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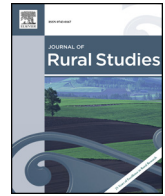
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Romance in the cowshed: Challenging and reaffirming the rural idyll in the Dutch reality TV show *Farmer Wants a Wife*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of rural life in the immensely popular Dutch version of the reality TV show *Farmer Wants a Wife* (2004–present). It asks whether this representation manages to move beyond the persistent association of rural life with the idyll, which, as many rural scholars have noted, prevents important aspects of contemporary rural life from being seen and understood. A comparative visual and narrative analysis of the first series (2004–2005) and the eighth series (2014–2015) of *Farmer Wants a Wife* reveals how it initially challenges but ultimately reaffirms this association. The first series emphasises the profound dissonance between the idyllic expectations of the rural on the part of those seeking to find love with the farmers and the decidedly non-idyllic realities of twenty-first-century farming. By the eighth series, the show has largely abandoned its commitment to documenting the realities of Dutch rural life, instead privileging the love stories, for which idyllic portrayals of the rural function as an unquestioned backdrop. The ambivalent, changing way in which the rural idyll is mobilised in *Farmer Wants a Wife* is conceptualised through the genre theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Lauren Berlant, which yield new insights into why the association between rural life and the rural idyll is so persistent and how it might be loosened.

‘Those ladies are looking for the prince on the white horse; with me, all they find is the prince on the green tractor’ Farmer Hans (*Farmer Wants a Wife*, series 1, episode 1)¹

1. Introduction

Since 2004, one of the most popular television broadcasts in the Netherlands has been the reality TV show *Boer zoekt vrouw* or *Farmer Wants a Wife*, based on a British format sold to 31 countries by Fremantle Media.² It regularly draws between three and four million viewers in a country of 17 million people, receives extensive media coverage, and has turned several of its participants into national celebrities. The show follows farmers, portrayed as having trouble finding spouses because of their rural location and the demands of running a farm, in their quest for ‘true love’. After the farmers and their businesses have been introduced to the television audience, potential spouses (mostly from urban or suburban locations) write to them. The farmers

subsequently meet some of the letter writers for ‘speed dates’ and invite their three favourites for a joint visit of a few days to their farm. At the end of this visit, the farmers choose one of the three to join them on a ‘romantic city break’ to see if a relationship will develop. By the time of its tenth anniversary in 2014, the show had featured 68 farmers, who received letters from 10,488 potential spouses, resulting in more than ten marriages.³

Farmer Wants a Wife hinges on the paradoxical idea, jokingly invoked in our epigraph by a farmer featured in the show’s first series, of the “prince on the green tractor.” This phrase captures the tension between, on the one hand, the show’s premise that it is difficult for farmers to find love and its presentation of farming as a tough, distinctly unromantic business, and, on the other, the impression created by the large numbers of letter-writers that farmers and their rural lifestyles are highly desirable. In this paper, we examine how this tension results in a contradictory representation of rural life that both challenges and affirms the rural idyll as the prevailing mode for conceiving of the rural.

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¹ All quotations from *Farmer Wants a Wife* have been translated from Dutch by the authors.

² The Dutch version, broadcast by KRO-NCRV on the public television channel NPO1, began its tenth series in autumn 2018; each series has 13 episodes. For a comparative study of how the Dutch and Australian versions of *Farmer Wants a Wife* localise the format, see [Van Keulen and Krijnen \(2014\)](#).

³ Data provided in the ten-year anniversary broadcast (NPO1, 21 December 2014).

The Netherlands is highly urbanised, with 90.5% of the population living in cities.⁴ While the limited size of the country means that the rural is never far away, many Dutch people will not have significant first-hand experience of rural life. Instead, their ideas about rural life are shaped by news media and factual or fictional portrayals in literature, film, television, and art (Phillips et al., 2001; Dickason, 2017; Haigron, 2017). The rural idyll, derived from idealised literary and painterly renderings of the countryside (Short, 2006; Key, 2013; Holt, 2003), has emerged as the most influential lens through which to conceive of rural life. This is the case both in the cultural imagination and in social reality, most notably in the UK (Short, 2006; Woods, 2011; Hildyard, 2013; Elson and Shirley, 2017; Haigron, 2017; Mingay, 2017), but also in many other countries, including the Netherlands (Van Dam et al., 2002).

While the rural idyll has taken different forms across cultures and history, all of these entail a ‘mystification’ of rural actualities that works to naturalise and legitimate particular social relations, rendering it a ‘cultural fantasy’ (Short, 2006:144) or ‘myth’ (Haigron, 2017). Some of its forms have been especially persistent and can be seen to ‘linger as ghosts’ in contemporary conceptions of the rural (Short, 2006:145; Bunce, 2003; Williams, 2011). As a result, crucial aspects of rural life that do not fit the conventions of these durable forms of the rural idyll, such as unemployment, crime, and poverty, remain obscured (Somerville et al., 2015; Key, 2013). This affects not just the perception of the rural of people situated outside it, but also that of its inhabitants. Research in the UK has shown, for example, that the gap between the expectations produced by the rural idyll and the realities of rural life can harm the health and wellbeing of rural residents (Watkins and Jacoby, 2007; Matthews et al., 2000). The strong grip of the rural idyll on conceptions of rural life and the harmful effects this can have makes it vital to study its persistence.

Today, popular television is a particularly important medium for the reproduction of the rural idyll because of the large audiences it can reach and the wider media coverage shows like *Farmer Wants a Wife* attract.⁵ *Farmer Wants a Wife* is a particularly revealing instance of a media representation of the rural idyll because, as noted above, it evokes it in a profoundly ambivalent way. This ambivalence is due in part to its status as reality TV, a television genre that, because of its increasing focus on the rural, deserves more critical attention in rural studies.⁶ Different from the documentary, reality TV combines documentary realism’s aim of presenting reality as it is with an ‘entertainment-based drive of the narrative structure’ (Dovey, 2015:160). Because the dual purposes of conveying factual information and entertaining the audience are ‘often awkwardly at odds’ (Dovey, 2015:160), Reality TV is prone to producing contradictory portrayals like that of the rural in *Farmer Wants a Wife*.

