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# TELEVISION CRITICISM



## Television Genres

13. Give an example of an archetypal ritual found on television.
14. Find a myth in a television drama and relate it to some deep-seated human condition.
15. Make a structuralist's chart of binary oppositions according to syntagmatic and diachronic columns, then reduce the oppositions to broader ones. Find the themes and motifs of the myth and what transforms the oppositions to the myth, a model of social action.
16. Try to analyze the structure of a 30-minute television program of your choice on a scene-by-scene basis, answering the four questions posed by Michael Porter.

### Suggested Readings

- Aristotle. (330/1995). *Poetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
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- Campbell, Joseph. (1988). *The Power of Myth*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Jung, Carl G. (1969). *Four Archetypes: Mother/Rebirth/Spirit/Trickster*. Princeton: NJ, Princeton University Press.
- Jung, Carl G. (1971). *The Portable Jung*. (trans. R. F. C. Hull.). New York: Viking Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. (1963). *Structural Anthropology* (trans. Jacobson, Claire & Schoepf, Brooke G.). New York: Basic Books.
- Propp, Vladimir. (1968). *Morphology of the Folktale* (2nd ed.). (trans. Laurence Scott.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

"And the Emmy goes to Everybody Loves Raymond for the Outstanding Comedy Series!"

"The Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series goes to Patricia Arquette in Medium."

"The Emmy for the Outstanding Game Show goes to Jeopardy!"

### Introduction

The Emmy awards, perhaps the most important popular awards given to television programs, actors, writers, directors, and creators, are given in categories representing genres—comedy; drama; miniseries; reality/competition; made-for-TV movie; variety, music, or comedy; children's programs; animated programs; game shows; talk shows; commercials; and nonfiction programming. When a creator of a television program pitches a new show, it is identified as a situation comedy, a drama, a reality-adventure show, and so on. For television professionals, genre has been central to the organization and structure of the production industry. Although television shows are often blends of these categories, for example, the docudrama or the

“dramedy,” television programming continues to be based on the concept of genre. Television is known for its inventiveness in developing new genres, for example, the reality show. Another important aspect is the formulaic nature of television programming, which enables large numbers of people to recognize familiar types. Producers and viewers alike assume that genre categories exist and that they know what they are. The genres that prevail on television are those that yield a regular profit for their producers. As a television critic, you will recognize the genre, its conventions, and its departures from conventions when you conduct your analysis and evaluation.

*Genre* is a French word that translates into English as genus, family, or kind. It is a form of classification. In literature, the major genres are comedy, tragedy, novel, poetry, drama, prose, and nonfiction. In film, some major genres are romantic comedy, science fiction, horror, disaster, and film noir. In television, we recognize broad genres, such as situation comedy, drama, reality shows, talk shows, news programs, and commercials, as well as sub-genres, such as daytime soap operas, detective or police shows, family melodramas, magazine-news shows, and docudramas, as kinds or types of programming. These tend to be tried and true formulae that have certain predictability and familiarity.

The opening sequence usually follows a familiar pattern. For example, in the police or detective drama, a crime takes place followed by detectives arriving on the scene and canvassing witnesses. A situation comedy usually opens in the same locale, for example, a family's kitchen or living room or an office or a coffee shop with a dilemma expressed by one or more of the characters. Because they are series, viewers recognize the locales as well as the personalities of the characters. Although each television program has its unique qualities, each one may be classified according to some genre or combination of genres.

The formula for a genre is based on certain familiar narrative conventions or common features that make it relatively easy for audiences to follow. Genre conventions prompt viewers to enjoy a program in a certain way. Conventions include program formats, subgenres, general characteristics, character types, and types of plots. The television audience not only recognizes conventions but also comes to expect them in particular genres. The audience also recognizes when conventions are flouted. This reveals the active union of viewers and television shows. As television programming continues to develop different approaches, traditional conventions are altered and blended with other genres to evolve into new genres and conventions. What is important is acceptance of certain basic assumptions and how much sense a new genre makes.

## Television Genre, Production, and Scheduling

Genre is also used to organize the actual production process in the television industry. Comedies tend to be produced inside studios, with the final production presented in sequence before a live audience, followed by postproduction editing. Dramas tend to be produced more like films in that they are shot out of sequence, often filmed with a single camera, in studios and on locations, followed by postproduction editing. Comedies are produced to fill 30-minute segments, while dramas are usually in 60-minute time slots. Furthermore, genres are used to determine placement on television schedules. Soap operas and children's television are aired in the morning or early afternoon, while situation comedies are broadcast in early prime time for “family” viewing. Crime shows or adult dramas come later in the evening after the “family hour,” presumably after the children are in bed. Morning news magazine programming takes place early in the morning before the workday begins, and local and world news programs come around 6:00 or 6:30 p.m. when the workday ends, and at 10:00 or 11:00 p.m. before bedtime or late-night talk shows.

## The Rules for Classifying Genres

There are certain “rules” for classifying genres that relate to both cultural norms and production constraints. Such “rules” allow the mass audience to easily understand and follow familiar conventions. Viewers orient their reactions to what they see according to their expectations that have been generated by their knowledge of and experience with the genre. They expect to be amused by a situation comedy like *Two and a Half Men* or *Scrubs* but not necessarily by a detective show like *CSI*. They do not presume that a western such as *Deadwood* will have singing and dancing as they might in a musical. It is, however, difficult to isolate the characteristics that distinguish one genre from another because they change from season to season and from program to program.

Genres and their conventions change as cultural norms develop. Cultural themes reflect societal norms in a given time. Former situation comedies such as *I Love Lucy* or *The Dick Van Dyke Show* featured married couples who slept in twin beds. The men had careers and the women were homemakers who got themselves into funny predicaments. Today women on television have careers, may be single parents, and have sexual relations. Sometimes couples are gay as well as straight. Regardless of changing norms, a situation

comedy has always been expected to be funny and often has laughter on the soundtrack. In the past, recorded laugh tracks were used, but today most laughter comes from a live audience in the studio watching the final performance. Indeed, the actors may even pause in their dialogue to allow for audience laughter. The audience is expected to laugh along with the studio audience, recognizing the humor in the dialogue or physical actions. Some situation comedies are not filmed in studios and may not have laugh tracks at all. Furthermore, what constitutes a comedy is not always clear, even to the professionals.

The popular *Desperate Housewives*, a show that is 60 minutes long, won the 2006 Golden Globe Award for Best Television Comedy although it is seldom funny, and it is not filmed before a live audience. Perhaps this is why the 2006 People's Choice Awards nominated it for Best Drama. Which genre is it? This show deals with divorce, death, murder, juggling career and parenting, and outrageous behaviors on the part of some of the characters in the manner of a television drama series, but it is also about friendship, love, domestic problems, comeuppance, and learning from situations in the manner of a situation comedy. The better classification would be "dramedy" because it fuses elements of both comedy and drama, therefore it is a hybrid genre. Marc Cherry, the creator of the show, calls it a "comedy-drama." Sometimes situations on *Desperate Housewives* provoke laughter, but more often we react to it with surprise and curiosity.

Joanne Ostrow, television critic for *The Denver Post*, wrote that hybrid shows were examples of "genre bending." She wrote, "Producers desperately seek ways to stand out in the increasingly competitive entertainment world, [and] the result is the number of hybrid experiments" (Ostrow, 2001, p. 1E). Ostrow also quoted Gail Berman, Fox Entertainment President, who said of Fox's mystery drama reality show, *Murder in a Small Town X*, which Fox produced, "It's not a hybrid for hybrid's sake; we want to constantly push the envelope creatively" (Ostrow, 2001, p. 1E). This brings home the point that the competitiveness for ratings is usually the driving force behind the push for novelty. Very often new television programs are blends of former successful shows and films. *Invasion*, a prime-time drama in 2005-2006 about a mysterious force that has taken over some of the residents following a hurricane in Florida, was also about divorced parents and the impact of divorce and new parental relationships on their children. It seems to be a merger of the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which was about aliens

taking over the bodies and identities of the townspeople, and *Once and Again*, a popular television show in early 2000 that featured two divorced families and the impact of divorce and new parental relationships on their respective children.

## Genre and Television Criticism

As television critic, you need to know about genres and conventions to be able to discuss subgenres, expected audience responses, and the conventions of formats, the characteristics of the subgenres, characters, and plots. You will ask how a genre helps us to understand how a story is told and how to identify and analyze the features of a program or a series. Knowledge of genres and conventions also explains an audience's ability to tune in to a new program midway through it and recognize the character types and progression of the plot. Genres, as discussed in *Key Concepts in Communication and Culture*,

... limit the meaning-potential of a given text, and they limit the commercial risk of the producer corporations. But they are constantly transformed by the addition of new examples, so that in the end you have to conclude that there's no such thing as a "typical" Western, even though you can recognize one when you see it. (O'Sullivan et al., 1994, p. 128)

The characteristics of the subgenres especially tend to be reflective of cultural norms, concerns, and fears that change as times change. Topics such as sexual relationships, fertility, and homosexuality, which could never have been the subjects of situation comedies or daytime talk shows in the past, now are commonplace on television. Since the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City by Al Qaeda operatives on September 11, 2001 and other terrorist acts around the world, the war on terror has been incorporated into many television dramas.

