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A Political Economy of Formatted Pleasures

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A Political Economy of Formatted Pleasures

Author's DRAFT

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Despite all their apparent diversity and difference, most successful television formats[1] are very similar. They offer a very limited palette of audience pleasures[2] by concentrating, for the most part, on entertainment rather than information or education. Formats are about fun. Moreover, formats promote a particular kind of fun. This chapter argues that, by promoting audience pleasures based in the pursuit of individual and materialistic goals, most television formats are consonant with a dominant orthodoxy which sees markets as the only way to organise society[3]. This elective affinity between format pleasures and free market ideology, however, does not come about through any deliberate design. Rather it is an unintended consequence of television production's response to economic and practical necessity. In their form, content and production practices formats are pre-adapted to the demands of a globalised media market place. As we will see here, this peculiar commercial logic has given formats a peculiar signature in terms of what they can and cannot represent.

[1] It should be noted that despite the common usage of the term, format television is so varied that the term 'format' itself is difficult to succinctly explain or define.
(See Moran 2004: 6)

[2] For a broader discussion of television pleasures see Brown 1994: 168–9; Tulloch 2000: 61–9; Fiske 1987: 314–5; see Philo and Miller 2001.

[3] For an account of reality television as the 'secret theatre of neoliberalism' see Couldry 2006.

Form, Content and the Global Media Field

Before exploring these issues, it is necessary to understand format television's current prominence. Format production takes place not only at the micro level of studio operations and production decisions but also, simultaneously, as part of a complex global media environment. The rise of the format has taken place in step with the transformation of, what can be called, the global media field. This describes the broader system of political, economic, technological, and social processes in which television production is embedded. To gain a conceptual perspective on such a system, a model is required which transcends traditional dichotomies between macro and micro, the objective and the subjective. Bourdieu provides one such conceptual model, which allows us to understand how long-term, international processes may interact with small-scale, everyday activity in cultural production (see Wacquant 1992; Fowler 1997: 2). This merging of national and international perspectives is essential to understanding format television, which, despite its recent prevalence, is the product of long-term social transformation.

In the past 30 years, what had been largely discrete national media systems have given way to open global trade in media products. As Iosifidis *et al.* note in this new 'more competitive and fragmented broadcasting environment' formats make commercial sense. They 'provide a cost-effective way of filling schedules with localised productions which proved more popular than imported films and series' (Iosifidis et al. 2005: 148). Since the 1970s, an austere economic climate has emerged shaping the development and production of television programming[4]. In this

[4] (For a fuller discussion see Schiller 1971; Herman and McChesney 1997).

transformed media environment, to be succesfully produced, programmes must be cheap, reliable and popular.

Employing Bourdieu's work on cultural production, Simon Cottle has described changes in media production in terms of 'media ecology'. He describes how, as the 'ecosystem' in which television is produced has been transformed, the form and content of programmes have changed also. Cottle elaborates on how programme form and content are shaped by this new environment. He cites the example of wildlife television, which has been transformed by 'new technologies', 'heightened competitiveness, industrial centralization' and 'internationalizing markets' (2004: 82). Slow, in-depth programmes have been replaced by fast-paced, action-based shows (2004: 93). In-depth wildlife programmes have been replaced by shows that aim to maintain audience attention through a succession of animal predation sequences. Similar changes can be found across programmes such as news, current affairs and drama. As Siune and Hultén point out 'the important changes are not to be found at the macro level of output but within different genres: news becomes sensational, current affairs becomes infotainment and talk shows, drama becomes soap opera' (1998: 29). Within and across genres, the detailed, the slow and the serious has tended to give way to fast-paced, superficial fun. In today's austere broadcasting landscape certain genres have died out while others have become dominant. Formats, with some other popular, low-cost genres like soap opera and sport, have found their ecological niche. They have thrived in recent years because they are pre-adapted to a commercialised, global media field (see Moran 2004; Moran 2006; Iosifadis *et al.* 2005; Waisbord 2004).

