Reality TV as a moral laboratory: 
A dramaturgical analysis of The Golden Cage

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Abstract
Public debates on reality television often address the display of emotion and immoral conduct. Television scholars have recently proposed that while reality television offers its audience an opportunity to learn valuable lessons, they rarely address the issue of the morality of the genre. In this contribution, we analyze the display of emotion and immoral conduct in the Dutch reality show The Golden Cage. Reality television is viewed as constituting a ‘moral laboratory’. The question guiding our research revolved around the kind of exercise this moral laboratory provides for. A dramaturgical study of the display of actions and emotions as part of participant “projects” (Beckerman, 1979) was used to answer this question. Results indicate that moral issues and emotions were continuously at stake, and immoral conduct appeared to be coupled with pleasurable emotions. It is concluded that the laboratory of The Golden Cage is at least equally suited for exercising autonomy and identity performance under competitive pressure as it is for the simulation of moral conflicts.

Keywords: Reality TV, emotion, morality, dramaturgical analysis

Introduction
Reality television couples an immense popularity with loathing criticisms. Criticism of the Dutch reality program The Golden Cage (De Gouden Kooi) has been notably harsh. The resistance the program met was illustrated by Dutch Christian Democrat parliamentarians’ call to advertisement agencies to boycott the ad blocks scheduled around the program. Professional journalists and cultural critics expressed their disapproval of the program in the newspapers, accusing the program of an unprecedented exhibition of immoral attitudes and conduct. In addition, fear was expressed that the program exploited emotions, which were presented so intrusively as to eliminate any moral reflection on the part of the audience. The government was incited to appeal to the producers’ responsibility with regard to the protection of public morality (cf. Effting...
and Du Pré 2006; Evers, 2006). When the U.S. network ABC expressed interest in buying the program rights, an international wave of moral indignation was ignited on blogs and online news sites (cf. Wade, 2007; Adalian, 2007). *The Golden Cage*’s intellectual author John de Mol responded laconically, emphasizing the format’s pedagogic function: ‘Just as [*The Golden Cage*] demonstrates how sick you feel the day after drinking abuse, it also shows that someone playing mean games is presented with the bill by the end of the day. Now is this a way to promote bullying? No, it shows that if you play at bowls, you must look for rubbers. Negative conduct generates positive learning effects’. (Busato, 2007).

Reality television, or more precisely, the Reality Game Show (RGS) is a hybrid genre that combines elements of a game show (competition) with those of a documentary (featuring common people who are continuously filmed). In *The Golden Cage*, 10 people agree to stay at a luxurious villa for an indefinite period of time. Each person must pay a €10,000 entrance fee in order to participate. Participants are treated like millionaires in the villa: Maids attend to their needs, a chef prepares the meals, and they even have a sports instructor. Like in other RGSs, participants are eliminated from competition for various reasons. The last remaining participant wins €1,000,000 and the villa. A psychological twist is added to the traditional RGS format: While participants have to collaborate, they must ultimately eliminate each other (Dovey, 2008). That is, participants have to live together and therefore need to cooperate, but they also have to force each other out of the villa in order to win. There are two ways to eliminate participants: Participants can either vote for another participant to leave — here unanimity is required for this decision, thereby reinforcing cooperation. Alternatively, participants can leave the villa voluntarily, whereby they lose the entire entrance fee. Clearly, participants will only leave voluntarily when they can no longer bear the situation; therefore, joint pressure is needed to eliminate a participant. Dovey (2008) notes that this format turns the game into a psychological experiment, which tends to fuel excessive emotional display. To quote Annette Hill (2005, p. 1): ‘Everyone cries. Everyone votes. The winner bursts into tears of gratitude, excitement and something else known only to them’.

In recent years, cultural studies contributions have been devoted to addressing the reproach that RGSs are merely a sensationalist, vacuous display of emotions. The key concept in these contributions is that of authenticity. Analyses of *Big Brother*, the predecessor to *The Golden Cage*, have resulted in the proposal that such a display of emotions offers access to the inner life of participants and helps viewers to obtain knowledge about ordinary people and the ups and downs they face in daily life. When the participants perform more *authentically*, viewers are
more likely to take the shows seriously and view them as presentations of meaningful life stories. Additionally, the audience acquires insights into which display of emotions is socially desirable in a diversity of situations (Biltereyst, 2004; Hill, 2005; Aslama and Pantti, 2006). Moreover, authenticity has been given a more prominent place than emotion in explaining the popularity of the RGS. Van Zoonen and Aslama (2006) and Hill (2005) pointed out that a major gratification of RGSs for the audience is to discover the limits of participant authenticity. The audience may, to varying degrees, endorse the producers’ claim to reality of the situations shown (i.e. that situations are not staged). Additionally, the audience may interpret participants’ performance in the situations shown as more or less authentic. This criterion may be more important for the appeal of the RGS than ‘reality’. According to Hill (2005) and Van Zoonen and Aslama (2006), the appeal of Big Brother is in the playful discovery of the distinctions between participants’ role performance, as imposed by a contrived situation, and showing their authentic selves. The format has been designed to promote performance. Participants are perceived to ‘act naturally’ in the sense that they can remain true to their actual selves (Hill, 2005). Participants who remain true to their actual selves may act as role models for viewers. The added value of authentic emotions is therefore in their potential use for identity construction.

