

Global Media Journal

German Edition

Book Review

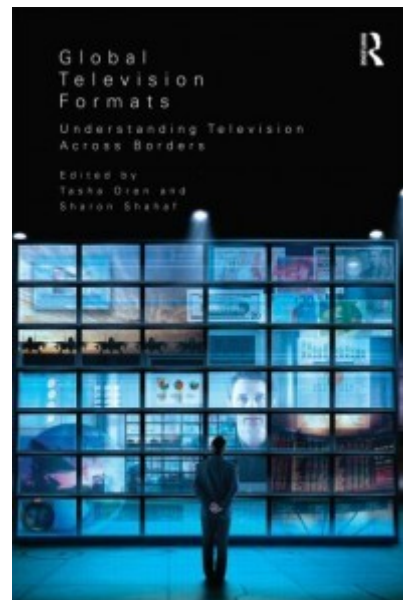
Global Television Formats. Understanding Television Across Borders

Oren, Tasha & Shahaf, Sharon (2012): Global Television Formats. Understanding Television Across Borders. New York and London: Routledge. 392 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-96545-3.

Anne Grüne, University of Erfurt

To cite this article: Grüne, Anne (2013). Oren, Tasha & Shahaf, Sharon (2012): Global Television Formats. Understanding Television Across Borders. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 3(2).

Contemporary worldwide media environments experienced massive changes in recent years. The remarkable impact of social media and broader processes of digitalization and mobilization, which in turn preceded the rapid dynamics of media convergence, are the most common phenomena to name. Thus, it appears reasonable that the academic interest in particular developments and phenomena of television, the classic fulcrum in global media studies, seemingly decreases. However, the collection edited by Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Georgia State University, proves television studies to be a still relevant, fruitful and highly contentious field of enquiry for understanding entangled media environments in the 21st century. Especially the accelerated circulation of television formats illustrates contemporary layers of global, transnational, national, and cultural connections. Oren herself concludes in the collection's final essay "the global TV format is now television in its purest form" (p.379), attributing the format's symptomatic status to its functionality and the "dynamic feedback loop it generates



between convention and innovation, locality and the (mediated) world” (ibid.). Indeed, the legal formatting of entertainment concepts has become a highly visible mode of production in the global entertainment business. In turn, forms of creative borrowing, reiteration, and reproduction are deeply rooted in the history of televisual and cultural production in general. Formatting allows the flexible recombination of televisual conventions and social settings with their multi-layered global, transnational, national, and local traces. It is thus reasonable and necessary that the editors recall the need for more “nuanced and contextualised frameworks” beyond binary conceptualizations such as global/local or core/periphery in global media studies (p.2).

This edition reflects the increased academic awareness of the significance of TV formats for global television. Both established as well as emerging scholars in the field contribute to the volume and provide a wide range of knowledgeable insights into contemporary television environments. The analytical and empirical approaches that help to interrogate the format phenomena in the context of global media dynamics are manifold.

In order to organize the 18 essays the editors favour a topical clustering over that of regional, genre-centric, or methodological approaches. The first part assembles theoretical discussions of TV formats. Silvio Navarro and Dana Heller scrutinize the potential of performance and critical dance theory to inform conceptual understandings of contemporary dance television formats. Heller emphasizes the significance of the human body and movement as bearers of discourses of collective identity. In her view, dance translates and reconfigures perceptions of global or national identity and as such serves as an instrumental social text. In a similar vein, Navarro considers the cultural significance, creative autonomy, and the “generative quality” of local adaptations (p.29). In contrast to common understandings, adaptations are not merely derivatives of seemingly stable models provided by the original formats. Adaptations are rather highly contextualized re-interpretations or re-enactments. According to the author, the meandering “between repetition and creativity” (p.33) within format adaptations illustrates the fruitful analogy with the concept of performance.

Eddie Brennan provides a contrasting perspective by re-emphasizing the critical political economy frame. He draws attention to the audience pleasures which are offered by the most internationally successful formats. According to his preliminary empirical validation of goal orientations in exemplary formats, the pleasures are very similar as well as limited in scope. They are “in harmony with the individualist ethos of market orthodoxy” (p.81). Thus, he illustrates the interrelation of commercial orientation and textual attraction. The argument, however, does not account for the various media repertoires or actually experienced pleasures of given audiences.

The logics and dynamics of format and genre developments are focal points within

the remaining two discussions in this theory-oriented section. Tony Schirato analyses the format logic in mediated sports events. He shows how developments in a sport such as cricket and developments in television sports coverage overall mutually influence one another. Yeidy M. Rivero reveals how television genres can operate as formats in particular television environments and in particular historical moments. Thus, the author includes “the travels and the industrial, thematic, and cultural adaptation of television genres” in the definition of formats as practices (p.92). She bases her argument on a thorough investigation of malleable structures, interpretations and classifications of a bilingual situation comedy in U.S. television which serves as a diasporic cultural artefact.

