

The Hybridization of German Documentary Formats since the 1990s

by

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Since the 1990s we saw in German television an unprecedented boom, an explosion of documentary material, but also a hybridization of documentary formats and particularly of reality TV. The quantitative expansion seems to go hand in hand with a change in our basic understanding of what the documentary form actually is. Documentary films, sophisticated features and reports, are being replaced by magazine programs and Docu-Soaps, i.e. particularly reality TV or fake-documentaries. My aim here is not to deplore – like some prominent TV critics as Jürgen Bertram for example – a general disintegration of TV culture, even if the effects do give cause for concern. What I intend here is to analyse the dynamic of the change process.

The term “Genre”, used by many academics and taken from an aesthetic discourse does not seem entirely suitable here, because it suggests a more or less stable cluster of aesthetic qualities, which hardly describe the quality of the dynamisation and processual change, even if the dimension of innovation through the allusion to “Hybridization” – a term I will return to in a moment – is certainly mentioned. Biressi and Nunn, for example, write: “The term ‘reality TV’ is a broad one. It is usually taken to refer to the surge in a variety of ‘new’ or more often hybrid genres which were launched in the late 1990s.” (Biressi/Nunn 2005, 10)

To establish the idea of the aesthetic stability of a genre, we can either choose as broad and comprehensive a definition as possible, for example that of Biressi und Nunn: “The designation ‘reality TV’ refers to these new and emergent forms of ‘spontaneous’ and unscripted non-fiction entertainment despite the obvious contrivances involved in assembling a carefully selected group of people and re-locating them under highly controlled conditions or carefully setting up the prank.” (Biressi/Nunn 2005, 15)

Or, a differentiation of numerous subgenres can be established, to circumscribe the relatively wide range of reality TV; Murray and Ouellette, for example, speak of¹ a variety of specialised subgenres, including most

¹ “[...] a variety of specialised formats or subgenres, including most prominently the gamedoc (*Survivor*, *Big Brother*, [p.3] *Fear Factor*), the dating program (*Joe Millionaire*, *Mr. Personality*, *Blind Date*), the makeover/lifestyle program (*What Not to Wear*, *A*

prominently the gamedoc, the dating program, the makeover/lifestyle program, and the Docu-Soap, the talent contest, popular court programs, reality sitcoms and celebrity variations that tap into many of the conversations for presenting "ordinary" people on television.

The equally common but largely unreflected use of the term "Format" can, as opposed to the term "Genre", hardly deny its background in an economic calculation. The term, established by producers and program makers in recent years, is currently used even by critics like Fritz Wolf (Wolf 2003), for instance, to characterise a television program, which is no longer an individual show or an individual film, it is just about the program planning of the so-called "format television", which only keeps slots for correspondingly-formatted content. Formats and their formatting are the manifestation of a television in which only the large number still counts, and in which calculable budget figures through easy recognition of brands and the sinking of minute prices. Individual handcrafted qualities are more and more unimportant. The fact that thereby individual, committed documentary film makers find less and less space, that they appear as professionals rarely in this system, is certainly more than just a marginal, worrying side effect.

Consequently this is a change in the status of documentary itself. Terms like Angela Keppler's "performative reality TV", or Charlotte Brundson's "factual entertainments", or the "postdocumentary tv culture" spoken of by John Corner indicate a change in a once more sophisticated documentary ambition, but they also suggest at least an aesthetic comparability. Without challenge their powers of explanation from a particular perspective in individual cases, the question is, whether the development dynamic of formats themselves can thereby really still be analysed. The question arises, if other cultural patterns do not only determining the operative functioning of this format culture but also the

Wedding Story, Extreme Makeover), and the Docu-Soap (*The Real World, High School Reunion, Sorority Life*). Other examples include the talent contest (*American Idol*), popular court programs (*Judge Judy, Court TV*), reality sitcoms (*The Osbournes, My Life as a Sitcom*), and celebrity variations that tap into many of the conversations for presenting 'ordinary' people on television (*Celebrity Boxing*)." (Murray/Ouellette 2004, 3/4)

standards by which they orientate themselves. If a often used term like “visible evidence” implies that the significance of the visible can still be credited with meaning, looking at the mass of industrial image production, the question seems more relevant of whether we are not facing a "visible indifference", in which the documentary serves only as a justification for the cheapening of production.

