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SHORT COMMUNICATION

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TV FICTION IN A REALITY TV AGE

In recent years, TV fiction seems to have lost considerably in importance compared to reality-based programs. In many countries, reality programs have taken over timeslots formerly occupied by fiction and turned into trademark programs for the respective channels. On the other hand however, certain elements of fiction are employed increasingly in non-fictional genres, which is a new phenomenon in genre development and brings forth new hybrids between fiction and non-fiction. Especially by means of storytelling and the construction of its protagonists as role playing characters a process of fictionalization of basically non-fiction formats can be detected. Which, by the way, can be related to similar developments in the real world.

Keywords: television, genre, fictionalization, format trade, Reality TV.

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1. Introduction: TV Fiction under Stress

For some time now, it looks like TV fiction is losing importance. Current trends in TV programming with no exception belong to the segment of non-fiction: quizzes, real life soaps, docu soaps, court shows, casting shows. These types of programs not only pose a threat to TV fiction by taking up timeslots formerly occupied by fiction in many countries, some of them also have acquired special importance. Quite a few - like *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, broadcast by Germany's market leader RTL, have turned into trademark programs, contributing considerably to the respective station's public image (cf. Buonanno 2002: 8f).

The position of television fiction is obviously undergoing changes. This contribution attempts to examine some of the whys and how's of this process. As today's television is mainly driven by economic considerations, these come first. As an interim result, it will hopefully become apparent that there are in fact good reasons why fiction only plays a minor role in the current development of television content. But - and this is the key argument I want to propose - this is only the surface of the process in question. Below that surface, something quite different is happening. Taking a closer look at genre theory and the relationship between fictional and non-fictional television, between reality and *reality* will lead to a somewhat surprising conclusion. As an epilogue, this conclusion will be put in a broader context. This paper is of an exploratory nature so it is written (and should be read) as an essay.

2. The Economic Side

TV economics provide strong arguments for a trend in programming favouring non-fiction. Apart from daily soaps, TV fiction traditionally belongs to the most expensive genres. The current general economic crisis also shows in cuts in advertising, so it is getting more and more difficult to re-finance TV fiction - most so, of course, for commercial broadcasters, relying mainly on advertising revenue. Today's fashionable non-fiction programming is not only far cheaper to produce, it offers various additional economic benefits. For example, it only takes little money to manufacture accompanying programs for real life soaps and casting shows. Spin-offs like "behind the scenes", "making of" or "what happened to" programs not only fill broadcasting time, they also help to sustain viewers' interest in the core format. Apart from that, both genres plus

quizzes demonstrate how even in times of crisis television can be used to make profits - indirectly. Creative business models show that merchandising and linking television with telecommunications can be ways to compensate for losses in advertising. Successful quizzes are an excellent platform to promote board and computer game versions of the show, handling applications of would-be contestants via special service numbers on the phone can also generate considerable additional income. In addition, casting shows and real life soaps feature regular audience votes as a second way to integrate telecommunications' money in the revenue structure of the programs. As far as merchandising is concerned, casting shows have a natural relation to CD sales - most aspiring artists sing. Even contestants of real life soap can be employed to sell CDs as the first German *Big Brother* exemplified: most of their CD releases made it into the German top 10.

Another important aspect which makes these programs especially appealing to commercial broadcasters is that they represent fairly safe business. They are - with very few exceptions - adaptations of formats¹ which come along with a track record. They are new on the individual national market, but have already been successful elsewhere. When broadcasters buy a format, they do not only acquire the right to use a concept, they also buy know-how and professional support in order to get the best results possible. Introducing new programs is always risky, using international formats reduces this risk considerably. What's more, there is something involved which may be called a dialectics of success. TV formats in a way operate like all other commercial brands. Wherever they are available, they look at least very similar, conveying a transnational impression of quality, and come with an inbuilt referencing system. No matter if it's Nike trainers, Coca Cola or *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, all locally sold product on the one hand profits from the global image of the brand, on the other hand the success on local markets further strengthens the global label.

So format trade makes a lot of economic sense, especially in times of crisis. However, for simple reasons format trade up to now mainly deals with non-fiction programming. Television history shows that on the average domestic programming achieves higher audience figures than imports - the most prominent exception to this rule was the international success

¹ For a discussion of the term "format" and format trade see Hallenberger (2002b).

of *Dallas* in the 1980s. In the case of non-fiction, imports even are close to unthinkable. Of course, live broadcasts of special events like the presentation of the Academy Awards can be sold to many countries - it only takes some voice-over, and you're done. But you simply cannot broadcast an American game show in Italy - or a Swiss game show in Germany - hosts, contestants and studio audience behave differently, prizes and tasks have to fit in specific cultural contexts. For a short time, a German commercial channel had the original *David Letterman Show* in its line-up but as a treat for an extremely small target group.