In this paper, we present a critical examination of *Farmer Wants a Wife*’s relation to the rural idyll in the form of a comparative narrative and visual analysis of the first (2004–2005) and eighth series (2014–2015). An important finding is that the show’s relation to the rural idyll is not just ambivalent but also changes over time. Most television representations of the rural idyll evoke it in a consistent manner, as is the case, for example, with the fictional UK shows examined by Phillips et al. (2001), Horton (2008) and Dickason (2017), and the factual ones discussed by Bishop (2017). In contrast, as we will show, *Farmer Wants a Wife* moves from posing a challenge to the idyll’s

hold on representations of the rural to reaffirming it.⁷ Before presenting our analysis, we explain how we conceptualise the rural idyll as a genre through the theories of the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1996) and the American cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2011). These theories, which have not yet received much attention in rural studies, yield new insights into the intimate association between rural life and the rural idyll, both in terms of why it is so persistent and of how it might be loosened.

2. The rural idyll as genre

Mikhail Bakhtin (1996) uses his concept of the chronotope to distinguish different versions of the genre of the idyll. The chronotope (literally ‘time-place’) is defined as a conventionalised combination of a particular construction of temporality (i.e. linear or cyclical time) with a particular construction of spatiality (i.e. isolated or connected space). In literature, a chronotope creates a specific type of fictional world that can generate certain narratives, characters, and events, but not others (a cyclical-isolated world, for example, cannot produce a narrative of radical change). Because of the standardised nature of the generated narratives, the chronotope ‘has an intrinsic generic significance [...] it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions’ (Bakhtin, 1996:85, emphasis in text). Chronotopes, in other words, produce genres. Thus, the idyllic chronotope (cyclical time combined with isolated space) produces the genre of the idyll, in its different versions, and is also a constitutive element of the hybrid genres of the provincial novel, the *Bildungsroman*, the Sentimental novel and the family novel (Bakhtin, 1996:224, 229).

Crucially, for Bakhtin chronotopes exist in literature and in life; he speaks of ‘actual historical chronotopes’ assimilated, in ‘complicated and erratic’ ways, by literature as ‘generic forms’ (Bakhtin, 1996:85). Literary genres, then, have a basis in social reality, which is itself structured and made sense of through conventionalised spatio-temporal configurations. These ‘social chronotopes’ constitute ‘the imagining systems of whole societies and civilizations’ and ‘organize the world into space-time grammars’ (Sandywell, 1998: 206–207), of which the rural idyll is one.⁸

With respect to the chronotope of the idyll, which Bakhtin traces, in different forms, through literary history,⁹ he begins by distinguishing the four ‘pure types’ of genres it originally produced: ‘the love idyll (whose basic form is the pastoral); the idyll with a focus on agricultural labour; the idyll dealing with craft-work; and the family idyll’ (Bakhtin, 1996:224). However, he stipulates that these ‘ancient matrices’ (Bakhtin, 1996:227) shared features, were often mixed and had multiple variants. Uniting them was the idyllic chronotope’s fundamental relation to a unitary, cyclical, pre-capitalist form of folkloric time that binds people to a fixed, familiar, isolated place where they follow in the footsteps of their ancestors. This spatio-temporal constellation lacked social stratification, as everyone engaged in ‘the collective task of fostering the growth and renewal of the social whole’ (Bakhtin, 1996:211). The main form of labour was agricultural and not part of a larger economy: farmers produced only what is needed by their community. People were not yet individualised, there was no sense of a historical time transcending the community’s continuous renewal and there were no outsiders.

In response to the emergence of capitalism and particularly

⁴ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2212.html> (accessed 20/8/18).

⁵ In the Netherlands, even people who do not watch *Farmer Wants a Wife* are aware of it because of the amount of media attention it receives.

⁶ Globally, reality TV focusing on the rural is on the rise: besides the different versions of *Farmer Wants a Wife* (including a new British one broadcast on the BBC in 2017 entitled *Love in the Countryside*), examples include the American *Duck Dynasty* (2012–2017) and the Chinese *Where Are We Going, Dad?* (2013–present).

⁷ We compare the first with the eighth series because the latter is the most recent series focusing on farming in the Netherlands; the ninth series was the second “international” edition, featuring Dutch farmers abroad.

⁸ For an extensive discussion of Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope and its productivity for analysing contemporary popular culture, see Peeren (2008).

⁹ Curiously, research on the rural idyll has invoked Bakhtin’s views on carnival and the carnivalesque (Holloway, 2004; Winchester and Rofe, 2005), and his notion of landscape (Parry, 2013), but not his account of the idyll (Bakhtin, 1996:224–236).

industrialisation, Bakhtin (1996:236) sees the ‘idyllic complex’ develop in new directions, accommodating stories of those who leave their idyllic community and return individualised (provincial novel), of the destruction of the idyll (*Bildungsroman*), and of confrontations with the dangerous world outside the idyll (family novel).¹⁰ What remains throughout these transformations is the core idyllic notion of a ‘small but secure and stable little world of the family, where nothing is foreign, or accidental or incomprehensible’ (Bakhtin, 1996:232). This notion is arguably central to the rural idyll as it lingers today, and explains its continuing appeal.

Although for Bakhtin genres are relatively stable structures, they are not impervious to change. On the one hand, there are ‘generic forms’ – like the rural idyll – that continue ‘stubbornly to exist, up to and beyond the point at which they had lost any meaning that was productive in actuality or adequate to later historical situations’ (Bakhtin, 1996:85). Similarly, elements of even the most ancient, pure forms can be taken up in later genres. Bakhtin (1996:226) explains, for example, that ‘the love idyll was able to serve as the foundation for various types of novels, and could enter as a component into other novels (for example, those of Rousseau)’. Aspects of the love idyll, then, can conceivably re-emerge even in a contemporary show like *Farmer Wants a Wife*. On the other hand, genres come in different types and variants, and may develop over time. Such development can result from changes in historical reality, as in Bakhtin’s account of the transformation of the idyll by the emergence of capitalism, or from the interaction between different chronotopes, which are not isolated from each other but ‘may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships’ (Bakhtin, 1996:252). Thus, when a literary text or television show mixes different genres, these can mutually reinforce but also change each other, depending on the compatibility of their characteristics.

