

Evolution of Entertainment Television Formats in the 2000s

The main stages in the development of prime-time entertainment on the national channels are described. The focus is on the four dominant formats which sequentially replaced one another throughout the 2000s. The processes whereby one format is displaced by another from prime time are examined. Basing on Yu. N. Tynyanov's theory of literary genres evolution the author believes that a new replacing format arises as an opposition to the format that is being displaced. Within this framework comedy variety displaced quizzes and talent shows displaced musical realities.

Key words: format, quiz, talent show, humor, entertainment show

A watershed in the content-related strategy of Russia's television occurred at the turn of the century. In the 2000s the nation's new information space, controlled by the power structures, no longer allowed of television companies' alternative agenda. The result was that "the heightened political awareness characteristic of Russia's mass media in the 1990s turned into its opposite and most media companies chose the well-tried entertainment formats as their main fare"¹.

The "Television as Watched by Viewers" survey conducted annually by the Videointernational's analytical center since 1999 confirms this change². With each coming year the entertainment and recreation functions of television increasingly supplant news for television audiences. Today's viewing is mostly for rest and entertainment.

Television as a dynamic program system

Entertainment television as it currently exists has repeatedly come under study. Most researches endeavored to classify entertainment programs and to build a typological structure going by various criteria. As a rule, such structures were seen as static, and the entire body of entertainment programs accumulated over the many years of television history were divided by group.

Any consideration of television segment, the entertainment one among others, as a static system yields no complete understanding of change evolving on television. Television is temporal, it develops over time, acquiring new temporal characteristics at every new stage. This peculiarity of the nature of television calls for the development of a dynamic system which would account for the evolutionary change in programming.

This paper looks at entertainment television of the 2000s as a dynamic system in order to see why some entertainment formats³ are supplanted by others. Yu. N. Tynyanov's theory of evolution of literary genres has been used as the basis for constructing a dynamic system mentioned above.

Yu. N. Tynyanov, Russian literary scholar, published his article "On Fact of Literature" in the No 2 issue of the "Lef" magazine in 1924. The young historian of literature suggested that the history of literature should be viewed as an evolution of literary genres. Though the paper treated literature, the basic evolution principles as presented by Tynyanov may be extended to most kinds of creative work. For instance, Tynyanov's conception helps establish some relations within the entertainment programs group and understand how they correlate. It also explains the reasons for popularity of many entertainment programs, showing the relationships between their formats. The aim of this paper is to try and adapt Tynyanov's theory to the processes that were under way on Russian television of the 2000s.

Going by Tynyanov's method, let us define television as a system of programs. The system is divided into the center and the periphery. The center embraces the entertainment programs known to any casual viewer. By the format criterion, these are the programs aired by

the Big Three (1st Channel, Russia 1, NTV) in the day part with the largest potential audience. Day parts are defined proceeding from the temporal laws of weekly and daily viewing. The day parts with the largest audience potentialities include Monday through Friday (18.00-00.00), Saturday (16.00-1.00), Sunday (13.00-0.00). These time slots are called the early prime, prime time and late prime time. Programs scheduled in these time slots not only gather large audiences but also more often become the subject of discussion at various levels including TV critics, the viewing public, advertising notices, TV guides and variety parodies.

The peripheral programming is different. The periphery includes programs on niche channels, non-prime-time programs of the Big Three, and those that went off the air and are not represented in the current television space. The periphery is thus much less available and interesting to viewers and of little concern to critics and journalists covering TV.

The TV periphery is heterogeneous and may be graded. For instance, the prime-time entertainment programs on the STS channel are more popular with the nationwide audience than those of the morning slot on MTV. At the same time, the programs of both channels rank lower than those of the structurally center-located channels, represented by the Big Three prime-time programs.

The prime-time STS, TNT, Ren-TV and TV-6 programs and non-prime-time programs of the Big Three constitute the first level of the periphery.

All programs of the niche channels, STS, TNT, Ren-TV programs and the programs already not on the air constitute the periphery's second level.

