REITERATIONAL TEXTS AND
GLOBAL IMAGINATION

Television Strikes Back

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Format television is so ubiquitous a presence on the contemporary broadcast grid that, even more than the multi-strands of convergence media or the proliferating arcs of revitalized dramatic series, it has come to typify what television is in our contemporary moment. Yet, serious scholarly considerations of format, as we note in our introduction, have been curiously few.

Not only an industry bonanza, the format is also a theoretical challenge. The first scholar to undertake a sustained study of format as structure and industry, Albert Moran, defined, explained and explored the form as an international phenomenon, and his work remains foundational for format-scholarship. However, with his definition, Moran may have also pre-empted thinking of the format in terms of traditional television studies since he so definitively characterized it as a textual no-thing. Formats, as Moran explained, have no core essence and are not a tangible commodity: “The term has meaning not so much because of what it is but because of what it permits or facilitates.”

Format is a business relationship, an industrial condition, a legal arrangement, a set of rules for sale, look too closely at it qua program, however, and content generalities diffuse and float away.

Yet Moran also takes care to call formats a mobile technology. This, in light of the format’s fundamental global appeal, is especially important as I try in what follows to offer some closing thoughts and opening initial suggestions for further study of formats as televisual texts.

Following Moran’s field-forming definition, it has been easier for scholars (as we review in the introduction) to think about formats specifically, in terms of their generic affiliations, subject matter, representational strategies, etc. Such specificity is, of course, far from a disadvantage. However, a big picture perspective remains wanting. In an effort to argue for format as a particularly important aspect of the contemporary development of global television and for an understanding of what television is at a moment when its demise is discussed as often as its output, a consideration of alternative theoretical thinking about format is worth trying out. Note, too, that in the statement above I linked television’s global interconnection with a suspiciously breezy characterization of its essence. As scores of scholars have argued (myself included), the history of television is replete with the medium’s specific, explicit (and often aggressive) articulation as, first and mainly, a national medium. In fact, institutional histories of television are told primarily and necessarily as narratives of location, national ideology, and—if only perceived or hoped-for—expressions of collective culture and identity. To this extent, early histories of television are by definition histories of national aspiration and distinction. However, contemporary television development, along with a broadening of the media field to include satellite, Web-based media, and other global content flows, presents challenging new opportunities to reconceive television’s place in the global media field. This “field” is not only a content exchange and commercial marketplace but also a larger cultural frame of reference that shapes our collective sense of the global.

Understanding television as one exemplary aspect of cultural production and reception where global and local are experienced in terms of one another is a major assumption in what follows (and indeed, in practically all considerations of specific format programming). However, I will also attempt to suggest additional and complementary ways of thinking about contemporary format television beyond and along this (spatially and temporally bound) framework.

In what follows, I’d like to take up formats not as a global tidal wave but as pseudo-organic formations, constructed yet now-naturalized televisual protocols that do not only shape the global industry and the television text but also serve as useful models for understanding, indeed defining, current and future television in the global context.

The Structure of Format—Reverse Engineering

To begin thinking of format as a worthy unit of theoretical inquiry, it may be helpful to examine it in terms of other reiterational texts. Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as just such an entity: a “form of repetition without replication.” While this definition serves her purpose of redirecting critical weight and regard from the “prior” or original work and disdain for the adaptation as secondary (the source of adaptation, as she notes, is still critically regarded as “better” because it is original), this definition is also extremely useful in thinking about format as a textual particularity. To go further, the notion of an original at all, in the case of format, is flimsy; although a production reel/book is often sold to format licensors (and “borrowed” without formal agreement), formats can be, and are resold before production. Moreover, the classic industry notion of a format is a text made for maximum reproduction. As Keane and Moran observe, format distribution also differs from the structure of finished (or “canned”) programs by
the importance of each format's production history. With every iteration, the format gains in complexity, cultural richness, and industrial value.