Non-fiction programming is unsuitable for importing, but programs of many non-fiction genres can be transformed easily into product appearing as domestic - this is in a way the basic idea of formatting. Plus, the programs in question should be serial and have a long potential life-span - it makes little (economic) sense to format a program which only gives you a single 90-minute broadcast. So formatting requires concepts with a high ratio of constant as compared to variable elements. This ratio is relevant in two ways: one, with regard to the format as a whole - if you can use a large number of elements for all national versions it is best suited to be handled as a format. Two, it is relevant with regard to the variations between episodes - the larger the similarity between instalments, the better. A prime example to illustrate this point is the quiz and game show genre, and it is no accident that format trade as we know it today in Europe started with this genre in the 1980s. Nearly everything which gives a show its particular character and look is transferable from country to country - the rules of the game, the set, lighting and sound effects. What has to be different basically is the personnel (host, contestants and the studio audience) and the specific tasks/questions the contestants have to solve, because this is the source of the impression of a *domestic* production. Once you have a set, production facilities and a host, it is very easy to churn out as many instalments as you want - it only takes some authors inventing new tasks/questions, new contestants and new studio audiences.

This example also makes evident why television fiction up to now only very occasionally is formatted. Fiction, formulaic fiction included, with very few exceptions is far more *variable*. The only elements which can be transferred are basic storylines and the constellation of characters. You need a different setting, characters have to behave and talk differently to be credible so the program has to be rebuilt from scratch. The differences between episodes are equally large - each episode requires a new script, at

least a certain variety in sets and additional actors/characters. What is likely to happen when you cling too close to the original was experienced several times by RTL in Germany in the 1990s. For example, RTL launched a German adaptation of *Married with Children* (“Hilfe, meine Familie spinnt”, 1993) which used original scripts and even copied the set design - this gave the set a very strange look because the house was to be in Germany, but when you enter a German house, you're in a hall, not in the living room. The sitcom had rather low market shares and was soon replaced. Some years earlier, RTL had started the first German daily soap, *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten*, the German adaptation of the Dutch adaptation of *The Restless Years*.² Over the years, *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten* has turned into a huge success, but only when Grundy stopped using Australian scripts. In general, daily soaps are about the only fiction genre which at least plays a minor role in format trade. Compared to other types of television fiction, daily soaps are suited best for formatting because they are extremely formulaic and involve highly specific know-how in production - making a daily soap is first of all an extremely complex logistic operation. But even here problems are likely to occur which lead adaptations away from the blueprint. When an adapted daily soap is successful, sooner or later you introduce new characters, the storyline moves away from the original and the serial develops a life of its own. As a consequence, it will become open to question whether it still is a format adaptation or an original program.

3. Fiction versus non-fiction - traditional concepts

On the whole, during the previous history of television the distinction between the two was fairly easy. Based on their accumulated televisual competence, their ability to recognize patterns, viewers could clearly categorize everything they were offered. Fiction and non-fiction in this respect first of all meant two antagonistic concepts of *reality*. Fiction, that was invented stories played by actors depicting roles in settings chosen or assembled for the purpose. Non-fictional television was the television of the *real* - even when this *reality* with very few exceptions was a televisual production, too, arranged for and made by television. But what was at stake here claimed to (also) have an existence beyond the media.

² For a thorough analysis of the characteristics of the German and Dutch versions as compared to the Australian original see Moran (1998: 123-140).

News programs deal with events occurring in the real world (of which media, of course, are a part, too). A large part of these events however are really *non-events* because they do not simply happen but are scheduled, more often than not carefully planned and staged with media coverage in mind. Typical *non-events* are press conferences, state visits, meetings, openings and inaugurations. A comparable phenomenon is sports. Although most sport *events* would not exist (at least not in their current form) without TV coverage and the money paid for transmission rights, but as sports events they have in principle a reality independent from mediation. Even the core genres of non-fictional entertainment, called "Shows" in the German language, come with a particular claim of realness. Music programs feature real artists, promoting concerts and CDs which can really be bought in the shops. In talk shows celebrities appear as their *true selves*, i.e. in a role coded as *natural*. The difference of this role compared to the roles in which they are familiar to viewers ranges between rather large (e.g. actors) and rather small (e.g. politicians). Quiz and game shows have contestants who really answer questions or fulfil tasks - and who really win prizes.