Format Production and Competing Visions of the Good Life

Television production, as part of general cultural production, is predominantly carried out by what Bourdieu terms the 'dominated fraction of the dominant class' (1993: 38). This describes a 'cultural middle class' comprised of artists, writers, teachers, television producers and so on. Bourdieu sees cultural production as the site of a class struggle between the 'dominant and dominated fractions of the dominant class' (1993: 378). Or, in other words, there is a conflict between the top and bottom of the middle class. Members of the dominant fraction are, generally, producers of material wealth through commerce or industry. The dominated fraction, on the other hand, produces culture. In this conflict, cultural producers try to undermine the dominant fraction of their class by 'decrying wealth, which they lack, and extolling the virtues of culture, in which they abound' (Brennan 2000: 2). Bourdieu sees this conflict as a struggle to 'impose the dominant principle of domination' or ultimately 'the definition of human accomplishment' (Bourdieu 1993: 41). It is a conflict between two opposing visions of happiness or the 'good life'. In one, happiness is synonymous with building material wealth, through money and property. In the other, the good life is built through the accumulation of cultural knowledge and associated prestige. Bourdieu describes these positions as *heteronomous* and *autonomous* principles of hierarchisation respectively (Bourdieu 1993: 40). In the first, reward is material and extrinsic to the individual[5]. Under the autonomous principles of cultural production reward is immaterial and more intrinsic.

The field of cultural production then contains two opposing sets of rules and rewards. The rules and rewards that originate in the field of cultural production see

[5] Kasser et al. describe extrinsic goals as 'those focused on exterrnal rewards and other people's praise, and include striving for financial success' (2007: 7).

cultural producers competing to gain respect and notoriety among their peers (see Bourdieu 1985: 731). The main tools they can use to achieve this are knowledge and skills peculiar to their field (see Bourdieu 1986: 243). Contrary to these 'purist' positions is a set of rules and rewards that originates in the marketplace. These are essentially the prizes of popularity and wealth. Cultural 'purists' shun these rewards (see Bourdieu 1993: 38–40). Format television, however, is not for purists.

Economic and Cultural Orthodoxy

> In much the same way as the former social-democratic hegemony was maintained with different emphases and priorities by previous governments of both Left and Right, the new neo-liberal hegemony is now actively being pursued with different emphases and priorities by governments of both Right and Left (O'Donnell 1999: 15).

Market-centred orthodoxy has come to dominate global politics to the extent that it now constitutes a new 'common sense' (Harvey 2005: 39) In 1996, Herman and McChesney report, *Forbes* magazine 'exulted' in the fact that the world's governments whether they were left or right 'could no longer "interfere" with the prerogatives of business without suffering an economic punishment that would bring them down'. Governments, the magazine reported, had 'effectively lost their power to govern' (1997: 32). Mass media are caught up in a corporate drive to boost the global role of markets in allocating goods and services, to diminish the role of governments and generally, to further the 'commodification of everything' (Harvey 2005: 165—6).

In keeping with this general trend, the global media field has become predominantly privatized and commercial. Moran identifies an 'increasing shift towards facilitating private sectoral interests in television' with 'state-controlled' and 'public-service television' frequently being 'reallocated to private entrepreneurial interests' (Moran 2006: 3). Despite their importance to citizenship and democracy,

mass media are increasingly treated like any other type of commodity (see Corcoran 2002: 2; Herman and McChesney 1997).

It could be argued that public service broadcasters have escaped this colonisation by market principles. Public broadcasters, however, have been weakened in terms of their audience numbers, their prestige and their autonomy. Most now operate according to a quasi-commercial logic. While the BBC, for example, may not sell advertising to British audiences it is nevertheless under political pressure to deliver low cost programmes to large audiences. It may otherwise face charges of wastefulness and a failure to deliver on a public service mandate. More significantly, persistent misdemeanours in this regard are likely to lead to budget cuts (see Buckingham 1987: 2–3; Born 2004: 113). As a result, among both public and commercial broadcasters, 'good television' is broadly synonymous with 'popular television'. A model of 'good television' where audience and revenue figures supersede concerns with quality, prestige or critical acclaim is now in the ascendant. The rules and rewards of the market dominate. Formats have risen to prominence in a system where 'purist' positions are economically untenable, culturally negligible and, increasingly, unthinkable.

The general commercialisation of cultural production has seen an attack on 'purist' positions, which are cast as paternalistic, intransigent and elitist. By attacking cultural 'élites' and thus attempting to dissolve cultural hierarchies, the dominant fraction of the dominant class moves closer to what Bourdieu sees as its goal, the creation of a single, monetary hierarchy (Bourdieu 1993: 41). Thus, the endless variety of different social games collapses into a single goal, where the only remaining model of achievement, happiness and the 'good life' is one based on extrinsic validation through wealth, fame and power (see Kasser et al. 2007).

This colonisation of cultural production is consequential for producers, their occupational culture and the content of the programmes they create. In their work television producers depend in large part on instincts or hunches (Gitlin 1983: 26–27). These learned 'instincts' in turn depend on a shared but often unspoken professional culture which is the product of similar conditions of employment and movement in the same social circles (see Elliott 1972: 159; Cantor and Cantor 1992: 96; Pekurny 1982: 136–7; Alvarado and Buscombe 1978: 251; Schultz 2007). As the global media system has changed so have producers' employment conditions. Most importantly in the case of format television, production work and supporting social networks have been abstracted from national contexts to become trasnsnational.