In thinking further about the notion of medium-specificity, Hutcheon's definition can also help us by deduction, as the classic notion of adaptation (a cross-platform move of content from one media form to another) does not sit well with format either. Formats differ from narrative adaptations in that they are not "repurposed" from another medium or recycled (made into an other) but are, paradoxically, essential duplicates. What's more, they are largely media specific. Imagine a film/play/comic book adaptation of Big Brother, Top Chef or So You Think You Can Dance? An actual format adaptation is hardly conceivable but their use as procedural settings for a narrative overlay is not only possible but has already occurred in American Dreamz (Paul Weitz, 2006) and more famously in Shumdog Millionaire (Danny Boyle, 2008).

As several authors in this collection point out, format is an umbrella term used across program types; so-called "reality TV" is often used interchangeably with format yet the latter's scope is broader. For the sake of easy classification, let us name formats that transfer narrative or character-specific adaptations narrative-based formats and formats of quiz, make-over, or contest structures as procedure-based formats. The latter category is dominated by—and recognizable as—game-formats in as much as each program and season-arc most commonly feature the emergence of a "winner" through an elimination process.

However, when moving beyond the market base definition of format as sold property to a focus on format as a widely-adapted set of form/content televisual conventions, a vast, third category of formats opens up in non-fiction, "real world" events programs such as news or sports shows. As we have argued in the introduction—and Tony Schirato develops in his essay for this volume—these programs too have a televisual format logic but, unlike the other two, can be thought of as indexical formats as they present events accessible outside televisual creation. My interest, for the rest of the chapter, is in theorizing the most readily identified of the format categories, the procedure-based format. What I also want to suggest, and what these three categories already illustrate, is that the procedural format is uniquely hyper-televisual. Unlike story, event, character or theme—the transferable elements of the narrative and indexical categories—what is transferred (or "formatted") about the programs within the procedural category is precisely their television-essence: their look (set design, logos, placement), their sound (theme, musical and audio cues), and their programmability (rules, structure, sequence, and overall meaning).

Structures (Narratives and Stylistic Grammar)

Repetition and reconfiguration are the lifeblood of television. Indeed, television revels in ritualized predictability. This understanding is mythically synonymous with television's coming of age in the U.S. context, ushering out early experiment and its theater affinity and shepherding in the grid-based program types and the demise of the so-called first golden age. As countless television scholars point out, duplication and recombination are much more stable components of television than novelty, not only for the sheer imperatives of continuous demands for content but also in the domestic, repetitive, and scheduled nature of its consumption and the conditions of its sustained production. Innovation within conventions is thus the primary logic of television itself.

The appreciation for variation within the constraint, the give and take between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic elements within, and the pleasures of familiarity and repetition for an engaged audience, have been some of the first hard-won battles for television scholarship. As Reeves and later Sconce emphasize, that very tension between constraint and freedom, the formulaic and the original, the new and the repetitive, are essential to televisual textuality (and its audience's knowing complicity in its repetitive formulation) and constitute the inherent aspect of their production, readability and enjoyment.

Classic formats are not only repetitive across programs—in terms of their conceptual foundation and set of rule-bound actions and outcomes—but also internally (each program performs a repetitive set of action-events in tight, regulated recurrence). Here, the notion that this structure is itself, in Moran's term, "generative" is essential: Formats are not only codification of serial program production but also, both paradoxically and importantly, a creative concept. It is precisely from the rules (and limitations) of format law that various permutations emerge. Such injunction is also coded into many of format's most successful iterations' DNA: the time constraint, the narrow and arbitrary task, the resulting emotional duress, etc., are all crucial for the production of, and variations on, action and audience interest.