While the analysis of the role of authenticity adds a great deal to understanding the emotions in The Golden Cage, it does however not address the objection to the display of immorality. Moral reflection is at best addressed obliquely as in Hill’s (2005) observation that the meaningful stories offered to viewers of RGSs may incite ethical reflections. The lack of consideration of moral reflection in the RGS becomes more conspicuous when considering cultural studies’ general dismissal of the idea that consumers of popular culture lack critical moral thinking as an elitist prejudice (Tavener, 2000). The irrelevance of moral issues to the reality genre also cannot be grounds for its omission. A content analysis study by Krijnen (2007) shows that moral themes and reflections abound in both fiction and non-fiction television programs. RGSs contains just as many moral reflections as other types of programs in the sample researched. The present study aims at exploring the moral conduct displayed by participants in The Golden Cage in relation to the emotions portrayed and thereby also addresses the moral concerns raised in the public debate that are under-researched in the field of cultural studies.

Although we have mentioned the reproaches of immorality and excess of emotions, their relationship has yet to be made clear. In line with the dominant philosophical conception of morality that considers moral decisions to be made on the basis of rational considerations, many peo-
ple subscribe to the assumption that emotion stands in the way of morality (Rachels, 2003; Johnson, 1993). From this point of view and given the basic concept of the RGS, which features participants in a continuous relationship crisis producing incessant emotion, there appears to be little room for moral themes or deliberation. If it is accepted that there are important pedagogical elements in RGSs, the question then arises as to whether moral themes and deliberations can be part of RGSs and how they relate to the participants’ emotions. In this contribution, we investigate the claim of moral lessons as inherent to the content of an RGS, focusing particularly on the role of emotion.

Emotion and morality: The moral laboratory

The relation between emotion and morality has traditionally been characterized as problematic. According to Kantian philosophy, emotion stands in the way of moral reflection, which should be a purely rational exercise. Having become the norm in modernity (Poole, 1991), this view has lost ground in recent years to conceptions originating from romantic ideas of moral sentiment in drama and literature. Philosophers of literature, such as Richard Rorty (1989) and Martha Nussbaum (2001), elaborate on the contribution of emotion in fiction to one’s own moral capacities. Fiction provides readers with imaginary situations experienced via the character’s individual subjectivity, calling forth strong emotional valuations and subsequent moral reflections (Nussbaum, 2001). For example, emotions such as indignation or revulsion involve disapproval of a character’s conduct, raise readers’ awareness of their own ethical beliefs, and may result in moral reflection.

Media psychologists express related views on the role of emotion in entertainment (Tan, 2008). Stories, shows, and games simulate difficult situations that could occur in real life and evoke strong emotion in entertainment users. The emotions incite an investigation of situations inimagine and a consideration of alternative solutions. In doing so, they employ social skills that are difficult to be trained in real life (Mar and Oatley, 2008; Kramer, 2008). Investigations instigated by emotions emphatically include moral judgment and reflection (e. g. Nussbaum, 2001; Haidt, 2003; Rozin et al. 1999; Raney, 2005). As a form of entertainment, reality television offers a variety of scenarios and, at the same time, constitutes attractive food for the audience’s imagination, including the moral imagination. As stressed by Biltereyst (2004), RGSs involve the audience in the participants’ emotions and consequently in moral considerations (Nussbaum 2001). In this sense, RGSs may be considered as an emotional-moral laboratory for the audience (cf. Hakemulder, 1998). In the laboratory emotions may help rather than hinder viewers to concern
themselves with moral issues. However, it is not clear to what extent the reflection invited by the RGS is moral and for what kind of moral exercise the RGS laboratory is exactly equipped. How the audience reflects on participant emotion and morality is an issue to be assessed by audience studies. This study of *The Golden Cage* is concerned with the show’s content. It attempts to shed light on the nature of the displays of participant emotions and how it might contribute to any moral exercise.

*The dramaturgy of emotions and morality in The Golden Cage*

The design of the emotional-moral laboratory can be described using basic concepts from dramaturgy — the analysis of strategies and tactics employed by playwrights to instigate desired audience reactions in the theatre. We see terms from this art form as appropriate for covering the content typically conveyed by RGSs because emotions and actions displayed by RGS participants can be seen as performances, in the well-known sense dating back to Goffman’s (1959) analysis of the presentation of self in everyday life. In Goffman’s theory, persons perform as they do because they are watched by other participants in the interaction. In an RGS, the idea of performance is present because participants are aware that they are continuously being watched both by other participants and a real audience (Corner, 2002; Hill, 2005).

Because performance is the realm of theatre theory rather than of narrative models that involve mediation of story events by a narrator, we propose to analyze participant actions through a dramaturgical analysis rather than with narrative models. According to Beckerman (1979), whose analytic approach we have adopted, theatre is conscious self-presentation. Actors play a role; their dramatic skills also include finding a balance between exhibition of the character and of the actor’s self. The same mixture may be seen in reality television where participants are aware of an audience that watches them.

There is an overall dramaturgy of the RGS in which the participants’ performances fit. Rather than simply neutrally mediating between ‘reality’ and what the audience sees on the screen, producers of an RGS make strategic decisions equivalent to those that playwrights make with regards to obtaining specific audience effects. First, there is the basic situation of the RGS. Producers of reality shows contrive a situation in which participants are forced to react to one another (Dovey, 2008). Physical containment of participants prevents them from moving away from situations and from others, which is close to a state of imprisonment (in a ‘cage’).