According to Moran (2006) and Waisbord (2004), the global media system, now contains a transnational global media élite who share similar working conditions and professional aims. Waisbord claims that there is a 'growing homogenization of the professional sensibilities among television executives worldwide' (2004: 379). This shared occupational culture is supported through trade publications, and formal and informal networks (Moran 2006; Waisbord 2004).

> Attendance at annual trade meetings, exposure to the same trade publications, and regular electronic communications have helped maintain frequent interpersonal contacts that facilitate familiarity with global trends… These meetings are places for cultivating a similar business mindset among industry executives (Waisbord 2004: 365).

Sharing similar concerns and working conditions, these producers develop a similar sense of what constitutes good format television. There is a loose, fuzzy but, more or less, coherent sense of what constitutes a 'good' format[6]. Waisbord sees that 'globalization has nurtured the formation of a cosmopolitian class of industry

[6] This can be described using Bourdieu's concept of habitus which describes a lasting, general and adaptable way of thinking that shapes the way we read, understand, and react to the world around us (Bourdieu 1984: 170; see Inglis 1998: 11).

professionals who, from New York to New Delhi, increasingly share similar concepts and attitudes about "what works" and "what doesn't" in commercial television' (2004: 364). Of course, this shared sense of 'what works' is equally prevalent among beleagured public service broadcasters. Formats then, in addition to being an economic necessity have become an accepted part of producer culture. Rather than being subjectively experienced as a product of the 'dull compulsion of the economic' (Abercrombie, Turner and Hill 1980: 57) many producers now see formats as an obvious and common sense way of making good television.

Formats as Technologies of Reproduction

Although the term is commonly used and understood, it is actually difficult to offer a precise definition of what a format is. Moran argues, however, that to ask what a format is, is miss the point. 'Such a queston implies that a format has some core or essence' rather than being 'a loose term that covers a range of items that may be included in a format licensing agreement' (Moran 2004: 6). The term is significant 'not so much because of what it is but because of what it permits or facilitates'. In an increasingly liberalised media system 'flows' in global media trade have extended beyond 'finished televison programmes to include television-related knowledge, services and so on'. There is a trade in ' tangible and non-tangible elements across borders' that includes 'finance, advertising, programming, scheduling practices, management outlooks and marketing strategies' (Moran 2006: 3). As an amalgam of such services and forms of knowledge, television formats are a global media product *par excellence*. The important function and effect of a format is that it is 'an economic and cultural technology of exchange' (Moran 2004: 6). Thus, 'a format is a cultural technology which governs the flow of programme ideas across time and space' (Moran 2004: 8).

Conceiving of formats as a technology allows us to see how, in their form and content, they may be related to the media 'ecosystem' that has shaped them. Sterne identifies technologies as a way in which cultures and social systems may be embodied and thus perpetuated (see also Law 1991, Latour 1991, Elias 1986 and Lee 1997).

> Technologies are associated with habits and practices, sometimes crystallizing them and sometimes promoting them. They are structured by human practices so that they may in turn structure human practices. They embody in physical form particular dispositions and tendencies—particular ways of doing things (Sterne 2003: 377).

Clearly, formats carry meanings across the globe. Yet, these meanings are necessarily divorced from national culture. For Waisbord, they are 'culturally specific but nationally neutral'. The 'DNA' of format televison is 'rooted in cultural values that transcend the national (2004: 368). The values, which have shaped format television's 'DNA' are, of course, the *heteronomous* principles which currently dominate the global media field. It can be posited then, following Sterne, that this system's culture, practical pressures and values have been inscribed within format television as a cultural technology.

Certain ground rules apply in the production and sale of format television. The conception of programme concepts is confined to companies, such as Endemol or Fremantle Media, who create, licence and sell formats. Outside of this programmes are merely manufactured following these companies' instructions, which are delivered through a production 'bible' and on-site consultancy. The format sales model depends on a degree of national variation without any fundamental tampering with the structure of the format. As a cultural technology format television encourages the faithful reproduction of programme form, content and production practices. Thus, following Sterne, formats sell more than programme concepts. They export

‘dispositions’, ‘tendencies’ and ‘particular ways of doing things’ that have their roots in a market orientation to cultural production (2003: 377).

Colonisation without Imperialism?