4. Fiction versus non-fiction and genre development

Since the beginnings of a commercial leisure culture in the second half of the 19th century, media have been an integral part of that culture. The media involved soon developed systems of classification which were called "genres". In passing it must be mentioned that the term "genre" has different meanings in German and English. In German, "genre" refers to systems of classification primarily based on content whereas in English "genre" includes formal classification as well, called "Gattungen" in German. In this text I use the word "genre" in the narrower, German sense. This concept of "genre" is important both with respect to media aesthetics and to media pragmatics. When a media product is attributed to a certain genre this fact informs about some key characteristics of its content plus it gives you a clue what to do with it. This type of information is valid both for users and producers of media content. For users, a genre label helps to choose from the ever-increasing multitude of products on offer by indicating roughly what kind of satisfaction to expect or hope for. For producers and distributors of media content a genre label is helpful in reaching the target group and in creating products which fit in with the intended audience's expectations. In other words, genres are a

system of negotiation, connecting buyers and sellers, a tool to optimize media markets.

The first genre systems developed in the field of fiction, in popular literature and film. In the 20th century other media adopted the basic concept, explicitly or implicitly. Although it is not always common to call these systems of classification “genres”, terms like “talk show” with regard to radio and television, “manga” in the field of comics or “techno” in popular music function in an analogous way.

In all of popular culture the development of a particular genre shows similar general patterns.³ In the beginning there is a phase of formation, i.e. in a field perceived up to that point as one some offers achieve a remarkable success which is repeated by similar products. So both users and suppliers find it interesting to isolate this type of product. Negotiated by the market, conventions of form and content develop and suppliers introduce a label for this type of product. If this group of offers proves sufficiently successful as a nascent genre it will consolidate. Two aspects of this process are of prime importance: the relationship of formula and variation and the cumulative character of genre development.

Of course, all genre products are formulaic to a large degree, but a certain amount of variation is also inevitable if the work in question is intended to be successful. There are two basic ways in which variation can be produced - by introducing new elements and/or combining elements in a new way. The history of crime fiction in popular literature, film and television for instance provides various examples for both, like the increasing inclusion of the private lives of investigators (a new element) or the reversal of the order of narration (a new combination of elements), i.e. describing/showing the crime first instead of leaving the reader/viewer the task to find out “whodunit”.

The fact that genre development is a cumulative process - each genre product is both an example and contributes to the overall image of the genre in question, including the ability of changing it - is important insofar as a single product can both consolidate and change a genre. If it is extremely successful, two things can happen. The variation - these particular key elements arranged this particular way - may become part of the formula or it may become the starting point for a new (sub-)genre.

After formation and consolidation now a third phase of genre development is about to begin - differentiation. Again, there are two basic ways

³ A more elaborate version of the argument can be found in Hallenberger (2002a).

in which this is possible, a *horizontal* and a *vertical* way. Vertical differentiation means sub-genres, groups of products which are still perceived as belonging to the genre as a whole but forming a separate entity with specific rules nonetheless. Typical sub-genres are for example time-travel and robot stories in science fiction, celebrity and non-celebrity talk shows or police and detective shows on television, ambient and breakbeat in techno music. Horizontal differentiation means the establishment of genre mixes as an additional offer which incorporates elements of both genres involved without changing them. But if a particular mix achieves huge audience response, it also has the ability to serve as a starting point for an entirely new genre. This happened some years ago with respect to television when the success of the *X-Files*, initially a combination of science fiction and crime, spawned so many similar productions that the phenomenon acquired a name of its own, "mystery".

As far as the mixing of genres of television is concerned, there has been a clear boundary until recent years. All processes of genre formation, consolidation and differentiation happened either in fiction or in non-fiction, but not between both fields: fiction genres only mixed with other genres of fiction. The main ingredients, drama, crime and comedy, showed up in ever new re-combination (like "dramedy"), key elements of non-fiction however were perceived as incompatible. The same holds true for non-fiction genres: talk, music and games for example could and in fact were put together in ever new ways but fictional genres did not fit in. To illustrate this point let's take look at some apparent exceptions to this rule.