While Bakhtin’s references to ‘the actual chronotopes of our world’ (Bakhtin, 1996:253) remain tantalisingly brief, Lauren Berlant (2011) takes up the idea that social reality is lived in accordance with generic forms. As conventionalised social constructions that ‘provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold ... in life or in art,’ genres guide how people respond to real and imagined events (Berlant, 2011:6). When a mismatch occurs between an event and the affective expectation of it produced by the genre through which it is experienced (when what happens does not make sense in the terms of that genre), a choice has to be made. One can either continue to see the event as if it accorded with the affective expectation, making it necessary to disavow (aspects of) the event, or adjust the affective response to the event, requiring the genre to be reconfigured. Genre’s basis in ‘normative social convention’ (Berlant, 2011:7) and people’s attachment to what is familiar makes the former choice tempting and, in practice, prevalent. As a result, the genres through which people experience the world and their place in it can lag behind social actuality.

The rural idyll’s stubborn persistence in cultural representations and the social realm, despite its inability to capture the realities of contemporary rural life, makes it what Berlant calls a ‘good-life genre’ (Berlant, 2011:2). These are genres that people optimistically continue to adhere to because they offer ‘predictable comforts,’ even when ‘the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds’ (Berlant, 2011:2). In this way, Berlant provides an answer to the vexing question posed by Rosemary Shirley in *Creating the Countryside: The Rural Idyll Past and Present* (Shirley, 2017:8): ‘even though we know they are unrealistic, how do these [idyllic] images [of the countryside] retain their charge?’

Like Bakhtin, however, Berlant also insists that genres can change.

¹⁰ While Bakhtin sees some forms of the literary idyll as more closely drawing on historical reality than others, he stresses that all of them involve idealisation (1996:226–227).

Even in the case of a good-life genre, if the mismatch between its staid (if comforting) conventionality and actual events keeps manifesting, this may create openings for either genre development or what Berlant (2011:6) calls a ‘waning of genre’. Such a waning occurs when a genre’s inadequacy to social actuality is no longer denied but acknowledged, causing the affective expectations attached to the genre to be dismissed as nostalgic and naïve. This potentially makes room for ‘new aesthetic forms’ more in tune with social actuality to be constructed (Berlant, 2011:7).

Although there are literary texts, documentaries, and television shows that present rural life without relying on the genre of the idyll (Parry, 2013; Fournier, 2017; Dickason, 2017), these remain exceptions. The idyll retains a strong influence across cultural representations and the social realm, with many people continuing to buy into its good-life fantasy. Such buying into the fantasy is literalized by the popular UK reality house-hunting show *Escape to the Country* (2002–present), whose title affirms the idyllic conception of the rural as a refuge from the negative aspects of modernity and globalization (Burchardt, 2002:166; Woods, 2011). As our analysis will make clear, *Farmer Wants a Wife*, too, suggests that a true waning of genre is a distant prospect for the rural idyll.

When looking at *Farmer Wants a Wife* in the light of Bakhtin’s exploration of the idyll, it becomes clear that it endorses aspects of some idyllic genres, while rejecting others. On the one hand, the programme revives elements of all four ‘pure’ forms: the love idyll (in its emphasis on the love stories), the idyll with a focus on agricultural labour (in its focus on life on the farm), the family idyll (in its explicit endorsement of marriage), and the idyll dealing with craft-work (in the use of decorative tiles and other craft objects in the show’s opening sequence and website, to be discussed later). It also reiterates the emphasis of all idyllic genres on the desire for a safe little world by portraying the farm as an insulated space, fully known and familiar to its occupants. On the other hand, neither the programme’s premise that the farmers can only find love by appealing to a national television audience, nor its presentation of farming as an unsentimental globalised business fits the ancient idyllic notion of the rural as ‘sufficient unto itself’ or as pre- or anti-capitalist (Bakhtin, 1996:225). The show equally challenges more modern incarnations of the idyll. Its focus on farmers, for example, counters the way in which the rural idyll has manifested more and more as an urban, elitist projection onto a countryside reconfigured as a ‘place of leisure’ in which ‘farmers themselves can become increasingly “matter out of place”’ (DuPuis, 2006:127).

The profound ambivalence of *Farmer Wants a Wife*’s engagement of the rural idyll can be ascribed not only to the fact that, as Bakhtin emphasises, there are multiple idyllic genres, but also, as mentioned earlier, to reality TV’s ‘generic hybridity’ (Kavka, 2012:5). As reality TV, *Farmer Wants a Wife* brings together multiple genres (produced by different chronotopes) that deflect each other. According to Bakhtin, “within the limits of a single work ... we may notice a number of different chronotopes and complex interactions among them ... [I]t is common ... for one of these chronotopes to envelope or dominate the others” (Bakhtin, 1996:252). The dominant chronotope is leading, moulding the others within it to its requirements.

In the case of *Farmer Wants a Wife*, the enveloping chronotope produces the genre of the reality dating show. This is a subgenre of reality TV that ‘portray [s] nonactors in dating situations with the camera acting as an observer of real-time events’ (Ferris et al., 2007:490), of which the American *The Bachelor* (2002–present) is the best-known example. In terms of its spatio-temporal organization, the reality dating show presents the linear story of someone looking for love selecting the ‘right one’ from a number of candidates competing for their attention, in a controlled or even confined space. The developing love story is narrated with a strong emphasis on emotional realism. In emotional realism, ‘reality’ and ‘authenticity’ are asserted not on the basis of empirical truth – the situations are often highly contrived and partially scripted – but on the basis of the level and perceived sincerity

of the emotions generated (Cloud, 2010:418; Aslama and Pantti, 2006). Seeking to extract constant emotional displays from their participants, reality dating shows tend towards melodrama (Dubrofsky, 2009:358).