The history, features, and changes in genres are subjects worthy of an entire book, and there are several good ones (Creeber, 2001; Edgerton & Rose, 2005; Kaminsky, 1985; Mittel, 2004; Rose, 1985). There are also books devoted to single genres, especially comedy, drama, talk shows, children's programming, and reality shows. To present the aspects of genres in an efficient manner, the following table was developed to describe the genres, the subgenres, and common features or conventions in recognized genres. It is difficult to arrive at a finite list of all the genres and even more difficult to specify their individual characteristics. Yet, because television industry practice and viewer anticipation follow genre designations, it is important to include this information here. However, this table must include

the disclaimer that these "rules" are frequently broken. The table is extensive but not all-inclusive because there are so many subgenres with differing characteristics. Some of the genres are self-evident and even have their own channels, for example, Food Network, Country Music Television, Cartoon Network, Home Shopping Network, and SOAPnet. The characteristics of each of the genres are discussed separately following Table 5.1.

## Comedy

### Situation Comedy

Situation comedies have been the staple of television programming for a long time. In the 2004–2005 season, their numbers significantly declined. Many pilots were made, but few made it onto the air. Plenty of people in the television industry were disappointed. Producers tend to prefer the economics of situation comedies because they are often less expensive to make than other types of programs. A situation comedy is usually located in a domestic or workplace setting. Therefore, the same set can be used over and over, and a limited number of actors are employed, although the casts of very successful shows such as *Friends* demand and receive extremely high salaries. The family and workplace settings are convenient places to bring people together. In the workplace, people have a common goal to get a job done, thus they have to interact with one another. The workplace provides an opportunity to develop characters of different backgrounds, ethnicity, gender, and race.

Situation comedies are generally known as escapist fare and provoke laughter through jokes, humorous dialogue and situations, and slapstick. As series, they are broadcast at the same time each week for 30 minutes during the television season and tend to be complete in each episode. The characters are the same each week, although there may be a guest actor playing the role of an outsider who sets the plot in motion. There may be a lead actor, such as Kelsey Grammer was in *Frasier*, although usually there is an ensemble of actors playing the family or the staff in the workplace. The plot customarily involves some minor dilemma or a test, known as "the problem of the week," for example, getting a date, having a disastrous date, avoiding a visit by an in-law, losing something valuable, forgetting an anniversary, wrecking the family car, buttering up the boss, coping with jealous coworkers, or convincing a coworker to go out on a date. The dilemma or disruption gets resolved by the end of the episode, and usually there is some sentimental reconciliation, a lesson learned, or moral growth. Equilibrium is achieved in 30 minutes, so there is a happy ending that the audience has come to expect. The basic nature of the characters and their situation is reaffirmed.

(Text continues on page 110)

Table 5.1 Genres, Subgenres, and Their Conventions

Genre	Subgenre	Format	Characteristics	Characters	Plot	Examples
Comedy	Situation comedy	30 minutes, usually filmed before a live audience and edited later	Provokes laughter through jokes, humor in dialogue, or slapstick. Domestic or workplace setting.	Ensemble actors, one or more leads, often stereotypical, guest stars.	A dilemma or test is solved by the end of show. Learning or moral growth.	<i>Joy</i> <i>My Name Is Earl</i> <i>Will &amp; Grace</i> <i>Scrubs</i>
	Animated comedy	30 minutes, animation with voices, often celebrity voices	Provokes laughter through parody, sight gags. Multiple story lines, intertextual references.	Cartoon characters, regulars and guests.	Domestic dilemma, event, or parody of real life.	<i>The Simpsons</i> <i>King of the Hill</i>
	Variety comedy	60 minutes, live before an audience	Provokes laughter, enjoyment. Comic skits, musical numbers.	Ensemble cast, guest host	Satire and parody	<i>Saturday Night Live</i>
Talk Show	Nighttime talk shows	60 minutes, recorded before a live audience	Provokes laughter, entertainment.	Single host, band leader, and	Topical humor and variety	<i>The Tonight Show</i> <i>Late Show With David Letterman</i> <i>The Late, Late Show</i>
		five nights/week broadcast late at night	Opening monologue, improvisational and scripted dialogue, skits, music. Desk for host, sofa for guests,	Celebrity guests, exotic animals.		

(Continued)

Table 5.1 (Continued)

Genre	Subgenre	Format	Characteristics	Characters	Plot	Examples
News	Daytime talk shows	60 minutes, recorded before a live audience	Informative, sometimes shocking, and personal	Host and guests who are often ordinary people, sometimes high-profile celebrities	Explores cultural oddities, usually domestic	<i>Oprah Dr. Phil</i> <i>Jerry Springer</i>
	Informational talk shows	Usually 60 minutes	Informative discussion of current topics, conversational, face-to-face, and remote interviews	Single host with experts, sometimes celebrities	Topics: current issues, books, films	<i>Larry King Live</i> <i>Charlie Rose</i>
National and world news	Usually 30 minutes, live with recorded segments	Informational, announces news with pre-recorded reports, brief news clips.	Anchor sits behind desk, network field correspondents report live or recorded	Global, national current events, business, human interest, health advances	<i>ABC News</i> <i>CBS News</i> <i>NBC News</i> <i>Fox News</i>	

Conventions

Genre	Subgenre	Format	Characteristics	Characters	Plot	Examples
Local news	Usually 30 minutes, 60 minutes in some large markets	Similar pattern regardless of place of origin, brief recorded clips and field reports	Two or 3 anchors and sportscaster, mixed gender and race, they also chat "happy talk."	Local news, "breaking news," about crime, accidents, disasters, lifestyle, sports, weather. Larger markets may include some global news.	Local television stations	
	News-talk	Usually 60 minutes	Informational, 3-4 in-depth stories, news staff stays with story and asks questions	Host with other staff reporters	Global, national current events, business, and health news.	<i>News Hour with Jim Lehrer</i>
24-hour news	24 hours of news, both live and pre-recorded	Informational news repeated throughout the day, other news on captions, special reports	Several different anchors in shifts, correspondents are prominent	Global, national current events, business, health, and human interest news	<i>CNN</i> <i>Headline News</i> <i>Fox News</i>	
	Magazine Show	1-3 hours with pre-recorded segments	Informational and entertaining news, interviews with authors, celebrities,	Two anchors, one male, one female who interview guests plus other print magazine	Multiple segments similar in layout to a print magazine	<i>Today</i> <i>Good Morning America</i> <i>The Early Show</i>

Conventions

(Continued)

Conventions					
Genre	Subgenre	Format	Characteristics	Characters	Plot
Drama	Workplace	60 minutes recorded outside and on indoor sets, episodic	Audience follows several events, anticipates the outcome. Workplace crisis or conflict is usually settled within the hour. Set in hospital, law office, courtroom, government facility, prison. Interpersonal attraction between and among people at workplace. May have flashbacks.	Ensemble cast, young attractive women and men with few older adults, mixed racially.	Crisis or conflict, teamwork to arrive at a solution within the hour, interpersonal relationships develop over time.
Examples	ER, House, Grey's Anatomy, Law & Order, Boston Legal, The West Wing, The Nine, Lost, E-Ring, Prison Break				witnesses, examine evidence at crime scene or in laboratory, make arrest, solve crime, find missing person.

Conventions					
Genre	Subgenre	Format	Characteristics	Characters	Plot
Drama	Crime	60 minutes recorded outside and on indoor sets, episodic	Audience follows case step by step, anticipates the outcome. Case is solved within the hour, interpersonal conflicts may carry over to subsequent shows. Character and dialogue are central to show. Usually set in urban area. May use flashbacks. Emphasis on law, order, and justice.	Ensemble cast with character development over time. Major and minor characters, mixed gender and race.	Crime is committed or person goes missing; law enforcers arrive at scene, interrogate
	Investigative or public affairs	60 minutes, pre-recorded	Informational, entertaining, shocking stories with reenactments and interviews	Anchor with field correspondents	Usually one primary story about an event, scandal, illegal or immoral acts.
	Celebrity news	Information about film and TV stars' private and professional lives, 30-60 minutes	Male and female hosts announce stories with pre-recorded, edited segments.	Hosts are youthful and attractive.	Stories about the them as people who date, marry, divorce, have children.
	detective/police/FBI, forensic science	60 minutes recorded outside and on indoor sets, episodic	Male and female hosts announce stories with pre-recorded, edited segments.	Ensemble cast with character development over time. Major and minor characters, mixed gender and race.	Crime is committed or person goes missing; law enforcers arrive at scene, interrogate
Examples	ER, House, Grey's Anatomy, Law & Order, Boston Legal, The West Wing, The Nine, Lost, E-Ring, Prison Break				witnesses, examine evidence at crime scene or in laboratory, make arrest, solve crime, find missing person.