In the following I would like to refer to a mediological point of view. Mediology was established in France in recent years as a new field of scientific methods by Régis Debray, Daniel Bounoux and many other authors, but it should not be confused with media studies. A mediological approach is bringing together aesthetic, economic and technical aspects to explain cultural transmitting processes. From this perspective the frequently detected tendency towards hybridization does not only mean the aesthetic mixing of various genres. As Paul Soriano (Soriano 2005) recently commented in the mediological journal "médium", it means also all other levels of production, of technology, of economy and of reception. The thereby structured and generated process of cultural transmission can also be considered in the sense of Bruno Latour (Latour 2002) as a cultural transformation, where, for example, technical innovations turn into political agendas, or economic strategies lead to a certain aesthetic.

This understanding of “Media” can be seen here through the example of the reality TV formats, which are certainly not only to be understood as hybridization of previous genres, but are themselves now also subject to hybridization and transformation processes. In the following I will first address the economic dynamic of these transformation processes and then go on to illustrate the hybridization of the reality TV formats themselves with three examples.

I. Reality TV Formats as Business Model

If we look first at the general economic conditions at a European level, we observe that they partly constitute the dynamic of the German development. The number of broadcasters in Europe who offered a 24-

hour program increased in the 1990s, and so did the overall number of broadcasters, as can be read in the 2006 report of the EU Commission to the EU Parliament (Siebte Mitteilung 2006). In the years 2003 and 2004 we can see a growth about 30% in the number of TV channels, from 584 to 767.

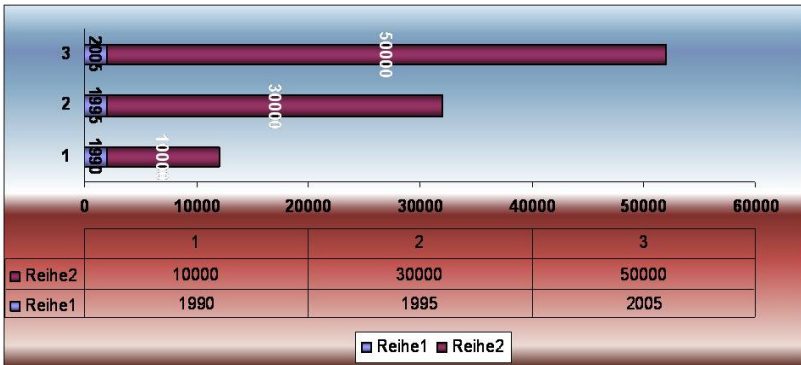
In spite of the so-called guideline "Television without borders" valid in Europe since 1989, which is supposed to support domestic channels through subsidies and quota regulations, in these same years the number of new productions from European producers fell by 2% and the share of independent producers by 2.5%. Without regard the EU Commission's interpretation of its own report, which beheld the deceleration of failure as a success, we aware of three obvious consequences in Europe, apparent to every viewer: 1. the amount of repeats is rising, 2. the amount of imported, non-European films is rising, and 3. the amount of cheap productions is rising, because the available capital is not growing at the same pace. This is where documentary formats come into play.

What matters in mass production television is not only to work with pre-formatted, standardised products but also to make bulk savings. A positioning in this fast-changing, highly competitive and competitively-organised market can only succeed through innovative pressure. Therefore, new formats are first also new business models, as the US authors Murray and Ouellette write:

"The explosion of reality programming in the 1990s was also the product of a changing industrial environment [...] U.S. television networks were open to the possibility of new production and financing models, including the purchasing and selling of formats rather than completed programs, the expansion of merchandising techniques, an increased emphasis on audience interactivity, and the insertion of commercial messages within programs."
(Murray/Ouellette 2004, 7)

Analysing the share of documentary formats in German television, which have been examined by representative samples² in the years 1990, 2000 and 2005, shows the following results:

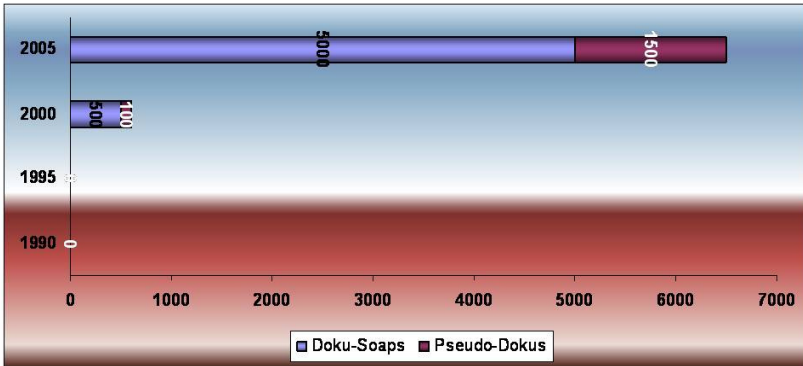
In 1990 all documentary formats together, including magazine programs, accounted for 10,000 minutes weekly of the 19 examined television broadcasters' whole program. In 1995 this had risen to around 30,000 minutes, and in 2005 it was already over 50,000 minutes weekly.