This structure is relatively stable, and it underwent practically no change throughout the 2000s, the only thing being that the periphery's first level became more distinct. The structure's content is, however, less stable, and it changed from season to season, with some programs and formats drifting to the periphery from the center and others either emerging in the center or migrating there from the periphery.

Dominance of game shows

Let us fill in the central part and see what it looked like in the earlier half of 2002. Among other programs, the center was made up of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?", "The Weak Link", "The People Versus", "The Russian Roulette", "The Wonder-Working Field", "What? Where? When?" (ORT), "The Bid" (RTR), "Greed", "One's Own Game" (NTV). All these shows belong to the intellectual games or quiz format and it dominated in the earlier half of 2002, taking the central area of our system.

A year and a half later, in the latter part of 2003 only four programs ("Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?", "The Wonder-Working Field", "What? Where? When?" and "One's Own Game") from the above list remained in the central part. This dominant format was driven to the periphery by a new format, comedy variety show. To understand how and why this came around and if there is any logic in such a change, one has to turn to the chronology of entertainment television of the period.

The center of the system in the latter half of 2000 contained three game shows: "The Wonder-Working Field", "Smart Girls and Boys" (ORT) and "O, Lucky Man" (NTV), the latter making the television history. In February 2001, this program moved to ORT, with the name changed to "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" and with a different host. NTV, however, rerun the program for a year, the format beginning to diffuse. Soon games with a money prize filled the central part of our system.

In the fall of 2001 NTV filled the gap with the "Greed" and scheduled "One's Own Game" to a more advantageous slot, while RTR added "The Weak Link" to the programming, and TV-6, the first-level peripheral channel, launched "Countdown" with Andrei Boltenko as a host. Thus, having sensed the main trend and an attractive format, TV producers, inspired by the success of the "Millionaire", turned to imitation.

The trend was upheld by the channels of the first-level periphery. In the spring of 2002,

STS scheduled “The Armchair” game with F. Bondarchuk and “The Smartest” a bit later. During the same period ORT put “The Russian Roulette” and “The People Versus” into the prime-time slots as spin-offs of the successful format. RTR was the last to succumb with several series of the “The Bid” game hosted by I. Apeksimova.

The first principle of TV evolution, as we see, consists in successful projects' cloning. New programs are developed or selected, if it is the matter of foreign licenses, depending on how well they fit a successful format, it being the program's backbone, the main construction principle.

The novel moves and stylistics first shown in the “Millionaire” became automatic in a host of other game shows, turning the system's center into a junkyard. The game's sameness made viewers feel bored and, deprived of originality, the format lost luster. Such format can no longer remain at the system's center and, as a rule, is displaced to the periphery. “Greed” and “Countdown” were taken off the air in the spring of 2002. “The People Versus” was moved from the prime-time to the week-day non-prime-time day part and then changed the broadcaster, going to Ren-TV which belonged in the second-level periphery. “The Russian Roulette” and “Weak Link” were aired for a short while in the day time on Sundays (the first-level periphery), and were soon withdrawn from the air. “The Bid” went to TVTs in 2003 and soon closed. “The Armchair” ended its days in the daytime slot instead of prime on STS. “The Smartest” turned into a children's program in the morning slot.

Once an effective format of money quiz was displaced to the periphery with a new format, comedy variety or magazine. The change was far from instant, taking about a year.

Comedy variety as the format's construction principle

Before the beginning of 2002 the system's center contained only two comedy variety shows of the same format, the “Sold Out” (RTR) and “Laughter Panorama” (ORT). They occupied a niche of their own, leaving the free space to programs of other formats. As we have found, most air time in the system's center was taken up by quizzes.

