
Reviewed by Paul Julian Smith
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Beyond copycat television

Scholars in television studies are now used to the fact that they should pay attention to territories outside the historical legacy of a discipline that arose in the UK and US. But such awareness is often no more than lip service, limited as it is by empirical and linguistic competence. In Global Television Formats: Understanding Television Across Borders, editors Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf and their seventeen contributors (Oren also contributes a final chapter herself) attempt to fill that huge gap with accounts of such varied genres as sports, reality, contests, and (to a lesser extent) drama in Europe, Asia, and Africa. While the contributions are, as would be expected, diverse, they coincide in their return to (and revision of) Albert Moran's pioneering work on the global format as a flexible programming unit, held to be in opposition to the more static transnational model of the import/export trade in "canned" programs. Likewise the contributors take it for granted that in this multidirectional model of globalization, top-bottom scenarios (of, say, US media imperialism) no longer hold, given the intense localization inspired by even the most widely distributed of apparently homogenizing formats.

Beginning, then, with a synthetic introduction by the editors, the volume is divided into four distinct parts. "Format Theories and Global Television" seeks to go beyond Moran's model of "copycat television," offering theoretical reflection. Thus Vinicius Navarro argues for "performance" as a new mode of conceptualizing variations in format; Dana Heller appeals to critical dance studies; Tony Schirato and Eddie Brennan invoke Bourdieu's cultural field in the context of sport and reality/talent shows, respectively (although Brennan is alone in clinging to a critique of colonization here). Yeidy M. Rivero's fascinating case study of a bilingual PBS sitcom from the 70s seems somewhat out of place in this company.

The second section is "The Format in Historical Perspective." Here Jérôme Bourdon places European format development, with its borrowing of quiz and games shows from the US, within the history of the transition from public service to commercial broadcasting; Chiara Ferrari highlights the "Italianess" of RAI's paradoxical "original adaptation" hosted by the aptly named Mike Bongiorno; Joseph Straubhaar gives an overview of the development of hybridized telenovela in Brazil; while Paul Torre explores the current challenges to Hollywood of a global production environment, which is less asymmetrical and more interdependent than ever.
Part III is devoted entirely to a single format: the *Idol* franchise, which the editors acknowledge now seems to be waning in the face of smaller "lifestyle" shows. Yet Biswarup Sen's enviable local knowledge identifies differences within episodes of the Indian version (when competitors come from, say, border regions or are self-defined Indian-Americans); Joost de Bruin examines nation-building strategies in New Zealand, which would still, it appears, exclude the lived realities of Maori spectators; Martin Nkosi Ndlela treats localized *Idols* within and across African nations, paying particular attention to target audiences; and Erica Jean Bochanty-Aguero more predictably finds *American Idol*’s global self-posturing wanting, even as she suggests that the US notion of the national is no longer simple or single.

The last section ("Local Articulations and the Politics of Place") offers accounts of the questions of space and place that have already been treated throughout the volume. Marwan M. Kraidy studies reality TV in two very different Arabic-speaking countries, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia; Michael Keane questions the "great leap forward" in China's format business; Lauhona Ganguly treats *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* in India; Sharon Sharp examines domestic reality programming, detecting unexpected differences between British, Chilean, and American versions of *Wife Swap*; and editor Oren's valuable structural account of what she calls "reiterational texts" climaxes with what she herself calls the "curious case" of an Israeli version of *The Apprentice* in which luckless contestants are obliged to present their country's political point of view to hostile audiences abroad. The twin themes of localization and interdependence could hardly be clearer than here in this chapter.

As my account suggests, then, *Global Television Formats* offers both a revisionist theoretical focus, with a number of new models proposed, and valuable empirical research, based mainly on content analysis. Like "National Mike [Bongiorno]," contributors move nimbly between the two focuses, engaging local knowledge in a way that is accessible to English-language readers and offering a wealth of fascinating detail on such engaging and even humorous matters as the eccentric local hosts who go way beyond US blandness (Turkey's transgender "Petulant Virgin" stands out here).

Although the vastness of the field precludes universal coverage, there are some notable gaps. I was disappointed that Spanish-language countries are barely mentioned, while two full chapters are devoted to Brazil. Surely a media Goliath such as Mexico's Televisa deserves some attention? Scattered references to the *Ugly Betty* franchise call attention not only to the neglect of Spanish-language originated formats but also to the absence of drama, which is vital to national and corporate identities but is here overshadowed by realities and competitions. Content analysis can be disappointingly brief and sketchy. Thus Brennan's assertion that national cultures have been "colonized" by stateless orthodoxy is supported only by a table of some twenty formats that go unanalyzed in his piece. Given that readers are unlikely to have access to many of the texts
treated, it is a shame that there are just seven illustrations (three of which chronicle one *American Idol* contestant's memorable hairdos).

*Global Television Formats* remains, however, inevitably (and admirably) diverse in its approach and range. Readers will discover under its broad thematic umbrella a host of valuable data and informed commentary. With the decline of the top-down model of US cultural imperialism now broadly accepted, this book offers an invaluable route map to a new media landscape that is more complex than scholars have previously acknowledged.