Table 5.1 (Continued)

Table 5.1 (Continued)

Conventions					
Genre	Subgenre	Format	Characteristics	Characters	Plot
Family drama		60 minutes recorded outside and on indoor sets, episodic	Audience identification with characters, familiar conflicts, set inside home and surroundings in the present time.	Ensemble cast with young adults, children, some senior citizens.	Multiple interpersonal conflicts carry over from week to week.
Hybrid dramas		60 minutes recorded outside and on indoor sets, episodic	Family drama fused with mystery or science fiction. Audience anticipates outcome, may identify with characters.	Lead actor(s) with ensemble cast.	Dilemma may or may not be solved within the hour, may be crime, espionage, or interpersonal conflict.
Telefilms		Audience may have familiarity with story. Miniseries over 3 or 4 nights or 90- to 120-minute movie, possible pilot for a proposed series	Audience identification with characters. Adapted from a well-known book or original screenplay. Full-length drama, may be romantic, adventure, or melodrama.	Actors may or may not be famous. Heroes and villains.	Characters established and followed through story to the end.
Examples					
					<i>The O.C., Wildfire</i>
					<i>The Sopranos</i>
					<i>Smallville</i>
					<i>Brothers and Sisters</i>
					<i>Invasion</i>
					<i>Medium</i>
					<i>Chest Whisperer</i>
					<i>Jericho</i>
					<i>The Five People You Meet in Heaven</i>
					<i>Tuesdays with Morrie</i>
					<i>Empire Falls</i>
					<i>Lackawanna</i>
					<i>Blues</i>

Conventions					
Genre	Subgenre	Format	Characteristics	Characters	Plot
Docudramas		Audience may know something about the biographical person but expects to learn more. Audience is expected to know it is watching impersonations, not file footage. Blend of fact and fiction. Miniseries over 3 or 4 nights or 90- to 120-minute movie.	Based on a true story, biography or crime in dramatic form, includes imaginary dialogue. Often melodramatic.	Some resemblance to actual people, actors may not be well known.	Tends to rely on family melodrama, a specific time in the life of a famous person, often features nature and personal topics such as spouse abuse or eating disorders.
Soap opera	Daytime drama, some nighttime drama	30-60 minutes, daily, continuous serials. May run for years. Audience has to stay tuned to follow narrative.	Interpersonal relationships, domestic crises, overlapping storylines, cliffhangers.	Regular cast of familiar characters, attractive young adults, a few older adults. Familiar setting in homes or work places.	State of equilibrium is disturbed, rarely a solution or a climax that ties loose ends. Resolution is endlessly deferred.
Examples					
					<i>The Elizabeth Smart Story</i>
					<i>For the Love of a Child</i>
					<i>The Burning Bed</i>
					<i>The Karen Carpenter Story</i>
					<i>Elvis</i>
					<i>The Young and the Restless</i>
					<i>As the World Turns</i>
					<i>General Hospital</i>
					<i>All My Children</i>



Table 5.1 (Continued)

Conventions					
Genre	Subgenre	Format	Characteristics	Plot	
Science fiction	Feeds audience imagination 30-60 minutes, episodic On Sci Fi channel	Usually takes place in the future and in space, features fantastic technology. Stories reflect contemporary problems of the present such as nuclear threat, racism, multiculturalism, ecology.	Usually takes place in ensemble space ship crew, aliens	Heroes save humanity from aliens and Armageddon.	Examples <i>Star Trek</i> <i>Battlestar Galactica</i>
Reality shows	Encourage audience voyeurism Usually 60 minutes, usually episodic, almost never appear as reruns	Ordinary people compete for expensive prizes. Competitive, winners chosen by group vote or judges. Real-life police responses to crime, sting operations.	Non-actors audition for places and opportunity to compete.	Contestants are given tasks to complete in blocks of time; contestants are eliminated by judges, or authority. One team or one winner emerges. Police arrest offenders.	Examples <i>The Biggest Loser</i> <i>The Apprentice</i> <i>Fear Factor</i> <i>American Idol</i> <i>Cops</i> <i>The Bachelor</i>

Conventions					
Genre	Subgenre	Format	Characteristics	Plot	
Sports	Football, basketball, baseball, hockey, tennis, golf, soccer, water sports, volleyball, Olympics	Audience sees live broadcast of full-length games on the game. Sports announcers describe and comment on the game.	Live competition	Stays on the air until a winner emerges.	Network and sports channels coverage of various sports such as Super Bowl and college bowl games, NBA, World Series
Children's television	Live and animated programming.	30 minutes, 5 days/week, daytime educational program of various ages	Ranges from educational to cartoon violence.	Often has familiar characters such as Big Bird. puppets and live actors. Cartoons have heroes and villains.	Examples <i>Sesame Street</i> <i>Mister Rogers' Neighborhood</i> <i>Scooby Doo</i> <i>Sponge Bob</i>
Game shows	Television audience can match answers or guesses with contestants, 30-60 minutes. Recorded in front of live audience, weekly or daily.	Contestants compete for prizes within the program or over several weeks.	Host and attractive woman to work the game board. Contestants.	Categories of quiz questions. Correct answers increase value of prizes, suspense is built as contestants struggle to give correct answers.	Examples <i>Jeopardy!</i> <i>Who Wants to Be a Millionaire</i> <i>The Price is Right</i> <i>Wheel of Fortune</i>

(Other genres are mostly self-evident: religious broadcasting, shopping networks, food networks, award shows, music performances, movie channels, History Channel, Discovery Channel, *Nova*, *Nature*, Animal Planet.)

(Text continued from page 100)

The main characters are likeable, and audiences identify with them because the foibles of the characters are recognized as similar to their own shortcomings. Carl Reiner, who wrote, directed, and produced many outstanding situation comedies, such as *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, said it was important for the characters to have “warmth.” “You laugh easier when funny things are happening to nice people” (Rose, 1985, p. 117). James Burrows, director of *Cheers*, *Will & Grace*, and many other situation comedies, echoed Reiner when he said, “The successful key to a situation comedy is to create warmth which transfers to the audience. Good shows are stories told from the heart” (O’Donnell, 1996). In his book *Comic Visions*, David Marc wrote, “. . . sitcoms depend on familiarity, identification, and redemption of popular beliefs” (Marc, 1989, p. 24). While the situation comedy endorses cultural norms, it may also advance certain new ideas.

The late Sheldon Leonard, producer of many successful situation comedies, such as *The Andy Griffith Show*, said, “We can, within a framework of good showmanship, advance valid social comments, valid ethical concepts, valid generalizations about the human condition which have meaning for the audience” (Rose, 1985, p. 119). In the situation comedy about a television news staff, *Murphy Brown*, not only did the lead character (played by Candice Bergen) have a child out of wedlock, but in a later episode, Murphy had breast cancer and subsequent surgery for which she chose a lumpectomy rather than a mastectomy. Breast cancer was also a theme in some of the last episodes of *Sex in the City* as Samantha (Kim Cattrall) lost her hair due to chemotherapy. These problems were not treated as comedy but rather as real-life situations. Thus, the situation comedy, though generally funny, also enables the audience to identify with real-life situations and embrace the characters as more human.

### Animated Situation Comedy

Animated situation comedy has once again become popular on prime-time television, especially since *The Simpsons* became a regular series in 1990. Animated situation comedy tends to have everything a human comedy has—a family, an ensemble of regular characters who do things to provoke laughter, multiple story lines, a “problem of the week,” and restoration of equilibrium at the end of 30 minutes. Spin-offs of *The Simpsons* include *King of the Hill*, *South Park*, *Family Guy*, and *American Dad*. *The Simpsons*, which began as 30-second inserts in *The Tracey Ullman Show* in 1987, has been running as a regular 30-minute series since 1990, holding the record for the longest-running situation comedy, and has surpassed the longest running prime-time animation series, *The Flintstones*.

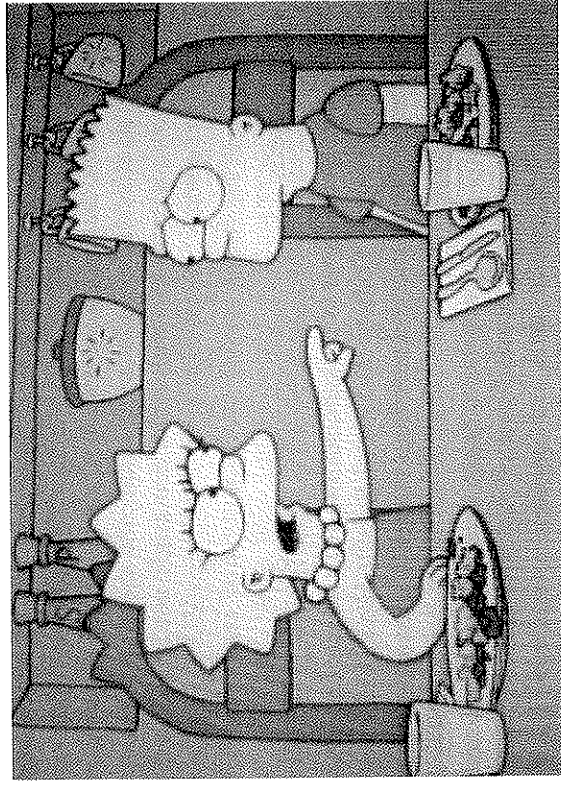


Photo 5.1 Bart and Lisa Simpson.