Many past studies addressing global flows in programming have seen the dominance of particular countries as a form of cultural imperialism (Tunstall 1977: Tunstall and Machin 1999). Such a model cannot hold, however, when studying television formats because, of course, they deliberately strip out most of the trappings of their culture of origin. Iwabuchi claims that ‘it is now untenable to single out an absolute symbolic centre that belongs to a particular country or region’. The prevalence of format television ‘shows that the global cultural power alignment is highly dispersed and decentred’ and ‘origins become subsumed by local transculturation processes’ (Iwabuchi 2004: 33). It would appear that, in a global system of open trade in media, media imperialism is a waning concern. Many commentators have rejected the media imperialism thesis on theoretical and normative grounds (Chadha and Kavoori 2000: 416). Moreover, Chadha and Kavoori contend, the proposition that media systems in developing economies are dominated by western media content has been undermined by a number of practical developments. While transnational media organizations play an undeniable and occasionally aggressive role ‘their domination is restricted by the interplay of national gate-keeping policies, the dynamics of audience preference as well as the forces of local competiton (Chadha and Kavoori 2000: 428).

In addition to market and regulatory checks, format television can be argued to further reduce tendencies towards media imperialism. Offering a global and, more or less, standardised business model, formats can be adjusted to the tastes and customs of local settings. Iosifidis *et al.* argue that ‘the growth in format sales and local production reinforces the notion that the most successful trade in cultural products

involves the suppression of the look and feel of programming concepts which express national origins' (Iosifidis *et al.* 2005: 148; see also Iwabuchi 2004: 29). Formats, Waisbord argues, are 'de-territorialized' without any 'national home'. Thus, they 'represent the disconnection between culture, geography, and social spaces that characterizes globalization'. Traces of national origin are deliberately removed so 'domestic producers can incorporate local color'. Thus 'global audiences can paradoxically feel at home when watching them' (2004: 378).

Despite such checks on unbridled cultural imperialism Chadha and Kavoori note that there is no 'room for complacency'. Commenting on Asian media, they write that while various processes have reduced the importation of foreign programming in many territories, commercialisation has become the dominant organising principle (2000: 428). As demonstrated by Cottle's model of media ecology, this almost universal move from citizen to consumer oriented media has had traceable consequences for the nature and diversity of cultural production (see Cottle 2004) . There is an increased volume of indigenous production with more programme titles being broadcast on a growing number of channels. There is also a pronounced increase in entertainment programming. However, behind these changes, Chadha and Kavoori argue, programme diversity has actually decreased.

> Even in the case of entertainment oriented programs while there is considerable plurality in numerical terms, and this is often touted as a 'sign of enhanced choice', the apparent abundance is quite limited, with successful programming being based largely on the cloning of successful genres and formats – as a result there is little genuine diversity in much of the programming, except the fact that it is local rather than imported in nature (Chadha and Kavoori 2000: 429).

The media imperialism thesis may be irrelevant to understanding the politics of format pleasures. Worse yet, any concern with conflicting 'national' cultures, whether positive or negative in its outlook, may actually obfuscate a political understanding of

format pleasures. National markets are not being over-whelmed by cheap cultural imports. There are, however, other equally serious causes for concern. A consumer orientation in programming may be leading to an over-dependence on entertainment. A reliance on formats as a 'tried and trusted' cultural technology may encourage cultural homogenisation. Ultimately, more citizen-oriented programming may be displaced leading to a public sphere that is filled with spectacle and evacuated of political content. The key point here is that these processes are not imposed from outside. Instead, they arise spontaneously from the practical pressures that prevail in a commercialised global media field.

Exemplary Formats, their Pressures and their Pleasures

To be successful a format must be able to travel internationally, generating as many localised versions as possible. At the same time, the fundamental structure of the show must remain coherent. And, of course, there is constant pressure to deliver large audiences at the lowest possible cost. These conditions pose a number of fundamental expressive limitations on both the form and the content of a programme format. It is these practical constraints, rather than producers' attempts to indoctrinate, which orient format pleasures towards the rules and rewards of the market[7].