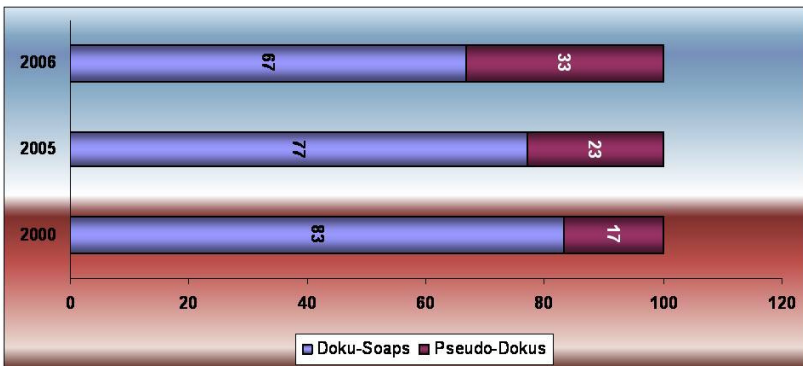
Weekly Minutes of Documentary Formats in 19 German TV Channels (all together)

We can certainly distinguish between individual formats. For example, political magazine programs are among the losers, having lost about 1/3 of their broadcast time between 2000 and 2006. The winners are the Docu-Soaps, to which the reality TV formats belong. In 1990 our samples showed Docu-Soaps to be wholly unknown. In the year 2000 they already have a share of about 600 minutes per week, of which fake or pseudo-documentaries account for 100 minutes (as illustrated). In 2005 the sum of these formats makes up 65000 minutes per week, of which the share of pseudo-documentaries, at 1500 minutes, has markedly risen. In the year 2006 this rises from 23% to 33% in relation to normal Docu-Soaps.

² The weekly program of 19 German television stations had been chosen for the analysis of the years 1990, 2000 and 2005. The share of the documentary formats was differentiated by "genres". A rounded annual average was created by three chosen weeks (one in March, July, and November) for each year.



Relation Docu-Soaps and Fake-/Pseudo-Dokus I



Relation Docu-Soaps and Fake-/Pseudo-Dokus II

Apparently two alternating phases run through the business model documentary format on television, in which they are evaluated from an economic perspective, before being removed from the program without much publicity, because they no longer achieve the necessary ratings:

1. The first phase is the innovation, in which the new formats are launched with plenty of public hype and sometimes a certain scandalising effect, with the aim of getting the public's attention. The launch of *Big Brother*, for example, was this kind of new, innovative model, in which we can, however, also see certain hybridizing elements: inside the compound stories were played out which we would normally only see in soap operas,

but this time with no script and with a different, reduced aesthetic and cheap furnishings.

2. The second phase is the variation in which either the already created model should be assessed in ever new, mostly slightly varying series, or the competition tries to take a share of the success of the new model through more or less strongly varying copies.

Both phases are characterized by amortization pressure, which demands the production of the same or at least similar output with less and less money. From an economic viewpoint this follows from a clear tendency towards cheaper production.

Compared with an elaborate and internationally marketable documentary production from, for example, the BBC (which plays a special role in this field here in Europe), where for around 50 minutes 400,000 Euros will be invested, for a Docu-Soap of 30 minutes we only need to calculate around 20,000 Euros, so around 12 to 15 times less. This can be sold as a concept abroad if necessary, but fills a wide range of program space much more cheaply.

Lutz Hachmeister and Jan Lingemann (Hachmeister/Lingemann 2003) have been proven that in 2004 around 22% of all broadcasts on German television belonged to the area of non-fiction, and the figures are increasing. However, since 2001 there has been a decrease in financial production volume from 2.65 billion to 2.32 billion Euros, in a generally stagnant market. The consequence: cost minimisation and risk-sharing, in which only the strongest agents will win through. Today the economic system of the broadcasters is firmly in the hands of a few established production firms, that act either as subsidiaries of the big broadcasting groups or as their privileged contractors.³

Individual players, as for example committed documentary makers see themselves, appear less and less as professionals in this economic system. Of about 850 providers who, according to Hachmeister and Lingemann (Hachmeister/Lingemann 2003), still produce documentary films and

³ For example: Spiegel TV, Janus TV, MME, Medienkontor Hamburg, UFA Entertainment etc.

reports in Germany, only 8% gain three quarters of the turnover. The other 92% have to be satisfied with smaller contracts, which can less and less offer a possibility for professional work.