Throughout 2002, the share of comedy variety in the system's center was steadily growing. One after another ORT and RTR released, respectively, the “Laughter Panorama” without an emcee – the “Joke after Joke”, and “Sold Out” without an emcee – the “Laughter Room”. The breakthrough came with the “Distorting Mirror” on the 1st channel in early 2003, and the next year the program ran on RTR. The 1st, meanwhile, continued to rerun the program. The situation reminded that with the “Millionaire” and “Oh, the Lucky Man” which, for a while, had run on two channels simultaneously. The share of the “Distorting Mirror” in the programming of the 1st and RTR was disproportionately large. Not infrequently, the channels resorted to counter-programming, scheduling the programs in the same slot. On the May Day holidays of 2005 the “Distorting Mirror” ran on RTR for 6 hours apiece.

By genre, the “Distorting Mirror” is more comedy theatre than comedy variety. The format is more difficult to produce than the latter. It takes much time and comedian's talent to clone such a program. At the time the “Distorting Mirror” was impossible to match, conversely, cloning a variety show is easy, for performers may rely on their repertoire. This was precisely what the major players on the television market chose to do, aggregating the variety material.

The 1st channel and Rossiya set up three annual humor festivals – “H’umora (Humorina)” (the 1st channel), “Yurmalina/Yurmala” (Rossiya) and “Yalta” (the 1st channel, Rossiya). The new variety programs such as “Men of Laughter”, “Humor Cup”, “Laughter Allowed”, “Funny People” and new magazine selections “New Russian Babushki”, “Winter Joke with...” were built on reruns of variety materials. The peripheral channels, too, took up the trend, exploiting the lucrative segment. Their magazine programs were based on the already tested humor sketches, the programs being “The Funny Program” (Muz TV), “For Laughter's Sake” (STS), “Humor Park” (TVTs), “Laughterdrome” (DTV), etc. The main format elements were imitated, “having been reduced to imbecility and vulgarity”⁴.

Thus the center-periphery system changed radically between 2002 and 2004. Quizzes no longer dominated and the TV audience was drowning in the comedy variety flow. Once routinized, the format was displaced by another format from the center to the periphery. Yet, the new, comedy variety, format, when automatically imitated, also degenerated.

After once the successful construction principle, the format's backbone, had been used in the maximum number of programs, viewers lost interest in it. Sameness and pseudo-novelty are no longer appealing, and, having outlived themselves, the programs are now driven to the periphery. Of all the diversity of comedy variety only four programs survived at the central part of the structure, these being the "Sold Out", "Laughter is Allowed", "Yurmala" and "Distorting Mirror". The programs, however, have become less routine than at the time of their dominance. Besides, they are scheduled far more apart having retained their format.

The reasons behind dominant format change

Is there any law by force of which one format displaces another to the periphery? Why was it humor that displaced games? According to Tynyanov, in contrast to the automatic construction principle there arises the dialectically opposite construction principle⁵. This principle becomes the backbone of a new format to spread.

Comparing the game and comedy shows we can find only one attribute by which the formats are dialectically opposite, namely, the initial emotional attitude. On television, game and humor may be counterposed as tragedy and comedy in the classical theatre.

The tragedy is caused by conflict of the personality and the world, society or fate. The TV quiz participant is likewise in conflict with the circumstances controlled by the game's rules. Like the hero in the tragedy, the player will most probably suffer a defeat (winning the maximal prize is a very rare occasion). The audience and the player himself understand this. Both the player and the audience hope against hope. The fear of defeat is enhanced by the appropriate atmosphere. Most game shows take place in a somber setting, in semi-darkness, and are accompanied by vibrant music not without some tragic undertones.

The tragedy principle in the television games is emphasized by the host who is "seldom an unconditionally positive character"⁶. "Being good would interfere with his function in a game: he is not only the keeper of traditions (rules of the game) but also an agent provocateur of extreme situations. This task makes him akin to the traditional villain of the formulaic picaresque literature"⁷. The "villain" of the game is always the winner because his position is unassailable, unlike the players, who come and go, often as losers.

The tie between comedy variety and comedy is more obvious. Both approach the reality with humor or satire.