[7] To explore the dominant characteristics of format television, twenty programmes that could be considered to be exemplary formats were selected (see table 1). These were selected primarily on the basis of international format sales. However, the selection was also informed by other considerations. Formats were also included on the basis of:

1. Having won recognition and notoriety through industry awards
2. Being an example of counter-flow, selling a format from the media periphery to traditionally dominant countries
3. Being a long running format (over five years)
4. Having been deemed valuable enough to be the subject of legal dispute (see Appendix, Table 2)

Visual Medium and Extrinsic Message

Arguably, as a visual medium, television may be predisposed to representations of the 'good life' that are more in sympathy with *heteronomous* rather than purist principles. It is more suited to displaying extrinsic rather than intrinsic rewards. As such, when displaying people and characters it is not well suited to dealing with unspoken thoughts and feelings. Iwabuchi provides a telling example in the Japanese version of *Survivor*. The show's Japanese producers decided to concentrate on contestants' inner battles rather than interpersonal rivalries. This proved disastrous. It was impossible to mediate such inner processes though the reality format. The show's Japanese producer saw that it failed because:

> The depiction of contestant emotions is much too intricate to be easily portrayed and understood… the emphasis on a search for the true self did not result in unexpected or exciting interpersonal relationships such as love affairs among contestants that are a significant element of international versions (cited in Iwabuchi 2004: 25).

Television can, of course, deal with inner life through drama productions, for example. In pared-down format productions, however, television is best suited to communicating activities that provide a level of visual spectacle. Thus, format television is more suited to portraying rewards that are tangible rather than intangible and goal orientations that are extrinsic rather than intrinsic. Beauty, fame, and the trappings of wealth and power can be readily represented through low budget television. Inner peace, knowledge and self-esteem may be laudable goals but they do not easily, or cheaply, translate into emotive, dramatic or marketable television. As low-cost, visual media, formats are already pre-disposed to representations of the 'good life' as it is seen by the dominant fraction of the dominant class.

Time, Timeliness and Hermetically Sealed Formats

In television production, time is money. Equipment and locations must be rented by the day. More significantly, technicians, camera crews, production staff and so on must be paid by the hour. Most formats avoid the need to pay cast members or writers. Nevertheless, costs need to be controlled by working as quickly as possible. This requires a rationalised and routine approach to production. In many cases studio-based format shows such as *The Weakest Link*, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* and *Are You Smarter than A Fifth Grader* will shoot several episodes in quick succession on a single day. Thus costs are minimised. A consequence of this, however, is that such shows are practically incapable of being timely. That is, they can make no direct reference to ongoing public events or current affairs. They are effectively self-contained and sealed off from the world around them by their production regime.

Unlike batch productions, some shows may be shot over an extended period. Programmes like *Survivor* and *Wife Swap* may be shot over several days or weeks. However, these productions face the same problem of timeliness. They tend to feature location shoots, occasionally in exotic settings. To maximise such an investment trade will often take place in finished programmes as well as formats. Shows like *Survivor*, *Wife Swap*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* have all been exported as finished programmes as well as being traded as formats. Here timeliness is equally impossible because these programmes, in order to travel through space, must also be able to travel through time. Put simply, a programme which is intended for export as a finished product cannot make references to football games, political campaigns or social crises that will be meaningless and out of date six months after its initial transmission. Thus while their production cycle may be longer than short run batch

productions they are, for similarly practical reasons, equally incapable of making reference to anything outside the show's basic formula.

Many format shows are effectively live. *Big Brother* is a prominent example. While the show appears as edited highlights on a daily and weekly basis, it is also made available 24 hours a day through television and the internet. Ironically, in this example, despite the live nature of the show, external reference is impossible. *Big Brother* places its contestants under constant surveillance. The contestants, however, are isolated from all news of the outside world. Once again references within the show are confined to the bounds of the show itself[8].

Seventeen of the twenty programmes addressed here were incapable of making external references, preventing the inclusion of political or social themes[9]. It should be noted here that the absence of timeliness is not, of course, confined to television formats. Many other genres such as television drama for example are equally incapable of representing up to the minute social concerns. However, beyond television's usual temporal limitations, formats are more completely isolated from the world in which their audience live. Even soap operas, with their industrialised production processes commonly make reference to social and political issues (Livingstone 1988: 56). However, while they may travel, most soap operas are not made with a deliberate view to export. Formats, on the other hand, are. As we have

[8] It is notable that when British independent politician, George Galloway took part in Britain's *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2006 his attempts to discuss Britain's participation in the war in Iraq were drowned out by birdsong and engine noise (see *The Guardian* January 16 2006). In this case, the blending of external issues and entertainment were certainly not seen to be conducive to the delivery of good format television.

[9] There are, however, some notable exceptions. Shows that are shot on a weekly basis such as *Got Talent* and *Idol* may potentially include timely references to external events. Thus unlike batch productions and expensive long shoots they may include broader social themes that lie outside the immediate concern of the programme. Shahaf provides an extreme example of this in the case of *Kohav Nolad*, the Israeli version of the *Idol* franchise. During the 2006 Israeli-Lebanese conflict the show not only referred to ongoing events but also changed its basic form and location in response (http://flowtv.org/?p=24: accessed January 12 2008).

seen above, the inclusion of national specificity stands in the way of the format trade. The inclusion of social and political issues from a national context risks corrupting the production and enjoyment of a reliable, low-risk format. Formats then could be compared to a computer operating system where the particular look, colour and sound can be customized. The fundamental software, however, remains sealed and cannot be tampered with. This leads to a situation where audience engagement and pleasure must be generated entirely within the confines of the show itself without reference to external concerns.