Second, there is selection. Each RGS episode is in fact a strongly condensed compilation of a huge set of $24 \times 7$ registrations. An average
episode of *The Golden Cage* lasts 22 minutes (1.5% of the total minutes in a day). This means that producers make far-reaching decisions as to what the audience gets to see.

Third, strategic explanations are deployed. Episodes present individual participants addressing the audience as in theatrical asides (directly providing access to their experiences through monologues into the camera). In addition, producers provide interpretations of the action in voice-overs. These interventions are scripted so as to strengthen the dramatic impact of selected actions. Last but not least, episodes are embellished with sound effects that underscore events or steer the interpretation of participant’s actions, as in a Hollywood drama.

The dramaturgy of RGSs thus strives toward ‘emotion television’, just as drama aims at stirring emotions, offering situations that may occur in everyday life in extremely magnified form and thereby providing for an emotional-moral laboratory. As in traditional forms of drama, participant action can be understood in terms of one all-encompassing conflict branching out into various clashes between the characters’ individual ambitions. To the extent that RGS participants act their strategic part like characters in a theatrical play, their performance can be described accordingly. Beckerman (1979) proposes to define character strivings as ‘projects’. The concept of project enables us to link actions, emotions, and morality in the analysis of participant action. A project is ‘the concrete focal point of a character’s energy, and it is the project that the performer enacts’ (1979, p. 71). Performers do not need to be fully conscious of projects – this is the reason why Beckerman coined the term project instead of motivation. According to Beckerman, projects are at the root of goals and plans that shine through a character’s actions. They are therefore the driving forces behind character action and emotion. Projects meet with resistance, as Beckerman puts it, and, we add, are therefore linked with emotions. Projects inevitably involve moral considerations because they are themselves subject to moral judgment – Is it right to desire to profit monetarily at the expense of others? – or because realizing one’s engagement to a certain project requires choices between means to an end, one more acceptable than others. Because Beckerman does not provide a complete list of possible projects, it is left to the drama analysis to propose them for a given play. Theatrical projects originate in the playwright’s mind; in reality television, we argue, they result from the artificial situation participants have been forced into. In adapting the term this way, we propose five projects that seem necessary in response to the requirements that the producers of *The Golden Cage* have imposed on participants.

Table 1 summarizes projects shared by participants in reality shows such as *The Golden Cage*. We discuss these in relation to typical emotions.
Table 1. Dramaturgy of the Reality show

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dramatic conditions: Reality show features</th>
<th>Participant projects</th>
<th>Selected participant emotions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>joy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>With boredom</td>
<td>helplessness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>With lack of contact with outside world, esp. relevant persons</td>
<td>sadness</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>anger</td>
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<td>nostalgia</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>guilt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organized, controlled, partly staged situation shown to wide audience</td>
<td>Maintaining positive self image (feeling of control, initiative)</td>
<td>joy</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>pride</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>shame</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Self presentation toward audience: creating desirable image</td>
<td>helplessness</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>guilt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Game</td>
<td>Win competition</td>
<td>joy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strengthen position</td>
<td>sadness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Engage in and maintain alliances; break up alliances</td>
<td>frustration</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obtain power</td>
<td>floating</td>
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<td>Schadenfreude</td>
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and their inherent moral considerations of the participants involved in the projects.

1) **Coping with the condition of near-imprisonment** involves dealing with the lack of perspective and uncertainty. Participants tend to feel sad and helpless or hopeful and optimistic. Severed from their home environment, participants cope with boredom, long for their loved ones and worry about family and friends as well as their own affairs. Moral choices arise from this project. Whereas reproachable conduct includes rousing others by provoking incidents and rows, laudable ways of coping include looking for diversion in other activities, such as hobbies or setting up a small business.

2) **Maintaining a positive self-image.** The show’s set-up includes staging effects on participants, which cause them do things they would not
under other circumstances. The assignment set by the show’s conditions is to maintain a feeling of control and a sense of justification of one’s own goals, decisions, and actions. Shame and guilt may result from failing to correctly act according to one’s norms. Morally right ways to deal with the assignment is to subject one’s own actions and attitudes to moral reflection. An obvious but reproachable way out is to abstain from moral reflection altogether (‘This is just who I am’).

3) **Maintaining a positive public image** is a project related to the former. Participants have to avoid loss-of-face vis-à-vis other participants in order to stay ahead. Participants in *The Golden Cage* have access to media; favorable coverage can function as a strategic asset in retaining positions in the participant pecking order. Pride and shame are the emotions associated with success and failure in realizing this project. Examples of morally desirable conduct would be showing one’s weaknesses and doubts and confronting those who show condemnable conduct. Reproachable conduct would be defaming others in order to bolster one’s own appearance.

4) **Winning the competition.** As in every competitive game, the main goals are to improve one’s own position and undermine that of others. In this particular game, obtaining support from others and engaging in coalitions are subprojects. Emotions relating to competition are joy when you succeed, disappointment if you do not, and Schadenfreude if others fail. Morally positive conduct would be to persuade others to leave voluntarily. However, moral ‘purity’ is difficult to attain because participants are never free from self-interest in persuading others to leave. There is no lack of less laudable ways to win, in fact, there are as many as there are ways for making life difficult or unbearable for others participants.