We thus have found the format construction principle of dialectical opposites underlying the change of games for comedy variety. The "tragic" was displaced by the "comical" to the periphery. In this context, of special interest are the "survivors", the game shows "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" and "The Wonder-Working Field". Their viability next to comedy appears quite legitimate. "The Wonder-Working Field" has always gravitated to the comedy genre. L. Yakubovich, the host, has always been more of an emcee than an intellectual "villain". The players more than once were asked to sing or to recite something. The setting was different from that of the 2001-2002 quizzes in its brightness and shining lights. A defeat was not at all tragic and was alleviated by prizes and giveaways for all players.

The "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" was linked to variety shows by the host. Besides, Maxim Galkin's image has changed noticeably after the new format appeared. The host has become more amiable and made jokes more often. His image has had nothing to do with being a villain, he, rather, has become a nice and jolly prompter. The difference between Galkin's image on the stage and that of Galkin in the TV studio has been practically erased.

Having considered one of the first episodes of the entertainment television evolution in the 2000s, when games were supplanted by comedy variety, let us, in Tynyanov's stead, formulate

the evolution's basic stages:

- given that the construction principle has become automatic, there arises the dialectically opposite construction principle (the comedy principle of variety in contrast to the tragedy principle of games);

- the principle goes through the application process – the construction principle finds the readiest applications, i.e. there appear programs implementing the new construction principle;

- the principle extends to the greatest mass of phenomena manifested in cloning;

- the principle tends to become automatic, giving rise to the opposite construction principles⁸.

“Making stars” and “makings of stars” as the construction principles of new formats

As the system's center was filling up with comedy variety, another format was gaining in strength on Russia's TV.

“The Star Factory” (1-7 hrs), “Be a Star”, “The Secret of Success” (1-2 hrs), “The People's Artist” (1-3 hrs) are categorized as musical reality show⁹, talent show¹⁰, and action programs¹¹, all basing on the same construction principle. The programs sought not merely to scout for new talent¹² but to spot new stars. The star-making tendency materialized in the new or resurrected talent contests for young performers, these being “The New Wave” (since 2002) and “Five Stars” (since 2005).

The programs mentioned above were represented in the central part of the structure. Each program spotted new stars in the music sphere. The periphery responded with similar programs aimed to make comic stars (“The Humor Faculty”, Ren TV) and fashion models (“You are the Super model”, STS). In the structure's central part, such programs were few, as compared to comedy variety. Unlike the latter, no channel could afford to produce more than one music reality show in half a year, otherwise the audience would be confused, trying to make out who is the new star.

In the course of three and a half years of the presence of musical variety shows in the structure's center the “we-are-making-stars” construction principle became automatic in the viewers' minds, and its dialectic opposite, “makings of stars” started to take shape.

Programs which presented stars in some uncharacteristic capacity appeared in the central part in 2003. The 1st channel sent a team of stars to a desert island in “The Last Hero” project while Rossiya did the same in order to take the “Beauyard Fort” by storm. The same year the 1st channel released the hidden-camera practical joke program (“The Practical Joke”) already traditional for the peripheral channels. In contrast to the periphery analogues, the new program featured stars.

Beginning from 2006, which was already critical for musical reality, the number of shows featuring stars began to grow dramatically, with the stars venturing into the alien professional spheres. TV sports let in the starring amateurs with such programs as the “Big Race”, “Mountain Ruler”, “Dancing with Stars”, “Stars on the Ice”, “Glacial Period”, “Starry Ice”, “King of the Ring”, “Tug-of-War”, “1st Squadron”. In two programs the stars had a do at circus acts and singing. (“Circus and Stars”/ “Circus” and “Two Stars”).

The new programs, however, were not intended to spot new stars of figure skating or circus: celebrities merely demonstrated their aptitude for acquiring new professional skills.

The makings-of-stars trend, the opposite to the principle of “making stars” musical reality, became automatic for both the audience and producers. It follows that a new dialectically opposite construction principle should arise, entailing a new trend. At present the dominance of “star-laden shows” is strong though their number in the central part of the structure is steadily decreasing. Meanwhile, the opposite construction principle is forming somewhere behind this basic trend.

