forced to confront human nature with its emotional, embodied, and personal elements.

The new approach to the public sphere emphasises emotionality, which opens the public to personal issues and presence (Gripsrud 2007; Richards 2009). In other words, as Annette Hill (2007, 11–14) argues, emotionally-driven reality programmes that concentrate on ordinary people have become part of the public sphere, and these programmes can reveal changing cultural attitudes. Indeed, despite or maybe because of the entertainment-related stigma reality television can raise public discussion on social issues, moral values, and the limits of acceptable behaviour (Ellis 2009, 111). The debates do not only consider topics related to sexual or romantic relationships, the typical examples of reality programming, but also shared understandings of socially acceptable emotional reactions to normal death, dying, and mourning.

The recognition of the role of emotions on television and in society has been connected to the rise of a therapeutic culture in which emotional expression is part of a constant process of self-discovery and self-fulfillment. Barry Richards (2007, 30, 34), for example, observes that the Western cultural atmosphere favours 'reflecting on and seeking to manage emotions'. The need to manage emotions concerns both television viewers and actors, as Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005, 101) recognise; they point out that for the viewer, emotional processing relates to social identification, while for the performer, emotions are part of self-monitoring and the creation of a public persona. This desire to reflect and manage emotions is emphasised in *My Last Words* wherein mediated encounters with the dying address the kinds of emotions that might be expected in facing death. In this television programme the shared emotions of real individuals construct a collective understanding of dying by creating a dialogue between mediated personal experiences and public interpretations of how to deal with death. However, because the emotional is still primarily connected to the personal and is only now emerging into the public realm, television's exposure of emotions is vulnerable to charges of voyeurism, such as whether it is socially acceptable to use intimate experiences in factual programming.

In this article the concept of voyeurism in (factual) television programming follows Clay Calvert's definition of mediated voyeurism, which 'refers to the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment but frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse, through the means of the mass media and Internet' (Calvert 2004, 2–3). Here the concept of mediated voyeurism is closer to social curiosity than to traditional psychiatric understanding of voyeurism as exaggerated erotic observing (Voyeurism 2008). Lemi Baruh (2010, 203–204) further emphasises this difference by arguing that in mediated voyeurism the interest lies in the intimacy of a situation rather than in its sexuality and furthermore that both viewers and actors are aware of the viewing process.

Indeed, reality television does not ride only on the viewer's voyeuristic pleasure, but also on the participants desire to make themselves visible, as Andrejevic (2004, 179–190) argues; he remarks that this pairing of voyeurism and exhibitionism is typical of contemporary consumer culture, which induces 'individuation and self-authentication' by making oneself seen. Consequently, the viewer is allowed to witness something that he or she would not otherwise have access to and can make social comparisons and evaluate not only the participants, but themselves as well (Baruh 2010, 206). In other words, despite the negative stigma of voyeurism as a psychiatric concept, mediated voyeurism is not necessarily a negative phenomenon in itself. Instead, it functions as part of the emotionalised therapeutic (television) culture where both viewers and participants desire to share and evaluate their emotions and experiences.

Although voyeurism can be seen as a viewer's personal trait (Bagdasarov et al. 2010, 303), in this article I will treat the questions of mediated voyeurism at the level of the programme content because the viewer's experiences are never disconnected from the broadcast text. A television programme can invite the viewer to read its texts in a certain way (including voyeuristically) by accentuating some preferred or dominating meanings (see also Ridell 1998). Because *My Last*

Words encountered extensive public debates on questions of voyeurism, it is important to examine the textual level of this series and determine whether it invites the viewers to read the text voyeuristically or whether the debate was primarily about negative prejudices towards reality television and social anxieties about death and dying.

Materials and Methods of the Study

I will look into the ways in which the narration of *My Last Word*s encourages and/or discourages voyeuristic interpretations. The principal material for this article consists of the five Finnish episodes of *My Last Words*. For my purposes here, I approach the content of the episodes through narrative analysis, which concentrates on the constructiveness of narration – its semiotic and discursive level – in order to answer questions about how the story material is deliberately arranged and how it addresses the audience (see, for example, Bordwell 1985, xi–xiv; Prince 2008, 115–22). However, narratives are also cultural and discursive phenomena, which participate in cultural and historical processes, and as such they provide models for making sense of experiences, such as dying (see, for example, Bal 1999). In the analysis of *My Last Words*, special attention is given to the visual elements, but the discourse and sound are also studied to determine how voyeurism and privacy are mediated in the death-centred narration.