Animated situation comedy is characterized by parody and satire. The brochure for the Museum of Television and Radio’s seminar on *The Simpsons* describes it as “a gonzo attack on mainstream television, melding sharp, clever writing with animation to reinvigorate the conventional sitcom format as a cartoon satire on contemporary America” (Creating Prime-time Comedy, 2003, p. 9). The references to television, film, organized religion, political figures, and advertising give the show its special edge. To appreciate this aspect of *The Simpsons*, a viewer has to be familiar with classic films like *Citizen Kane* as well as television’s *The X-Files*. The Simpson family watches a lot of television, thus there are many references to actual series. On one episode, the little sister Lisa is trying to make new friends while on vacation at the seashore by telling them about hermit crabs. One child asks Lisa, “Did you learn that from a teacher?” “No,” said Lisa, “I learned it on *Baywatch*.” These intertextual references are enhanced by the audience’s knowing complicity and recognition of famous guest voices such as Meryl Streep and Patrick Stewart. To understand the intertextual humor, the audience has to be familiar with the events, names, voices, films, and television programs that the show parodies. In one episode, Lisa gets in trouble because a career test indicates that her future work should be that of a homemaker. The school principal asks her, “What are you rebelling

against?" Her response refers to Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* when she says, "Whattaya got?" It is possible to enjoy *The Simpsons* without intertextual recognition, but when the allusions are caught, the enjoyment is enhanced. Thus, children and adults alike enjoy the show. Because it is an animated cartoon, it gets away with antics that might not be acceptable in human situation comedy.

### Variety Comedy

The variety comedy shows of the past, such as *Your Show of Shows* with Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca or *The Carol Burnett Show*, had a regular host, an ensemble cast, music, and humorous skits. While many variety comedy shows have come and gone, *Saturday Night Live* has been on NBC since 1975 with weekly guest hosts, including Sting, Queen Latifa, and Cameron Diaz, an ensemble cast of improvisational comics who do impersonations and put on funny and satirical skits, and breakout musical acts. This show has launched the film and television careers of comic performers like Steve Martin, Eddie Murphy, Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray, Adam Sandler, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and Jane Curtin. It is telecast live before an audience in New York City at 11:30 p.m. and has followed the same formula since its inception. The skits, performed by the ensemble cast as well as the guest host, satirize current events, politicians, newscasters, or relationships. *MadTV* on Fox follows a similar formula although its cast is not as well known.

### Talk Shows

#### Nighttime Talk Shows

Steve Allen launched the nighttime talk show genre in 1954 with comedy, music, and guests on *The Tonight Show*. When Johnny Carson became the show's star in 1962 and remained there for 30 years, it became a late-night institution. The format Carson used has hardly changed. There is a single host sitting behind a desk who talks to guests who are sitting on a sofa. The host has a sidekick or a band leader with whom to banter, and there is a performance space for musical numbers. The guests may be celebrities, politicians, or zoo keepers who introduce exotic animals to the host.

Writers meet with the host to develop a "script" that is placed on the host's desk, but much of the dialogue is improvisational. As Rob Burnett, head writer on the *Late Show with David Letterman*, said, "Everything is planned and nothing is planned" (Writers Guild of the East, n.d.). The late-night talk shows are taped before a live audience earlier in the evening

and broadcast late at night, after the news, five nights a week. Each show opens with a monologue, usually a parody of that day's newspaper headlines, followed by talks with guests who may be promoting films or books or themselves (Arnold Schwarzenegger announced his candidacy for governor of California on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno), musical events, and comic skits. Letterman does remote acts outside the studio, but they are filmed and edited in advance. These late-night talk shows are 60 minutes long. *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* is 30 minutes long and runs four nights a week. Stewart satirizes the news and current events, but he also has comic skits and guests who visit in the talk show format.

Bernard Timberg called this "television talk" rather than "television talk shows" because it is a special kind of talk. "It is often directed to an individual in the studio (guest or sidekick) but also, simultaneously, to a national television viewing audience of millions" (Timberg, 2000, p. 359). He also indicated that television talk "begins and ends with the host. Talk shows are, to use the words of one producer, 'he' or 'she' shows. The producers and talent coordinators line up guests and topics for 'him' or 'her'; the writers write lines that will work for 'him' or 'her,' to be spoken as he or she would speak them. The tone and pacing of everything that happens with the show is set by the host" (Timberg, 2000, p. 361).

#### Daytime Talk Shows

Daytime talk shows are taped before a live audience for 60-minute time slots, five days a week. The host and guests tend to explore cultural oddities. The guests are seldom famous—rather they are people who reveal sensitive problems, usually domestic or criminal, and disclose their most private experiences to the host or hostess. Often these people are from marginalized or stigmatized groups. They may be incest or rape victims, unwed mothers, transsexuals, prostitutes, or people with incurable diseases. In some cases, the guests and the studio audience have been rehearsed. Oprah Winfrey will not pander to anything vile or mean-spirited on *Oprah*, which is regarded as a "talk service" show. However, Jerry Springer and Maury Povich, whose talk shows bear their names, emphasize the vulgar and crude, often with fist-fights between guests, nasty repartee, and outbursts from the audience. Media psychologist Dr. Phil, on the show of the same name, teaches through interpersonal discussion and psychological analysis of his guests. The audience can observe how others with problems and personal conflicts in relationships work through them. Daytime talk shows highlight moral conflict and confrontation between and among the guests and sometimes the audience members. The approach is to "tell all" no matter how distressing.

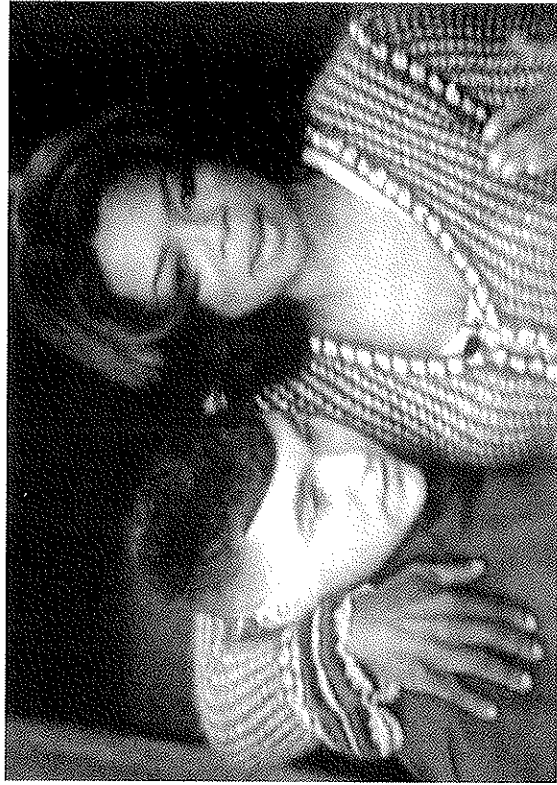


Photo 5.2 Oprah shows compassion for her subject.

### Information Talk Shows

Information-oriented talk shows include discussion of current issues, books, films, and other serious topics. They are conversational and guest-oriented. Larry King, on *Larry King Live*, conducts both face-to-face and remote interviews and takes telephone calls from the viewing audience. Since Ross Perot announced his presidential candidacy on King's show, appearances on the show have been a must for politicians. Charlie Rose, on *The Charlie Rose Show*, leads serious discussions with one or more guests who sit at a table with him. The viewing audience gains information from experts.

### News

News includes the elements of "timeliness, consequence, prominence, rarity, proximity, conflict, change, action, concreteness, and personality" (Merzler, 1979, pp. 23–24). News reporting is interpretative and creative, therefore it is a symbolic strategy that contains an attitude toward the events that are recounted (Wilkins & Patterson, 1987). Communication satellites, radio

relay stations in space, carry press agency news feeds and global television bringing news from remote regions around the world and up-to-the-minute reporting from conflict zones. Interviews, correspondent reports, and actual footage are structured to fit the news format and time.

### National and World News

The national half-hour news report at the end of the workday follows a standard format of news stories sprinkled with advertisements for remedies for indigestion and headaches. An anchor sitting at a desk reads the news reports with taped or live visual images to convey the stories. Satellite transmission of images allows the viewers to feel a sense of immediacy and involvement. The nightly telecast of the war in Iraq "exerts a powerful effect on the audience. Suddenly everyone watching television is dragged into war. When there is a sandstorm, the audience can't see any better than the troops . . . the viewer feels a part of the invading army" (Boxer, 2003, p. 2). Network correspondents report from Washington, DC, the White House, Capitol Hill, the Pentagon, and from around the globe. Cuts in budgets have reduced the number of correspondents in the field, resulting in "parachute journalism." Correspondents based in a foreign city have to fly at a moment's notice to a location where the news is breaking (Foote, 1998). National news anchors have become stars. Former anchors from the three networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—Peter Jennings, Dan Rather, and Tom Brokaw became institutions in our living rooms. Katie Couric, already a star from NBC's *Today*, is now the anchor on CBS *Evening News*.

When CNN, the 24-hour news channel, appeared in 1980, the three networks redefined their approach to news to compete. "Assuming that viewers watched the big stories before the evening news was broadcast, networks opted for more reflection, stylized reporting, longer trend stories, and a hint of 'infotainment.' What they lacked in immediacy and news-gathering ability around the world, they tried to make up for with a well-regarded anchor name and segments" (Foote, 1998, p. 12). In addition to national and international current events, the nightly news also includes segments of business news, advances in medicine, and human interest stories, all of which are very brief.