Today “stars” continue to remain a must of an entertainment program but now, again, there are programs focusing not so much on versatility of celebrities as on the ordinary man's

achievements. In the central part of television entertainment there are the “Moment of Glory”, “Funny Man”, “Hello Girls”, “Marry Me”, and, to a degree, “Can You Sing? Do!”, etc. The new programs do not aim at turning a spotted talent into a star in some or other creative milieu. This brings them close to the “makings-of-stars” programs for in both cases the programs are designed to show the person's abilities, talent and potentialities. Interest in star talent is likely to be substituted with interest in more original talent of an ordinary person.

We have thus identified four basic formats of entertainment television in the 2000s. Each of these formats dominated for a certain period. The construction principle applied to diverse material generated a great number of similar programs. The constructive principle of “musical reality” was less productive because of its specificity but the format that evolved was the starting point for the further development of entertainment television, namely, for the emergence of the “makings-of-stars” format which displaced the “making-stars” format to the periphery (“STS Lights a Superstar”).

The trends described are characteristic only of the central part of the television system proposed by us. Television involves phenomena of various planes, and in this sense one television trend cannot be completely replaced by another. “But there is a change in a different sense – the dominant trends and dominant genres change”¹³. Although the processes going in the center affect the periphery, the latter may develop according to a different scenario, its first level in particular. The dominant formats of the first level in the 2000s were represented by talk shows and reality shows but not many programs of these formats managed to move to the center, “Let Them Talk” being one such example.

Evolution within the entertainment program format

Having considered the main trends of the entertainment formats evolution at the macrolevel and having determined the most general trends of the entertainment television development in the 2000s, let us now turn to the microlevel because the evolution also occurs within the format itself.

Tynyanov believes that a literary genre, or a television format in our case, cannot be described statically since it constantly undergoes at least a partial change. “A new phenomenon comes instead of an old one, replaces it, and, not being a ‘development’ of the old one, it is its substitute. If there is no such ‘substitution’, a genre as such disappears, it decomposes”¹⁴. In other words, any program is topical and has appeal only if it is integrated into a new format context. This may be achieved only if the initial format is changed. We have already shown this in the case of survival of the “Who Wants to be a Millionaire” and “The Wonder-Working Field” at the time when comedy variety prevailed. The “makings-of-stars” age also modified the “Millionaire” construction for it almost turned into a “makings-of-stars” quiz.

“The construction principle applied to any field tends to expand over the broadest possible fields”¹⁵. Tynyanov terms this phenomenon the construction principle's “imperialism”. The construction principle affects the entire air space of the central part, not only underpinning the new dominant format, but also transforming programs of the “old format” which tend to drift to the periphery.

There are very few entertainment programs that went through the dominance of various formats and survived for over five years. The format of each of these (the program format), however, was undergoing change depending on which format was dominant at the construction principle's center.

While quizzes were dominant, the “Sold Out” was being fed with quizzes (variety quizzes for humor lovers such as the “Sold Out's Bag” and “Done”) and contests (ditty contest). At the time of makings-of-stars the “Sold Out”, like other humor shows, integrated into the new trend. Aware of shrinkage in the number of comedy variety shows, most performers took part in celebrity shows while the “Distorting Mirror” team stormed the Beauyard Fort. Comics were returning to programs that were habitual for them, but they returned with a new image,

establishing links between the formats and drawing comedy variety into a new context of the television space.

“What? Where? When?” sacrificed its unshakable elitism to answer the trend and so chairs at the game's tables were taken by such personalities as Nikolai Baskov, Tatiana Ustinova and Larissa Rubal'skaya. To meet the arising interest in the ordinary man's talent, the program formed the MTS teams of viewers. It was only such alterations within the format that could prolong the program's stay in the system's central part.

“The Wonder-Working-Field” gave room to karaoke for the participants, which is another proof that programs survive by grafting elements of other formats that at the moment dominate in the system's center.