II. Hybridization of Reality TV

The hybridization of reality TV is not only a transformation of the business model of the reality TV formats but also an aesthetic transformation, which transforms the status of the documentary. The reference to an outside reality seems to be reduced to an external gesture, which stiffens into a convention and a matter of course. What's left over are staged dysfunctions as supposed evidence of the reality-character of the documentary, which are used to make plausibility and get the public used to a bad, or a cheap aesthetic.

1st Example: *Wife Swap (Frauentausch)*

First example: since 2003 Constantin Entertainment has produced the program *Wife Swap (Frauentausch)* for the channel RTL II. According to the channel this is a reality format, an entertaining sociological experiment about the woman as the manager of the family. Two families who could not be more different swap their mothers for ten days, as the description of the TV channel itself tells us.

"With up to 18% *Wife Swap* on RTL II achieved dream ratings in the advertising target group of 14 to 49-year-olds."⁴

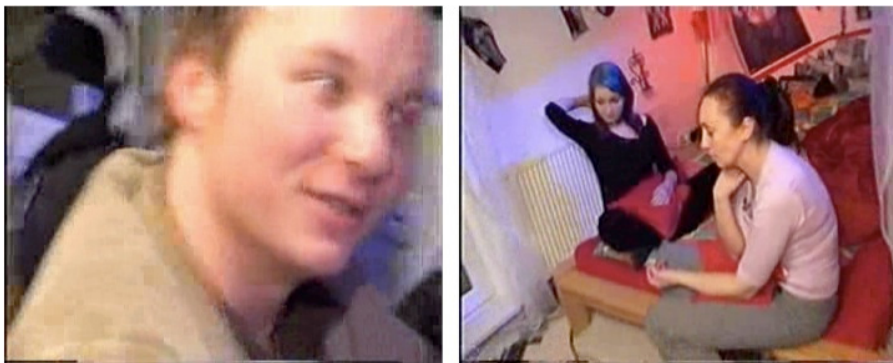
The channel only records what happens to its own accord in the families. In occasional cases the experiment was even broken off, if one of the women could not cope with the psychological burden of the new situation – apparently a sign of the program's authenticity. The camera teams stand back and observe – the cut seems to be, beside the setting of the general framework and resultant potential for conflict, the most important drama-

⁴ rtl2 Frauentausch 2006.

tising element that the action entertainingly creates. Authenticity seems guaranteed, even if it is without very high scholarly aspirations.

A look at the unshown rough cut, however, shows another picture, which certainly does not undermine the claim presented here, which rather underlines how fragile a definition of reality TV using the authenticity aspiration is. The line between fact-based presentation of reality and staging is so blurred that a differentiation becomes meaningless: the unpublished rough cut shows the spontaneous and unscripted actions of the observed protagonists but also the instructions of the cameraman which leads to the repetition of the scenes.

In one scene for example we see an exchange mother having an argument with the daughter of the host family. Clearly she does not agree with the moral conduct of the daughter and she wants to discuss it, but also to make peace with her. A complicated feeling. A voiceover intervenes (with the voice of the cameraman), to clarify the feelings and also, for the viewer, through outside gestures to clarify – or is a feeling being staged here? The scene was repeated twice.



"Wife Swap"

2nd example: *Lenßen & Partner*

My second example further illustrates the advancing hybridization of reality TV: so-called fake- or pseudo-documentaries. The term might be confusing at first, but it reveals concrete trends which have been seen in television for several years: the dissolution of reality TV formats into faked or partly scripted “Factual Entertainment” like, for example, *The Class of 05 (Abschlussklasse 05)*, which records a point in life of a group of school-leavers; or the sex-and-crime pseudo-documentaries like *Lenßen & Partner*, *Niedrig und Kuhnt* or *K 11*, where the “protagonists” send out as an investigator who again and again comes across situations familiar from exploitation films, in which, for instance, young women are made compliant with drugs or they are forced into prostitution, or abducted. The aesthetic construction of all these fake or pseudo-documentaries orientates itself towards documentary formats which are produced under difficult conditions, thereby strengthening the impression of danger, of secrecy, of the forbidden, which can only be recorded with difficulty.