### Local News

The local news is usually on for 30 minutes before network national and international news and late at night before the nighttime talk shows. Local

news broadcasts tend to have a similar format regardless of their origins, thus the local news in New York City resembles the local news in Los Angeles. Typically, there are two or three anchors behind a desk, a man and a woman plus a sportscaster, usually male. Often one or more of the anchors is African American, Hispanic American, or Asian American. In addition to reporting the news, the anchors chat with one another. The weather person is not behind the desk, but rather he or she appears to be standing in front of a map for the weather spot on the program. Promotions and lead-ins are used to grab viewer attention. ("Arson suspected in home fire. News at 6:00.") Local news often emphasizes "breaking news" with live images of car chases, people being carried by stretcher to a waiting ambulance, burning buildings, and so on. In addition to crime and disaster news, local stations usually have some soft news. ("Fireman rescues kitten from sewer pipe.") In addition, there is health news, local and national sports, and celebrity items. Local news from large urban areas has some national and international reporting. For example, the ABC local affiliate in Los Angeles had its own correspondents in Israel reporting on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's stroke in 2006.

### News-Talk

PBS's *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* is on five nights a week for 60 minutes. It has in-depth news stories, usually only three, with reporters straying on the story for greater understanding. Lehrer stops and asks questions during each report. The stories are about national and international news, business news, and education, and there are interviews with heads of state, writers, and politicians. When the stock market report comes up, the reporter tells the audience what it means. A seminar at the Museum of Television and Radio in 1989 included Lehrer and his former coanchor Robert MacNeil, who said, "We intended our show to be different . . . to expand time devoted to a story to fit its importance. [You] stay with the topic or interview until you find its importance." They do not consider their audience elite, but very broad in scope. Lehrer said, "We do not assume a certain body of knowledge in the audience. We are very basic, we use maps and other information helpful to understanding the issue. We ask, 'would so-and-so understand this and would he care?'" (*MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, 1989).

Other news talk shows are more specific in their focus. For example, *Meet the Press* reviews weekly news events on Sunday mornings. Network and cable channels feature shows with pundits, self-appointed experts who express their own opinions and argue with one another about issues of the day.

### 24-Hour News

The Cable News Network (CNN) began to broadcast news 24 hours a day, seven days a week in 1980. Although it had anchors, emphasis was placed on the news, not on personalities, and the correspondents' reports were given importance. News bureaus were set up across the United States and around the world. In 1982, Ted Turner initiated a second CNN service, *Headline News* with updated newscasts every half hour. When President Ronald Reagan met Mikhail S. Gorbachev at the summit that would signal the end of the Cold War, CNN had 17 correspondents onsite. By 1989, CNN was available in 65 countries. In 1991, CNN was the only television network operating live from Operation Desert Storm in Iraq and Kuwait.

Other 24-hour news channels emerged—MSNBC and Fox News— to challenge CNN. Stuart H. Loory, who was Washington managing editor and vice president of CNN for 18 years, believes that there are four reasons why CNN has fallen behind Fox News in the ratings: (1) CNN "abandoned its founding concept [by promoting] anchors and correspondents instead of allowing their work to speak for itself"; (2) "CNN has abandoned the emphasis on hard news coverage—the pursuit of stories by its reporters—for discussion of the stories by experts, analysts, and consultants"; (3) "CNN too often abandons the general news of the day to dwell on one story only"; (4) "CNN puts too much emphasis on video often forgoing a story because it cannot be illustrated well enough" (Loory, 2005, pp. 342–343). What made CNN so successful in the past seems to have been exchanged for attempts at higher ratings. On the other hand, the CNN Web site, celebrating its 25th anniversary, had an essay by Christiane Amanpour, who wrote: "CNN still is one of the most recognized brand names in the world. Its chunky bright red logo is the eternal symbol of excellence, credibility, truth and trust. We plan to keep it that way for the next 25 years!" (Lule, 2006, p. 339)

### Magazine Shows

#### News-Talk-Entertainment

News-talk-entertainment shows are generally on in the early morning. To attract the working audience, 22 minutes of commercial-free hard news is reported at 7:00 a.m. The next hour, from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m., has hard and soft features aimed at a female audience, and the final half hour is aimed at senior citizens, with health-oriented pieces. The content includes interviews with celebrities, authors, politicians, and doctors. Consumer advice, health news, cooking tips, film reviews, and fashion are presented by the anchor-hosts

and guests. Much of the fare is light-hearted, and the anchor-hosts, usually one woman and one man, chat with one another. More serious news is handled by a regular news reader, and another regular on the show talks about weather. These multiple segments are similar to a print magazine, for they are short, informative, and basically entertaining. *Today* has been on NBC since 1952. Meredith Vieira, Matt Lauer, Al Roker, and Ann Curry are the stars who go outside to chat with the crowd that gathers as early as 5:00 a.m. in Rockefeller Center. In the summer, they have live music on Fridays. *Good Morning America* hosts are Diane Sawyer, Robin Roberts, Chris Cuomo, and Sam Champion. Their show is similar to *Today*, although the crowd outside waves behind a glass window. The CBS *Early Show* also follows a similar pattern with hosts Julie Chen, Harry Smith, and Hannah Storm. Needless to say, these news-talk-entertainment shows are very competitive. Although Fox News on cable has a similar show, *Fox and Friends*, it began a new, one-hour morning show in January 2007. Fox's new show has no hard news, however, just entertainment and lifestyle segments.

### Investigative or Public Affairs

Investigative or public affairs television shows were developed "to offer an alternative to the television presentation of news" (Stark, 1997, p. 188). Each of these shows has one or more anchors and investigative field reporters. They may focus on single or multiple stories of a scandalous or disturbing nature, such as kidnapping, organized crime, unsafe food in restaurants, scams, and frauds, although sometimes they do positive profiles on people who have done good deeds, recovered from adversity, or are effective leaders. They may use taped footage, but some are inclined to use reenactments with actors. *60 Minutes* has been on the air since 1968, and reporters such as Mike Wallace, Morley Safer, and Andy Rooney have been with the show for many years. The late Ed Bradley was a very popular reporter on the show. Diane Sawyer joined the show as its first woman in 1984. When she left in 1989, Lesley Stahl replaced her. When host Harry Reasoner introduced the first broadcast of *60 Minutes*, he said, "It's kind of a magazine for television, which means it has the flexibility and diversity of a magazine adapted to broadcast journalism" (Stark, 1997, p. 189). The first show had a story mix of political campaigns, conflicts between police and citizens, an animated film, and a humorous essay. In later years, *60 Minutes* altered its focus with fewer lighter features and more investigative pieces. In keeping with popular tastes, it also featured profiles of film stars and athletes. Steven Stark wrote, "*60 Minutes* changed the face of programming and journalism . . . [it] made journalists into national icons" (Stark, 1997, p. 189). *60 Minutes* spawned a

trend in news magazine shows. *48 Hours* covers one story with multiple angles, whereas *Dateline* is known for its surprise visits and hidden cameras. *20/20* features sensational stories, often using reenactments.

### Celebrity News

The 21st century has seen an increased obsession with the lives of celebrities, and many television shows concentrate solely on the private and personal lives of film and television stars. *Entertainment Tonight* or *ET* began in 1981 with Mary Hart and John Tesh in an upbeat, gossipy, and glitzy show about the stars, award shows, new films and television shows, and musicians. Soon other shows followed—*Insider*, *Hollywood*, *True Hollywood Story*, and an entire cable channel, E! Entertainment Television, devoted to entertainment news. Described as "hysterical cheer" and "tabloid TV," the fast-paced style of celebrity news shows with attractive and young female and male hosts revealing the intimate details of the lives of the stars has influenced the style of local news programs and reality shows.

### Drama

Drama on television may be serial, a miniseries, or a single play that may last for one hour or several hours spread over a fixed number of nights or weeks. Drama is the most varied, complex, expensive, and popular television genre. Series drama tends to be formulaic, whereas miniseries and single plays are formatted to fit the allotted time in the schedule. Series consist of 22–26 episodes per season and are broadcast weekly. Because a single episode of a drama series costs \$2 million or more to produce, the plots tend to be self-contained with a resolution at the end of the hour. This is convenient and cost-effective for reruns because viewers do not have to know what happened in the previous episode. Not all series are self-contained, however, for unresolved issues keep the viewers tuning in to find out what happens next.

Most dramatic series have ensemble casts of actors who play the same roles from week to week. Audiences prefer familiar characters and story lines. In a study conducted by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to find out why American audiences were not watching imported British dramas more frequently, participants in focus groups said that because they did not know the characters, it required too much effort to watch a new program with so many new actors. Their preferences were for familiar characters, sets, and story lines (Kubey, 2004). Familiarity with the characters and narrative structure also enables the audience to pick up a story line when the holiday seasons interrupt series for several weeks.

## Crime Shows (Detective, Police, FBI, and Forensic Science)

The crime series are 60 minutes long, starting at point A with a dilemma (a murder, a missing person, a theft, a rape, a kidnapping, or an arson in an urban or suburban area) that is resolved (by detectives, the police, FBI agents, or forensic scientists) at the end of the hour at point B. Although they are part of a series, individual episodes can stand alone because of the resolution at the end of each show. Since September 11, 2001, terrorism has become a common theme on crime shows, especially those that feature the FBI.