In television history there have been quite a few game and talk shows in which contestants or guests played little scenes, but this did not change the character of the program because they remained a separate theatrical element. Plus, theatrical drama in the context of television is not perceived as fiction - the main characteristic of a televised stage production is the reality of the performance, usually witnessed by an audience, which makes it non-fiction.

In the fiction field there have also been some attempts to cross the lines. Already in the 1960s, German television for example combined a crime play with game show elements (*Dem Täter auf der Spur*, 1967-1973). This program basically was a crime story but included as an additional element some celebrities in a studio who had to guess who the villain was. The different settings made it evident that this wasn't a mix of genres, but an add-on. A far more complex phenomenon was the

Millionenspiel (1970). Based on a science fiction story by Robert Sheckley, Wolfgang Menge made a television play pretending to be the final episode of a futuristic game show. In this fictitious *Millionenspiel* a contestant was hunted by a gang who were to kill him. If he survived, including a final showdown in a television studio, he would win one million Marks. Like the famous radioplay *War of the Worlds* by Orson Welles (1938) the *Millionenspiel* was fiction posing as non-fiction - and provoked similar reactions. As the simulation was very convincing (including fictitious sponsor messages), viewers who missed the beginning of the program were tempted to believe this was really a new game show. Many viewers protested against the inhumanity of the program, but quite a few volunteered as future contestants - and as future killers. In this case, it was exactly the intended blurring of contexts which provoked the scandal. As fiction, the *Millionenspiel* was an excellent satire on commercial television, the root of the scandal being its misinterpretation as non-fiction.

5. Fictionalization and de-fictionalization

For some years now the exclusiveness of the concepts of fiction and non-fiction in a way has been lost. Innovations in programming have always been achieved by inserting a specific difference, by introducing a particular variation in a formulaic framework. Quite frequently this difference has been taken from the field of fiction in recent years, adding something new to non-fiction formats.

A key result of the introduction of commercial TV channels in Germany was a massive turn towards the mundane (cf. Mueller 1995). Supported no doubt by the fact that these programmes could be manufactured in large numbers at relatively little cost, everyday life became a crucial subject and everyday people were the protagonists. They starred in a flood of game shows, they spoke about their problems in numerous talk shows - which up to then had been an exclusive forum for celebrities and professional experts, daily soaps presented the everyday life of young people played by unknown but aspiring young actors who walked and talked just like their target group, Reality TV collected film clips of serious or funny catastrophes happening to ordinary people.

This first new wave of reality-based programs differed from older concepts of a *television of the real* first of all by its purpose, which was to entertain. Both on- and off-screen commentary emphasized the thrill or the fun inherent in the pictures. Educational or informative functions,

which cannot be completely denied⁴, only came in as an additional aspect. A second difference was the presentation of the events either by video recordings made on the occasion by those involved or by scenic reconstruction or re-enactment. A third difference was the mode of presentation - Reality TV meant storytelling, factual TV as narrative (cf. Wulff 1995).

The combination of documentary and dramatic elements on first glance made Reality TV a modern heir to the established genre of the docudrama, but again there was a significant distinction. Under the name of “Dokumentarspiele” (ZDF) or “szenische Dokumentationen” (ARD) German public-service television had experimented with docu-dramatic forms already in the 1960s (cf. Wolf 2003: 99). The aim was to create either an “illusion of the authentic” (ZDF) or “one of several possible interpretation of history” (ARD, both quotes translated from Hickethier 1998: 251), i.e. works of art. Productions of this type are made even today and quite a few of them are recognized for their outstanding quality. For example, Heinrich Breloer's mini-series *Die Manns* received many awards, among them the Adolf-Grimme-Preis - of course as a work of fiction. Reality TV however pretended to be non-fiction.

To be precise, what the docudrama represents is not so much a mixing of genres, but a mixing of principal types of programming. In general, viewers can keep different elements apart - both the documentary portions and the played bits can be recognized as such. In the case of Reality TV, the problem is a little more complex. A competent viewer of course can distinguish videotaped segments made on the occasion, staged bits and re-enacted sequences, but these sequences in themselves do not reveal whether the protagonists are the people who experienced what happened or whether they are actors playing roles.

Some years later, the docu soap radicalized the concept insofar as docu soaps use several ingredients traditionally associated with fiction. In short, docu soaps can be described as serial storytelling in a semi-documentary framework. They usually tell parallel stories with in-built climaxes, they use cliffhangers to link episodes and the protagonists are people playing themselves.⁵

⁴ A study on *Notruf*, the German version of *Rescue 911*, brought the result that watching the program actually can increase the readiness to help. Cf. Grimm (1995: 91f).