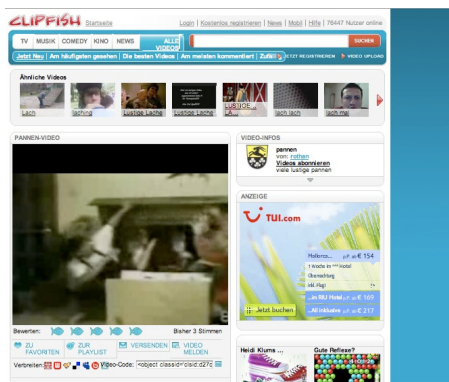
Staged Dysfunctions

The action scenes are filmed strictly by hand (i.e. with a shoulder tripod), the camera partly imitates the view of the investigator (so simulates a subjective camera perspective), it is confused, peeps around the corner, adopts unusual positions apparently dictated only by hurry, the view is misplaced or blurred; surveillance cameras are often used and their view presented through black and white pictures of low technical quality, with malfunctions.

The fact that we are dealing with a fake, a pseudo-documentary format is not even concealed here. This is a significantly cheaper way to produce detective stories then, for example, producing *Derrick*. For *Lenßen & Partner*, instead of using actors with a daily fee of around 1000 Euros, they systematically utilise performers for a daily fee of around 90 Euros. That pays, and the audience does not seem to be bothered by the low quality.

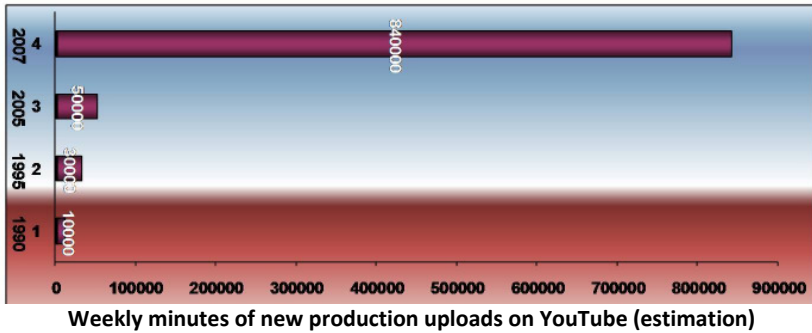
3rd example: mishap shows on MyVideo.de

That holds true for my final example too: so-called mishap shows are one of the most noticeable formats that can be found on television as well as, lately, on the Internet.



Clipfish

If the mishap shows first boomed on television in the 1980s following the proliferation of private video cameras, they have now achieved an extraordinary popularity, with 60,000 newly uploaded video clips daily alone on a website like YouTube, and a daily download of 100 million clips. These figures are not meant to suggest a direct comparison with television and Web TV; they are just to indicate the scale of the phenomenon.



Because video-sharing websites do not work according to the program structures of conventional television, and rather than fixed time structures they use algorithms which put the most clicked-on clips at the focus of attention, a self-strengthening cycle emerges, that leads to hit lists of the top ten, the top one hundred etc. Added to this there is an unaspiring aesthetic which does not just present mishaps but is characterised by a multitude of dysfunctions – crooked snippets of pictures, poor focus, blurred pictures, overloaded soundtracks etc. – in short, an aesthetic that, like in the 1980s, is initially the product of amateurish recordings. However, separate, fixed conventions have evolved here, which are now even being re-imported into television.

In the following example we see the program MyVideo.de broadcast by SAT 1. The first still shows the studio with the presenter, followed



Presenter



"Abspielbalken"

secondly by a kind of aesthetic convergent view of both media in form of a technically and aesthetically unmotivated "Abspielbalken" ("playback bar") and third the Clip of the Week which obviously comes from the Internet platform.



"Fall of the week"

The Pro7Sat1 Group does actually have a 30% share of the video-sharing website MyVideo.de, just as, for example, the RTL Group maintains the portal Clipfish.de. Here television itself is developing a new business model: "From the point of view of the film and television industry the

Internet is not only an optional threat or a new channel of distribution, it is also a world wide talent pool, from which we can ladle without limit" (Hornig 2007), as Frank Hornig recently wrote in the *Spiegel*. Yes, we could formulate it even more sharply: the Internet delivers user generated content practically for free. The audience is not only having a cheaper aesthetic standard inflicted upon it, it is even providing the cheap production itself.

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