Within the framework of the reality dating show, *Farmer Wants a Wife* establishes a dynamic dialogue between three genres: 1) the rural idyll and its idealised portrayal of rural life; 2) the romance or love story and its standard narrative progression from initial attraction (on the basis of the letter and ‘speed date’) via falling in love (during the farm visit) and this love being tested (during the city trip) to the revelation of whether the couple will live happily-ever-after in the ‘reunion’-episode at the end of each series; 3) documentary realism, characterised by the use of ‘observational realism’ as ‘a set of formal markers that confirm to us that what we are watching ... is a record of an ongoing, and at least partly media-independent, reality’ (Corner, 2015:149). There are obvious tensions between, on the one hand, the rural idyll and the romance (with the love idyll signalling their complementarity), which both indulge fantasy, and, on the other, documentary realism, which claims to show the world as it is. In *Farmer Wants a Wife*, these tensions play out in different ways as the relationship between the three genres changes.

The narrative and visual analysis that follows serves, first of all, to substantiate our argument that *Farmer Wants a Wife* moves, between the first and eighth series, from challenging the rural idyll to endorsing it. Second, it mobilizes Berlant's and Bakhtin's theories to explain how this shift occurs and what its consequences are for the show's portrayal of the rural. Looking at the first series (2004–2005) we show how especially the opening sequence and first episode present the rural setting of *Farmer Wants a Wife* in line with elements of certain forms of the idyll, including those distinguished by Bakhtin. At the same time, this series emphasises the dissonance between the potential spouses' idealised expectations of the rural (evoking the idyll as a good-life fantasy in Berlant's sense) and the non-idyllic realities of Dutch twenty-first-century farming. By highlighting this dissonance, the first series provides the potential for a waning of the rural idyll. Subsequently, we show how, in the opening sequence and first episode of the eighth series (2014–2015), as well as on the redesigned website, the realities of Dutch rural life are no longer highlighted as insistently. This marks the subordination of the genre of documentary realism to that of the romance within the framework of the reality dating show genre. With the increased prominence of the love stories and the associated melodrama, the rural idyll is no longer challenged but uncritically endorsed as a mere scenic backdrop for the love stories. As a result, the potential for its waning as a genre disappears.

3. Finding love while shovelling cow shit: questioning the rural idyll

The first series of *Farmer Wants a Wife* (2004–2005) has an opening sequence that highlights its focus on the realities of contemporary farming life: a rapid montage of images (sheep, pigs and cows in fields and stables, a statuette of a couple in Dutch folk dress, tomatoes being plucked, cabbage being cut, manure being poured, hay being harvested and a milking machine) is accompanied by an upbeat theme tune incorporating sounds of bleating sheep and a cow bell. Midway through the sequence, the farmers who are seeking love start being introduced, their names superimposed on images showing them collecting cow dung, feeding animals, ploughing the field with a tractor, helping a cow give birth and inspecting crops. Countering the sequence's commitment to documentary realism, however, is the way the images are enclosed, in the four corners of the screen, by a red-green-and-blue flourish. This flourish resembles a pattern commonly found on Dutch flatware and tiles known as *boerenbont* (Gaudy Dutch or, literally, ‘farmer's multi-coloured’), with hearts replacing the usual stylised flowers. The sequence ends with a shot of cows grazing in a field as the flourishes move centre screen to form a decorative tile bearing the show's title (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. *Boerenbont* tile. Screenshot from the opening sequence of *Farmer Wants a Wife*, first series (2004–2005).

For many years, this tile, which also featured prominently on the show's website, constituted its logo. Together with the statuette of the couple in folk dress featured in the opening sequence, it evokes a particular aesthetic that, in the Dutch context, is associated with an idyllic conception of the rural as a realm offering a simple, no-nonsense life-style that has remained unchanged over generations and is considered quintessentially Dutch. In this respect, the tile and the statue reference the rural idyll's function as a ‘receptacle for national identity’ (Bell, 2006:151; Lowenthal, 1994; Edensor, 2002; DuPuis, 2006). The opening sequence, then, quite literally puts an idyllic frame around its documentary depiction of the realities of contemporary Dutch rural life.

Yet, despite this frame, the first episode of the first series, in which the ten participating farmers are introduced, mostly concentrates on highlighting the realities of farming and dissuading idealised or romanticised notions of it. Jaspers visits the ten men on their farms to ask why they are not in a relationship, what their ‘ideal woman’ is and whether she should help to run the farm. Overall, the conversations present a nuanced, realistic image of farming as, on the positive side, offering the freedom of being your own boss and the joys of working in nature with animals, and, on the negative side, requiring long hours of hard work for meagre financial rewards. Jaspers even brings up the tendency to romanticise rural life in her discussion with Joris, who does not come from a farming background. After he explains that it is ‘practically impossible’ to start one's own farming business from scratch, she notes: ‘it seems romantic, but of course it isn't really’. He responds: ‘No, it is actually really hard work for far too little money’.

At the visual level, too, documentary realism is privileged over the romance genre. In-between the conversations, the *boerenbont* tile logo continues to appear; the way the logo is placed around black-and-white images of the twenty-first-century farms works to nostalgically associate rural life with the past, in accordance with the conventions of the rural idyll. The rest of the episode, however, predominantly shows documentary-style footage of the farmers at work. For Bakhtin, agricultural labour occupies a central place in ancient idyllic genres, but here this labour is shown to be large-scale, automated and part of a commercial business. As such, it opposes the notion of people consuming ‘the produce of their own labor’ and the ‘special emphasis on the unmechanized nature of idyllic labor’ (Bakhtin, 1996:227, 233) that, even in more modern forms of the idyll, founds the presentation of rural life as an antidote to the corruptions of urban, modern, capitalist, globalised life.