The format is based on the Dutch series *Mijn Laatste Woord* (2007) produced by the public broadcasting company Evangelical Broadcasting, which highlights a Christian view of life. Whereas the Dutch series emphasises the meaning of religion for comprehending death and life, the independently-produced Finnish series was filmed by the media production company Susamuru, which does not represent any specific religious view or philosophy. The company produces mostly reality television programming for the Finnish broadcasting companies, including, the public broadcasting company which bought the series.

The Finnish Broadcasting Company is part of European public service broadcasting. The programming focus is on news, current affairs, documentaries, and educational programmes, especially on the YLE1 channel where the series was located. Thus, the reputation of the channel encourages connotations of high-quality documentaries. Furthermore, although *My Last Words* is the first Finnish reality-based series to focus on the dying, before the series was broadcast, some documentaries were occasionally shown on the same channel. The journalist Tiina Merikanto had filmed several programmes dealing with the dying, such as *The Last Months of a Cancer Patient* (*Syöpäsairaan viimeiset kuukaudet – uusi elämä tuntemattoman edessä* 2000), *The Journey of the Death of a Mother with Cancer* (*Syöpäsairaan äidin matka kohti kuolemaa* 2008), *Katja Kotikangas Passed Away* (*Katja Kotikangas nukkui pois* 2009) and *Long Goodbyes* (*Pitkät jäähyväiset* 2010). In each of these shows death was approached through the experiences and emotions of real-life dying people, who were given a voice, while the professionals of death were left out or placed in supporting roles. The focus was on the emotional encounter with death instead of on scientific descriptions of the process of dying. *My Last Words* follows this tradition with a similar narrative point of view.

The series introduces five Finns and four Dutch persons as principals. It opens with Maria who has had a cancer for several years and refuses to be treated as sick or dying. The second episode concentrates on Manta, a religious woman with advanced diabetes. Episode three introduces the only Finnish male principal, Raimo, who has decided to remain positive to the end. Episode four introduces the oldest participant, Sirkka, who is living in a hospice. The last Finnish participant, Ilona, actually does not die during the filming process. When she signed up for the programme, she had cancer and a poor prognosis. Later, however, her cancer was cured. Instead of presenting her video letter, during the final section Ilona describes her feelings after the healing process. The Dutch episodes start with the carpenter Jan, who emphasises the meaning of community in his life. Then comes 23-year-old Naomé, who says her goodbyes to her family and a wide circle of friends. The third character, 70-year-old Hedwich, stays active until the end and volunteers at the hospice instead of signing in as a patient. The last episode tells the story of Grietje, who has accepted the fact that she is dying, while her family and

friends refuse to do so and seek help from God. Whereas the Finnish episodes centre on the family and occasionally bring in some close friends, the Dutch episodes are more communally orientated, and religion plays a more visible role.

As a television series, *My Last Words* reflects the general difficulty of categorising factual television programming where tendency to observe people's real lives has resulted in the contradictory, overlapping and wide range of genres, from documentaries to reality shows (Hill 2007, 1–5). *My Last Words* is a hybrid that shares elements of both (observational) documentary, which concentrates on the topical and the everyday in a casual style with the intention of commenting socially on human nature (Biressi & Nunn 2005, 63), and (documentary-style) reality television, which typically focuses on ordinary people in emotionally difficult situations (Hill 2007, 15). Susan Murray (2009, 67–68) points out that, with their interest in the personal, both formats are 'obsessed with the intimate'. As a consequence, both are often accused of taking voyeuristic approaches when they create a sense of looking in on the lives of other people (Andrejevic 2004; Baruh 2009; Baruh 2010; Bagdasarov et al. 2010; Biressi & Nunn 2005; Calvert 2004). Similarly, when the *My Last Words* was announced in Finland, the producers were accused of violating the intimacy of the emotional processes related to death and dying.