Indeed, formats are the quintessential marriage of restrictive rules and pithy pitch; they are nothing if not conceptual. Format creators, known as devisors, look to generate such rules, more commonly known as "engines"—a set of visual, formal or structural elements that would characterize a format pitch. In a now classic example, Mike Briggs, the U.K. talk show host who co-devised Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?, pitched the engine as: the major prize, "giving contestants a set of possible answers, offering a series of lifelines, using a host with a supercilious manner, and soundtrack, lighting and dark wardrobe to dramatic effect." Julie Christie of Touchstone Production also stressed the importance of brevity for initial format engine description: "If you cannot say it in a paragraph, you cannot say it at all." As Christie explained, a format is all about the rules you put on an idea. Christie's definition is simple, elegant and right on the money: Format is a protocol. As some ludologists suggest about chess, the rules make the game; the engine makes the format go.

The television industry's use of the term "engine" recalls another's: that of the computer game industry. This association may be ontologically accidental, but it is rich in relevance as game engines refer to base game software components
(for example, the "skeleton" structure of a first-person shooter game) that are licensed by subsequent game developers and built on for content. A sparse and flexible base-software configuration, the game engine is designed as reusable foundation for various reversionings. Similarly, the format engine is thought of primarily as a mobile set of rules and procedures designed to be both flexible and generative. We can think of the game engine as having significant (albeit distant) family resemblance to the format engine, that bundle of protocol and base components at the heart of the television format.

Games, and computer games in particular, are a unique form of reiterational text, and as such can lend insight and dimension to our understanding of format. David Marshall and John Dovey have recently suggested game models, playfulness, and video game influence as central for thinking about contemporary media modes. Marshall charts the development of a "paedagogic regime" of play aesthetic and game-like structure from its child-targeted origins to current mainstream media texts and practices. As he argues, game culture and the rise of a play aesthetic have not only emerged as an organizing experience in media culture but are central to an industry-wide reconfiguration towards interactivity and intertextual associations across media products.11

Dovey regards the elimination-contest formats like Big Brother as simulations—behavior-models set loose within dynamic rule-based systems—and indicative of the emergence of an alternative, ludic order of representation. This logic of the playful and gamelike, he argues, has replaced empiricism as the dominant mode of contemporary public culture. Although televisual, game format television, he maintains, is a "new media" product, best considered through the interdisciplinary understanding of media that includes software studies, human–computer interaction and cyberculture studies. By this logic, formats are "text machines" of identity simulation, populated by character algorithms set within a ludic zone.12

While diverging in focus, both authors see the emergence of games (and computer games in particular) as constitutive in a major turn for both media culture and media studies. In this sense, video games loom large in the feel of culture, even for those who have never played them.

In an effort to carve out more space within television studies for format theory, I take these forays into alternative systems of cultural analysis as more useful here than the traditional regard for formats as generic categories. This is not to say that genre is unsuitable or useless for format application. As some contributions in this volume demonstrate, genre analysis is the one graspable textual instrument we have to begin considering format television as a serious and varied aspect within the televisual expressive field. However, such conventional genre approaches can also limit the types of questions we can ask, get mired in sub-categorical tangents, and cannot adequately account for the particular relationship between form and content that procedural format TV relies on. Moreover, formats appear as near-inversions of genre: textual patterns where the "seams" of rules and cross-

textual conventions are not only visible but highlighted. Genre theory may help us classify the varieties within format programming but can tell us little about why and how such classifications of nakedly-repetitive patterns matter or mean.

Alternatively, a terminology—and its accompanying vantage point and emphasis—loosely borrowed from gaming offers a productive consideration of code-based structures, affective repetition, modular development, elaborations on convention and rule-motivated content. It may also be helpful in figuring out just what’s going on: How are format-based narration strategies different from other television conventions? What does the growing popularity of playful and game-like structures mean for audience engagement? Are there broader cultural implications for the changing shapes of digital media and their global exchange?