5) **Obtaining power** is a project in itself and is also related to all other projects: While it is instrumental to winning the competition and facilitates surviving near-imprisonment, it also tends to help in becoming popular among participants and the audience and in retaining a positive self-image. Having power is accompanied by pleasant emotions and pride – wanting it, on the other hand, by frustration, helplessness, sadness, and the like. Getting power is surrounded with moral issues by eminence. Dubious means abound, with intimidation and scheming among the readily available options. ‘Cleaner’ ways include attracting respect through ‘natural’ preponderance, leadership, and ‘character’, as well as ‘spontaneously’ giving and receiving friendship.

The dramaturgy of reality television is the force that drives participants to act according to these projects. The resulting permanent conflict man-
manifests itself in continual clashes between participants and crystallizes in gradually developing outcomes. According to drama theorists ranging from Aristotle to Pfister (1977), spectators of drama necessarily develop a desire to follow these complications. It may be argued that viewers of reality television have such a desire in common with drama spectators and moral reflections perhaps occur in the course of the activity. For this to be the case, 1) causes for emotional-moral reflections residing in the emotion display have to be identified and 2) displayed emotions must be telling of participants’ moral attitudes. Starting from the dramaturgical model, we analyzed how displayed emotions can, on the one hand, be linked with projects and with (im)moral conduct shown by participants on the other. The furnishing of The Golden Cage as an emotional-moral laboratory and the quality thereof could thus be made visible.

Method

23 episodes of The Golden Cage were analyzed with regard to displayed emotions, participant interactions, and underlying projects. Because the complexity and dynamics of the situations developed across the entire cycle of programs, three subsequent seasons have been selected for analysis. 10 episodes were taken from the initial season of the program (Season 1, October 2–13 2006), that included the premier, eight from a later season (Season 2, March 26–April 4 2007), and five from the last weeks of the The Golden Cage series (Season 3, April 21–April 25 2008). Additionally, the grand finale, an event broadcasted live, was analyzed.

Full transcriptions1 were made of the episodes (except of the grand finale that contained mostly material from previous episodes) and were analyzed using the Atlas.ti program. The analysis followed Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) ‘grounded theory’ approach. Elements of the dramaturgical model functioned as ‘sensitizing concepts’. The voice-over was taken into the analysis as providing orientation to interpretations of events and participant projects. An essential feature of the grounded theory is that the analysis is considered as interplay between researchers and data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The sensitizing concepts evolve over time. In order to prevent results from becoming mere subjective interpretations, grounded theory is structured by three stages of analysis. During each stage, the researchers have set up a sensitizing process in which all steps in that stage were discussed and fine-tuned.

In stage one, each episode was studied separately in order to describe the appearance of emotions and moral conduct. As suggested by the psychological literature, verbal utterances and facial expressions may be used to identify emotions from audiovisual recordings. We freely adopted the general theory of facial expression of basic emotions from
Ekman et al. (1982). The use of the theory for analyses of film has been discussed in Tan (2005) who concludes that facial expression in film may be used as an index of emotions if the communicative context of film, notably acting in relation to a plot, is taken into account. The coding of emotions does not distinguish ‘authentic’ from ‘acted’ emotions or any mixture of the two. The basic emotion schema was not used as a formal coding device; for this reason, no reliability checks were performed — instead, it was used as the starting point for the sensitizing process. Labels were assigned to emotions and actions. A limited set of so-called basic emotions like joy, surprise, fear, anger, disgust, and contempt could be clearly identified, as following Ekman et al. (1982), and were therefore taken as a starting point for coding. In the first instance, coding of emotions fell short of validity. A typical example was that of the participant who smiled with joy, all the while repeatedly slapping another participant in the face in order to annoy him/her. Here a more complex emotion label, such as gloating, seemed more appropriate. Refinement of the crude basic emotion schema was added by involving dialogue in the analysis, making it possible to distinguish between more subtle emotional categories. Dialogue was decisive in the final labeling of emotions, as verbal expressions often tended to override facial expression and gesture. In stage two, similarities and differences between episodes were labeled, thereby resulting in a reduction of labels and adding nuance to emotions and moral actions. Furthermore, emotions were divided into (hedonically) ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ categories (cf. Ortony, Clore and Collins, 1988; Roseman, 2007). Positive emotions are pleasurable to the experiencer, whereas negative emotions are painful. Although warnings against simplifications inherent in the distinction have been expressed (e.g. Frijda, 2007), the distinction in positive and negative emotions can be used when emotional experiences are predominantly pleasant or painful. The distinction also helped to relate emotions to projects (successes vs. failures) and to project related action intentions. This was achieved in stage three, which consisted of linking participant actions and interactions and emotions with projects — that is, adding project labels to action and emotion sequences. Furthermore, moral conduct was associated with display of positive or negative emotions.

Results

The analysis showed that immoral conduct reigned supreme in *The Golden Cage*. By ‘immoral’, we mean participant actions (including verbal statements) resulting in another person’s detriment and accompanied by the actor’s positive emotions. In itself this result does not come as a surprise given the basic situation and the competition characteristic of
the RGS and the wide rejection of the program as a baiting show. Interestingly, the coupling of evil action and pleasure seemed to be emphasized by the producer using dramatic means like voice-over and sound effects.