In order to acknowledge the public opinion about the series, I collected three additional materials for this study. Firstly, I interviewed the producer, Sari Isotalo, (on 15 August 2013) about the process of making the series and about its aims, and studied how the Finnish Broadcasting Company marketed the series. Secondly, I analysed the media coverage of *My Last Words* both before and after the series was aired. The coverage includes the major newspapers in Finland (*Helsingin Sanomat, Turun Sanomat*, and *Aamulehti*) and two major tabloid magazines (*Iltalehti* and *Iltasanomat*). And thirdly, I analysed online threads related to *My Last Words* both before and after the broadcasts. The following web-based discussion platforms were followed from January 2008 to May 2008, and from April 2013 to June 2013: viimeisetsanani.com, www.hs.fi, www.iltasanomat.fi, www.iltalehti.fi, www.suomi24.fi, www.vauva.fi, kaksplus.fi. The media coverage and the audience reception have been studied through content analysis in order to describe the public debates on *My Last Words* and draw conclusions about how voyeurism and privacy issues related to death and dying were understood. Before turning to the narrative analysis of the series itself, I will briefly discuss the changes in the public debates related to the programme.

The Production and Reception of *My Last Words*

The production team of *My Last Words*, including the producer Isotalo (15 August 2013) and the broadcasting company (*YLE TV1*, 15 April 2013), has emphasised that the series' cultural aim is to normalise death and mourning. Yet in the beginning public opinion was ready to chastise the show's concept as a violation of privacy and the kind of commercialisation that exploited the suffering of other human beings. In January of 2008, within a few days of a press release that sought participants for the programme, the major national media had eagerly commented on the topic. For example, the leading national newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, published nine articles on the subject within the first week after the announcement. Most news stories openly avoided condemning the programme, but they did assert that the topic was controversial. The media discussion heated up when the tabloid magazines began to sensationalise the coming series. In one story, for example, a distinguished and highly respected Finnish physician, Dr. Risto Pelkonen, took a stand condemning the very idea of the programme as repulsive (*Iltasanomat*, 16 January 2008). In response, the Archbishop of Finland, Jukka Paarma, defended the programme by arguing that a tactful approach to death could ease anxieties related to the nature of death as a taboo subject (*Iltasanomat*, 21 January 2008).

The discussion was not limited to articles and the news, but continued on internet forums and discussion pages of the news media. Three main areas can be seen in these debates: programme content, the limits of television, and the cultural role of death. The most heated topic revolved around the programme, its concept, and its imagined implementation. Those who opposed the programme's idea claimed that the concept was exploiting, voyeuristic, awful, distressing, or offensive. One

anonymous commentator (on *Vauva.fi*, 16 January 2008), for example, wrote that the programme was 'the worst kind of social porn'; another (on *Kaksplus.fi*, 10 September 2009) stated that it was incomprehensible that a television programme would 'play with suffering people like this.'

Similar concerns have been raised elsewhere in discussions of the role of public broadcasting. For example, Kevin David Kendrick and John Costello have discussed voyeurism and morality in connection with the BBC's reality series *Nurse*. They argue that reality-based shows dealing with sickness exploit human vulnerability and force the viewer into a voyeuristic position. Even in the name of public access or demystifying anxiety related to illness and death, moral questions and compassion should be more important than giving viewers an opportunity to witness the intimate last moments of others (Kendrick & Costello 2000, 16–20). Still, in the Finnish discussions, some people admitted to being curious about human fate. These people wanted to know what others think as death approaches. However, these commenters also demanded of voluntary participation in the programme and a tactful approach. Monica (*Suomi24.fi*, 17 January 2008), for example, thought that it would be 'interesting to know what a dying person is thinking, as long as the broadcast is in good taste and respects the bereaved.'

The role of television programming, and especially the limits of reality television, was also discussed. The opposing comments argued that television is and should be an entertainment medium, and therefore difficult issues such as death should be avoided. By contrast, the favourable reactions saw the programme as a brave and novel opening in Finnish television and welcomed programmes addressing a taboo. Furthermore, there was some discussion of the role of death in contemporary society. For example, Leena (*Yle.fi*, 19 January 2008) observed that 'death is as natural part of life as birth. It can and should be discussed.' This was the attitude that the producers wanted to encourage, but too often this cultural discussion remained on the sidelines (Isotalo, 15 August 2013).

Interestingly, the same arguments were used both for and against the television show. Death was seen as a private issue in contemporary culture and depending on the viewpoint, this was either desirable or something that should be changed. In particular, the argument of naturalising death by means of a television series was seen as having both a negative as well as a positive result. Hintriika (*Suomi24.fi*, 17 January 2008), acknowledged these two aspects, writing that 'it is true that death has become a taboo because dying doesn't take place at home as it used to. Everything death-related is hidden until the funeral. Therefore, we should talk more about it – but not with sensationalism.'