Formats' Emotional Flavours

To permit international sales, the themes at the core of any format must be as universally attractive as possible. Thus format programmes are more likely to appeal to basic emotions rather than to stimulate questions, discussion or debate. As van Zoonen notes, shows such as *Big Brother*, and hundreds of other formats are built on 'primal experiences and emotions' or the 'basic instincts' of 'ordinary people' (2001: 670).

As noted, television is a visual medium. It is also an emotional medium. As Freeth argues 'television is not at heart an information medium'. When television works, 'it works below the belt'. The medium is 'best at communicating atmospheres and attitudes, personalities, motivations, hopes and fears, and the broader political and cultural significance of things' (1994: 166). The emotive nature of television does not necessarily constrain its expressive range. Television can cause emotional arousal in any number of ways. Drama, news and documentary can all be emotionally engaging while dealing with social or political themes. However, due to their hermetically sealed nature, most formats must be able to excite the emotions without reference to

any broader context. Rather than creating excitement, anger or satisfaction by linking a programme to political or social issues the emotional charge of format television must be built using the devices and people available within the programme itself.

Not only must audience engagement be created from within the confines of the format, it must also happen rapidly. In a multi-channel environment, where viewers make programme choices via remote control in a matter of seconds, it is essential to 'hook' the audience as quickly as possible. There is no such thing as a slow-burning format that only becomes rewarding after persistent viewing. In a media ecology that is intolerant of risk such an approach is practically impossible and unlikely to be considered as a programming possibility. This need to give audiences a quick return for their attention also helps to explain the individualistic nature of most formats. The formats addressed here concentrate disproportionately on the individual, rather than the family, community or broader group, as the locus of action (see table 1). In this respect, they are in harmony with the individualist ethos of market orthodoxy. The individualist nature of format television, however, may again owe more to practical constraints than ideology. There is a fundamental difficulty in developing a format around collective representation and participation. Audience identification with a media character depends on recognisable social types and a viewer's ability to understand the character through the lens of their own personal experience (see Cohen 2006: 185). People can identify readily with the emotional predicaments of other individuals, typically conveyed through visual cues. However, audience identification with a heterogeneous group or team is unlikely to occur as readily. Understandably then, in the pursuit of viewing figures and economic survival, formats are more likely to gravitate towards the representation of individuals at the centre of the action.

Furthermore, the individualistic nature of format programmes may provide pleasures by serving psychological needs that arise from the individualised nature of modern societies. Many format programmes, like *Big Brother* and *Wife Swap* for example, offer pleasures of surveillance and vicarious living. Audience members can look into the lives of others for comparisons with their own lifestyle. This need to compare one's own life and habits with others is a product of the privatisation of family life (Habermas 1989: 45). This is visible in the eighteenth century in the birth of melodrama, which accompanied the separation of work and family life. Here, among the middle classes, a new isolated sense of self was created, unsupported by public life and lacking a stable, taken-for-granted world view. This persists today, creating a psychological need for reflection and validation through social comparison. There is a need to establish and reinforce visions of how life should be lived. Two hundred years ago, this was done, largely, by looking into other people's private lives through the medium of literature (see Habermas 1989: 45; van Zoonen 2001: 670). Today manifestations of the same need for social comparison can be found in television formats.

Social comparison also underpins the way in which shows such as *Big Brother, The Weakest Link, Idol* and *Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader* depend *schadenfreude* as a key emotional ingredient (see Wong 2001). This German term refers to pleasure taken in the misfortune of others. This sentiment is commonplace in format television. A former BBC producer described to Raymond Boyle how, to attract a young audience and avoid boring them, 'you need humiliation to some extent, to see people suffer' (Michelle Kurland cite in Boyle 2008: 419). Like vicarious living, this negative form of social comparison among privatised individuals may psychologically validate one's lifestyle and sense of self (Trepte 2006: 258).

Formats may project the individual as the locus of action. In this, however, they are also reflecting the lifestyles of western audiences.