It is also important, in any invocation of gaming in a discussion of television, to distinguish between the use of game as a helpful—if imprecise—structuring conceptual framework and the notion of play as a primary, experiential base for gaming studies. As gaming scholars insist, games fundamentally differ from media texts in that they are most decidedly not "read" but played.13 And while it is tempting, for the sake of symmetry, to argue that much of format programming also comprises games and competitions “played” by the contestants, this formulation is myopic at best: Games are made for the people who play them, TV game formats are made for the people who watch the game. Functionally, the concepts are fundamentally and operationally dissimilar, and practically, no easy alignment of gaming and television is possible or advisable. However, both digital games and format television share a culturally identifiable playful structure, procedural logic, and iterative legibility. In this sense, I propose the context of an increasingly familiar gaming culture as an important, sympathetic component of media and digital culture, and contemporary comfort with modularity, configuration, and an algorithmic structure in which rules are both foregrounded and constitutive. Thus I am not claiming paternity but rather a larger cultural common denominator from which both contemporary televisual and digital games products draw cultural legibility. In this, the pleasure of format also involves the self-conscious and referential aspect of programmer’s configuration and the audience’s appreciation of the back-of-the-camera rules, design, and the more contemporary pleasures of customization.15 The codification of format is thus a fundamental part of its enjoyment, along with the audience’s absolute complicity in, and understanding of, the highly artificial order that other television tools (such as editing or casting) bestow and impose on the already determined raw material in this procedural, modular text.

In his work on the culture of television production, John Caldwell has argued persuasively that television’s survival in the so-called convergence era has depended not on radical transformations but rather on tweaked or re-emphasized industry strategies that have characterized the business and creative structures of television from the very start. Two of the tendencies he analyzes are migratory and ritualized textualities (or syndication and pitch). While Caldwell only touches
on format—and views the ubiquity of format as a cannibalized and hybridized form that has evolved through the “pitch” culture of creative textual mutation—both modes of televisual textual organization are crucial to understanding the current development and proliferation of the format as culturally contemporary but essentially televisial.

So far, I have suggested the format as located in the cross-current of two seemingly contradictory temporal flows: The current success of format television is associated with larger contemporary techno-cultural forces and shifts, yet its basic structure and logic is fundamentally linked to television’s intrinsic tendency towards formulaic regularity. As Caldwell argues, to understand this mode and practice of textual production in its current stage is to understand the basic workings of television.

I now turn to another Janus-faced quality of the format structure: its function as a localized product of a global formula.

What’s Global in Global Format?

To invoke global television in the convergence age and to suggest a synergetic relationship between contemporary television and a framework drawn from digital game scholarship brings up yet another in a series of current “crises” for contemporary television studies. Graeme Turner has identified a tendency within television studies towards “techno-political hierarchy” that views the emerging interactive and Web-based media in opposition to traditional television. This formulation perceives television as a dying technology, wedded to outmoded nationalism, top-down distribution of power and ideological closure, just as digital media are celebrated as democratizing, user-oriented, progressive and global: “The closer to the global consumer we come ... the further we are from the nation state ... the technology liberates the consumer from political and regulatory containment.” Here Turner further notes the exuberant enthusiasm of television scholars—following other social and cultural theory—to endorse and embrace a model of post-national, globally-felt television consumption (mostly via the Internet) as both progressive and widespread, a much-overstated notion on both fronts.

The argument that fuses the dilution of television as a site- (and technology-) specific medium with cosmopolitan identity appears to contradict recent program-specific scholarship (like many chapters in this collection), that argues for a particular national and cultural identity that is both reproduced and affirmed in local production—particularly of format television. Indeed, satellite television, Web-based programming, mobile media, convergence technology, and the growing popularity and accessibility of regional and transborder television—in addition to the robust trade in “finished programs”—demand that traditional television scholarship take account of a growing transnational media presence. As Jean Chalaby observes, “International TV channels are not simply
deterritorializing but deterritorialized cultural artifacts themselves. Many of their features, including coverage, schedule and patterns of production tear apart the relation between place and television.”