Crime shows have ensemble casts playing crime fighters who have weapons and know how to use them. These characters also have interpersonal relations with one another. While a crime gets solved, the suspense and conflict in these relationships are not necessarily resolved at the end of an episode, carrying over to the next week. The casts are usually mixed in gender, race, and age, with characters who develop some depth over time. However, these shows are not so much about crimes but rather about those who try to solve them, thus they depend upon characters and their dialogue. Although each individual crime series has its own uniqueness, they tend to follow a similar structure: (1) a crime is committed; (2) the detectives-police-FBI-crime scene experts arrive at the scene to view the body or fire or other criminal act; (3) they interrogate witnesses and family members and follow the leads; (4) they search for and ultimately detain or arrest the suspects; (5) they solve the crime.

Sometimes there will be internal conflict when the police or detectives disagree or go beyond the boundaries of their duty. The Internal Affairs Bureau (IAB) officials, although on the side of the law, are often depicted as villains who get in the way of the detectives who are trying to solve a crime. *NYPD Blue* and *The Shield* are about crime in New York City and Los Angeles, respectively, with very well-drawn characters, especially Dennis Franz's character, Andy Sipowicz, a recovering alcoholic with bigotry issues, and *The Shield*'s Michael Chiklis, who plays Vic Mackey, good cop and bad cop rolled into one. Over the years, their characters have developed through both their work and personal lives. *Cold Case*, set in Philadelphia, is about investigating unsolved murders from the past, while *Close to Home* is about crimes committed in suburban neighborhoods. Both of these series feature female leads, Jennifer Finnigan as Annabeth Chase on *Close to Home* and Kathryn Morris as Lilly Rush on *Cold Case*.

The crime scene investigator characters of *CSI*, *CSI: Miami*, and *CSI: New York* collect evidence that they examine in the laboratory and almost always examine bloody, bruised, and mutilated corpses with medical examiners

explaining the cause of death. A trademark of these shows is expensive equipment donated by publicity-seeking manufacturers (a \$50,000 forensic microscope and a \$500,000 ballistic identifier on *CSI*) and special visual effects known as "snap-zoom" that snap into a body or zoom into a piece of evidence (Stein, 2003, p. 72; Gliatto, 2002, pp. 113–115). The viewer looks at the evidence along with the characters in the show. Correct scientific vocabulary, often in Latin, is used for realism.

Without a *Trace* features FBI agents searching for missing persons. This show uses flashbacks as acquaintances of the missing person remember details with ghostly images as the agents re-create their movements. Hank Steinberg, the show's creator, said, "The essential distinction between our show and every other cop show on television is the possibility that the missing is still alive" (Hinson, 2003, p. 10AR). Most of the time, the FBI team manages to locate the person who has gone missing, but not every person is found alive. Each of the agents has a personal story too, which affects how he or she acts in the investigations. *Criminal Minds* features FBI profilers who track criminals to try to prevent them from attacking again. *Numb3rs* has an FBI agent who recruits his brother, a mathematical genius, to help solve tough cases. A variation on the FBI is the Naval Criminal Investigative Service featured in *NCIS*. This series chronicles the operations of an elite team of special agents whose mission is to investigate any crime that has a shred of evidence connected to Navy and Marine Corps personnel.

The long-running *Law & Order* series effectively combine the police and lawyer subgenres. Not only is each crime solved by the end of the episode, but the court case that brings the criminal to justice is also completed. The characters on *Law & Order* are strictly revealed as professional with very little reference to their personal lives.

Essentially, crime series emphasize law, order, and justice as well as the determination and ability of law enforcement officials. It is not unusual, however, for some of the law enforcers to break rules or to work against their associates. In fact, this is a common theme in *The Shield*, which has the tag line, "The road to justice is twisted."

## Workplace Drama

Workplace dramas are about groups of professional people in a hospital, law firm, government office, casino, the military, or a prison. An ensemble cast of young and attractive men and women with a few older adults is likely to be racially mixed. The characters they play undergo personal growth over time in both their work and their personal relationships. The settings provide the work-related action as well as the characters' personal affairs. In

most workplace dramas, several events occur simultaneously, with work-related crises or conflicts usually settled within a 60-minute episode, while the personal affairs continue over several episodes.

The hospital has been a popular setting for television workplace dramas with various illnesses, accidents, last-minute surgical saves, compassionate doctors, and a multitude of patients who provide opportunities for guest actors. *ER* has been on television since 1994, but the cast of characters has changed over the years with younger actors added as the older ones leave the show. Alex Kingston, who played the surgeon Dr. Corday on *ER*, left the show at the end of the 2004 season. In an interview with the British publication, *Radio Times*, Kingston, who was 41 at the time, said “her contract wasn’t renewed because the program was increasingly focused on young characters ‘and apparently I, according to the producers and the writers, am part of the old fogeys who are no longer interesting.’ Producer John Wells, in a statement, said the Corday storyline had run its course” (Kingston ends *ER* shift, 2004, p. D1). Much more a personal drama than a medical drama, *Grey’s Anatomy* follows a group of young, attractive doctors through their first-year surgical residency at a Seattle hospital and the older doctors who guide and harass them. *House* has a lead actor, Hugh Laurie, who plays Dr. Gregory House, a brilliant diagnostician with a dysfunctional personality, who delivers surly, acerbic lines with a wry sense of humor. He supervises a group of young doctors and argues with the hospital administrator about a single case on each episode.

Fictional presidents of the United States, both female and male, and their staffs coping with national and international crises have been featured on the political workplace dramas *Commander-in-Chief* and *West Wing*. Although each program has a lead actor (Geena Davis and Martin Sheen, respectively) playing a principled president, the other characters are played by strong ensemble casts. National and international crises usually get solved (unrealistically) within the hour, although occasionally the crisis lasts for two episodes. Audiences may enjoy an imaginary glimpse into the activities in the White House, and, because the president’s family has domestic quandaries similar to those of ordinary families, audience identification is likely to occur. When the ratings declined, *West Wing* was cancelled in 2006 after seven award-winning seasons. Kevin Reilly, NBC entertainment president, said, “There’s a point when you look at the ratings and say, it feels like it’s time.” In addition to critical acclaim, *West Wing* had “the most upscale audience on television, an important drawing point for advertisers” (Bauder, 2006, p. 1).

Other workplace dramas take place in a casino (*Las Vegas*), in the Pentagon (*E-Ring*), in the CIA (*24*), and even in prison (*Prison Break*). With

the exception of *24*, which positions each episode into one of 24 hours—requiring weekly viewer commitment—each of these programs solves a crisis within the hour. *24* and *E-Ring* have narratives about fighting terrorism; *Prison Break* has a story about a man getting imprisoned to help his brother escape.

## Family Drama

Family dramas are melodramas, for they depict ordinary suffering as special and meaningful (Deming, 1990). Personal life as revealed through close relationships is at the core of melodramatic narrative that also is replete with extraordinary conflicts and catastrophes (Ang, 1990). Family dramas have their own network, ABC Family, where viewers can watch youth-oriented series such as *Wildfire* and *Smallville*. *The OC* on Fox features an affluent California family in soap opera fashion with parents and teens who get involved in various interpersonal conflicts and crises outside the home.

*The Sopranos* is a family drama, but instead of going to the office, Tony Soprano, a besieged, Prozac-popping boss of a group of unsavory gangsters, conducts business in the back room of a strip club. His extended family consists of uncles and cousins as well as the “family,” in the sense of organized crime. The show’s creator David Chase said, “It has to do with the limitations of family and friendship in a materialist world” (Meyers, 2004, p. 18). The family dynamics range from Tony’s conflicts with his wife, son, and daughter over domestic issues to fights with his sister to vicious and illegal activities with his brothers in crime. Tony’s therapy sessions and his dreams allow the viewer to see his internal fears and suffering. Because *The Sopranos* is an HBO production, its format is 54–58 minutes of drama without commercial interruption, and it is replayed three times each week. An entire year of repeats ran in 2005 while the producers took a year off to prepare the new episodes to begin in March 2006. Without censorship, HBO allows nudity in the Bada Bing! strip joint, very strong language, and gruesome killings. TV critic Robert Bianco wrote, “It should be noted that this ‘family’ drama is hardly family entertainment. *The Sopranos* is sexually explicit, incredibly profane, and shockingly violent . . . You’re not meant to empathize [with Tony Soprano]; you’re meant to recoil” (Bianco, 2004, p. E2).

## Hybrid Drama

Hybrid dramas on contemporary television are police or family dramas blended with elements of science fiction or the supernatural. *Medium* is a



self-contained, hour-long drama that is part family drama and part police show and features a mother of three young daughters who is married to an understanding and helpful husband. She works for the district attorney because her dreams reveal the identities of killers, and she has visions of their crimes when she confronts suspects and crime scenes. *Invasion* was a continuous story about a divorced couple, each of whom has remarried, who struggle to get along for the sake of their children in the midst of a mysterious extraterrestrial invasion wherein citizens of a South Florida community are taken over by aliens that appear as lights in the water. *Ghost Whisperer* features a beautiful newlywed woman who speaks to confused dead people before they "cross to the other side." Each episode has a resolution at the end when the dead person resolves the conflict with his or her family member and goes "into the light." Producers of shows with a supernatural twist apparently believe that the American public is concerned with death and interested in the supernatural.