⁵ For a detailed description of the history and concept of the docu soap see Wolf (2003: 95ff).

This particular aspect was also very evident in *Big Brother* the first of the so-called “real-life soaps”. When watching the first episodes of the German premiere of the format, one had the impression to be an eye-witness of subtle change in the contestants’ behaviour. As it was the premiere, the contestants initially had no idea what to expect and what to do to win or at least not to be voted out. What apparently happened was that they developed something like an on-camera version of themselves, a mediated double - in other words, they re-invented themselves as TV characters. *Big Brother* also represented the most complex mix of genres up to date. As a whole, it functioned like a game show (contestants performing tasks in order to win a prize), apart from doing household chores and working on specific tasks, the main activity of the contestants was talking (as in a talk show), most topics of their conversation were suitable both for talk shows and daily soaps - in which they would also have fit in as actors.

Reality TV, docu soaps and real-life soaps and their successors can be seen as steps in a process of *fictionalization*. In contrast to older forms of reality-based programming they employ various means derived from fiction to present, well, not reality but *reality* - a version of realness which is different both from traditional fiction and traditional non-fiction. In a popular fiction genre, by the way, the reverse happens. Compared to standard fiction programs, daily soaps in a way mean *de-fictionalization*. Especially when daily soaps were new to German TV screens, they were often criticised (and justifiably so) for bad acting, flat lighting and poor sets but this criticism missed the point. For the target group it was not relevant that daily soaps were bad fiction, what made them interesting were the people acting, what they said and did. Daily soaps were not so much fiction with bad acting but talk shows with a plot.

6. Fiction and fictionalization

So a look at recent developments in television programming leads to a maybe surprising conclusion. On the one hand, TV fiction as we know it has a precarious position on today's television market, on the other hand fictionalizing elements have become a decisive feature of successful non-fiction programs .

Apart from being an integral part of fashionable (basically non-fiction) genres, traits of fictionalization also show up in various other contexts. Examples are too numerous to mention, but a small selection may illustrate the phenomenon. In sports broadcasting it has become common to

present athletes in additional feature segments like fictional characters, especially in boxing it has also become customary to give individual fights a headline - as though they were episodes in an action serial. Quiz shows like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* quote heavily from the iconography of space fiction in their visuals. By giving ample space to the drama involved, today's casting shows come over as an interactive real-life version of biopics about the rise to stardom. During the last year of Germany's most important late-night show, the *Harald Schmidt Show*, quite a few broadcasts mainly consisted of interchange between the regulars of the program, turning it into a docu soap which might have been called *Our Show Family*.

7. Epilogue

The way fiction has invaded non-fictional television once more tempts to reflect on the *realness* of the *real*. Leaving outdated debates of post-modernism aside, the observation can be seen first of all as a reminder of a truism. Living in a media society means (among other things) using various media products routinely and on a daily basis. So media offerings are an integral element of everyday life and not external to it. With its turn towards everyday life as a key source of programming, television - first and foremost commercial television - has simply acknowledged this fact.

The fictionalization of non-fictional television can also be interpreted as an acknowledgement of a fact, but a fact which up to now has been overlooked quite often. From oral storytelling onwards, fiction has had very real effects, the stories told and their protagonists captured people's imagination and thus became part of their lives. Technological progress made way for ever more stories of ever stronger illusionist quality - from word to printed picture, to moving pictures to moving pictures plus sound to moving pictures plus sound in your home.

Of course, television offered both fiction and non fiction, serials and teleplays and news and documentaries and sports - but at the end of the day fiction simply had better stories and better pictures. When coming to New York for the first time in life, friends told me what immediately came to their mind was not images from documentaries or news programs, but images from *Kojak*. This example may illustrate that the invasion of the non-fictional by fiction started long before the advent of Reality TV.

Today's reality-based television acknowledges the fact that our whole perception has become fictionalized to a certain degree. And since the

invention of the walkman we even can have a customized soundtrack to our everyday life.

One point remains, however. By employing media and mediation to make sense in and of our lives, we can influence perception and interpretation, but not the hard facts of life. When you are unemployed, your situation will not necessarily change by clever strategies in media use. Albeit television seems to have found a solution even to these problems. Big-money quiz shows, real-life soaps and casting shows tempt us by offering *real* escapes from unsatisfactory circumstances. However, and in sync with the spirit of the times, this way is only open to a chosen few that conform best to market requirements.

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