The producer, Sari Isotalo, admitted that in the beginning, the heated debate annoyed her because the discussion concentrated on matters other than the programme idea itself. Still, bearing in mind that the programme was intended to heighten emotions, she believes that it has succeeded. She also observed in time the discussion began to concentrate on death as she had hoped it would do (Isotalo, 15 August 2013). Especially after the series was broadcast, the reception was positive and the response concentrated on the cultural role of death. Compared to the discussion that took place before, the discussion during and after the broadcast was modest both in quantity and in intensity. Opposing comments similar to those mentioned above were heard, but often they were framed with arguments indicating that the commentator had not watched the programme. As an anonymous visitor (*Viimeisetsanani.com*, 24 April 2013) wrote: 'I won't watch it, I don't understand programmes like this, they just make you feel bad. I know I'm mortal, and I do not want to feast on someone else's death.' Such comments repeat the same old prejudices and reveal the problematic role of death in contemporary (television) culture.

Those who watched the episodes were pleased with what they saw and often felt it necessary to assure others that the series was not voyeuristic. Instead, the programme was seen as realistic, true to the topic and to the sincere participants. Also the cultural importance of the topic was highlighted. An anonymous visitor (*Yle.fi*, 17 April 2013) wrote: 'Really good and

touching programme. I cried throughout the whole programme; it brimmed with wonderful warmth and love. This will help people deal with the idea of death, and I recommend it to all. The filming is respectful to the main character and her beloved. Subtle and respectful approach by the producers.' On the whole, the series was mostly seen as emotional and touching without being sensational. Thus, although the series had the potential for voyeurism, thanks to its intimate, emotional, and observing relationship with the dying, it avoided being understood as such. I argue that the reasons for this change in debate can be found in the narrative structure of the episodes.

Narrative of *My Last Words*

In *My Last Words*, each episode includes three different encounters. In the first section the dying person is introduced to the viewers. The viewer gets to know the person's background, illness, and attitude to death. In this opening section other participants, such as family members or friends, are also introduced. In the second section the dying and the family/friends are revisited. During this second meeting questions of impending death return and possible changes in attitude to death and dying are discussed. The last section takes place after the death of the principal, when the video letter is revealed to the family and friends. After the reading of the letter the camera recedes, leaving the family and friends in mourning.

As my analysis will show, in *My Last Words* the narrative choices serve both to encourage and to discourage voyeurism. For example, the participants are carefully chosen. The discursive power to define the death-related experiences is given to the dying persons. Secondary roles are given to the family and friends, who give a voice to mourning, loss, and grief. The narrative and emotional perspectives are intentionally kept on the level of ordinary people who are facing death. By contrast, the professionals, whose voices are most often heard in the public discussions of death and dying, are excluded. There are no doctors defining the illness or explaining the dying process, no funeral industry representatives to explicate the practicalities of bereavement or any religious authorities, who through transition rites hold a great deal of practical power over death. Occasionally, a nurse or some other caregiver may be introduced, but even they are either part of the background or they share their own emotional take on death. Through this careful selection of real people as the dramatis personae, the series emphasises not only the private over the public, but also the emotional over the professional. The use of participants who share a private and emotional take on death invokes questions of intimacy, yet the generous use of interviews emphasises the consent of each participant.

In *My Last Words* the narrative discourse both hints at and avoids voyeurism: some images observe intimate moments, while others were openly designed together with the participant. Below I will further address voyeurism by analysing five recognisable scene types in *My Last Words*: interviews with the characters, illustrations, characters in space, the transition to death, and video letters.

Interviewing the Participants

My Last Words' essential and dominant programme content is the interviews. In the Finnish episodes the audio consists mainly of interview material, with background voices or music used occasionally in transitions from one interview to another. In the Dutch episodes voice-overs tell the background of those who are dying. It is intriguing that the Finnish episodes chose not to follow this aspect of the format. Instead, almost as a reaction to the accusations that the series was taking advantage of the vulnerable, the Finnish narration proceeds almost entirely from the voices of the participants, who are given full definitional power over the discourse. In this way, the narration demonstrates that the dying and his or her family and friends have participated in their episode from their own starting points, aims, and desires.