*Jericho* is a hybrid drama about what happens when a nuclear mushroom cloud suddenly appears on the horizon, hurling the people of a small Kansas town into chaos. They do not know if they are the only Americans left alive because all communication and power are shut down. This show is a reflection of our fear of terrorism, but ultimately, it is about nation rebuilding as the citizens of Jericho pull together to cope with a tragic situation. The characters' actions are heroic as they discover their inner strength.

### Teleplays and Telefilms

Teleplays or films cover a wide variety of stories, for they may be based on well-known books, historical characters or events, or original adventure, romantic, or melodramatic scripts. They may be in the format of miniseries spread over three or four nights, or a 90- to 120-minute movie that could also be a pilot for a proposed series.

Imported teleplays from England are shown weekly on *Masterpiece Theatre* and *Mystery!* on PBS. There is no *Masterpiece Theatre* or *Mystery!* on British television; rather the shows that appear on PBS are dramas from England's BBC, Channel 4, and other television stations. *Masterpiece Theatre*, on the air since 1971, has dramatizations of classic literature, history, and contemporary stories, such as *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, *The Lost Prince*, *Henry the Eighth*, and *House of Cards*. Hosted by the venerable Alistair Cooke for 20 years, who was succeeded by Russell Baker, these programs often stretch over two to eight weeks and feature well-known British actors such as Derek Jacoby and Miranda Richardson. *Mystery!* is a weekly program on PBS that features short series such as *Prime Suspect*, *Foyle's War*, *Inspector Linley*, *Miss Marple*, and *Brother Cadfael* that run from two to six

weeks. *Mystery!* also features famous actors such as Helen Mirren and the late Alan Bates. Both programs come from PBS affiliate WGBH in Boston, which originally promised to present a fair number of American works or productions, but rarely did so. A producer said, "It's cheaper to import productions which the BBC or other British companies have already done" (Stark, 1997, p. 174).

*Hallmark Hall of Fame* has high-quality dramatic productions on network television with reruns on the Hallmark Channel. HBO has adaptations of books that run for two or more weeks, such as *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, and *Empire Falls*, as well as original dramas such as *Lackawanna Blues*, based on the true story of Ruben Santiago, Jr. and his relationship with Rachel Crosby, set in 1950s and 1960s Lackawanna, New York, and *Warm Springs*, a story about Franklin D. Roosevelt's early battle with polio. *Angels in America*, an award-winning Broadway play, was adapted for HBO by playwright Tony Kushner and directed by Mike Nichols. It cost \$60 million for a six-hour production with stars including Meryl Streep, Emma Thompson, and Al Pacino.

### Docudrama

Once a staple of network broadcasting, the made-for-television movie is now more likely to be a docudrama on a cable channel about a biographical person or event. These films are based on a true story, biography, or crime such as *The Elizabeth Smart Story*, about the abduction of a young Utah girl; *Elvis*, about the early career of Elvis Presley; *For the Love of a Child*, a true-life drama about the two women who founded Childhelp USA and rescued more than five million children. Viewers are expected to know they are watching impersonations, not file footage, and that these films are a blend of fact and fiction. They tend to rely on family melodrama and mature topics such as spouse abuse (*Burning Bed*); eating disorders (*The Karen Carpenter Story*); and other private topics and personal stories.

### Soap Opera

The soap opera could be considered a subgenre of the drama, but it has become so prevalent and popular that it is considered a genre unto itself. As a genre, soap operas are best known for daytime dramas such as *All My Children*; however, nighttime serials such as *The O.C.* have soap opera qualities. Daytime soap operas are daily, 30- to 60-minute, continuous serials without end, running year-round for many years. Because they are performed daily, the actors have little rehearsal time. They are performed in

broadcasting studios, taped, edited, and aired two weeks later. The settings are urban or suburban, but nearly all the action takes place indoors. Open narratives with unresolved stories keep the viewers coming back. Agnes Nixon, creator of *All My Children*, said her philosophy for viewers was "Make them laugh, make them cry, make them wait" (Stark, 1997, p. 204). Many fans record the soaps when they cannot watch them at scheduled times, but they also have access to the Disney Channel reruns of ABC-owned soaps and, since 2000, the SOAPnet channel repeats those in syndication.

"Soap operas," Robert C. Allen explains, "implicitly assume they will never end, and they very seldom produce narrative closure within a given episode. Every plot line continues across a number of episodes . . . Soap operas disperse their narrative energy among a constantly changing set of interrelated plots, which may merge, overlap, diverge, fragment, close off, and open up again over a viewing period of several years. Individual episodes advance the plot incrementally, but no one watches a soap opera with the expectation that one day all of the conflicts and narrative entanglements will be resolved so that the entire population of the soap opera universe can fade into happily-ever-after oblivion." (Allen, 1992, pp. 107-108)

Soap opera casts are very large and may include as many as 40 regular cast members who have an array of melodramatic problems. The young adults have ideal bodies and faces and wear the latest fashions. Steven Stark summarized some conventions of the soaps:

Women who want to get pregnant never can, but those who don't want to usually end up with a child, even after a presumed safe one-night dalliance. Amnesia is almost as frequent as the common cold. No one accused of murder is ever the guilty party. The parents of characters often are not the "real" parents . . . People get killed in accidents, only to have long-lost twins somehow mysteriously show up months later, when an actor or actress playing the character returns to the soap from another engagement . . . Characters seldom talk on the telephone, preferring instead to drop in on people, even if they have to drive a long distance. (Stark, 1997, pp. 205-205)

The soaps are known for taking on major social and personal issues, for example, mental illness, spouse abuse, interracial romance, date rape, homosexuality, and infertility. In an attempt to attract younger viewers, according to Seiter and Wilson, soap opera narratives also have supernatural story lines

such as demonic possession and witches and angels wreaking havoc on townspeople (Seiter & Wilson, 2005). Soap operas are popular among high school and college students as well as older adults. How popular they are was made clear when I supervised a graduate project on soap operas and asked undergraduate students in my large film and television class to be subjects in three categories: nonwatchers, moderate watchers, and heavy watchers. In a class of 100, only one student was a nonwatcher of soap operas.

## Science Fiction

Science fiction as a genre is easily recognizable because the action usually takes place in the future and often in space, although this is not always the case. When science fiction is set in the future, the societies tend to be utopian, that is, progressive and positive, or dystopian, that is, apocalyptic and pessimistic. Plots tend to be about saving humanity from aliens, although sometimes the aliens are peaceful. Both aliens and humans utilize fantastic technology. The best-known science fiction television program was *Star Trek*, in which an ensemble of mixed ethnic and racial characters explored outer space but also dealt with contemporary problems of the present day, for example, racism, nuclear warfare, overpopulation, multiculturalism, and ecology. *Star Trek* spawned four prime-time series. Conventions of the science fiction genre are often mixed with other genres, such as comedy in *Third Rock from the Sun* and crime in *The X-Files*.

## Reality Shows

The proliferation of reality shows in recent years may cause people to think that they are a new phenomenon; however, the reality show can be traced back to 1973. (A case could be made for *Candid Camera*, which began in 1948, as the first television reality show. The show's surprise contrivances were set up without the contestants' knowledge until the end when they were told, "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*.") The first modern reality show was the PBS series, *An American Family*, a documentation of the daily life of the Loud family that included the parents' divorce and the son's coming out as a gay man. Seven months of filming resulted in 12 weekly one-hour installments. *An American Family*, however, did not immediately bring about other reality shows. *Cops*, a half hour of edited footage taken by camera and sound professionals who ride along in a squad car as the police answer calls, began in 1989 and is still running on Saturday nights on Fox with reruns on Court TV and Fox's Reality channel. Each week the veteran reality show

gives its audience “a dose of unscripted chaos” from various cities and towns around the nation with “cops breaking up domestic squabbles, cops hassling drunks, cops busting down doors, cops bagging bad guys” (Farhi, 1998, p. 21). Nothing is rehearsed, for the people in the police squad car do not know where they are going until they get the call from police headquarters. *Cops*, like many reality shows that followed it, is cheap to produce because there are no actors or sets.

The new trend in hour-long reality shows began in 2000 with *Survivor*, a blend of soap opera elements, quiz show, and adventure program, which spawned many imitators such as *Fear Factor*. *Survivor* has a very large production crew—more than 20 camera people and 13 editors. Three hundred hours may be taped to be edited for a single 42-minute episode (Simon, 2005). Romance and rejection are featured on *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* while the world of business is the theme of *The Apprentice*. Makeovers are popular themes in *The Biggest Loser* (obese people try to lose weight); *Extreme Makeover* (contestants undergo plastic surgery); and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (homes are refurbished). The top-rated *American Idol* has inspired many copycat shows that stress talent competition and harsh comments from the judges. There may be as many as 50 reality shows running on various channels on television. In most cases, the production process manipulates and contrives the action on these shows, and they are partly scripted for the non-actors who compete with one another for expensive prizes. Contestants on some shows vote to eliminate fellow players, and they can be quite cruel to one another. Reality shows encourage audience voyeurism as viewers watch people undergoing difficult tasks, competing with one another, and being humiliated, rejected, or victorious. Audiences like to watch reality shows because, as Ron Simon explained, they refer “back to the commonplace world we experience and live in every day and especially how real people interact in undirected situations” (Simon, 2005, p. 180). Viewers also are likely to feel superior to the contestants and judge them as uncouth and disgusting. The popularity of reality shows may reflect the urge for a sense of contact with what is real rather than what is fiction.