Although these diverse analytical perspectives are fruitful in detail, they stimulate the theorization of particular cases rather than the understanding of formatted television and border-crossing phenomena in general. For example, Heller and Navarro both reduce their analyses to competition-based formats. They leave open to debate if the proposed theoretical translations are applicable to scripted and fictional formats. The same applies to discussions of mediated sports and format pleasures. Considerations about the analogies of televisions formatting practices and other forms of creative borrowings and reinterpretations (transfers of styles and structures in other dimensions of cultural production) remain under-explored. This also applies to discussions and/or categorizations of the potential borders referred to in the subtitle of the collection. The articles loosely refer to comprehensive frameworks in social theory and even more so highlight particular cases. Oren’s concluding essay offers alternative meta-analytical impulses to the classification of formats or to the global/local nexus, which is often stated to be inscribed in global television formats. As an example might serve her discussion of the modular logic of television in which content remains local but in which conventions and codes – the “soft protocols of reiterational televisual style” (p. 379) – are rather universalized deep structures.

The historical dimension of TV formats informs a variety of essays in the collection. Among them is the description of the institutionalization of format practices in European television with regard to public service models of broadcasting and the flux relation to the U.S.-television environment by Jérôme Bourdon. Furthermore, Chiara Ferrari provides a case study of national, regional, and global signifiers in early Italian show adaptations. And Paule Torre investigates the shifting role of Hollywood in the global marketplace of formats as well as Hollywood’s responses to these transformations. Finally, Joseph Straubhaar’s profound examination of internal and external exchange processes and practices in Brazilian’s television history illustrates in detail the dynamics within a particular geo-cultural region. At the same time, the author returns to broader concepts of hybridity in transnational television by considering the cultural dialogs involved in the evolution of telenovelas.

Overall, the collection’s emphasis on the complexities of historical patterns and the

social and cultural situatedness of TV formats enriches our recognition of television histories in various geographical regions as well as our understanding of their entanglements with transnational and global developments.

In a similar vein, the essays on the politics of place and nation, which are mirrored in TV formats, emphasize the sustaining importance of regional, local, and national contexts as opposed to global dynamics. Marwan Kraidy reveals contentious readings of reality formats in liberal Lebanon and conservative Saudi Arabia. His contribution is also theory-driven as he reconsiders the social and political implications of reality casting shows for a hypermedia space, which captures the convergence of transnational communication spaces. Michael Keane and Lauhona Ganguly's discussion of the role of format adaptation in more comprehensive developments of privatization and commercialization focuses on broader transitional conditions of television industries in China and India. Sharon Sharp's textual analysis of domestic reality television in the USA, Britain and Chile highlights representations of social conflict and the negotiation of national identity. In their investigations of various Idol versions, Biswarup Sen, Joost de Bruin, Martin Nkosi Ndlela and Erica Jean Bochanty-Aguero similarly accentuate the various representational strategies that help to construct and transmit collective imaginations of national and ethnic identities and entities in TV formats.

To conclude, the collection reflects the increased re-integration of TV format studies into the analytical terrains of textual and cultural analysis. It is therefore surprising that the volume lacks profound references to theories of popular culture or the vivid field of audience studies. The selected case studies are dominated by (con-)textual analyses of representational strategies and exclude, for example, reception-oriented analyses. Thus, actual readings and responses to formats by various audiences are not investigated here. If, however, television is considered to be a "larger cultural frame that shapes collective senses of the global" (Oren, p.367) format-scholarship should take into account discourses especially in cultural and reception studies and should further invest in analyzing and scrutinizing collectively shared imaginations and frames. Moreover, the range of case studies considered in the collection is limited to a number of common international hit shows. Likewise, it would have been desirable to recognize dynamic developments in particular geo-cultural regions in a more balanced and systematic way. For example, transformations of television systems and conventions in Eastern Europe and Russia are not represented at all; the various impulses that the format trade has given to indigenous reality formats in the Arab world are not reflected. This applies also to circulations of television style in East Asia. In this respect, the volume does not cover the empirical complexity of today's format circulation. Moreover, definitions of the television format are neither coherent nor fixed. Formats are understood as television products, as cultural practices and artefacts, as broader textual categories or as symbols of global economic trajectories (p.4). In short, the reader might feel at a loss when he or she aims at exploring a systematized analytical terrain of television formats. Nevertheless, the edition provides a useful and important

academic overview and is to be recommended to all those interested in television formats. The collection offers nuanced analytical understandings of television though a few loose ends remain to be tied up.