Display of emotions

Participants’ display of emotions is near permanent. Every scene featured emotion portrayed in images or apparent from dialogue. To give an impression, on average, an explicit emotion featured every six minutes. The basic emotion schema was refined during the analyses. While the basic emotions surprise, disgust, and fear were virtually absent, anger and sadness had to be differentiated into milder and more project-specific forms, like nostalgia, offence, and disappointment for sadness and irritation, grudge, and frustration for anger.

Figure 1 presents frequencies of emotions. Anger, malice, joy, irritation, frustration, and gloating occur remarkably frequently. Emotions are not equally distributed across analysis periods. Joy and malice were predominantly exhibited in the first period, while anger and gloating were in the second. In the third period, the variety of emotions had decreased and joy and gloating were dominant.

What Figure 1 fails to convey is that positive emotions were exhibited much more frequently than negative ones. It was not uncommon for a participant to show anger and attack others with apparent pleasure. Positive emotions coupled with aggression toward another participant constituted about two-thirds of coded emotional displays. Perhaps even

![Figure 1. Frequency of emotions per Analysed Period.](image_url)
more telling is the emphasis in the program’s presentation on the emotions shown by the initiator of the interaction (typically anger and malice) and under-representation of the victim’s reaction (e.g. fear, sadness, and anger). The impression was therefore created that *The Golden Cage* seemed to focus on malevolent pleasure of attackers, while downplaying the victims’ pain.

**Projects**

The projects ‘Coping with near-imprisonment’, ‘Positive self-image’, ‘Positive public presentation’, ‘Winning the competition’, and ‘Obtaining power’ proved largely sufficient for analyzing participant interactions. Interactions serving the gain of power occurred only in combination with ‘Winning the competition’ and the two projects were conflated for that reason. All scenes of *The Golden Cage* appeared to fit within the dramaturgical model, as they could be interpreted as serving an important goal as part of one of the projects. Figure 2 provides an overview of the frequencies of projects across periods. In line with expectations, ‘Winning the competition’ was featured most often, followed by ‘Positive self-image’.

Figure 2 shows a seemingly dramatic decrease in the number of projects in period 3. The explanation for this may be twofold: First, the participants had been told at the onset of this period that the show was to have a grand finale in three weeks time, lending urgency to the project ‘winning the competition’ at the cost of others. Second, the decrease may be related to the dominant role for the voice-over in this period.
**Coping with near-imprisonment**

In order to *survive*, participants attempted to seek comradery and remain in touch with important others outside the villa. Seeking comradery involved actions such as gauging others without revealing too many clues regarding one’s identity and intentions. Maintaining contacts with the outside world required earning so-called contact-points, distributed by the particular week’s group leader during group meetings or in organized competition such as a game of golf.

Participants had high spirits in the first period. They exchanged many ideas about how to deal with imprisonment and probing candidate friends. Open-minded listening to others and mutual support could be regularly observed. A conversation between Ilona and Natasia serves as an example. Natasia was offered the chance to win a sum of money (€ 50,000) if she would enter *The Golden Cage* sooner than originally planned. She agreed and, as a consequence, could not say good-bye to her children the way she would have liked; now she longs desperately for them.

Natasia: Yes, he [her partner Wilgo] was really right, he said to me, ‘It looks as if you are just in it for the money’. I thought I did the right thing, love, I thought I did.

Ilona: Yeah, you would love to call, I know …

Natasia: Right, Ilona, but in all honesty, it really, really backfired so hard.

Ilona: Oh, it did. I think we all feel this way … Yeah, that’s for sure. *(TGC, October 2 2006)*

Providing support and comfort can be regarded as opting for benevolent conduct. Participants in this interaction displayed positive as well as negative emotions. Natasia shows regret, guilt, and sorrow, but also relief in receiving support. Ilona, who offers her a shoulder to cry on, exhibits compassion. Actions of both parties, offering or accepting comfort, seem to be morally right.

In the second analyzed period seeking comradery appeared to involve less innocent strategies. Participants attempted to affiliate with another by blackening a third. What we did not foresee is that this line of conduct also characteristically went hand in hand with positive emotions of the perpetrators. A typical example of pleasure in denigrating a participant is a conversation by three participants with Huub, who has fallen in love with the villa’s cleaning woman Lieke. They join in expressing their doubts to Huub about the sincerity of Lieke’s intentions:
Eric: That doesn’t say anything about proper intentions, it just looks a bit over the top. You really need to be careful because it could make both you and Lieke …
Sylvia: But it just proves that …
Eric: Incredulous …
Sylvia: Everything testifies to … that it is just so.

(TGC, April 2 2007)

In this scene, facial expressions convincingly show the speakers to be content with what they are doing. (Convincingly meaning that they either were or successfully pretended to be content due to limitations of coding. See Method section). The two scenes illustrate how period two appeared to offer a mirror image of what we observed in period one. When a participant needed support, actions to comfort her were replaced by rejection. That participants obviously enjoy their action seems morally offensive.