The evolution theory in question may also explain appeal and popularity of certain media personalities. Maxim Galkin's success, for instance, may be due to his versatility. When quizzes are the order of the day he is a quizmaster, when it comes to comedy variety, he is a participant of the “Distorting Mirror” and the host of “Maxim Galkin Tonight”, and at the third stage he is no longer a quizmaster but the emcee of the “Starry Ice” and “Dancing with Stars”.

Tynyanov asserts that “it is impossible to offer a static definition of genre which would encompass all the genre phenomena: genre shifts, and what we observe is a seesaw rather than the direct line of evolution”¹⁶. This is precisely why a long-living program cannot be ascribed to one format. As long as any program lives, its format will alter, shift and absorb new elements from other formats. Take the “Sold Out's Bag” (2002), for instance, is it a quiz or comedy variety?

If any format remains static and fails to adjust, it crumbles, and like the once popular “Laughter Panorama”, goes to the periphery. Format mobility varies. The “Joke after Joke” or “Laughter Room” could not, for instance, be incorporated into the “star” context. They can only move to the periphery and will come back to the mainstream when the trend changes. The same goes for quizzes. The construction principle of the comical was inapplicable to the “Weak Link”, otherwise we would have a travesty.

In order to survive under change and to be in tune with other programs, the programs that are already in the center inevitably obey the dominant construction principle. Those that fail to do so, drift to the periphery, leaving room for those peripheral programs that comply with the current construction principle and change their format.

This movement of programs and formats in the center – periphery system leaves no chance for them to remain “pure”. Programs and formats change constantly under the impact of the dominant construction principle and that of other programs. Television producers and editors feel this very acutely¹⁷, because they are not to follow a trend but to anticipate it, creating new formats rather than imitating them.

To sum up, having adapted Yu. N. Tynyanov's conception, we may assume that entertainment television follows the laws of its own. These laws extend both to the dominant trends and the specific programs. All programs and formats may be viewed as a system, with every element exerting influence on other elements.

This influence makes formats change and shift, which is the essence of their evolution. The programs that can adjust to the new environmental conditions, survive. Those which cannot adjust have to move to the periphery and wait until their revival comes under the new conditions.

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² "Televidenie glazami telezritelei" (Television Through the Eyes of Viewers). M., 2006-2008 www.acvi.ru.

³ The concept of "format" is used in the broad sense in this paper and denotes a totality of programs unified by some common attribute which, at the same time, is not the genre-forming one. Cf. the "program format" as the totality of the creative and technical characteristics of one specific program.

⁴ Tynyanov Yu. N. "Literaturnyi fakt" (Fact of Literature) // Tynyanov Yu. N. Poetika. Istoriya Literatury. Kino. M., 1977. P. 258.

⁵ Ibid. P. 260.

⁶ Novikova A. A. "Sovremennye televisionnye zrelishcha: istoki, formy i metody vozdeistviya" (Current Television Shows: Origins, Forms and Methods of Influence). SPB, 2008. P. 164.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Tynyanov Yu. N. Op. cit. P. 262.

⁹ Sherstoboeva E. A. "Muzykal'noe televidenie: istoricheskii, programmnyi, organizatsionnyi i pravovoi aspekty" (Music Television: Historical, Program, Organizational and Legal Aspects). Dis. kand. filol. nauk: 10.01.10 / MGU. M., 2009. P. 67.

¹⁰ Novikova A. A. Op. cit. P. 184.

¹¹ Pobereznikova E. V. "Televidenie vzaimodeistviya: Interaktivnoe pole obshcheniya" (Television of Interaction: Interactive Field of Communication). M., 2004. P. 71.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tynyanov Yu. N. Op. cit. P. 268.

¹⁴ Ibid. P. 257.

¹⁵ Ibid. P. 266.

¹⁶ Ibid. P. 256.

¹⁷ See, e.g.: Kemarskaya I. N. "Pereformatirovanie kak proyavlenie mutatsii zhanrov" (Reformatting as a Manifestation of Genre Mutation) // *Nauka Televideniya*. Vyp. 5. M., 2008. S. 86-94.