Moreover, other scholars have urged television studies to move away from the nation-centered stance that insists and affirms the resiliency of nation in the face of globalizing media—a perspective sociologist Ulrich Beck influentially dubbed “methodological nationalism.” As Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy have recently insisted, such models fall short of accounting for the contemporary globality and mobility of media texts. In their London study of Turkish-speaking communities, Robins and Aksoy argue for a cosmopolitan, transnational perspective that accounts for a dialogic imagination of co-existing ways of life and experience, rich and complex beyond the grasp of monologic, national-centric approaches. Drawing heavily on Beck’s argument and his evocative description of the nation-based analysis as a “zombie category,” they go on to accuse such studies of a lack of imagination and mechanized thinking at best, or characterize their authors as cheerleading stakeholders in the nation-state’s power at worst. As they argue, television scholars who have recently articulated the centrality of nation in their discussions of global television and media culture “mobilize the rhetoric of political pragmatism and realism, intending to convey the idea that the old national model still works”—and aiming to rule out possibilities that there could be any meaningful potential in new transnational or global media developments.

Arguments like these are valuable in their insistence on alternative identity formations through media and their caution against academic automation. And while in Robins and Aksoy’s hands “The Nation” looms as a stiffing and homogenizing soul-prison, their argument also resonates with a kind of fatigue for the standardized essay that keeps restaging, ad infinitum, a celebrated nation-local’s triumph over global-Western groupthink. Yet, at its weakest, the argument falls into the same dialectic system it aims to reject when it casts the national as a thin, ideologically-pungent broth, set against the rich, fragmental stew of multi-locational, multi-cultural, post-national complexity. The possibilities of alternative, transnational models of media do not preclude, but describe in toto, the current experience of intimate, domestic, and more often than not, nationally-based programming. Such programs often anchor a sense of collective recognition to mundane details of social interaction, habits, routines, and shared practical knowledge, as well frustrations, divisions, and acknowledged tensions within these structures of experience—particularly so when we move away from U.S./U.K.-based studies. As Minna Aslama and Merit Puntti observe in their study of Finnish reality television formats, the sense of belonging is not by any means bound to authoritative, official version of culture and identity.

That television’s relationship to space can no longer be taken for granted is indisputable. However, the current explosion of format television appears to disturb traditional theoretical approaches preoccupied with media’s relationship with
cultural articulation on both “sides” of the nation-centric debate. No doubt the current success of global formats is intimately tied to a particular logic of globalization—both capital and popular. It is also, as many scholars argue in these pages, an especially good example of how contemporary global cultural exchange differs from older models of influence and imperialism while simultaneously unseating cherished characterizations of local culture as resistance to the crushing span and ubiquity of global/Western media products. Arguments that insist on a break or opposition between national experience and global or transnational consciousness conflate the former with state-powered nationalism from above, and sweepingly ascribe chauvinistic and insular disposition to various articulations of national linkages that may operate quite differently, ignoring currently occurring multiplicities that necessarily make up the national experience of viewing. More importantly, they cut off the possibility of national address as itself part of the meaning viewers make of transnational media texts. Here I suggest the international format as one such textual category where the national frame comes into view precisely because and within the understanding of such programming as multi-national reiterations.

Before addressing viewers’ experiences, it is important to step back and consider how and why the base “software” of formats is enjoying so much current global success. While the phenomenon of formats is easily dismissed as mere industry clamoring to repeat a proven money-maker, Silvio Waibord argues that they are better understood as revealing important developments in the globally interconnected television industries and institutions on the one hand, and the efforts of transnational producers to deal with the resilience of national cultures on the other. The simple economic advantages of formats over original productions and “canned” imports are surely an important factor, as are the local development of commercial television, and the internationalization of the television marketplace. Another important factor, however, as Timothy Haven points out, is the rapidly changing and standardizing television profession itself. As a generation of professionals worldwide begins to think about TV in similar ways, they likewise define the imaginary connections that bind together different segments of the public both within and beyond the nation-state. These forms of standardization are, Hasvors argues, far more powerful (and, for Havens, pernicious) than the representational strategies of television texts, the meanings that viewers make from television or global patterns of media ownership. Waibord makes a similar point while making a counter-argument: “Structural regulations and institutional expectations limited programming choices, for programming trends to become truly globalized, television systems needed to be patterned along the same principle.”