Where the first series of *Farmer Wants a Wife* does align with the conventions of Bakhtin's idyllic complex is in terms of the type of rural community it portrays. There is a consistent emphasis on the importance of the family unit (several of the farmers have family members helping out on the farm or living on the same property); generational continuity (with most farms handed down from father to son);

participation in local customs; and rigid gender roles. Bakhtin associates older forms of the idyll with both the 'unity of the life of generations' (1996:225) and patriarchy (1996:231), while Little and Austin (1996:106), with reference to its contemporary incarnations, contend that 'the woman of the rural idyll is the wife and mother, not the high-flying professional'. In line with this, farmer Hans notes that he wants a wife who has dinner ready when he finishes work (episode 6); farmer Piet insists that his ideal woman would have to do the cooking (episode 3); Marianne offers to take care of the house and the children while Piet farms (episode 5); and Sieta, who finds pigs 'dirty', proposes that instead of farm work, she will do the cooking (episode 8).¹¹

The series also evokes the idyllic genre's long-standing link to 'a little spatial world not linked in any intrinsic way to other places' (Bakhtin, 1996:225), but it does so in a way that ultimately challenges it. This happens in the eleventh episode, in which the five farmers who received the most letters and the partners they chose at the end of the farm visit go on a city trip. Jaspers presents this trip as 'the countryside meets the city', implying that this is the first time the farmers have ventured outside the rural and raising expectations that they will feel out of their element. However, it quickly becomes clear that Berlin and Brussels are not new destinations for the farmers, that they all speak decent English and are perfectly comfortable drinking champagne in luxury hotels. This is not fully unexpected, either, as in the first episode two farmers had already mentioned their fondness for going on foreign skiing and beach holidays. Nonetheless, Jaspers persists in her attempts to reinforce the conventions of the rural idyll by repeatedly asserting (without getting any of the farmers to agree) that the farmers must surely prefer their down-to-earth, peaceful life at the farm over the decadent, chaotic life of the city.

The city trip and its framing by Jaspers can be seen as an example of the situation sketched by Berlant in which the affective expectations produced by a genre (in this case that of the rural idyll) come up against events that do not fit these expectations. Jaspers' refusal to acknowledge the mismatch means the situation does not, in this instance, lead to a waning of genre. However, the episode's lack of clarity as to whether the journey from the rural to the urban should be seen as one from the farm as a fantasy realm to the city as 'the real world', or as a journey from 'the real world' of the farm to the city as fantasy does open up the possibility of genre development in Bakhtin's sense. Jaspers calls the city 'more romantic' than the farm and, at the beginning of the next episode, notes: 'it is not going to be easy to say goodbye to all these idyllic places in London, Berlin, Brussels, Madrid, Copenhagen'. This allows the idyll – as an idealised realm conducive to love and romance – to also embrace the urban, potentially giving rise to a new version of the idyll with different conventions.

While the possibility of an urban idyll is not pursued any further, a more significant and persistent challenge to the idyllic genre's hold on the rural is made by the first series' highlighting of the mismatch between the potential spouses' idealised expectations of farm life and their experience of it during the farm visit. Generally, the women expect their time at the farm to be relaxing and spent mostly outside, interacting with the farm animals as pets (one of them expresses a desire to 'cuddle cows'). What they do not anticipate is having to clean out large stables, operate heavy machinery and watch animals being taken for slaughter in a muddy, smelly, cold (the first series was filmed in winter) environment. Only those familiar with farming have more realistic expectations. In episode 5, Astrid, lacking such familiarity, tells the camera that, when visiting Teus' farm, she would like it 'if a calf was born ... and I also want to see the sheep'. This is immediately followed by a comment from Mariandel, who studies at an agricultural college

¹¹ Notably, *Farmer Wants a Wife* has also undermined the rigid gender roles of the rural idyll by including female farmers. However, the first female farmer did not appear until series 3, when the show's focus had already begun to shift from documenting the realities of Dutch rural life to the love stories.

and comes from a farming family: 'Astrid may think of the farm that it is quite romantic, feeding calves and such, and that is part of it, but it is more than that. It is very dirty!' Later on, Astrid complains about being made to shovel cow dung at dawn, indicating that farm life has indeed not met her expectations.

In Berlant's terms, the gap between the potential spouses' expectations and the realities of rural life presents them with a choice. They can either maintain their idyllic expectations (for example by dismissing the specific farm they visit as somehow uncharacteristic, leaving open the possibility that other farms would offer the expected experience of the rural), or acknowledge that their expectations were unrealistic. The latter choice would enable a waning of the rural idyll and is the one ultimately encouraged by the first series of *Farmer Wants a Wife*. Even though, as noted above, this series evokes some elements of the rural idyll, ultimately these are subordinated to or revealed as inadequate to the realities of rural life. In terms of the three genres subsumed under that of the reality dating show, therefore, documentary realism is consistently privileged over the romance and the rural idyll: a lot of screen-time is devoted to providing factual information about different forms of contemporary farming.

Throughout the first series, the romance genre, which, if privileged, would enhance the reality dating show's tendency towards melodrama, is kept largely in check. Significantly, when this series was filmed, neither the farmers nor the potential spouses suspected that the programme would become so successful.¹² In fact, the farmers featured in this series frequently express their dislike of being filmed (Joris and Hans in episode 9; Piet in episode 10; Teus in episode 11) and Jaspers has to press hard to get them and the potential spouses to provide the emotional realism demanded by the reality dating show. Several key events in the love stories, including Astrid and Teus' first kiss (episode 10), take place off-camera, keeping melodrama to a minimum.

Nonetheless, in the storyline of farmer Peter, the first series of *Farmer Wants a Wife* also contains the beginnings of the shift that would lead to the increasing prominence of the romance genre. After paying so little attention to the three women he has invited to his farm that two of them leave prematurely, Peter turns out to have secretly contacted a fourth woman, Anita, who had written to him but could not participate in the show because of her work. When this is revealed, he is chastised by Jaspers for breaking the show's rules. However, to avoid losing one of the love stories, the show's producers decide to integrate Peter's relationship with Anita by allowing him to take her on the city trip. Peter's case generated a lot of publicity and episode 10 of the first series, which exposed his 'cheating', was the most-watched Dutch television broadcast of 2005 with almost 3.2 million viewers.¹³ The scandal's resolution complies with the reality dating genre's melodramatic thrust, as the chastising of Peter and the subsequent ousting of the third woman by Anita generated maximum emotional drama. Arguably, this is the moment when the reality dating genre's demand for melodrama begins to overshadow *Farmer Wants a Wife*'s impulse towards realism and when the show's ability to challenge the idyllic genre's hold on the depiction of the rural starts to diminish.