In the series, it is customary for the dying to assert that they are not afraid of death. Instead, they want to see death as a natural part of life over which they have no control. The dying also emphasise their need to talk openly with others about

death. Many know the difficulties others had in dealing with the dying, and they have experienced social alienation. All the principal participants express a desire to be part of society as long as they have the strength to do so. In turn, family members and friends discuss their feelings of the impending death. They express fears of loss, and many of them stress that, even though they are aware that their loved one is dying, they could not prepare for the final loss. For example, Manta's daughter is saddened when she thinks about her mother's approaching death. 'I've mourned the loss of my mother many times, but so far it has never been final. It can only be final once. You can't practice it, death I mean, or prepare for it. The fact that someone has been ill for a long time doesn't make you ready for the actual loss.' Despite their fears, the family and friends also emphasise the importance of positivity, everyday tasks and need to concentrate on the living as long as they still have a chance to be together. Although both the dying and other participants express a need and a desire to talk about death, they do not want to be defined by death alone.

Although the interviews are deeply personal, they appear to concentrate on the messages chosen by the participants. The interviewer is not shown on camera, yet her questions are sometimes audible, and in this way the role of dialogue is made apparent. This indicates that the ongoing discussion is not a private confession, but rather that the dying are willingly taking the leading role in the interviews and sharing their views on death. In Baruh's (2009) empirical research on the types of content that are considered voyeuristic on reality television the revelation of personal information or exhibition of private emotions did not invite voyeuristic experience unless the experience was later gossiped about or happened behind someone's back. Thus, willingly given personal information is merely part of public confession, whereas voyeurism appears to connect with an observational invasion of intimacy.

In *My Last Words*, the willingness to share emotions is further emphasised at the level of image. The participants are sitting down. They are concentrating. They are facing the interviewer and the camera as well. These scenes with 'talking heads', which are typical of television's factual programming, emphasise that the participants knowingly and willing are taking part in a television show. Indeed, when the camera's presence is visible, a sense of interacting with the participants is more likely to occur than sense of voyeurism (Baruh 2009). Occasionally, the participants are even allowed to look at the camera. The direct address acknowledges the existence of an audience and creates a sense of intimate and interactive relationship with the viewer, usually allowed only to hosts of a television show (Fiske 2011, 54).

While the interviews highlight the consent of the participants, the images used are constructed to be emotionally involving. The participants are most often framed in close-up, medium close-up, or medium shots, which emphasise their gestures and facial expressions, tearful eyes in particular. Close-ups especially invite identification and emotionality. In visual theory the human face is recognised as having a huge impact on creating empathy in the viewer (Gaut 1999; Plantiga 1999). The power of facial expressions (and bodily postures) lies in the recognition of the emotions that a person is going through. Emotions are also transmitted through mirroring effects and imitation. Thus, through various means, visual images may influence a viewer's emotions, increase identification with the programme participants, and teach emotional responses to a given situation (Gaut 1999, 213; Plantiga 1999, 239–43). Similarly, the emotions addressed in *My Last Words* help to create a sense of public encounters with death and foster a shared understanding of socially acceptable emotional reactions to death.

By concentrating on the facial expressions of the interviewees, *My Last Words* emphasises the emotionality of the theme and encourages the viewer to empathise with the participants' situation and their emotions. The emotionality of these scenes could be interpreted as sensational, yet the highlighted presence of the camera mediates emotions as being a natural and normal part of encountering death. Similarly, the emotional reactions of the dying and their relatives and friends highlight the sincerity of the participants. By allowing viewers to witness their fears and grief, as well as their warmth and positive attitudes, the participants share how death and dying affect people emotionally. They invite the viewer to share their intimate

moments, and although this invasion of privacy is voyeuristic by definition, Baruh's (2009) study shows that when emotional reaction is distinguished by an invitation, the viewer rarely recognises it as a voyeuristic moment. In other words, the willingness to participate and the possibility of addressing the viewer directly create the sense of a tactful approach, even when the emotional revelations are overwhelming.

Illustrations

Although the narration concentrates on the interview material, visually the camera does not stay with the interviewees all the time. The editing of different images imposes a rhythm on the narration. In the Finnish episodes the tempo is considerably slower than in the Dutch episodes. In the Finnish episodes every image stays with the viewer longer, prolonging the moment before the cut to the next image. The slow pace creates a picture of the need to calm down before death, to look back and evaluate one's life. In the Dutch episodes the idea is reversed. The need to evaluate exists, but in terms of tempo, the desire to live full and fast until the end is emphasized over the need to slow down.