Maintaining a positive self-image

Keeping an appropriate self-image turned out to be crucial for staying upright in The Golden Cage. ‘Self-disclosure’ scenes show participants revealing intimate details about themselves, sorting out their own moral limits, and justifying their choices. In contrast to self-presentations to others, participants attempted to account for their conduct in order to approve of themselves in the first place. The following monologue is illustrative. Nicolaas attempts to justify to himself his decision to vote against another participant’s request to keep a pet in the villa:

Nicolaas: I believe it’s unfair to the rest of the group if somebody keeps something dear to them. Some people love an animal, others a human, and I think it’s unfair toward the others — so I voted against it. (TGC, October 10 2006)

Monologues such as these are not addressed to other participants; however, participants do address the show’s audience. Therefore, maintaining a favorable self-image was often difficult to distinguish from managing one’s public image.

Positive self-presentation towards others

Creating and maintaining a favorable presentation of the self in order to solicit alliances within the villa and gain support from the audience seemed a continuous concern for the participants. Self-disclosures and
regular conversations between participants proved effective means to this end. Acts of favorable self-presentation were generally causes of pleasurable emotions. For example, when Amanda probes the sincerity of Lieke’s feelings for Huub, Lieke corroborates the purity of her intentions.

Lieke: Well ... isn’t it obvious? It just started as a fling, for everyone is after Huub. [...] I admit it was sort of a game. But yeah, at some point it got more serious than I planned.
Amanda: Okay, I wonder whether I read it or not, but are you in love?
Lieke: Yes, I am. If not I wouldn’t be here. (TGC, April 2 2007)

Lieke apparently tries to convince Amanda of her sincerity with a heartfelt confession — it started as a game. Lieke experiences positive emotions about her confession. She seems proud to speak up honestly and enjoys feeling in love.

The participants’ preoccupation with the outside world’s views of them was conspicuous\(^2\). Moral referents, people one considers to be moral anchors (Krijnen, 2007), were apparently not only sought within the personal environment, but also in a wider social circle that is largely anonymous and irresponsible to the persons conduct. Emotions exhibited by the participants in The Golden Cage tend to differentiate according to this distinction. When persuading fellows of their righteousness, participants tended to feel content, whereas they tended to feel less at ease when managing their public image. The negative emotion potential of the latter situation can be clarified by the following example: Huub and Brian quarrel about Brian’s attempts to coerce his partner Amanda to take a pregnancy test. Although a display of power drives the clash, managing the outside world’s image of their selves is a major motive for the action of both participants.

Huub: Because I care for Amanda and whenever I see someone crying.
Brian: So you care for Amanda, so you harass her?
Huub: Come off it, lad <beep> what sort of place do you think you’re in right here? When they talk about this and then she will walk around there crying and that all fuels [the audiences’ gloating opportunities]. And you say: I just haven’t given it a thought; you prove it by saying ‘I want security first’ all the time. There are more discrete ways to go about it than this. This way you have exposed Amanda, as you did so many times. You shouldn’t have!!! (TGC, March 29 2007)
Brian’s overt criticism of his conduct apparently angered Huub. His defensive emotion was a response to Brian’s disgracing Amanda in front of other participants. It also manifested a concern for the outside world’s judgment and likely condemnation not only of his actions, but also Amanda’s. Any participant can easily denounce another and a shared norm is that no one should. Similar emotional reactions shown by other participants seemed to imply a constant awareness of being watched and valued by the show’s audience. Strikingly, in the third period, the amount of ‘self-disclosures’ containing self-justifications or attempts to maintain a positive image toward others had almost vanished. It seemed as if this was deemed useless when it came to the final struggle.

**Winning the competition**

It stands to reason that the ultimate drive of each participant in *The Golden Cage* is to win the prize: the villa and one million euros. Its manifestations are numerous indeed, however direct attack and scheming are among the most popular strategies. The interactions concerned are predominantly sources of positive affect for the initiators, however unpleasant they may be to the viewer’s eyes — and the poor target’s! The attacker’s emotion framed by the camera inevitably suggested that he or she enjoyed it for its success, for its own sake, or for the effect it will have on the victim.

All episodes frequently show the direct attack strategy. An example is a scene showing Natasia launching an instant attack on Nicolas and Sylvia who were involved in a conversation:

Natasia: [entering, to Nicholas:] I’ll tell you one thing!
Nicolaas: Yeah, what?
Natasia: If you let me down while we are such a close group then we are enemies, and you can never make up for that!
Nicolaas: Where do I go then? What am I going to do then?
Natasia: Darling, listen. I have the feeling you are talking about me. All you can do is say: Natasia, no we are not.  

(*TGC*, 6 October 2006)

Nicholas’ and Sylvia’s talk had nothing to do with Natasia whatsoever. The unpredictable aggression with which Natasia has the habit to confront the other participants definitely proved to be advantageous; she stayed in *The Golden Cage* for a long time.

