The Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky once said that no scene would be better acted than the one “acted” by normal people who do not know that they are filmed or taped: “I once taped a casual dialogue. People were talking without knowing they were being recorded. Then I listened to the tape and thought how brilliantly it was ‘written’ and ‘acted’. The logic of characters’ movements, the feeling the energy – how tangible it all was. How euphoric the voices were, how beautiful the voices” (Tarkovsky 1986: 65). Ingmar Bergman made similar remarks about the perfectly natural character of actions that are not “acted” but “lived” in reality.1

All of us will probably agree that “reality” writes the best scripts. Some things that happen in real life, or at least the way they happen, could not have been invented or narrated by any scriptwriter. With certain events – reactions, dialogues, constellations of cause-effect relations, etc. – the act of “happening” is so absolute, so immediate, and so unmitigated by intellectual considerations, artistic ambitions, or narrative devices that it expresses reality “as it is”. We enjoy these rare moments in which something happens just as though it has been “written by life itself” because they seem to express the “uniqueness” of actions as such. In many cases, these anti-narratives express the deeply human character of life which, normally, follows or transgresses rules but sometimes… things just happen.

The fascination with “reality as it is” has preoccupied artists in the domain of visual art as much as writers. The scope of this phenomenon is simply so large, it is impossible even to evoke. The task that these artists set themselves is to transfer from reality to art, not just an atmosphere or a mood, but something even less material. Often this “something” cannot be narrated but just shown. Those artists attempt to capture an indefinable “existential situation” which expresses a strong sense of “life”. This “life” and its expression are determined
neither by a structure nor by symbolic functions, nor are they effective within any specified ideological or narrative program.

Some people think that the art of film or photography has the best chance of capturing “reality as it is” simply because of their “realistic” nature. The idea is that pictures do not narrate but simply show. However, the theoretician of cinema, Siegfried Kracauer explained that even the most realist painter remains unable to produce a “realistic” scene but will end up “stylizing” reality, be it only through the realism he imposes upon “reality”. As a consequence, Kracauer developed an alternative approach, which he called the approach of the camera-reality (Kracauer 1973: 62). Here reality, when captured by the camera, stays a reality with all its charm and aura (as Walter Benjamin would have put it). Other eminent theoreticians developing similar ideas are Alexandre Astruc (1968), André Bazin (1961), and Amédé Ayfre (1969) who elaborated the notion of “caméra-stylo” (pen-camera). In a film “recorded” by a caméra-stylo there is no evocation of subjective, intimate symbols. No “inner reality” has been “put into” the image by the artist. On the other hand, there is no objective recording of reality either and this is most important. There is no documentation undertaken from the detached point of view located outside the things filmed.

The subject of the present Feature Scene is so-called “reality television” as it has existed for more than two decades (it became extremely popular in the late 1990s with the series Survivor and Big Brother) in the form of various types of “reality shows” on television screens all over the world. I believe that, in principle, these shows are inspired by the same kind of fascination with “reality” that is proper to the above-mentioned artistic projects. That such parallels are not far-fetched is shown by statements by the French director Jean-Jacques Beineix, who sees in the television production Loft-Story a renewal of contemporary cinema that has, in his opinion, become too academic. Or André Bazin, who was tempted, in the 1960s, by television aesthetics, Beineix suggests confronting cinema with the refreshing spontaneity and the directness of the non-actors we encounter in so-called reality shows. Even the elitist French journal Cahiers du cinéma even elected Loft-Story the best film of the year 2001.

Though, as some studies show, reality television has never been able to shake off the persistent smell of narrative and fiction, reality shows have become extremely popular in many countries. At first, this interest in “reality” may seem surprising. News reports as well as documentaries provide people with “reality” at increasingly frequent