As the next section will show, in the eighth series of *Farmer Wants a Wife* its commitment to informing the audience and the potential spouses about the actualities of contemporary Dutch rural life is mostly abandoned. Instead, the romance genre assumes full dominance, with the rural idyll subsumed to it so that the rural can function as an aestheticised backdrop.

¹² The first episode of the first series drew 1 million viewers; by the sixth series, the first episode had 3.5 million viewers. <http://www.mediacourant.nl/2013/09/boer-zoekt-vrouw-nog-steeds-kijkcijferkanon/> (accessed 20/8/18).

¹³ https://kijkonderzoek.nl/component/com_kijkcijfers/Itemid,133/file,n1-10-1-p (accessed 20/8/18).

4. Love in a field at sunset: The rural idyll as a backdrop for romance

Farmer Wants a Wife's changed engagement with the rural idyll in the eighth series is signalled, first of all, by its redesigned website.¹⁴ The new homepage features portraits of the ten new farmers against a background of a white sheet of paper with faint traces of handwriting, including phrases like 'I hope to see you soon' and 'sweet greetings'. This nostalgic image and the fact that, until today, potential spouses are encouraged to send letters rather than emails aligns with the idyllic notion that travelling to the rural is akin to going back in time. The central placement of the letter on the homepage under a generic rural scene that features no agricultural activities makes clear the show's abandonment of its early commitment to documenting rural reality. No longer the main focus, the rural setting is now non-specific and incidental to the love story. At the bottom of the homepage, the image of the letter blends into a photograph of Jaspers with the ten farmers. The latter still wear overalls and the scenery is rural, but the background is blurry and they are grouped not around a tractor or other agricultural machine, as in earlier versions of the website, but around a red four-wheel drive car also commonly seen in cities. Only an awkwardly superimposed, out-of-scale image of a hayfork points to agriculture, and the site no longer features links to news items about the rural, as it did in earlier years. Finally, the redesigned website replaces the logo of the *boerenbont* tile with Delft Blue plates serving as frames for the farmers' portraits. Although also referring nostalgically to traditional Dutch crafts and an aesthetics connected to national identity, Delft Blue lacks *boerenbont's* connection to farming and, in its very name, references an urban context. Overall, the new website evokes elements of the rural idyll as a good-life fantasy without the counterweight of more realistic and specific images of the rural.

A similar shift is noticeable in the opening sequence of the eighth series. Although still accompanied by the same upbeat theme tune incorporating farm sounds as the opening sequence of the first series, visually the love letters rather than the realities of farming life take centre stage. The sequence begins with an image of envelopes thrown onto a traditional Dutch blue-checked tablecloth and ends with an animation of two figurines in folk farm dress leaning in to kiss each other (see Fig. 2). The video montage in between shows decontextualised black-and-white close-ups of animals and various vegetables and fruits. Only a shot of a tractor points directly to agricultural labour. Together, the new website and opening sequence highlight the shift away from the documentary realism that, in the first series, challenged the idealising conventions of the rural idyll.

While there is still an impulse towards documenting rural reality in the first episode of the eighth series, it is not sustained. The episode opens with panoramic views of agricultural land and images are shown of grazing cattle, chicken in a pen, a milking carousel, ripening cheese, flowers in a greenhouse and a grain field, while Jaspers' voice-over reminds viewers of the contribution 'our farmers' make to the national export volume. In this way, the show draws attention to the industrial scale and international dimension of contemporary Dutch farming. The subsequent presentation of the ten farmers also focuses on the realities of twenty-first century farming: video montages show that they all own highly automated medium-to large-scale agricultural businesses and, as in the first series, Jaspers meets the farmers at work, sweeping dirt in the yard, milking cows, spreading out hay, cutting weeds, picking strawberries and washing curd in a cheese factory.

The interviews proper, however, take place inside the farmers' homes. These are no longer shown in the unembellished documentary style of the first series of *Farmer Wants a Wife* but through the glossy, generalising aesthetic of country life magazines, advertisements for 'natural' and 'biological' food products and rural branding (Shirley,



Fig. 2. Tablecloth with figurines. Screenshot from the opening sequence of *Farmer Wants a Wife*, eighth series (2014–2015).

2017). The camera lingers on the charmingly old-fashioned interior of milkman and cheesemaker Theo's farmhouse, on sheep breeder and camping owner Jan watching a magnificent sunset, and on fruit and vegetable grower Geert sitting on his sunny terrace. This is the beginning of the eighth series' consistent highlighting, in an idealising, idyllic mode, of those aspects of rural life perceived as most conducive to romance. Jaspers makes this explicit when she explains why the show's shooting period was moved from the winter to the summer: 'you get butterflies in your stomach more quickly with sultry temperatures, summer dresses and bare feet in the grass. In the summer series, there are more shoots outdoors, which makes the image of farming life extra romantic' (quoted in Roggeveen, 2012). In the 'extra romantic' image of farming life the show now seeks to present, the realities of this life no longer matter; the farm's only function is to provide an attractive backdrop to people falling in love.

Particularly striking in this respect is the introduction of arable farmer Bertie, who is shown at the edge of a newly planted field, leisurely removing some weeds with a hoe. Later, it is revealed that her land is actually worked by employees, while she busies herself with her teenage daughters, various hobbies and pets. The original emphasis on presenting farmers as 'tried and tested by the hard life on the farm' (per Jaspers' description in the very first episode of the show) has been replaced by a new emphasis on the farmers' relaxed lifestyles. Instead of questioning the 'good life fantasy' associated with rural life by the rural idyll, *Farmer Wants a Wife* now affirms it as real and attainable. What the rural idyll as 'good life fantasy' in Berlant's sense provides access to, moreover, is no longer an idealised life of working the land, but an idealised romance. Thus, Jaspers no longer inquires whether prospective spouses should be interested in or capable of helping to run the farms. Instead, the introductory conversations with the farmers revolve around their unhappy love histories and their desire to spend quiet evenings with someone (Theo), to watch TV and relax together after a day's work (Jan), to enjoy life and fall in love again (Geert), to confide in someone and grow old together (Tom), or, in the case of Bertie, who only recently came out as a lesbian, to try a relationship with a woman.¹⁵