These two realizations of the same format also use different illustrations to control the pace of the narration. The Dutch episodes tend to concentrate on photographs. Thus, while interviewing or voice-over narration continues, photographs of the dying person's life are shown. By contrast, in the Finnish episodes photographs are not used to create life stories of the dying. Only one episode introduces a specific photograph, and it come from the graduation party for Ilona's son, shown as part of Ilona's life story. Otherwise, photographs are almost entirely lacking, although in Ilona's and Raimo's episodes, the viewer see photographs in the apartment of the dying participant. Yet the camera does not concentrate on any particular photo, nor is the narration dependent on their presence. Instead, in the Finnish series, other illustrations help to personalise each episode. The camera seeks out objects in the dying person's home that somehow characterise the participant. The inserted illustrations often obscure the production techniques and create a sense of peeking into someone's life.

With Maria, the personalised illustrations include images of roulette (Maria used to work on a cruise ship), images of a computer, as she searches for articles about medications for life support. Although all of the episodes were filmed in co-operation with the participants, only this first episode reveals this process to the viewer. Tending the garden with her mother, for instance, Maria mentions that the watering can should be positioned towards camera for better effect. When Maria visits the Institute of Forensic Medicine to discuss donating her corpse to medical science, images of autopsy tables and skeletons are shown. The other episodes refer less openly to the topic of death and especially avoid such strong allusions to death's bodily side while the dying participant is still in life; instead culturally-recognisable metaphors are preferred. In Maria's episode these include the repeated images of clocks referring metaphorically to time, which is running out whether she wants it to or not.

With Raimo and Manta personalised meanings are highlighted. The inserted illustrations include pictures of Raimo's daughters in his living room, images of a record player (Raimo is an eager listener to music), and moments in his workshop where he repairs second-hand items. With the 52-year-old Manta, the inserts include both religious artefacts (in reference to her religious background) and handiworks or paintings (illustrating her desire to do things with her hands and her need to leave something behind). With Sirkka and Ilona personalised items are not used as frequently, although there are some decorative images, such as china angels. With these two women especially, however, the use of a second type of inserted illustration – images of nature – is highlighted. All of the Finnish episodes show nature images in abundance: forests, trees, flowers, birds, plants, sea, rivers and snow create a gentle pace for the narration, with the images functioning as transitions between the interviews, the locations, and times. At the same time, these images naturalise death. Death becomes part of the circle of life, with human mortality tied to nature.

Image 1. and 2.: Inserted nature images dominate the transitions in the Finnish narration of *My Last Words*. (*Viimeiset sanani* 5/5 Ilona [*My Last Words*]). Broadcasted on Wednesday 22.5.2013, 19.55. Yle TV1. Produced by Susamuru OY, duration 27 minutes. Screen capture Outi Hakola May 28, 2013.)

Although the inserts function as visual repertoire and drive the tempo of the narrative, they are also given metaphorical dimensions in personalising and naturalising death. The personalised images often refer either to memories or to items with symbolic power, such as angel statues or candles, which are familiar from death rites. With nature images, the pictures are often stripped bare, as most of the material was filmed in winter when nature lies dormant. The pictures thus have the power to remind the viewer of death. Both types of images repeatedly depict shared and recognisable cultural references to death. Furthermore, by giving both human and natural meanings to death, the images create a bridge between culture and nature.

Dying Participants in Motion

Although interviews and inserted illustrations are largely static, each episode includes moments in which the dying participants are actively living out their lives. I call these images, in which the camera is allowed to follow the daily activities of the dying, 'characters in motion.' Such images clearly emphasise the voyeuristic position of the viewer: when compared to the emotional interviews, now the participants do not face the camera. Instead, the camera is hidden and observes from an apparently invisible position. Baruh's research shows that when the camera adopts a 'fly on the wall' perspective, which places the viewer in the position of a silent observer, the sense of voyeurism is heightened. The use of private spaces further highlight this voyeuristic appeal (Baruh 2009).

In *My Last Words*, a typical moment follows the dying person taking a walk outdoors or leaving to go from one place to another. The camera is positioned in the bushes, behind the trees, peeking through leaves and branches. In addition, often the camera is positioned at a distance, and the image does not concentrate on the emotional facial expressions, but on the participants' movements and their environment.

Image 3.: When Sirkka take a taxi to visit her daughter, the camera is positioned on the hill, behind the trees, and distanced from the situation. (*Viimeiset sanani* 4/5 Sirkka [*My Last Words*]. Broadcasted on Wednesday 15.5.2013, 19.55. Yle TV1. Produced by Susamuru OY, duration 28 minutes. Screen capture Outi Hakola May 17, 2013.)