In light of such stylistic and economic centralization, the future, as Graeme Turner suggests, is in indigenizing: “(T)he way to examine the local within the global is through mapping processes of appropriation and adaptation rather than proposition of any thoroughgoing specificity or uniqueness.”

Global standardization of the institutional shape of television here actually facilitates (indeed, demands) a shift in the logic of programming. I want to think of this shift not as a radical departure (or reconfiguration) but rather as a countermove deeper into the primary, modular logic of television—just as various non-format texts break it apart. In this global logic, content is local but systemic conventions of the apparatus are both deterritorialized and naturalized. The news show, the interview program, the sitcom, the soap and the variety show are all base-formats that have specific, recognizable and classifiable codes. These soft protocols of content organization emerged—through particular processes of exchange—within various television systems and quickly solidified with the naturalization of a televisual space in each context. Such a codification of protocols cannot be separated, as Havens, Waibord and others observe, from the growth of a cosmopolitan industry elite whose shared business sensibilities and homogenizing tastes make up a large part of the explanation for format growth. As such, these sensibilities’ Western (and particularly U.S./U.K.) roots can hardly be denied, but neither should their industrial and stylistic provenance—in all their historically imbued signifiers of global power and ideology—be read as forever fixed and loaded. This origins-based approach is further bolstered by many theorists’ tendency to call local reiterations of global formats “hybrids.” The term may be genetically useful but also insists on parity and equivalence between structure and content, fixing both as specific, similarly meaningful cultural entities, and rendering their encounter a “cultural mix” of ontological equals. This understanding permanently fuses television’s cultural allegiance to its site of invention. We may, to better understand format’s operational logic in the present, think (strategically) beyond the hybrid (what, after all, is not?) and towards the modular and peripatetic. Further, if globally-coalescing centripetal forces produce the format to transmit and infuse cultural value, the value transmitted here is that of televisuality itself—as a particular, formal, globally shared and modular experience.

So What’s Local?

At the same time, a central tenet of this homogenized understanding of the format’s appeal—right along with its globally-shared formal conventions—is its essential, ever present, particularity. As Waibord insists, “formats are culturally specific but nationally neutral...because formats explicitly empty-out signs of the national, they can become nationalized.” The Israeli iteration of So You Think You Can Dance (“Nolad Lirkod”), for example, was heavily promoted as an international format sensation and compared (even within the text of the show itself) to the Idol format—also a hit in Israel. However, its first episode (the obligatory pre-season audition segment with its ritualized, heavily edited clips of triumph and ridicule) began with historic 1948 footage following the declaration of Israel’s formation as a state, when hundreds of Israelis broke into spontaneous
celebratory dancing in the city streets. The segment continued with contemporary footage from various locations in Israel, where groups gather to dance in styles ranging from folk to the cha-cha, krumping and ballet. Layered over clips of spinning toddlers, hip-hopping youth, and swinging elderly couples, the host's voiceover confirmed Israel's special affinity to the show's subject (with more than a hint of comic flare): "Israelis were born to dance...we're a nation of dancers! The English celebrate with a drink in the pub, the French luxuriate with a nice foie gras...and Israelis, we dance!" This effort to locate the dance format in such over-the-top nationalist context is amusing precisely in light of the show's formal allegiance to the SYTYCD format—whose U.S. version is familiar to the Israeli audience. The format's essential playfulness and global reproducibility thus anchors its audience in watching, reading and experiencing this and other format texts as having deep local resonance, nested within a larger format logic that is fundamentally televisual and globally connected. This mix is further reinforced in the show's opening credits where the globally reproduced theme song and credit sequence also includes a snippet of Israeli folk dance and song, in between the segments of Broadway, ballet and Bollywood styles (see Dana Heller's essay, Chapter 2 in this volume, for her analysis of this Israeli format version).