Scheming involved using another participant as a pawn in undermining a third participant’s position who was considered the real adversary. For instance, Huub and Brian both attempted to manipulate Amanda
in order to weaken the other’s position. In the following example, it was Huub’s turn:

Huub: It’s just <beep> Amanda, you know that yourself, trust your own judgment and let Brian distort it as he pleases. I think, I think, by now you figured out what I am worth and you will just see that confirmed from now on [...] And that’s the difference between me and Brian actually, because Brian won’t even give a fuck to protect you, he just uses you, and you know that damned well. (TGC, March 30 2007)

Huub had expressed earlier that he expected Amanda to leave the villa prematurely and therefore did not aim for a coalition with Amanda, but did need her to put Brian in place. Huub’s positive feelings could be inferred from his assertive tone at this point of the episode. A moment later he smugly addressed the audience in an aside:

Huub: [...] replaying a part of their conversation] I will never hurt you. And then she looked at me and she was so moved, and then, she said something like, ‘When I am with you? I want you just for myself and I know you are not a guy like that’. And I said you know, ‘We can always talk about that’, and I looked deep into her eyes. And she melted completely. And this morning, to be honest, I really played with her feelings, so yes I am playing a very mean game. (TGC, March 30 2007)

The immoral action had two victims, first Amanda and then Brian. The example illustrates the display of malicious pleasure and gloating on the part of the offender as well as one particular way in which the victim’s reaction remains hidden from view. Naturally, the victims found out what was done to them only later and therefore their reaction was easy to omit. Consequently, skipping parts of the action is an additional means to keep reactions to attacks literally off-screen. Another possible aftermath of morally reproachable conduct, the offender’s regretful second thoughts were also not shown — assuming that they even occurred at all.

Two participants were to be voted off The Golden Cage during the three weeks before the finale. This caused the participants to take drastic steps. For example, participant Huub decided to marry his girlfriend Claire (another participant). Huub openly admitted that he would never marry her if they had met outside The Golden Cage. Claire is only featured as deeply in love and unaware of Huub’s main goal, even though
a visiting friend tries to discuss this issue with Claire. It can be argued that such extreme measures to win the competition also resulted in additional pain for the victims.

The voice-over

The voice-over appeared to be a major procedure of *The Golden Cage*’s dramaturgy in emphasizing the coupling of evil actions with positive actor emotions. Consider the situation where Natasia launches a ‘down-with-Sylvia’-campaign:

Voice-over: This is Sylvia’s first morning in the villa. Yesterday she was appointed the tenth millionaire by majority vote. Everyone has his or her own way to deal with the impact of her entering. Natasia, as always, has her heart on her sleeve. She won’t rest before Sylvia leaves the villa. She initiates her anti-Sylvia campaign.

Natasia: Maybe she is just tired of traveling and is looking for peace and quiet.

Ilona: But she can’t keep going on that way.

Natasia: Oh well, I hope I can contribute to that.

Ilona: For there is no quiet in here, you’re never uhhh.

Natasia: Simply ignore her, do as if she doesn’t exist like all those gnats on the wall, you know. Just pretend she doesn’t exist. (TGC, October 9 2006)

The voice-over controls the interpretation of Natasia’s immoral actions by rendering the underlying goals and project explicit. The instrument is also used to convey the participants’ interests in actions and choices they make, and their enjoyment of these. At times, the voice-over seems to infer mala fide intentions where there are none, as in this scene.

Voice-over: In *De Gouden Kooi* the millionaires can earn contact points. With these points they can call their loved ones or even bring them to the villa. Natasia has decided to use her contact points to call her friend Wilgo. Her young son just had an operation and, as a good mother, she should want to know how he is doing. Well, that’s at least what you would expect … (TGC, October 11 2006)

What really happens during the conversation however is that Natasia does show an interest in her son:
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The voice-over seems to reflect the criticisms in the Dutch media of Natasia’s failure as a mother. Magnifying or insinuating reprehensible actions suggests the producers’ dissatisfaction with the game’s potential for invoking fascination in the audience.

As noted before, the voice-over became more important over the year-and-a-half of the show’s broadcast. In the third period analyzed, most events were only discussed by the voice-over and it even appeared as if participants were there to underscore the voice-over’s story rather than the other way around. For example, it is not participant Jaap who is explaining his plans to disrupt Huub’s and Claire’s wedding, it is the voice-over:

Voice-over: Jaap has once more turned into ‘Terror-Jaap’ and is scheming to disrupt the wedding. (TGC, April 21 2008)

The voice-over is accompanied by a view of four people sitting together enjoying a drink and discussing something. It is nighttime and their discussion is inaudible to the viewer. Sound effects consolidate the voice-over’s interpretations. After the announcement, Jaap is shown talking to Brian while the music of the shower scene in the movie Psycho can be heard.

Looking back at the manifestation of the projects, it appeared that managing one’s image somehow pervaded most actions and displayed emotions. It was noted before that the projects maintaining a positive self-image and positive self-presentation toward others were often difficult to distinguish and we might combine these under the heading of creating and maintaining a favorable image. This project turned out to be crucial for survival and winning because participants’ images were constantly under fire. Participants’ image seemed a dear and essential possession, and perhaps even the prime object of contest. They flaunted their satisfaction when they had gained power, fiercely denied allegations and the impact of any attacks they were subject to, and justified their conduct after having dealt a blow to others.

Conclusion

From the content analysis we concluded that The Golden Cage is a typical RGS in that it provides its audience with a near-continuous series of
emotional displays. The program's dramaturgy can be understood as imposing a set of projects on participants that inevitably come into conflict with one another. The clash is the source of emotion, just as in drama. In spite of what critics of the format may believe, the register of emotions exhibited by participants appeared to be broader than merely excitement and anger. They varied widely from helpless loneliness to intentional forms of aggression. This leads us to assume that *The Golden Cage* constitutes an emotional laboratory providing its audience with a vast array of situations in which they can observe participants, identify with them emotionally, and access their feelings and inner life.