In the small sample of exemplary formats examined here the preponderance are based on individual competition and extrinsic goal orientation. Indeed a number of shows are based on games where the winner takes all. These include *Big Brother*, *Idol*, *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here*, *Survivor* and *The Weakest Link*. Many shows are based on games that generate distrust, subterfuge and a Machiavellian approach to life. These include *Big Brother, The Mole, Survivor* and *The Weakest Link.* Such social pessimism could be interpreted as an ideological position. Curran argues that some 'seemingly apolitical material' can embody 'ethical codes or expressive values that lie at the heart of political creeds'. He cites, for example, 'egalitarianism, mutuality and a belief in human perfectibility in the case of traditional social democracy, or possessive individualism, self-reliance and social pessimism in the case of neo-liberal conservatism' (Curran 1991: 34). Again, producers do not include such ideas to indoctrinate. They are included because they are popular, easily conveyed and economically viable[10].

Overriding themes were identifiable in the form and content of the twenty programmes addressed here. Notably, most of the shows were based on various kinds of competitions. Only three of the programmes, *Wife Swap*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *How to Look Good Naked* could be considered to be non-competitive, self-improvement programmes. More importantly, the twenty formats analysed demonstrated a predisposition towards two central characteristics. Most

[10] It would be unwise to condemn all format television as being socially negative. Shows such as *How Long will You Live* or *Honey We're Killing the Kids* may disrupt viewers' sense of self around their lifestyles and consumption habits. Such shows also provide informational resources to help people change their diets, exercise regimes and so on. A small minority of television formats may provide empowerment and education. It is notable, however, that such formats have not met with great commercial success.

were based in competition between individuals rather than teams. The main prizes on offer, and, accordingly, the predominant goal orientations were extrinsic (see table 2). That is, goals were 'focused on external rewards and other people's praise', and included 'striving for financial success, as well as for image and status' (Kasser et al. 2007: 7). As a cultural technology shaped by a commercialised media field, formats reproduce the extrinsic goal orientation of Bourdieu's 'dominant fraction of the dominant class'. In their representation of acquisitive, individual competition, formats, for the most part, are structurally predisposed to represent a single, monetary hierarchy as the dominant definition of human accomplishment.

Table 1: Programmes by Goal Orientation and Mode of Participation

	Individual Participation	**Collective Participation**
Extrinsic Goal Orientation	Are You Smarter Than A 5th Grader? Big Brother Dragon's Den Idol I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here! Next Top Model Thank God You're Here The Mole The Singing Bee The Swan Queer Eye for the Straight Guy Survivor The Weakest Link The X Factor Who Wants to be a Millionaire? Wife Swap	Got Talent *The Lyrics Board*
Intrinsic Goal Orientation	How to Look Good Naked	Test the Nation / National IQ Test

Formats and the Fun Side of Market Orthodoxy

> The global media are the missionaries of our age, promoting the virtues of commercialism and the market loudly and incessantly through their profit driven and advertising-supported enterprises and programming. This missionary work is not the result of any sort of conspiracy; for the global media TNC's it developed organically from their institutional basis and commercial imperatives (Herman and McChesney 1997: 37–8).

Herman and McChesney contend that the stability of the global corporate system as it currently exists depends 'to no small extent' on the 'widespread acceptance of a global corporate ideology' (1997: 34). This ideology essentially legitimates the primacy of the market, the roll-back of the State and the conflation of 'freedom' with economic freedom (See Herman and McChesney 1997: 34). I am not concerned here, however, with the 'ideology' of format television in the sense of a set of codified ideas about how society should be managed. My concern lies with the 'pleasures' that format television may offer. I am arguing that format television offers a particular, and quite limited, set of pleasures that are rooted in the culture and practical pressures of a commercialised, global media field. Format television programmes are not, therefore, concerned with explicitly legitimating grand schemes or ideologies. Nonetheless, most format television subtly tells individuals about what is of value in the pursuit of happiness and the 'good life'.

As O'Donnell writes, one of the most potent aspects of the ideology of the new broadcasting environment is the fact that it is 'commonsense', populist and even fun (O'Donnell 1999: 15; see also Humphreys 1996: 229). The seduction of the commercialised global media field lies in the fact that, while it enriches corporate elites, it creates popular appeal by attacking cultural hierarchies and, ostensibly, offering greater personal choice. O'Donnell identifies commercial television entertainment as a focal point for this populist strand of market orthodoxy. As a

result, O'Donnell writes, proponents of a market-led society have appropriated notions of 'fun' and 'glamour' as their own. This, he claims, is 'one of the greatest ideological steals of recent times' (1999: 15).