As this example illustrates, an important aspect of the format as a modular unit of television programming is that it often travels, and announces itself, as an iteration.

While the practice of format adaptation existed throughout television history, the procedure has largely gone unacknowledged outside the television industry itself. For example, hit U.S. shows of the late 1980s and early 1990s, America's Funniest Videos and America's Most Wanted, appeared as distinct and original texts without any revelation of their origins as a popular Japanese program or German and British formats. By contrast, Big brother, Survivor, Idol, and So You Think You Can Dance, as well as Ugly Betty—all massive international hits that ushered in the format era—are read, and often promoted, in terms of their proliferation, popularity and global presence. Thus, the format's recent large-scale standardization has also produced a meaningful shift in its mode of self-representation as a text—a newly found reflexive self-consciousness in light of its acquired visibility.

Reading the Japanese iterations of Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? and Survivor, Koichi Iwabuchi notes that the shows make wide reference to their constitution as local versions of global formats that are popular all over the world. Iwabuchi concludes:

"The format business has given audiences a pleasure in sharing the common frameworks and the irreducibly different appearances that manifest in local consumption. Put differently, what is being promoted is not simply global localization that aims to adopt the common to the difference but also local globalization that makes audiences feel local, that is, a sense of participation in a global society through the reciprocated enjoyable recognition of local (in most cases synonymous with national) specificities articulated through the shared formats. The western gaze of modernity thus melts into a global modernity."

As Iwabuchi suggests, the sense of (and pleasure in) "global modernity" is fundamentally dependent on the presence of a recognizable, irreducible difference that comfortably and assertively sits within the shared format engine. The complex web of global and domestic linkages which television systems (and audiences) find within the format exchange were similarly—if less buoyantly—described by one Australian format producer as "parochial internationalism."

I would further suggest that formats, in their very existence and acknowledged structure of local repetition within a multi-national framework, can do more than just express national identity in content: they often cement the national quality of television.

**Format Diplomacy**

As a final, extended example, I offer the curious case of the Israeli reality contest format, The Ambassador ("Ha'shagir"). A loose adaptation of The Apprentice, the show employs the same formal and stylistic elements as its unofficial progenator: A group of young and ambitious men and women, divided into initial teams by gender, compete in each episode by performing difficult and stressful missions. Each week, the losing team is summoned to a solemn boardroom to face an imposing expert panel, after each of the weakest performers argues their case (and blames fellow contestants), judgment is rendered and one contestant is selected for elimination. As in The Apprentice, the loser is dispatched with a catch phrase intoned by the head judge: "Take back your portfolio and go home."

The portfolio in question, however, is a political reference. Despite its immediately recognizable format conventions (the histrionic segment-theme music, the rapid tension-seeking narrative editing, the indication-heavy soundtrack, the confessional, the contestant's own retelling of events, the set piece sections in each episode, etc.), The Ambassador differs dramatically from the Mark Burnett version in a major engine detail; in this show, contestants compete to become a spokesperson for Israeli policy around the world, charged with representing the Israeli point view to often hostile audiences. The show follows a long-held belief in Israel that much of the animosity felt towards it throughout the world is the result of Israel's failure in the arena of public relations—of hastana (literally, explanation). The show seeks confrontational situations in international settings (on university campuses, encounters with a skeptical foreign press, sales-pitches to international businesses, meetings with foreign leaders, etc.) and every such
The Ambassador elevates such tension to thematic heights by positioning a local iteration of a global format within the context of national soul-searching and global performance. Said differently, the program enacts a nation’s deepest anxiety over global scrutiny through self-representation.

Since global formats, as I’ve argued above, are most influential in their capacity to carry and disseminate the value of playful, standardized modular televisuality—and transnational imagination—this quality is also essential to how meaning is made (and solutions are posed) in The Ambassador. It is here that the naturalized televisual logic of format and its restrictive expressive palette meets and profoundly shapes local expressions of particularity, as Israel’s self-conscious preoccupation is processed through the circumscribed soft protocol of reiterational televisual style.