## Sports

Television is a very popular medium for watching sports. One can watch practically any sport on one of the cable sports channels or subscribe to specialized events such as baseball games and boxing matches. Networks present regular programs to broadcast basketball tournaments, college and professional football, horse racing, and specialized sports like the Olympics. While one game is being broadcast, regional “splits” show another game

that is being played simultaneously, or inserts keep viewers informed of the progress of other games. Viewers can watch live games, interrupted by commercials, through to the finish while listening to sportscasters describe the plays and comment on the players. Television has changed sports because instant replays cause time-outs. In professional baseball, pitchers' mounds were lowered in 1969 to make it harder for pitchers to strike out batters, thus making the sport more visually appealing (Bellamy & Walker, 1996). Sportscasters such as Bob Costas and Billy Packer have become celebrities who bring life to the games.

## Children's Television

Children's television is the only genre to use age as its defining characteristic. It may be aimed at toddlers, young children, preteens, or teenagers. It incorporates other genres—comedy, drama, game shows, talk shows, cartoons, and news. PBS's *Teletubbies* is for very young children, while *Sesame Street* with its well-known characters like Big Bird, Kermit, and other Muppets (meant to be the emotional voices of children) is for preschool and kindergarten children. PBS has a large variety of daily animated programs, for example, *Arthur* and *Clifford the Big Red Dog* with stories about sharing, acceptance of others, and friendship. The Disney and Nickelodeon channels are aimed at younger children, while MTV and the Cartoon Network attract teens. Norma Pecora pointed out that commercial stations have catered to 6- to 11-year-olds because they could pressure their parents to buy things, whereas preschoolers had no consumer value. With the introduction of cable channels, teens became more important to the market, thus teen dramas such as *Felicity*, *Dawson's Creek*, and *Buff*, the *Vampire Slayer* provided outlets for stories about identity, sexuality, and relationships (Pecora, 2005). The January 24, 2006 merger of WB and UPN into a new channel, CW, was done to attract young viewers and advertisers.

The Children's Television Act of 1990 requires all television broadcast stations to program for the educational and entertainment needs of the young audience. The Three-Hour Rule was added in 1995, requiring broadcast stations to program an average of three hours of age-specific educational programming each week (Pecora, 2005).

## Game Shows

Game shows either ask competing contestants questions or get them to do something to win very large amounts of money (*Who Wants to Be a*

*Millionaire*, *Jeopardy!*) or prizes such as cars, furniture, and vacations. They feature a host, usually male, an attractive woman assistant, and preselected contestants on a studio stage filled with a spectacle of flashing lights, bright colors, and carnival-like sound effects. These shows are taped live in front of an audience and are on the air daily or weekly. Some of the game shows have been on the air for many years—*Jeopardy!* since 1964 and *The Price Is Right* since 1973. Prior to 1967, all game shows were on prime time, but they were moved to daytime and prime-time access, the alleyway to prime time at 7:30 p.m. The viewing audience can match wits with the contestants with its own answers. The answers must be given within seconds, so there is no time for reflection. Competition, winning, and materialism are the values featured in these shows. Like so many other genres, game shows have their own network, GSN, The Game Show Network.

## Other Genres

There are many other genres, but their characteristics are self-evident, for they focus on a single theme: movie channels, History Channel, Discovery, Animal Planet, award shows for film and television, religious broadcasting, shopping networks, food networks, country music, and so on. The Weather

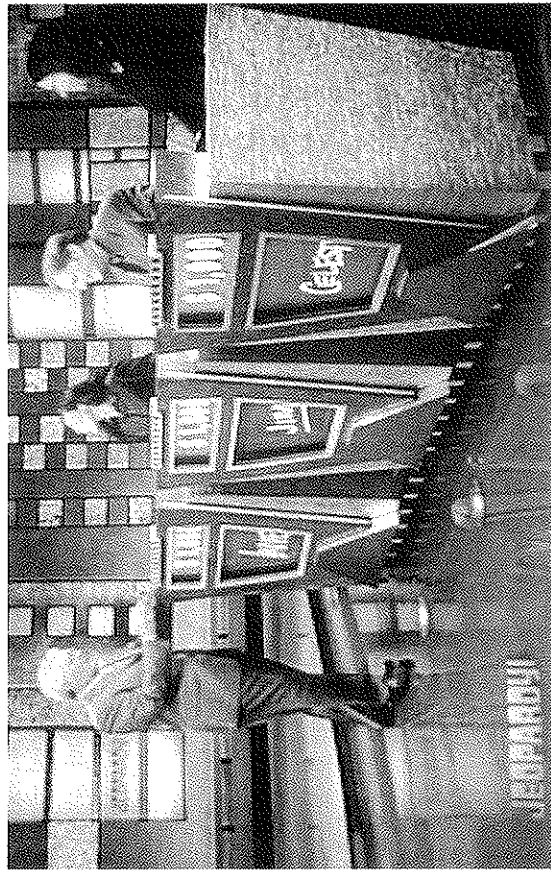


Photo 5.3 *Jeopardy!* host Alex Trebek gives a question to the contestants.

Channel drew record numbers of viewers in 2005 as devastating hurricanes hit the southern part of the United States. There is a cafeteria of genres on today's television, something for everyone, that supports the importance of television in our lives.

As a television critic, you will examine the characteristics of the genres in light of society and culture. The television medium stresses immediacy, thus context and culture are extremely important. Jason Mittell pointed out, "Genres operate in an ongoing historical process of category formation—genres are constantly in flux, and thus their analysis must be historically situated" (Mittell, 2004, p. xiv). Mittell emphasized that genres do not come from the television texts but rather from the television industry, its audience, and historical context. He asks us to look at a genre's operative coherence, "Does a given category circulate within the cultural spheres of audiences, press accounts, and industrial discourses? Is there a general consensus over what the category refers to in a given moment? Do so-called 'subgenres' play a useful and widespread role in classifying, interpreting or evaluating programs?" (Mittell, 2004, p. 11). Mittell suggests that we examine circulating generic practices and the ways they are culturally operative. In other words, what do they mean to a specific audience and why do people enjoy and regularly watch genres? How do they derive pleasure from genres? Horace Newcomb, in a similar approach, asks, "What is the relation of television's stories and storytelling strategies to American society and culture?" (Newcomb, 2005, p. 25). This question, according to Newcomb, together with asking "How does television tell its stories?" is central to the study of television. He supports the idea of examining industrial practices and ideological formation contained within genres. Social issues are treated in genres, but you, as a television critic, need to be aware of how the same social issue is shaped differently in different genres.

## Summary

Genre is an acknowledged form of television industry categorization that is recognized by viewers who develop certain expectations about what they watch and enjoy. Successful genres on television are those that bring in profits for their producers. Genres and subgenres, of which there are many, have formulaic conventions that render them identifiable. As society changes, so do the genres and their conventions. Television blends and bends genres, but the viewing audience continues to recognize the various characteristics within them. The television industry organizes production of shows according

to genre and schedules them accordingly. Knowledge of genres enables a television critic to understand how a television story is told, organized, and resolved. Such knowledge also enhances the television critic's awareness of the relationship of television storytelling to society and culture.

## Exercises

1. What are the conventions of genre? Select a favorite television show, identify its genre, and describe the conventions.
2. How are genres used in the television scheduling process?
3. Select any genre and list your expectations of it before you watch it.
4. Why is it important for the television critic to know about genre?
5. Why is a situation comedy generally cheaper to make than some other types of programs?
6. What are the genre characteristics of plot in a situation comedy?
7. Why do intertextual references on *The Simpsons* enhance viewer enjoyment?
8. Why are talk shows called "he" or "she" shows?
9. Watch the national and international evening news to see how much of it is news and how much is infotainment. List the news stories and list the infotainment stories. Now watch PBS's *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* for one of the stories you watched on the national and international news. Compare and contrast the coverage.
10. Select a crime series (police, detective, forensic science, FBI) and record your thinking as you watch it. Do you participate in examining the evidence and selecting a suspect? What led you to your selection? Did you pick the same one that the characters on the show did?
11. Select a workplace drama (hospital, law firm, the White House). Describe how the story is more about character and dialogue than workplace.
12. What is a hybrid drama? Give example and identify the genres in it.
13. Watch a daytime soap opera and count the number of characters and plot lines in a single episode.
14. Select a reality show. What elements of the commonplace world do you observe? How does it reflect our cultural norms? Why do you think it is popular with viewers?

15. Watch a sporting event on television with and without a sportscaster's comments. Describe the differences in your experience of watching the game.
16. Select a children's television program and estimate the age of the children at whom it is aimed.
17. Select a science fiction show and describe its characteristics. Does the story take place in the future? In space? Is it utopian or apocalyptic?
18. Watch a game show and try to give answers to the questions. How do you compare with the contestants? Why do you think the contestants know so much about what seems to be trivial information?

## Suggested Readings

- Creeber, Glen (Ed.). (2001). *The Television Genre Book*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
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