Within the framework of the reality dating show, the romance genre and, harmonising with it, revived elements of the genre of the love idyll have eclipsed the show's quest to document rural reality. Thus, in the eighth series, the use of romantic clichés like 'wanting to grow old together' is much more prevalent than in the first series, while much less screen time is devoted to farming activities. In most of the scenes

¹⁵ *Farmer Wants a Wife's* first gay participant, biodynamic stock farmer Willem, featured in the sixth series (2012). Introducing gay love stories challenges the rural idyll's persistent association with patriarchy and traditional gender roles, but, in the Dutch context, where gay marriage has been legal since 2001, it does not undermine the idyll's privileging of the nuclear family. *Farmer Wants a Wife* shows how gay couples can be assimilated by the rural idyll in a way that leaves most of its conventions intact.

¹⁴ The website has since been changed again.

showing the developing love stories, the agricultural setting is incidental or fulfils a purely aesthetic function. Although the potential spouses continue to voice idyllic expectations of rural life in their letters and during the ‘speed dates’, they express considerably more interest in the farmers’ appearances than in how they live. Their evaluations of the farm visit, moreover, no longer revolve primarily around how they feel about the realities of agricultural life, as in the first series: instead, they comment on the beautiful eyelashes, eyes and ears of the cows (Ria at Theo’s farm), the sheep’s ability to show affection (Rianne at Jan’s farm) and the fun of sharing a bedroom with two other women (Ada at Geert’s farm). Because they are no longer pushed – by the show’s earlier privileging of documentary realism – to shed their idealised conceptions of farming life, there is notably less conflict between them and the farmers during the farm visits. The farmers in the first series repeatedly insist that farm animals should be valued for what they produce rather than for their beauty or cuteness. In contrast, in the eighth series, Theo and Jan allow their visitors to admire the cows and sheep through an idyllic lens without comment.

The new dominance of the romance genre is confirmed by the fact that, rather than looking to present themselves as potentially capable farmers, the women are now primarily concerned with coming across as desirable. Thus, the three women competing for Tom’s heart refuse to put on work clothes to help him unclog the drain pipes, instead following him into the muddy field wearing leggings, pink rubber boots and long woolly scarves (episode 5). The farmers, in turn, put less emphasis on farming being a 24/7 business and do not hesitate to leave the farm to take their prospects out for a copious breakfast (Geert in episode 10), a long walk in the woods (Jan in episode 9) or to the beach (Bertie in episode 8; Jan in episode 9; Theo in episode 11). In this way, the prospective spouses’ participation in agricultural labour is reduced to a generic ‘task’ or ‘test’ that has no other purpose than to further the romance plot and therefore does not need to be taken seriously or shown in detail.

Farmer Wants a Wife’s appeal to realism, then, is no longer partially grounded in a commitment to accurately portraying contemporary Dutch rural life and the intricacies of farming, but confined to showing the love stories in an emotionally realist manner. The show is increasingly invested in fulfilling reality TV’s requirement ‘to elicit real and raw emotions’ (Bonsu et al., 2010:98) and to promote ‘the public display of once-private feelings’ (Aslama and Pantti, 2006:167). Consequently, the farmers and their potential spouses are pushed to display their emotions and feelings without restraint. Whereas in the first series emotional outbursts are rare, in the eighth series their absence is considered an aberration. This becomes clear when Bertie is attacked by viewers and in the media for failing to show adequate emotion and refusing to make her feelings explicit until the very end of the series, and when one of Theo’s visitors, Ria, leaves the farm prematurely because she feels he is not able to open up about his true feelings (episode 8).

The increased privileging of the love stories (and thus the romance genre) is accompanied by an uncritical reinstatement of a version of the rural idyll that revives elements of the love idyll as described by Bakhtin. The role of this version of the rural idyll is to act as the idealised background for the romance. This is underscored by Tom’s storyline in the eighth series. Instead of taking over his parents’ cattle farm, Tom has chosen to run a less muddy, stressful and time-consuming flower-growing business, and to live in a modern apartment rather than a farmhouse. Far from challenging the idyllic genre, Tom’s lifestyle actually accords with the conventions of the love idyll, which, instead of revolving around agricultural labour, presents the rural as a ‘pastoral’ realm offering comfort and leisure, the ideal conditions for romance (Bakhtin, 1996:224). As the farm visit moves towards its final stage and Tom is left in the apartment with two potential spouses, Rimke and Leonie, their increasingly melodramatic interactions revolve purely around which of them Tom will pick. That he is a farmer and lives in the rural is no longer deemed relevant. In the closing scene of

episode 8, the two women are drinking tea in the kitchen while watching Tom through the window as he tidies up the yard. They agree that nice single men are rare and that Tom is ‘a young god, who has never been married and is ready to have children’. Laughing, they add: ‘he has a fear of commitment, but he can’t escape us now that we are in his house and even sleeping in his bed’. This points to a central conceit of the reality dating show, where the chances of romance developing are enhanced by confining the participants to an attractive but isolated – in other words, idyllic – location. In the next scene, Tom enters the softly lit kitchen where Leonie is sitting at the table peeling potatoes. They proceed to express their feelings for each other, accompanied by slow instrumental music with swelling violins, but are cut short when Rimke suddenly enters and says: ‘Well, you are clearly having a profound talk with each other!’ Later, she confesses to the camera that when she saw them, she instantly felt jealous: ‘I would like to have Tom for myself; my feelings constantly go up and down, I feel so insecure!’ The intensity with which both Tom and the two women repeatedly express their emotions to the camera evinces the show’s full alignment with the governing principle of the reality dating show, namely to convey ‘a sense of having revealed an inner, private, previously hidden self – a naked self’ (Dubrofsky, 2009:360). At the end of the scene, the full moon turns the rural setting of Tom’s apartment into an aesthetically appealing, idyllic backdrop.