We interpret the functions of emotional display in the participants' performance as follows: A first function may be to create personae as in a drama. All emotional displays turned out to have a background in a limited number of projects that are linked with the set-up of the RGS. Whenever projects failed to produce conflict, the producers tended to act as *deus ex machina* selecting the right scenes and boosting participant performances to conform to their projects (by inserting participant monologues and voice-overs). Participants on their part seemed to cultivate a consistent performance. By filling in their projects in a characteristic way (e.g. gaining power by intimidating solo actions or gossip) they built a consistent image. The image could more or less develop autonomously from the person, with certain traits magnified, ultimately turning the participant into a persona. The persona could become very popular in the outside world. Terror Jaap became a star of sorts. The participants' and producers' strategies were mutually strengthened in a race for the most consistent public persona image. Because winning the competition was the major project, it may be that participants who cultivated this project into a successful and interesting (i.e. extreme) performance stole the show. Cunningness and ruthlessness seemed to be essential ingredients of the most popular persona. Jaap, who won *The Golden Cage*’s grand finale, was the ultimate winner, a crook who constantly outperformed other participants. He apparently both enjoyed and cultivated the epithet Terror Jaap that his admirers in the audience had placed upon him. It is essential in the dramaturgy of the successful persona that he shows an extreme degree of ruthlessness. The best evidence for this is that he took pleasure in doing evil, which is what was generally shown.

While the merits of *The Golden Cage* are clear at least to us, it is much more doubtful whether *The Golden Cage* is dramaturgically equipped for moral exercises. We may be skeptical about the RGS's potential for stimulating moral reflection. The conspicuous absence of victim views in particular is a source of concern regarding the equipment of the moral laboratory, for empathy with suffering persons is a necessary emotional
basis of moral reflection. On the one hand, the absence is a blessing since it partially counters the reproach of the RGS’s voyeurism and its potential to cultivate malicious delight in watching losers in pain. On the other hand, the same blind spot of The Golden Cage’s cameras in terms of the consequences of assaults, insults, harassment, and humiliation raises doubts about its contribution to moral training. Empathy with victims is impeded. It would also seem that personal involvement with common people and their vicissitudes — correctly identified as a valuable function of reality television (e.g. Biltereyst, 2004) — frequently assumes the shape of sharing malicious pleasures of gloating and Schadenfreude in The Golden Cage. Finally, John de Mol’s observation that perpetrators, in the end, are presented with the bill was not generally supported. This was illustrated most clearly by the rewards that Jaap was endowed with in the grand finale: the money, the villa, and lasting fame.

It seems possible that The Golden Cage fuels the tendency to ignore one’s scruples in dealing with adversaries; in other words, it may contribute to the callousness effects identified in social learning media effects research. Concealing the victims’ suffering, the glorification of malicious acts, and allowing perpetrators self-justification are all parts of the show that seem to contribute to lowering thresholds in regular viewers for reprehensible, transgressive conduct (e.g. Bandura, 2002, pp. 132–137.) However, this line of reasoning neglects what Bilandzic and Rössler (2004) recently label the specific ‘gratificational context’ of the RGS as a genre. In particular, an interpretation of the dominance and even glorification of morally undesirable attitudes and conduct in the emotional-moral laboratory ignores the dramatic perspective that was at the basis of the analysis of emotional scenes — as well as the ways the audience profits from it. It may be that many fans of The Golden Cage’s winner did not initially admire his ruthlessness and cunningness, but instead enjoyed the impeccability of his performance and the believable persona of Terror Jaap that he created. In other words, they enjoyed the element of play in the show (cf. Van Zoonen and Aslama, 2006). Alternatively, viewers may have loved the persona of Terror Jaap while waiting for the authentic Jaap, Jaap the person, to shine through the performance (cf. Hill, 2005). In these cases, the laboratory was perhaps most like a master class in acting or identity building, fueling the audience’s imagination of what it is like to act, to act naturally, and to script one’s own person under the particular circumstances of the RGS. Moral exercises, including imaginarily trying out immoral conduct or copying it in reality, would not fit the lab’s equipment. We may have to conclude that The Golden Cage is an emotional laboratory for the playful exploration of identity politics. This is in line with Biltereyst’s (2004) finding that the audience of Big Brother is far from naivety with regards to the authentic-
ity of participants and with Hill’s (2005) characterization of \textit{selving} as the game that RGS viewers play. In this view, the focus on performance and persona would neglect moral reflections. However, here seems to be room for such reflections in retrospect: namely, when viewers leave the laboratory and realize that the losers may pay a real price and that the winner’s authentic moral convictions may be simply part of the construction of a persona. These however, are questions for reception research.

\textbf{Bionotes}

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\textbf{Notes}

1. We thank Nathalie Werbata, Bob ten Berge, Peter Evers, Urlis Goodings, Daan Kleiman, and Noah Reymond for their many efforts.

2. Initially the audience could not influence who stayed in \textit{The Golden Cage} and who did not. The producers changed this rule during the second half of the show’s broadcasting.

\textbf{References}


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