For clear pragmatic reasons, low-cost entertainment is an increasingly important part of the world media system. Facing harsh 'economic realities' commercial broadcasters 'had every reason to rely upon the kind of programming that was most likely to maximise audience and that was at the same time relatively inexpensive' (Humphreys 1996: 230). Television today is 'increasingly and mainly a medium for entertainment' (De Bens and de Smaele 2001: 72). The massive increase in commercial channels in combination with 'light touch' regulation has seen these new broadcasters concentrate on entertainment to the increasing exclusion of informational, educational and political programming (Brants and Siune 1998: 133). At an explicit, and institutionally political level, market orthodoxy is a codified ideology. At the personal level, however, codified ideology can be left aside in favour of fun. In the case of format television, however, this is a particular flavour of fun, where the path to happiness lies in the individual pursuit of money, power and fame.

There is, of course, no intention to be a killjoy here. Entertainment is an essential part of any media system. Moreover, television entertainment can provide an essential means of conveying information and education, particularly to illiterate or less educated populations (Livingstone 1988: 73; Nariman 1993; Elkamel 1995; Singhal and Rogers 1999; Goldsmiths Media Group 2000: 44). Television entertainment can be highly political (Curran 1991: 33—34). The politics of market-led format entertainment, however, lie, in part, in the necessary absence of explicit politics. More importantly, however, they lie in the implicit celebration of liberal-individualist, utilitarian values. As Inglis notes, liberal-individualism 'holds the world

capitalist system together'. It is 'the unquestioned orthodoxy of global culture' transforming all 'locals into cosmopolitans' (Inglis 2008: 257). Through the propagation of these values under-developed countries 'become the same as their Western counterparts in their immersion in the material world, their pursuit of pleasure, quest for excitement, fulfilment of desire, obsession with consuming, and obsession with self' (Inglis 2008: 190)[11]. As noted above, the decline of nationalist cultural imperialism does not preclude the colonisation of national cultures by a stateless orthodoxy (see Chadha and Kavoori 2000).

At an institutional level the acceptance of explicit market ideology is essential to the maintenance of the currently dominant economic paradigm. At a personal level, the continuation of a tacit and unquestioned orthodoxy is equally important. As Inglis notes:

> If people become happy consuming less, there is the threat of economic depression. If people stop believing in the need to earn more to spend more, there is a danger the golden egg of world trade and globalization might become just a thin shell with no yolk to sustain it (Inglis 2008: 190).

It is through the personal acceptance of individual and utilitarian ideas that 'the way of the market becomes the way of the world' (see Inglis 2008: 162). Unlike, codified ideology, which is open to discussion and debate, the ideals of today's market-led society can also be experienced, on a personal level, as a set of vague feelings, motivations and goal orientations (Kasser *et al.* 2007).

By their nature, television formats are visually led. To maximise returns on investment they are low-cost and low-risk. As a technology of exchange, export sales are central to what a format does. The need to attract numerous national audiences, while preserving format coherence, leads to isolation from local social and political concerns. To survive formats must appeal to values and norms that are as widespread

[11] In this case, Inglis is referring to the development of liberal consumer capitalism in Ireland.

as possible. Thus dominant formats project and reflect individualist values and extrinsic goal orientations. Format pleasures are circumscribed by the practical constraints of a commercialised media field. Ironically, the same constraints inscribe the norms and values of market orthodoxy within formats' ostensibly apolitical brand of fun.

Appendix, Table 2: Exemplary Formats[12]

Name of format	Format Type	International Versions	Contra-flow	Industry Award Winner	Longevity	Subject of Legal Dispute
Are You Smarter Than A 5th Grader?	Game show	34				
Big Brother	Reality	39		✓	✓	✓
Dragons' Den	Reality/business	8	✓	✓	✓	
Got Talent	Talent show	16		✓		
How to Look Good Naked	Reality/makeover	2		✓		
Idol	Talent show	30		✓	✓	✓
I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here!	Reality / celebrity adventure	5		✓		✓
Next Top Model	Reality / modelling	32		✓		
Test the Nation / National IQ Test	Game show / quiz	40		✓	✓	
Thank God You're Here	Acting	16	✓			
The Mole	Game show / adventure	14	✓	✓	✓	
The Singing Bee	Game show / music lyrics	22		✓		
The Swan	Reality / extreme makeover	2		✓		
Queer Eye for the Straight Guy	Reality / makeover	8		✓		
Survivor	Reality / adventure	11		✓	✓	
The Lyrics Board	Game show / music lyrics	19	✓		✓	
The Weakest Link	Game show /	23			✓	
X Factor	Talent show	40		✓		✓
Who Wants to be a Millionaire	Game show /	105		✓	✓	
Wife Swap	Reality / lifestyle	2		✓		✓

[12] I am indebted to Anthony Quinn for his work identifying and presenting these exemplary formats.

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