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Proppian Analysis

Propp and the Folktale of “Reality” Television:
Toward a Structure of Reality Shows

The beautiful, the savvy, the romantic, the fit. These are the heroes of television’s new obsession, reality television. For the past five years, world television audiences have been deluged by these unlikely heroes and their so-called “reality shows,” each equipped with its own drama, challenge, and reward. In the United States, it truly takes serious effort to *avoid* a reality program during primetime hours. The same is true in other nations with well-developed television industries. England’s top channel, BBC, is a renowned creator of reality shows, while Australia’s Seven is set to produce 15 reality shows in the coming seasons (David Dale, 2004).

These reality programs, however, are nothing more than a new type of narrative, a new type of storytelling that aims to *mimic* reality. Much like any folktale or myth, or like any soap opera or sitcom, reality shows are fantastic tales with fantastic heroes. Reality television then, should be treated not as a modern documentary of human behavior, but rather as a new genre of storytelling. And in treating these shows as stories, I argue that these contemporary tales, as do the folktales described by Vladimir Propp (1968) and Benjamin Colby (1973), invariably follow a simple, yet well-defined structure – a “magic formula” for reality television. This analysis provides a brief outline of this magic formula and illustrates it through four well-known (seemingly different) reality shows: Average Joe, Survivor, The Apprentice, and The Swan.

Many types of reality shows exist. While some simply follow humans on their daily routines, most are competitive in nature. This analysis focuses primarily on the competitive genre, and recognizes that this structure may not apply to all other genres. The competitive show

will often contain a standard set of components: a host, who serves as the story's narrator; the competitors, one of which will be the story's hero; the challenge or challenges; and the reward, often in form of a person, but mostly in some form of monetary compensation. These elements often appear in a highly predictable order, which I will call the structure of these reality shows.

This structure can be broken down to eight subcomponents (events):

1. A number of contestants (16 in all the cases studied) are brought together to compete against each other for a common reward.
2. A challenge is introduced.
3. The contestants are normally divided into groups. In most cases studied, the groups were divided into groups of 8, but *The Swan* was a notable exception, where the 16 contestants competed in groups of 2.
4. The two teams compete each week in smaller challenges, with the object of eliminating a player.
5. Elimination is usually carried out by a vote or personal decision.
6. When the number of contestants falls below a certain point, a new game plan is instituted.
7. A final, "ultimate" challenge takes place between the finalists (2 in most cases, 8 in the case of *The Swan*).
8. A winner (the "hero") is selected and rewarded.

This order of events is conserved throughout the programs, and is thus the backbone of this genre of narrative. Below is an illustration of how four programs, all seemingly different in content, fit this structure. It is presented in table format for the sake of brevity (Table 1).

Table 1. Narrative structure of four reality shows				
Proposed Structure	Average Joe¹	Survivor²	The Swan³	The Apprentice⁴
1. Contestants are brought together to compete for common reward	16 men brought to mansion	16 contestants gather together in a remote location	16 women (ugly ducklings) chosen and taken to mansion	16 professionals gather in Trump boardroom
2. Challenge; reward introduced	Meet “bacholere” (challenge & reward); win \$1M	Challenge and reward introduced: outplay, outlast, outsmart for \$1M	Challenge and reward: be surgically made over and become finalist in pageant of “swans”; win \$250 K	Challenge and reward announced: become the last apprentice and earn job with Trump Organization
3. Contestants normally divided into groups	Contestants divided into 2 groups of 8	Players divided into 2 “tribes” of 8	Women divided into 8 groups of 2	Contestants divided into 2 companies of 8 (men vs. women)
4. Weekly competitions	Weekly group “dates”	Weekly tribal challenge	Weekly 1 on 1 competitions	Weekly company competitions
5. Elimination by vote	Elimination; 4 then 6	Losing tribe votes off one member	Losing swan voted out by “dream team” experts; winner on to pageant	Losing company sent to boardroom; elimination by Trump
6. Number of players below certain point; new game plan	Number of players at 8; new “beaus” introduced; special 1 on 1 dates, and 2 by 2 elimination.	Number of players at 10; tribes become one; immunity challenges introduced; 1 eliminated weekly	8 swans remaining; 1 st Annual Swan Pageant takes place	Number of players at 8; shuffle companies, assign new leaders; increasing difficulty in tasks
7. Final challenge	Special 1 on 1 nights	3 finalists in final challenge	Final challenge is to win pageant	Final challenge between 2 finalists is to become CEO of “event”
8. Winner crowned	Fiancé chosen	Survivor chosen from final 2 by vote	“Ultimate Swan” crowned	Apprentice crowned; offered “dream job”

As Table 1 illustrates, all four shows follow the proposed structure closely. Average Joe, an “unscripted relationship drama,” presents a love story that, with all but small variations, adheres to the same structure as Survivor, a Darwinian survival show.¹ This holds true for the other programs with seemingly different plots and motivations. Whereas in Survivor it is survival of the fittest, in The Swan, it is survival of the prettiest. The Apprentice seeks out the savviest and wisest of businessmen, whereas Average Joe rewards the savviest and wisest of romantics. These reality programs, then, while attempting to transmit a different message, all

¹ The Average Joe Website: http://www.nbc.com/Average_Joe/about/index.html (accessed on May 3, 2004).

² The Survivor Website: <http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor8/index.shtml> (accessed on May 3, 2004).

³ The Swan Website: <http://www.fox.com/swan/home.htm> (accessed on May 4, 2004).

⁴ The Apprentice Website: http://www.nbc.com/The_Apprentice/ (accessed on May 3, 2004).

share a common narrative structure that is embraced by television producers and audiences alike. In this sense, they closely resemble the Russian folktales analyzed by Propp (1968).

What is of special interest in this analysis is not the similarity between this contemporary form of narrative and that of Propp and Colby, but rather, their *dissimilarity*. In “A Partial Grammar of Eskimo Folktales,” Colby (1973) explains that his proposed grammar (taken to be structure) “[applies] to the folktales of all Eskimo, but not to the folktales of neighboring peoples.” Conversely, this structure of (competitive) reality programming seems to apply across many cultures and in many languages around the world. Apart from England and Australia, a host of other nations including (though not exclusively) France, Greece, and Morocco offer extremely similar programming. While this may be a result of ratings-hungry producers, it goes to show that there is a common interest in this particular form of narrative in different cultures of the globe. Further analysis of this phenomenon would be of interest.

References:

Colby, Benjamin N., “A Partial Grammar of Eskimo Folktales,” *American Anthropologist* **75**: 645-662, 1973.

Propp, Vladimir, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968.