Occasionally, distanced images are used when the dying meet others. For example, when Sirkka meets her daughters, the camera is now and then at a distance, showing the composition of the group. This could be interpreted as the camera hesitating to invade moments of personal interaction. Yet this positioning also highlights the camera's observational role as an outsider. Moreover, the camera is constantly being placed outside windows and doorways from where it looks in, stretching the limits between private and public space. Also, by being observed through reflected and detached images, the dying characters appear vulnerable from the outsiders' point of view.

Image 4.: The liminal spaces of *My Last Words*. The camera peeks in through the window of the workshop to observe Raimo. (*Viimeiset sanani* 3/5 Raimo [*My Last Words*]. Broadcasted on Wednesday 8.5.2013, 19.55. Yle TV1. Produced by Susamuru OY, duration 27 minutes. Screen capture Outi Hakola May 17, 2013.)

In *My Last Words* images in which a reflective surface, such as a window or a mirror, pictures the dying highlight questions of threshold, liminality, and transgression. A window represents the borderline between private and public, interior and exterior, and can function both as a symbol of detachment and as a meeting point (Kaplan 2002, 162–66; Bruhn, Gjelsvik & Thune 2011, 11–12). In the series, mirrors are used in a similar way. For example, when Ilona, lying in bed, is preparing her last words, the camera shows her reflection in a wall mirror; when Manta moves through her apartment in a wheelchair, the camera follows, again through her reflection, this time in a hall mirror.

In these scenes, a reflective image highlights the status of being between life and death and places the dying in a liminal state, the term that cultural anthropologist Victor Turner calls the time between a person's death and society's adjustment to this death (through burial, for example). Such a state threatens the social order, but by definition it is a limited period during which society adjusts to the loss (Turner 2008, 94–95). In contemporary Western societies dying is an increasingly drawn-out process, and the liminal state can begin during the dying process itself. Through this process the dying are slowly marginalised from the active members of society (Koski 2010). Although *My Last Words* endeavours to normalise death and give social visibility to the dying in order to prevent their premature exclusion from society, the hidden observational position of the camera and the use of windows and mirrors appear to conflict with this cultural aim. Instead, these scenes increase the sense of voyeurism whereby viewers are reminded of their position as outsiders.

Transitions to Death

During the latter parts of each episode, the passing away of the main participant is announced with a death notice that includes the person's name, birth date, and death date. Before the reading of the video letters there is a short transition scene, which includes the last images of the dying person. In the Finnish episodes the transition to the death notice is often a transition to light. The final images of Maria are taken with her family while they are enjoying a barbecue. The camera pans skyward and after light has filled the image, the death notice appears on the screen. A nearly identical scene takes place in

Manta's episode; she is making a painting when the camera pans to the light coming from the window. Sirkka is reading a poem with the words 'this memory can't be taken away from me' when the image focuses on the window and the light. Raimo is the only exception to the association of the death notice with light (as is Ilona, but she does not die during the series). Although Raimo is standing by a window listening to music, the camera does not focus on the light, but on an extremely close-up shot of his fingers, which are tapping in keeping with the rhythm.

The repeated use of light reminds the viewer that each participant has denied being afraid of death as such. Death may intrude into their lives, but death itself is not a bad thing; thus light and the sky are the images chosen rather than darkness. In addition to the theme of death and light, all of these transitions start from the participants' favourite everyday activities as these were introduced in each episode. This technique highlights the normality of death for ordinary people, placing emphasis on remembering persons as they were in life.

After the transition to the death notice, some death rituals are shown, depending on what the participant and the families have consented to. In the case of Maria, the transition rites are limited to an image of the grave and flowers. With Manta and Sirkka, images from the funeral are shown, although the camera is positioned at the back of the church so that only glimpses are given of mourning family members, with most of the images concentrated on candles, flowers, and the coffin. Once again Raimo's episode has a different solution. The viewer is allowed to see Raimo lying in his coffin with a white cloth placed over his face.

The camera witnesses all of these brief glimpses from afar. These images of transitions are not detailed, nor does the camera linger on them. Here the tempo of the cuts from one shot to the next is faster than elsewhere in the episodes. Although these techniques highlight the voyeuristic position of the viewer, the camera's invisibility to the mourners and the pace of the shots show consideration and empathy. The narration does not allow the viewer to intrude on the intimate moments of death rituals, at least, not for too long. In this way, despite the voyeuristic position, the sense of a tactful approach is created.