As offered here, the case of The Ambassador is (instructively) extreme in its explicitness, and fits the Israeli fixation and hyper-awareness of national identity and action under global scrutiny. Further, both Israeli examples I relied on here (Nedum Lirkod and Hashagun) appropriate the global format code to articulate specific and explicit national identities for their audiences. However, I do not argue that such negotiation of local formats in a globalizing television environment functions in this way in every case. Rather, I want to stress that when such national expressions or invocations appear, they do so in the context of international presence and participation. Such global acknowledgement is not just about references to one national identity in comparison to others, but also in full textual acknowledgment of the format qua format, as a local version of a globally traveling formula.

As Linda Hutcheon reminds us, there is no such thing as an autonomous text. Textual dependencies are not only inevitable but also vital to the legibility of each text in turn. The format’s ubiquity, its global recurrence, formulaic structure and intertextual dependence are all essential to how this televisive text is made meaningful and pleasurable in each reiteration. Through its particular ability to invoke a local specificity within global textual exchange, the contemporary format provides us with a clear-cut example of television’s specific cultural work in an expanding media environment. As I’ve argued above, both sides of the nation-centric debate can contribute to our understanding of the format phenomenon, but only when coupled with a consideration of its industrial development, the globally-linked standardization of the television industry—with its expressive costs and benefits—and the format’s assimilation into, and legibility within, a wider digital and modular mediascape. Neither polarity on the nation-centric debate accounts fully for how formats work, since formats are most useful in helping us understand how television can consistently oscillate between—and hold in mutual dependence—a domestic, communal, national, regional, transnational and global address. In terms of its functionality and the dynamic feedback loop it generates between convention and innovation, locality and the (mediated) world, the global TV format is now television in its purest form.
Notes


3. This definition also distinguishes programs made as formats from those which become format adaptations “after the fact” (televendals such as Ugly Betty are the most common examples). More complicated still are translations-turned-format adaptations like the slow evolution of the Israeli Bepop, its “straight up” translation to HBO’s In Treatment and now “formatization” in several other national versions that turned its narrative and kept only its structural rules. Whether fiction programs narrowly qualify as formats is less interesting here than what categories one applies to make such distinctions.


5. A fictionalized American Idol film is rumored to be in early pre-production at the time of writing this article (spring 2009).

6. This reduction can also be, at least philosophically, disputed as many sports events, and increasingly news events are both staged and performed for television. This category, then, does not refer to the anatomy of programming but rather to a more basic notion of “real world access” to events, even if they are, finally, performed for TV consumption.


10. Ibid., p. 39.


13. Further, format heavily relies on structures of narration and signification in ways that certainly lend themselves to productive textual analyses.


17. Turner, G., ibid., p. 57.


33. The show was not an officially licensed format although its style and structure is clearly drawn from the Fermalement format. In fact, Mark Burnett’s production company began lawsuit proceedings against the Kesher network.

34. Rina Matselisi, Nachman Shai, and Ya’akov Perry made up the first season’s judging panel. Former Shas head Perry was replaced in the second season by an ex-fighter pilot, Gil Segal, a military hero turned industrialist. Perry returned as a special guest judge in the semi-finals.

35. Ha’ishavir perfectly typifies and encapsulates Israeli political anxiety, internal conflict and Israel’s own acute self-consciousness at the feel of global scrutiny. It is then significant that its first season, in the fall of 2004, appeared less than a year after then-prime minister Ariel Sharon’s historic reference to Israeli policies as “occupation.” The show’s airing corresponded with a fierce internal Israeli debate over dismantling settlements in Gaza and the media spectacle of violent clashes between Israeli soldiers and evacuated settlers in the summer of 2005, just weeks after the first season’s finale.


37. Importantly, the format’s fit within the broad scope of digital media is as much a structurally and cultural, and involves industry and television audiences as much as a digitally-sympathetic modular structure