By the eighth series, then, *Farmer Wants a Wife* has lost the potential it had to convey the realities of twenty-first-century Dutch rural life kept hidden or unseen by the prevailing tendency to conceive of the rural through an idyllic lens. Moreover, the show’s reproduction of the idyll has narrowed to the evocation of elements of what Bakhtin (1996:226) considers its most impoverished form, that of the love idyll, which empties the rural of all social, economic and cultural specificity, and reduces it to a generic ‘natural’ location for romance.

5. Conclusions

In its depiction of twenty-first-century Dutch rural life, *Farmer Wants a Wife* mixes the genres of the rural idyll, documentary realism and the romance. Through their interaction, the conventions associated with the three genres inflect each other, as per Bakhtin’s theory (1996). Moreover, they do so in changing ways. Our analysis of the first and eighth series of *Farmer Wants a Wife* has shown that the framework of the reality dating show increasingly privileges the romance genre.¹⁶ As a result, the early challenge to the rural idyll’s grasp on the portrayal of rural life, mounted through a commitment to documentary realism, is neutralised. This indicates that combining the rural idyll with other genres may work both towards dislodging its hold on the rural and towards tightening it. The outcome will depend on the characteristics of the genres involved, the requirements of the overarching genre and the way these requirements evolve over time (in this case, from emphasising the *reality* dimension of the reality dating show to stressing the *dating* dimension). As a strategy to transform staid genres like the rural idyll, therefore, genre mixing requires careful calibration.

Working towards a waning of genre in Berlant’s sense is equally tricky, *Farmer Wants a Wife* suggests. The show, especially in its early series, repeatedly confronts the potential spouses (and, by implication, the viewers) with the inadequacy of their idyllic expectations of the realities of contemporary Dutch farming. However, it also makes clear that such confrontations do not necessarily lead to expectations being adjusted. Each subsequent series, after all, features new potential spouses who, despite having watched the show, retain idealised views,

¹⁶ Explaining why this occurred would require empirical research into the show’s production, which falls outside the scope of this paper. However, the most likely explanation is that the show’s producers decided to ramp up the emotional drama after the increase in viewership following the uncovering of Peter’s ‘cheating’ in the first series.

of the rural. As Berlant (2011) suggests, people tend to have a deep emotional investment in good-life genres like the rural idyll, which means that they will sooner disavow aspects of reality than abandon these genres. Such disavowal is actively encouraged by *Farmer Wants a Wife's* ambivalent engagement of the rural idyll: instead of consistently challenging its appropriateness, some of its elements, not least its opening sequence (in both its original and revised forms), present the rural in idyllic ways. Ultimately, the show does not lead to the waning of the idyllic genre and the emergence of new genres generating more appropriate affective expectations of rural life. Instead, it increasingly deemphasises the clash between the potential spouses' expectations and rural actuality, while revitalising elements of the idyllic genre in its most simplistic form (that of the love idyll) to serve as a backdrop conducive to the love stories and the emotional drama they generate. This means that the possibility of perceiving the contemporary rural in non-generalising and non-idealising ways, which would allow overlooked aspects of rural life to come to light, is once again pre-empted.

Nonetheless, in its early years, *Farmer Wants a Wife* was able, through combining documentary realism (a genre that does not tend to appeal to large audiences) with romance, to draw millions of viewers for a portrayal of the rural that, at least in part, challenged idyllic views of the rural. In the summer of 2018, moreover, a spin-off of *Farmer Wants a Wife* was launched called *Our Farm (Onze boerderij)*, in which Yvon Jaspers, 'looking for the real farming life', visits some of the farmers featured on *Farmer Wants a Wife*, as well as others, to discuss the challenges they face (Roskam, 2018). Significantly, Jaspers explicitly positions the spin-off as a more realistic counterpart to *Farmer Wants a Wife's* focus on romance:

I've been going to farms for fourteen years now and talk mainly about love. For *Our Farm* I re-visit *Farmer Wants a Wife* participants and other farmers to find out what it's really like to run an agricultural business in these turbulent times. What are the dilemmas of the modern farmer? What risks do you take as a farmer and when are you doing it right? Are they living their dream or does it sometimes resemble a nightmare? I wonder whether after this show I will still long for a life on the farm (quoted in Roskam, 2018).

Although the viewership for the spin-off's four episodes was smaller than that of *Farmer Wants a Wife*, it was still deemed a 'ratings hit' with between 1.5 and 1.75 million viewers.¹⁷ It is likely that many of these viewers would not have tuned in if it had not been for *Our Farm's* link to *Farmer Wants a Wife*, and it remains to be seen whether the spin-off will share the longevity and continuing success of that show.¹⁸

To date, however, *Our Farm* has generated a lot of media attention for and public debate about rural issues, just as *Farmer Wants a Wife* did in its early years. Moreover, its format – with the genre of documentary realism enveloping and critically reflecting on that of the rural idyll – has the potential to generate a transformation of the idyllic genre and to contribute to its waning. In conclusion, therefore, it can be said that, on the one hand, *Farmer Wants a Wife* underlines the difficulty of extricating the rural from the grip of the rural idyll. On the other hand, however, particularly in its early form and its recent spin-off, it provides a model for 'new aesthetic forms', to use Berlant's term (2011), capable of challenging the idyll in a way that would constitute a true move beyond this genre, the waning of which is long overdue.

¹⁷ <https://www.gids.tv/artikel/2628/kijkcijfers-onze-boerderij-blijven-stijgen>; <https://www.televizier.nl/kijkcijfers/de-tv-van-gisteren-laatste-aflevering-onze-boerderij-goed-voor-1-5-miljoen#> (accessed 20/8/18).

¹⁸ Especially after the objectivity of *Our Farm's* portrayal of farming was questioned when it was revealed that Jaspers has a contract with For Farmers, a multinational cattle feed company that lobbies against government regulation. <https://www.trouw.nl/home/hoe-onafhankelijk-is-yvon-jaspers-a2edb5dd/?sp=4475f639-dbed-4ec9-8574-525b596a370e.1537188507602> (accessed 28/01/19).

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.02.001>.

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