Video letters

Each episode of *My Last Words* ends with the reading of the video letters written by the dying and addressed primarily to family members and friends, who are invited to the showing. The parts of the letters shared with the viewers emphasise messages of love, pride, and the continuity of family traditions. Whereas the Finnish letters concentrate on personal messages to loved ones, the Dutch episodes are once again more community orientated: these letters may contain general messages on living and dying well and are directed to the television audiences as well as to loved ones.

Whereas the audio track focuses on the extracts from the letters, the images concentrate on the family members more than on the video letter. Thus, an important narrative task of the mourners is to provide emotional reactions to the letters. At this point the camera is facing those who have gathered in front of the television for the reading of the letter. The situation is reminiscent of the interviews because attention is drawn to the camera's presence. Here, the focus changes from the thoughts of the dying person to the mourners and their reactions.

Image 5.: Raimo's daughter reacts emotionally to her father's video letter. Her reaction captures both her grief and loving memories. (*Viimeiset sanani* 3/5 Raimo [*My Last Words*]. Broadcasted on Wednesday 8.5.2013, 19.55. Yle TV1. Produced by Susamuru OY, duration 27 minutes. Screen capture Outi Hakola May 17, 2013.)

Just as the dying wanted their dying process to be not only about sadness, but also about the continuation of life, so too the reactions to the video letters include both sorrow and happy memories. In this way, the series depicts a variety of emotional reactions to death, which affect not only the dying, but also their loved ones and, through the public eye of the camera, the society around them as well.

Conclusions

My Last Words mediates intimate moments and the emotions of those who are dying and mourning. It thus follows the definitions of mediated voyeurism in which intimacy is willingly and knowingly shared with a general audience. Although before the television series was broadcast, public opinion was doubtful and ambivalent about questions of privacy in relation to dying, the programme's actual reception was positive, with viewers judging the series as non-voyeuristic. Indeed, many of the programme's narrative solutions support an interpretation of a respectful approach to death: the interviews and the reading of the video letters of the dying stressed the sincerity and willingness of the participants, and the camera's reluctance to linger on death rites and funerals showed respect for privacy. From this perspective, the episodes refrained from prying more deeply into the participants' lives than was already freely shared with viewers. However, the illustrations, the dying in motion, and even the transitions to death tend to conceal the camera's presence and emphasise the viewer's role of peering in on the most intimate moments of other people's lives.

What the comparison of the narrative solutions with the audience reception indicates is that viewers tend to have a different understanding of voyeurism than do media researchers; voyeuristic content and voyeuristic interpretations are thus not necessarily the same thing. For viewers, the concept still appears to carry a negative stigma, invoked whenever they consider transgressing socially acceptable limits in observing the lives of others. Yet an open invitation to share even drastic emotional moments is not interpreted voyeuristically if the approach is tactfully executed and the viewer is not forced into an excessively voyeuristic position. Even when certain narrative techniques encourage a voyeuristic gaze, the audience tends to

overlook these moments and concentrate on the interaction with the programme's participants. Yet the same content can be interpreted as voyeuristic from the point of view of narrative analysis, because the series by definition shares the intimate emotions of individuals with a public audience. However, in television research, mediated voyeurism does not refer only to negative social phenomena. Instead, mediated voyeurism can be part of an emotional public sphere in which socially shared understandings of dying, death, and mourning are created, and voyeuristic content can prove to have (positive) social power.

When the differences in conceptualising processes are set aside, *My Last Words* and its reception reveal Finnish audiences' increasing familiarity with dealing with emotions, including anxieties about death, in television programming and viewing. The producer Sari Isotalo (15 August 2013) commented on this cultural change, saying that when the project began, normal deaths of ordinary people were almost entirely lacking on television; when the series was finally broadcast, openness to discussions of death in public had increased. Thus, the emotional topic of death shown in connection with ordinary people going about their daily lives does not necessarily or automatically equal sensationalism. Instead, observing privacy can be interpreted as a tactful and meaningful experience. In this view, despite the project's rocky start, *My Last Words* managed to focus viewers' attention on the series' main topic, death and dying, and succeeded in its aim to promote normalising and naturalising death as part of contemporary life.

1. All translations from Finnish to English (including show title, captions from the programme, Finnish media and internet discussions) are mine.

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